



A STEP INTO THE PAST

Huang Yi

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(尋秦記, 寻秦记)

by

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Synopsis

A lecherous army special task force soldier from 21st-century Hong Kong is selected to travel back in time, choosing to go to the Chinese Warring States Period.

Unfortunately, the time machine runs into an error during the experiment.

With no foreseeable way to return to the present, he must use his combat skills and knowledge of history to thrive in his new life in the year 251 BC.

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Book 1 Chapter 1 - Time Machine

Screech!

The shrill screeching caused by braking resulted in the friction between the tyres and the road sounded right in front of the city's most popular 'Black Leopard Bar'. The jeep that belonged to Team 7 of the army's special unit, regarded as the best of the best, suddenly stopped.

Amid the cheers and laughter, Xiang Shaolong and his three teammates grabbed the grills and jumped down from the car. After three months of intensive training in body and warfare in the Gobi desert, they finally have three days of leave. If they do not thoroughly enjoy life now, they would be letting down their parents who gave birth to them.

Xiang Shaolong is twenty this year. His skin glowed with a healthy tan because of his long hours under the sun. He may not be considered a handsome young man, but with his height nearing 2 meters, broad shoulders, trim waist and long legs, firm muscles with not an inch of excess fat, agile and smart eyes, pencil straight nose, perfectly rounded cheekbones, square face, matched with a lazy smile that seems to flirt with women, he definitely has the qualities that will pique the interest of any girl.

Just as they were about to enter, there was chaos and a mess of bodies landed on the ground amidst claps and curses. It was their team mates Xiao Zhang and Man Niu (Stubborn Cow) who came earlier being thrown out of the door and landing in a heap. They were groaning to get up and although this is usually a very simple

act, but now to these two top agents of the special unit, it's a very difficult task.

The expression on the four's faces changed and they rushed forward to help the two of them up. Rhino, who has a growth on his forehead, exclaimed, "How many people?"

This question is very logical. Xiao Zhang and Man Niu, like them, belong to Team 7 Special Unit. They are picked amongst the best in the whole army to receive special training as a crack team, and specialized in handling all kinds of dangerous situations like anti-terrorists missions, entering hostile countries to carry out assassination attempts or saving lives, protecting important political people etc. Their training includes the use of various weapons, unarmed combat, resistance training, survival training, various spying techniques, in fact the aim is to train them into becoming supermen. Even ten odd brawny men may not be able to harm even a single hair on them.

But since other teams have always been jealous of them, they find it an honor if they are able to take down members of Team 7. So it's quite normal for fights to break out whenever they're on leave and having drinks, but this is the first time that they have actually been thrown out of the door.

Xiao Zhang regained some of his senses, opened his bruised eyes and when he saw it's Xiang Shaolong helping him up, he exclaimed with joy, "Brother Long, go and back us up quickly!"

Everyone in the team addressed Xiang Shaolong as Brother Long, not because he's older, but because he's the sharp shooter of the

team, champion of freestyle boxing, and the fittest among them.

Man Niu panted and pointed towards the inside of the bar and said, “It’s Team 841’s instructor Black Faced Deity, he actually had the guts to harass our ice beauty.”

The four of them flew into a rage. Ice beauty Zheng Cuizhi is the secretary of their team’s instructor, so how can they allow other teams to touch her when none of them have managed to woo her?

Xiang Shaolong’s hands started itching once he thinks about fighting, so he puffed up his chest and shouted, “Help them in and let me show off my skills!” With that, he led them into the bar.

The spacious bar was filled with smoke and the noises and music deafening. Half of the crowd was from the army or police and foreigners and civilians numbered only about thirty. It was crowded and the mood spirited.

They had just appeared at the door when the bar suddenly became quiet.

The well built and muscular Black Faced Deity and about a dozen of his men were wearing civilian clothing and drinking and laughing with a few sexily clad ladies. Black Faced Deity was holding Ice beauty Zheng Cuizhi by her tiny waist and when she saw Xiang Shaolong, who usually ignored her coming in, she deliberately turned her sultry body towards Black Faced Deity and even kissed his cheek.

Black Faced Deity saw Xiang Shaolong and his face shone. He moved his hands lower towards Zheng Cuizhi's voluptuous butt and slapped it twice, saying with a smile, "One against one, or everyone charge!"

There's an unwritten rule in the army, which is all fights are to be fought only with fists, unless there's some great enmity, or if blinded by rage, they will not use things that can hurt like knives or broken bottles, in case things get out of hand and they get apprehended by the military police.

Xiang Shaolong saw the queen of the bar Zhou Xiangmei leaning against the table and looking at him with a smile and felt a boost of bravado. He replied with a smile, "Against someone like you, it doesn't really matter to me. Up to you."

Everyone in the bar, regardless of male or female, all cheered and added fuel to the flame, the atmosphere reaching a burning high.

Xiao Zhang moved to his side and warned with a low voice, "Be careful! That fellow's extremely good."

Someone shrieked with a strange voice, "Someone's afraid!"

The onlookers watching the show laughed even harder.

Man Niu walked over as well and whispered, "That two men Black Faced Deity are the best two champion boxers at the local martial arts school. They are prepared for a fight today with the

intent of making us lose face.”

Xiang Shaolong noticed the two murderous looking men long ago. ‘Taking note of your surroundings’ is the second rule out of the seven in the special task force. The first rule is ‘to be well prepared’ and the third is ‘remain calm’. This is exactly what he is going to do now. He instructed quietly, “Tell them to stay clear, I’m confident of settling those three alone.”

By now Black Faced Deity has removed his jacket and handed it to ice beauty. He took two steps forward and said coldly, “Xiang Shaolong! I’ve put up with you for a long time. The last time you injured dozens of my men at the Wild Cat Karaoke, today I will settle those old scores with you.”

Xiang Shaolong told his five friends to stand back and spread out, and he took two steps forward as well and were within four paces of Black Faced Deity. He called out calmly to the bartender, “Give me some fresh milk, I need to quench my thirst after I deal with this Black Faced Deity.”

This sentence immediately caused a roar of laughter from everyone.

Someone from Black Faced Deity’s group called out, “This lad is going to use his strength for drinking milk as well.”

Black Faced Deity leaned towards the left and made a fake move, while he deviously kicked with his leg, aiming at the position 5 inches above Xiang Shaolong’s calf.

Xiang Shaolong moved to the side and avoided the attack effortlessly.

When the crowd saw that they're finally fighting, they started cheering and adding fuel to fire.

Black Faced Deity roared and rushed forward with the speed of lightning, crouched when he got near and both his fists struck out towards the chest. Xiang Shaolong took another step back and avoided the enemy's fists.

When the crowd saw that he's only dodging but not retaliating, they jeered. Black Faced Deity's men also ridiculed him loudly.

Black Faced Deity thought that Xiang Shaolong is afraid of him and became even more conceited. He suddenly stuck out his middle finger and taking advantage of his lead, rushed forward and aimed a punch at his nose.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking to himself how good that he's coming. When the fist was only a few inches from his nose, he suddenly stumbled backwards, as if that punch has thrown him far back.

The crowd went mad and started shouting.

Man Niu and the rest naturally knew that he was not hit, and were perplexed why he only dodged but did not attack. That lad

stumbled six steps back, leaned back and actually fell into the arms of the queen of the bar Zhou Xiangmei, who was sitting on the chair.

Zhou Xiangmei was so shocked that she screamed.

Black Faced Deity leapt forward like a crazed tiger.

Xiang Shaolong yelled and straightened his body, his right hand taking the chance to touch Zhou Xiangmei's creamy bosom, and sprang up using the strength from his waist. He shot towards Black Faced Deity like a cannon, ignoring the fact that his opponent's fists are clenched and coming down hard on his back, and his head hit his opponent right on the stomach.

Before Black Faced Deity has a chance to hit Xiang Shaolong, his opponent's head caused his almost 100kg body to stumble back like a toy with an unstoppable force and fell right on to the middle of the dance floor.

The two hundred odd people in the bar gasped in unison. Immediately the place became from being extremely noisy to being extremely quiet, leaving only the speakers at the corners of the bar playing a very groovy song.

Xiang Shaolong was like a ferocious tiger being released and leap towards Black Faced Deity who is still on the ground.

The two professional boxers who were invited by Black Faced

Deity saw that the situation was amiss and both rushed out at the same time, going around Black Faced Deity who is still on the floor and attached Xiang Shaolong while sandwiching him between them.

His friends Man Niu, Xiao Zhang and the rest were all cursing and calling them shameless, but they did not help at all. No one can be more confident of Xiang Shaolong's abilities than them.

The battle ended in the blink of an eye.

Xiang Shaolong dodged a few times and avoided his enemy's attacks and squeezed in between the two of them, elbowed the person on his left under his armpit, his right hand pushing away his enemy's fist and before the man on the left fell to the ground, he gave two quick knocks with his knee on the person on his right's stomach. Black Faced Deity had just struggled to stand up but Xiang Shaolong has already given him a wicked punch on his nose just as the boxer on his right was kneeling down in pain. Black Face Deity cried out as fresh blood poured out and collapsed onto Cuizhi who was just rushing over and the two of them tumbled down.

Xiao Shaolong laughed heartily, and pointing Black Faced Deity's men, taunted them, "Come! All together now."

Man Niu and the rest rushed up, rubbing their fists and palms.

Cuizhi climbed up and shrieked, "Xiang Shaolong! You're good! Just you wait and see!"

Xiang Shaolong can't be bothered with her but walked towards the queen of the bar Zhou Xiangmei, pulled her up and walked out of the bar.

Zhou Xiangmei exclaimed, "Where are you taking me?"

Xiang Shaolong carried her up and deposited her on the passenger seat of the jeep and said with a laugh, "Home of course, I don't have enough money to pay the exorbitant price for a hotel room."

"Ring....."

Xiang Shaolong, who is used to strict training, woke up immediately and disentangled himself from Zhou Xiangmei's slender limbs and grabbed the phone.

Cuizhi's clear voice traveled to his ears, "Captain Xiang, you have 15 minutes to wash up, the Ministry of War's armored vehicle is waiting for you at the main door."

Zhou Xiangmei moaned and said, "Baddie! Come quickly!"

Xiang Shaolong rubbed his aching back, caused by the numerous rounds of 'fights' with this seductress, and exclaimed hoarsely, "Are you trying to scare me? Would a fight cause such a big trouble?"

Cuizhi said icily, “Who said it’s got anything to do with the fight, it’s the Science Institute who wants the fittest among our special task force for an experiment. I saw that you were so brave last night and your stamina was so surprisingly good, so I recommended you to the instructor. The instructor has given his orders!”

Naturally Xiang Shaolong knows that she’s making use of the opportunity to take revenge and said with irritation, “But I’m still on leave today!”

Cuizhi laughed, “Oh my Captian Xiang, you only have leave when there’s no mission. A soldier belongs to the country 24 hours a day.”

Xiang Shaolong can’t wait to strangle her, but he sighed instead, “Hai! I was so brave last night, all because of you. Do you really not know or are you just pretending?”

Xiangmei wriggled out from under the blankets naked and asked, “Who are you talking to?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly signaled her to keep quiet.

The other end of the line was silent for a moment, before a soft voice said, “You’re lying!”

Xiang Shaolong covered Zhou Xiangmei’s tiny mouth with one hand, and glibly replied, “Why would I lie to you. I, Xiang

Shaolong, thinks about you day and night, I just did not say it out! Do you know! You...”

Cuizhi interrupted him, “All right! We’ll talk about that later! You’ll only be a lab mouse for one day maximum, I’ll find someone else the next time. Get changed quickly.”

“Pak!” And she hung up.

The armored vehicle stopped outside the main door of the heavily guarded Science Institute and Xiang Shaolong was escorted inside like a prisoner by 4 soldiers and passed over to the security at the research department. He was immediately brought to a hospital ward filled with medical equipments and after going through a thorough body check-up, the doctor signed the papers with satisfaction and the nurse pushed him out of the room.

Lying on the hospital bed, Xiang Shaolong objected, “I’m not sick, I can walk on my own.”

The nurse is obviously very interested in him and smiled as she walked and said, “Be a good boy, I know you’re not sick, in fact you’re stronger than a bull.”

Xiang Shaolong could not change his character and he immediately flirted, “Hey! What’s your name and how can I find you.”

The nurse rolled her eyes at him and did not reply.

Doors opened one by one in front and the nurse pushed him deep into the building until they reached a lift.

8 security guards were standing guard next to the lift door and they took over Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong felt a shiver in his heart and wondered what kind of experiment could this be? Why would the laboratory be in an underground cell at the Science Institute?

The lift descended by more than 10 floors before it stopped. Xiang Shaolong was pushed out by the guards and after passing a few heavily guarded doors, came to a spacious hall.

Xiang Shaolong looked around and sat up in shock.

He saw on one end of the 30 meters hall a huge metal object that looked like a iron furnace right in front of him.

All sorts of equipment filled the hall, and it looked like the cabin of a huge spacecraft.

A hundred odd male and female researchers dressed in white coats were busy working with various equipments.

The two sides of the hall were split into two levels, the top level separated by a full length glass and inside there were countless

researchers busy working on many types of unnameable equipment, and some were pointing at him through the glass.

Xiang Shaolong was confused. God! What is this all about? The serious atmosphere and the huge weaponry is not funny at all.

A male and a female researcher walked to his side, and the man smiled, “I am Professor Fang Ting, she is Professor Xie Zhimei. We’re the assistants to the head engineer of this time-space project, Director Ma Ke.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up and exclaimed, “What is this all about? At least tell me why I’m here!”

The average looking female professor Xie Zhimei who looked like a spinster said seriously, “Don’t worry! Everything is safe, as for the details, Director Ma will tell you personally.”

Professor Fang Ting added, “It’s a soldier’s duty to serve the country, Captain Xiang should feel honored to be the first human experiment for the time-space project. Come!”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and smiled bitterly, and helplessly followed them towards that huge object. Hai! What kind of luck is he having today?

Xiang Shaolong lay down in a human shaped gold box, his hands, legs, waist and neck all secured by straps and became an experiment target at their mercy.

He was just cursing Zheng Cuizhi, thinking of how he will get her after the experiment, how he will take revenge on the bed, when a bespectacled old man with white hair appeared from the top of the box and smiled at him, “I am Director Ma Ke, Captain Xiang, how do you feel?”

Xiang Shaolong snorted coldly, “I feel like an animal being sent to the slaughterhouse, and am still wondering if this slaughterhouse is for pigs or cows.”

Director Ma laughed dryly, “Captian Xiang sure knows how to joke.” He paused and asked, “Which period of our country’s history are you more familiar with?”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “What has this got to do with the experiment?”

Director Ma was displeased and said, “Answer my question first.”

Xiang Shaolong can only blame it on his bad luck, and wanting to end this quickly, he replied after a thought, “I’m not familiar with history, but recently I saw that movie ‘Emperor Qin’, and was really envious of his Epang Palace and his indulgence in life, and I read a few books about the warring states and Emperor Qin...”

Director Ma interrupted impatiently, “Hey! That’s enough, so it’s the Qin dynasty, 246BC, the first year Emperor Qin ascended the throne.” Then he repeated the year into the intercom clipped on his white shirt collar.

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in shock, “My god! What are you saying?”

Director Ma became excited and his old face glowed. He reached out and touched Xiang Shaolong’s cheek and said with a smile, “Friend! You don’t know how lucky you are, to become the first man in history to go back in time.”

Xiang Shaolong did not understand him and said, “You...”

Director Ma was not interested in what he has to say at all and interrupted excitedly, “Did you watch that show ‘Time Tunnel’ on television. Look! In front of you is the great time tunnel, this is no longer a dream, but a reality. Very soon I will change humankind’s perception about time and space...”

Xiang Shaolong was lying in the box so naturally he could not see anything at all. He struggled and said, “Stop joking, tell me what experiment am I here for?”

Director Ma’s excitement was undiminished, and he continued rambling, “Later you will be sent into the time furnace, and once I press one button, the hydrogen reaction furnace fixed at the bottom will gather enough energy within 36 hours to produce enough thermonuclear in the furnace to make a black hole to go past time and space. By then the magnetic field conveyor will send you back to the world of the past, how marvelous do you think that is.”

Cold sweat broke out and Xiang Shaolong looked at this mad scientist who is not much different from a lunatic and said, “Are you joking.”

Director Ma said, “Of course I’m not joking. I have successfully sent 20 white mice and 2 monkeys back and returned them safely. But a pity they could not tell me where exactly they have been, and how they felt. That’s why I asked the army to provide us with the fittest warrior to experiment, and that person is you, Xiang Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong was scared out of his wits and he cried out, “I don’t agree, I want to quit the army immediately.”

Director Ma said unhappily, “Don’t be nervous, you’ll be there for less than 10 seconds, just like a short dream. I only want you to remember what happened in the dream. You can give the injection now.”

Xiang Shaolong was still protesting when one of the staff came and gave him an injection. As he gradually lost his senses, the cover was lowered and became a sturdy metal box. It was moved and pushed into the round entrance of the time furnace.

All the equipment in the laboratory immediately started working and numerous indicator lights lighted up. Close to 400 researchers were at work, concentrating on working and observing the equipments.

Time passed on slowly, and a few hours passed.

Director Ma who went to the main control centre became more and more excited, his eyes gleaming.

The final moment will soon arrive, the laboratory began a countdown from 100.

“60, 59, 58...”

The alarm suddenly went off.

The researcher in charge of supervising the energy field inside the furnace cried out in alarm, “The energy level in the time furnace is rising abnormally fast, Director Ma please advise if we should switch off the energy source immediately.”

“48, 47...”

All the staff had their eyes fixated on Director Ma.

“39, 38, 37...”

Director Ma looked at the readings on the machine showing the energy level in the furnace, his forehead breaking out in cold sweat. He hesitated for a moment and suddenly waved his hand and ordered, “Implement the fifth emergency procedure now!”

A thunderous sound could be heard from within the furnace, and

the whole laboratory started shaking, intense and hot white rays of light shot out of the cracks in the time furnace.

Before anyone had a chance to scream, the whole hidden underground laboratory was shattered into pieces by the strong explosion, and not a single thing remained. Naturally no one was left alive.

Book 1 Chapter 2 – Ancient Beauty

Xiang Shaolong woke up suddenly, his whole body in intense pain. He suddenly realized he's now falling from a great height.

“Crash!” Tiles flew all over and he felt himself crashing through a roof right into a house, and landed on a man. Groans and the sound of bones cracking can be heard.

It was followed by a female's scream and in his daze he seem to see the back of a naked woman running out, then he passed out.

Without knowing how many days have passed, in between bouts of consciousness, he seems to feel a woman taking care of him meticulously. Helping to clean his body and change his clothes, treating his wounds, feeding him goat's milk. Finally on a certain night, he woke up. The scene that appeared before his eyes made him draw in a gasp of cold air.

Heavens! Where is this place?

He was lying on a soft and thick carpet, an oil lamp hanging on the wall. The dim light shone weakly in this crude house about 10 square meters large with mud and hay as walls and tiles as woof. On one side of the wall, rain coats and hats made from straw hung on it, and at the corner of the house there's a fire pit with no fire. At its side there were cauldrons, stove, plates, bowls etc, primitive cooking equipment that can only be seen in museums. There were a few chests of different sizes on the other end, and there was a copper mirror on one of the chests.

Xiang Shaolong felt a chill in his heart.

That crazy director said he will only be here for 10 seconds, so why is he still in this nightmarish place. Could he really have gone back to Emperor Qin's hometown.

Footsteps were heard.

Xiang Shaolong stared at the wooden door, his heart beating quickly, praying that this is only part of the experiment, a prank set up by Crazy Ma to trick him into believing that he's really gone back to the past in that accursed furnace.

The wooden door was pushed open.

A beautiful lady wearing ancient hemp garment who could only possibly appear in movies appeared. She has a red scarf on her head, her long hair parted in the center, swept to the sides, tucked behind her ear and plaited into two braids. She carried a bottle, and on her feet she wore straw sandals and walked in.

She looked pretty, her figure nice and slim, and when her lively eyes saw Xiang Shaolong staring at her in shock, she was so startled she almost dropped the bottle. She hurriedly put it down, knelt down in front of him, her slender hands touching his forehead. She said some words very quickly in her melodious voice, her face full of joy.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, "It's the end." and fainted again.

The sunlight irritated his eyes, waking him up. The house was quiet without anyone else.

He's in a better shape than the last time. Besides he's always been optimistic, so he stopped trying to think and tried to get up. He came out from beneath the blanket and realized he is now dressed in a weird looking ancient clothing that is at least two sizes too small. His collar crisscrossed around his front from the back of his neck and dropped straight to the ground. At the bottom he was wearing an apron like leather shorts, and looked absolutely ugly.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to hide beneath the blankets again and looked ahead. He saw that the roof was recently mended and remembered that when he dropped down from the sky, he landed on a man.

Is that person dead or alive? If he has hurt someone, why is that pretty ancient young woman treating him so nicely!

With all these questions puzzling him, he stood up.

He felt a wave of dizziness, and after a moment he found himself leaning in front of the window, his hands grabbing the sill, supporting his body. The sunlight shone on his face, making him feel a little better.

What really happened? Has something gone wrong with that accursed experiment? Why isn't he back yet? Will he be forever unable to return? Wouldn't his family and friends be really worried? And there's no way he can have his great revenge in bed with Zheng Cuizhi now.

Xiang Shaolong is so miserable that he could cry.

The weather is so hot, if only he can have a can of soft drink.

He looked out and saw the lush green grass, abnormally blue sky and clouds that looked even whiter and cleaner than cotton.

Xiang Shaolong's heart lurched, and knew that he has really gone back to the past. Why else would there be such an unpolluted sky.

The skin on his limbs has scars from the burn and luckily his is healthy and his skin is now renewing the cells, so it's not too serious.

After wallowing in self-pity for a moment, Xiang Shaolong felt his energy rapidly returning and his curiosity rising.

What is the world like outside? Can he really find the tyrannous Emperor Qin as depicted in the movies?

He pushed the door open and walked out. It turned out he is in a quiet little valley, a stream flowing down the back of the house out of the valley. On the right of the stream he seem to hear a girl's

singing. On the left is a mulberry forest, a place to cultivate silkworms.

Once he thought of the ancient beauty, Xiang Shaolong's mood lifted and he walked towards the sound of the singing.

The girl was dressed in white, her skirt pulled up and tucked into the waist, revealing the thin chemise under the skirt and a pair of round and slender legs. She was squatting at the side of the stream washing clothes and cutlery, her expression languid and humming an unknown folksong.

Xiang Shaolong saw her revealing herself, and she's quite pretty as well and desire filled him so he walked over. However he was still unsteady on his feet and stepped on a loose rock. He exclaimed in alarm and fell into the stream.

That beauty was startled and jumped into the water to help him.

Xiang Shaolong stood up in the chest deep stream and the girl happened to reach him and grabbed his hands to place it on her shoulder.

Xiang Shaolong was roused and took advantage of the situation to lean onto her fragrant body.

The lady spoke to him in shock and concern with a string of words.

This time Xiang Shaolong's brains is more alert and after some concentration he understood most of what she said. It sounded like a difficult dialect used around Hebei or Shanxi region. He vaguely figured out that she was reprimanding him for running around before he has fully recovered, and was so full of gratitude that he blurted out, "Thank you Miss!"

That lady was stunned for a moment. She stared at him and asked, "Where did you come from?"

This sentence may be difficult to understand, but Xiang Shaolong finally guessed the meaning and was immediately dumbfounded. What can he say? Tell her that he came from the 21st century in a time machine?

The two of them were still standing in the water, totally drenched. It doesn't matter to Xiang Shaolong but that beauty's clothes were thin and after being wet it showed off her curves, and she's no different from being naked.

The lady saw Xiang Shaolong's hot eyes staring at her chest. She blushed and immediately forgot her question, and hurriedly helped him to shore.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but take the opportunity to lightly knock into her breasts and the lady's face blushed even redder, but she did not object or reprimand him.

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic. It seems that the beauties of this era is even more open than those in the 21st century. All those talk

about not taking 3 steps beyond the house or having to marry the man once he sees her body were all far fetched, or it's those hateful Confusionist lecturing about morals during later years.

So it seems that, even if he does not return to the 21st century for the time being, life would not be too boring.

Xiang Shaolong changed out of his wet clothes and sat opposite to the beauty, eating the rice she cooked, with vegetables, mutton and braised meat marinated with five spices.

Maybe because he's hungry, but Xiang Shaolong enjoyed the meal, all the food tasted especially delicious, even better than peking duck or hamburgers.

The beauty ate and looked at him with interest at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking to himself that this is such a secluded place, and not a village or even another house could be seen, and yet she seems to be living a fulfilling life. Could it be that the past is really better than the present?

The beauty said something softly.

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, "What?"

The beauty repeated her words and this time he understood. She was saying that he's very tall, and she has never seen someone so tall.

He was secretly laughing that people of this era must all be short, and asked her, “What is your name?”

The beauty shook her head to indicate she could not understand his question and encouraged him to repeat 3 more times before she replied, “The people of Mulberry Forest Village all call me Mei Canniang. (Pretty Silkworm Lady)”

This time it is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to not understand. By the time he clarified it, the two of them were laughing happily. So Xiang Shaolong told her his name as well. The conversation flowed with such tries, failures and continuous work, neither party wanting it to end. When Xiang Shaolong is 80% confident of understanding her dialect, he asked her about what happened the day he fell in through the roof.

Mei Canniang blushed slightly and said, “The man you crushed to death the other day is a bandit from a neighboring village called Jiao Du. He followed me home all the way from the market and was going to rape me. Luckily young master fell down from the sky and crushed him to death. I’ve buried him in the mulberry forest.” She paused for a moment, her face reddened to the ears and she lowered her head and said shyly, “I was married to two brothers, but they were forcefully conscripted into the army by bad people and were killed in Chang Ping.”

The battle of Chang Ping, isn’t it one of the famed battles between Qin and Zhao, where the army of Qin killed all 400,000 of the Zhao’s army. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly asked, “How long ago did this happen?”

Mei Canniang replied, “It happened 9 years ago.”

The battle of Chang Ping happened in 260BC, then isn't it 251BC now. Crazy Director Ma wanted to send him back to 246BC which is the year Emperor Qin ascended the throne, and although he's off by 5 years, but considering the facts he's still quite accurate.

He asked, “What is this place?”

Mei Canniang replied, “Didn't I tell you, it's Mulberry Village!”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Is this part of the kingdom of Zhao?”

Mei Canniang shook her head, “I don't understand what you're talking about? I only know what happens in Mulberry Village, the news of my husband's death were told to me by the people in the market.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “You really married two husbands at the same time?”

Mei Canniang replied, “Of course it's true!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed quietly to himself. Although he has read a few books about the Warring States, but he's not familiar with the customs during this period at all, so he put aside this question and continued, “Did you not bear any children for them?”

Mei Canniang replied quietly, “After the two fathers of the children left, life was extremely difficult and the children all died of sickness. Later I learned to keep silkworms and life finally settled.”

Xiang Shaolong felt pity for her, this beauty has suffered much.

Mei Canniang said quietly, “I have been praying to Heaven everyday, praying to her to bestow me a husband. Just when I was at my saddest, Heaven opened her eyes and dropped you for me. I am so ecstatic, from now on you will be Canniang’s husband.”

Xiang Shaolong was absolutely dumbfounded. But it’s not too bad as well, he need not put in so much effort to explain where he came from.

Hai! It seems that he’ll have to depend on her to support him. Suddenly he had a flash of inspiration, and thought that in 251BC, Emperor Qin is still destitute in Handan, the capital of Zhao. If he can find and befriend him, when he becomes the emperor in future, then won’t his fortunes rise as well, and can have anything he want, including beauties? Once he thought of this, his heart itched and he asked, “Do you know the way to Handan?”

Mei Canniang shook her head at a loss, then her face turned pale and she chewed her lower lips and stammered, “Are you thinking of leaving this place?”

Xiang Shaolong climbed over, stuck himself to her fragrant back,

his hands reaching forward to hold her little tummy and said gently, “Don’t be afraid! No matter where I go, I’ll bring you with me.”

Mei Canniang’s body softened at his touch and she exclaimed happily, “Really!”

Xiang Shaolong nibbled her ear lobes and replied, “Of course!”

Mei Canniang’s two husbands were all coarse and unrefined men, so she has never encountered such flirtatious teasing, her slender body shook and she said, “I’m going to the market tomorrow, I’ll ask someone then! Someone will surely know where Handan is.”

Xiang Shaolong put his huge hand into her clothes and kneaded her voluptuous bosom, asking “That bandit Jiao Du, did he... heh... what you?”

Mei Canniang panted, “He just took off my clothes, and have not... Ai!” Her lips have been locked.

Xiang Shaolong has never seen such a gentle and accommodating beauty, so he hurriedly showed her his best moves. The whole room was heated up and moans and pants joined together to form an orchestra. Mei Canniang, who has been alone for so many years, finally tasted for the first time the joy of being an equal with men in the act of copulation.

Xiang Shaolong felt an itch in his nose and sneezed. He woke up and saw that it was Mei Canniang teasing him with a mulberry leaf.

The sun has not risen.

He hugged Mei Canniang and pressed her down, using his body to put pressure on her sensitive areas, and even pushed her buttocks up with his hand so that she cannot avoid him while he greedily kissed her wet lips. Mei Canniang was totally caught unawares and almost lost her senses from the teasing. She kept crying out, and who knows if she was expressing her joy or objection.

Xiang Shaolong flipped her skirt over, revealing her round yet firm thighs, and was about to proceed when Mei Canniang moaned with a flush, “Shaolong! We have to go to the market immediately!”

Xiang Shaolong came to his senses immediately and stopped his assault. He warned her, “Do you still dare to be mischievous?”

Mei Canniang covered her mouth and laughed, “Yes! But not now, if we don’t go to the market now we won’t even have food for today.”

Xiang Shaolong was aroused by her heated body and hesitated, “It won’t take too much time to do it just once, right?”

Mei Canniang suddenly hugged him and said gently, “My good man! Besides eating some food after lunch yesterday, you have been doing it to me until I fell asleep. You’re even more capable than my two husbands added together and now you want to continue. Are you trying to kill me! Get up quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong thought of her hunger and charm last night and felt desire again, but once he thought of looking for Emperor Qin, he can only suppress his lust and climbed out.

Mei Canniang took out a set of clothes and said, “I made this for you when you were unconscious, you’ll certainly look very good wearing it.”

With her help, Xiang Shaolong wore it and it fitted him perfectly. It may be made of coarse material and hemp but Mei Canniang’s eyes shone on seeing it and complimented him, “Mei Canniang has never seen any man as handsome as you in the world.” And used a cloth to tie his growing hair before going on their way after washing up.

Xiang Shaolong carried a whole bag of silk, with a hatchet around his waist, straw shoes on his feet and followed Mei Canniang out of the valley, towards the ancient civilization 2000 years ago.

Book 1 Chapter 3 – Showing Off For The First Time

The two of them walked down the hill in the darkness preceding dawn, towards the marketplace beyond the endless hills.

Xiang Shaolong has never felt so much love and infatuation towards any women before. He carried her and ran down. To a warrior like him who has gone through special training, this is as easy as breathing.

However Mei Canniang was extremely surprised, but once she thought that he is a gift from Heaven, she no longer felt bewildered.

Xiang Shaolong asked her effortlessly, “How did you end up marrying that two brothers? Where is your own family?”

Mei Canniang screamed in shock just as he jumped. She patted her chest and her pretty face was blushing from the excitement. She replied, “I live in a place that is 3 day’s journey towards the sun. One day, the two brothers came with 10 tiger skins, 1 bear skin, 50 marten skins, 5 cows and 100 goats and gave to my father in exchange for me. Our tribe has never seen such extravagant gifts, so I married them.”

Xiang Shaolong carried her up by her waist and waded through a 3 meter wide river, thinking to himself that if he has the latest AK47, then he can hunt for tiger skins in exchange for women. He asked her, “How old were you then?”

Mei Canniang held on to his neck tightly and whispered in his ear, “14!”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “What? That’s below the legal age for intercourse!”

When they reached the main road outside the mountainous area, the sun revealed it’s first ray of light.

This couple who should have been separated by over 2000 years walked closely side by side, chatting happily.

Mei Canniang finally found someone, and after spending the most exciting and romantic night in her life, she was ecstatic. She was pulling Xiang Shaolong like a little girl, kicking her little straw sandals, walking cheerfully. The painful journey in the past has now become an endless joy, and she said with a laugh, “In the past I had to walk at least 20 hours to the market, but ever since someone built this road for military transport, it takes only 8 hours to reach the market. A lot of time has been saved.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, so war can actually promote the development of transportation, and indirectly boost the economy and increase efficiency. So it seems that, in this era, there are advantages to wars.

Hai! A pity he can’t bring anything here. If he has a machinegun, or even a gun, he may become the highest paid soldier in this warring states period.

He can't help but laugh once he thought of this.

Then he thought of the queen of bars Zhou Xiangmei and Zhang Cuizhi who caused him to end up in this state. And his parents, they always said that he's unfilial, his 2 older brothers and 3 older sisters are all better than him. Now that he's gone, he reckons that they won't be too sad. But he still felt that this is not the case. A pity that he can't give them a call right now to tell them that he's safe.

The sound of wheels grating along the ground sounded behind. It turned out to be a mule cart going towards the market, with a dozen or so white sheep on it. On the cart there were an old and a young man dressed as farmers and when they gave a friendly greeting, they were surprised and scrutinized the tall and well-built Xiang Shaolong. In contrast, they weren't too surprised about Mei Canniang's beauty.

After the mule cart was far gone, a few horses ran swiftly past and the men riding them were dressed like ancient warriors, on their horses there were bows, swords, axes etc, but they were not from the army.

The two of them avoided them and stood aside.

Mei Canniang spoke in his ear, "These warriors are all for hire. They help merchants transport money, and it's the most profitable business."

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Ha! Finally there’s a job suitable for me!”

Mei Canniang shrieked, “No! I cannot lose a husband like you again.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled and after reassuring her, they continued on their way.

The nearer they got to the market, the more crowded the roads became. Most of them were pushing wooden carts with a single wheel, carrying various goods like corn, millet, sorghum, rice, wheat, garlic, cows, goats etc and all of them were hurrying towards the same destination.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize how huge he is. The tallest among the people is still shorter than him by half a head and he looked around complacently, feeling like a crane among chickens.

After another hour, they finally arrived at the market.

40 odd kinds of mud houses, straw houses and stone houses were lined up untidily on two sides, forming a wide street. Various kinds of harvests and animals, buyers and sellers filled the mud road that was about half a mile long, a feeling of festivity filled the air.

They had just stepped into the market when Mei Canniang cried out quietly in fear, “Look! The group of men on the left is the bandit Jiao Du’s brothers. They’re staring at us, what should we

do?”

Xiang Shaolong gathered his wits and walked alertly forward.

A group of 10 odd powerful looking men who are obviously the town bullies were standing or sitting in front of a mud house but their eyes were fixed onto them in astonishment.

Mei Canniang continued, “They surely know about Jiao Du looking for me, and thought that I’ve become his woman. So when they saw it’s you instead, they were astonished. Oh dear, we better leave immediately!”

Xiang Shaolong scrutinized the crude metal swords they carried with his professional judgment and gave them a suave smile. He said to Mei Canniang, “My wife, do not panic. Your husband is here, no one will be able to hurt a single hair of yours.” He realized that the words he used is getting more and more similar to what these ancient people uses that he can’t help but laugh out loud.

Mei Canniang was so frightened her face turned pale, and pulled him towards the other end of what you can hardly call a ‘street’.

The two of them melted into the crowd. While others were sizing him up, Xiang Shaolong was taking note of his surroundings without any concern.

All these people from the warring states, just from the way they dressed, he can tell that they came from different places.

Regardless of men or women, most of them have a flat face, short, rough skin, very few of them has the same alluring body and pretty face like Mei Canniang. But they all looked simple and honorable, giving others a good impression.

The only exception was the men and women wearing unique red headpieces. Their hats were not like the hats that he's used to, which covers the top of a person's head. Instead it covers only the hair, which was tied into a bun, two red ropes hanging down from the side and tied into a knot under the chin.

The men and women of this tribe were not only tall and good looking, the women were fair and wore extremely sexy short tops and skirts which bared the chest and arms. It really was an eye-opener for him and quite unbelievable as well, changing his perception that all ancient people must be conservative.

A few of those young women were exceptionally outstanding, almost as pretty as Mei Canniang, and almost all of them trade in horses.

When Xiang Shaolong made eye contact with the prettiest girl among them, those beauties all made eyes at this fine specimen of a man from another dimension, not at all bothered that his eyes was fixated on their half naked chest and slender legs.

Mei Canniang felt much safer once they're among the crowd and when she saw his lecherous look, she's not offended at all. She said quietly, "They're all from the Baiyi tribe, expert in rearing horses. All the men and women are very good hunters, no one dares to bully them."

Xiang Shaolong felt his heart itching, but he was pulled into a mud house by Mei Canniang who took over the silk he was carrying and proceeded to do business with the man inside.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to slip out of the house.

“Dang! Dang! Dang!”

Copper bells sounded in the biggest stone house opposite, and someone shouted, “Quality horse for 30 coppers! Quality horse for 30 coppers!”

Xiang Shaolong was curious and walked forward. On the stairs of the large house stood ten over huge men wearing similar clothes as those riders they met on the way here. One of them wore a tall headpiece, his clothes were comparatively more splendid, a difference of heaven and earth with the coarse clothes worn by the farmers.

He may have good eyesight, but from a distance of over ten meters, he can only see that person has a square face and large ears, with a solemn look, and carried with him an air of affluence.

There was an immediate commotion in the market as the horse traders all squeezed forward with their horses and the situation was chaotic.

Right at this time, he heard a cold snort next to him.

By the time Xiang Shaolong was aware, those brothers of Jiao Du have already surrounded him heavily.

He unhurriedly took 2 steps back, and pushed Mei Canniang back into the house just as she was walking out. He asked quietly, "Does one have to go to jail for murder here?"

Mei Canniang asked in surprise, "What is jail?"

Xiang Shaolong rephrased his question, "Does anyone care if someone gets killed?"

Mei Canniang understood a little and replied, "Besides their own tribesmen, no one else will bother." She then added, "You're not going to fight with so many of them right? They have swords! I can give them the money I've just bartered for."

Xiang Shaolong was assured and thought, in this time period, nothing is more useful than strength and martial arts. All the tough training he had in the past will not go to waste at all.

One of Jiao Du's brother shouted, "Mei Canniang! Where is Big Brother Jiao? And who is this stinking man?"

By now those people on the street are starting to realize that something is happening here and all came forward to watch the show. Even that well dressed man who is here to buy horses and his men all stopped their trade and walked towards them.

Xiang Shaolong, who is used to creating trouble and fighting was assured and he laughed loudly, “Your Big Brother Jiao has been killed, come over if you want revenge.”

Mei Canniang was so frightened that she shivered and hugged him tightly from behind.

The expression on their faces changed at the same time and with a ‘swish’ they all pulled out their swords.

Xiang Shaolong slowly pushed Mei Canniang away and pulled out the hatchet from his waist. Immediately there were sighs and pitying noises coming from the crowd, saying that he does not know his own capability, actually using a hatchet to block swords.

2 burly men rushed towards him with their swords raised, slashing towards him from the left and right.

The crowd screamed, and one of the Baiyi beauties who were making eyes with Xiang Shaolong covered her eyes, not daring to look further.

Xiang Shaolong roared and his hatchet swung forward fast as lightning.

In his nearly 10 years of strict training, there is a saying that anything can be used as a weapon. These two men in front may be brave and ruthless, but he does not take them into account at all.

He can even easily defeat them empty handed, much less with a hatchet in his hands now.

“Clang clang”, the long swords were swept away. Xiang Shaolong ran forward like an arrow, his left fist punching a man’s face, his leg giving a flying kick towards the other man’s groin.

The two of them immediately cried and fell down, their long swords dropping from their hands.

Xiang Shaolong then retreated to where Mei Canniang was, his hatchet held in front of him, with a combat ready pose, shouting at the shocked crowd, “Come!”

The rest hesitated, not one of them dared to lead the fight. They have never imagined that there are such swift and vicious attacks.

Xiang Shaolong gave a long laugh and leapt out like a ferocious tiger, his hatchet slashing down and was embroiled in a battle with those 20 odd people.

He moved swiftly so that the enemy has no chance to group together and in no time they all fell to the ground, either felled by his punches or his kicks.

The crowd kept cheering for him, obviously they’ve had enough of those bullies.

When Xiang Shaolong became the ultimate winner, he picked up

the best sword among the pile and tied it to his waist.

The crowd cried out, and a few people rushed forward followed by the rest of the crowd. They picked up sticks or hoes or similar weapons and started hitting those bullies on the ground. It seems that in the face of public fury, none of them will be able to survive.

Mei Canniang ran over and hugged him tightly, exclaiming, “Heavens! You’re really brave! I will never have to fear bullies again.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and walked towards the other end of the street and asked nonchalantly, “Have you found out how to get to Handan?”

Mei Canniang replied, “There’s some who have heard of this place, but do not know how to get there.”

Footsteps can be heard behind them and someone called out, “Brave man, please hold your steps!”

Xiang Shaolong turned around while still hugging Mei Canniang and saw that man dressed in fine robes who was buying horses walking towards them.

Xiang Shaolong, Mei Canniang, and that well dressed man sat down on the floor in a big room.

Xiang Shaolong studied the man, and guessed that he’s about 40

years old, his features gives an impression of intelligence and his skin smooth. Obviously he has never done any manual labor in his life and compared to the farmers at the market, it's like the difference between a city man and a poor country man.

That man introduced himself, "I am Tao Fang, one of the 12 servants of Master Wu. Brave hero, your accent sounds strange, I wonder where you're from?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "My wife and I are both from Mulberry Village. I wonder if Master Tao has invited me here for some deals?"

Tao Fang looked perplexed, obviously not understanding his choice of words, so he could only guess part of the meaning. Luckily he's used to trading with various tribes, so he nodded and said, "Is brave hero interested in earning a large sum of money."

Xiang Shaolong looked at Mei Canniang.

She gave a sweet smile and nodded, indicating that she has no objections to any decisions he makes. To her, a man's words are orders.

Xiang Shaolong felt released from the binds of military rules, and feeling carefree, nodded, "Would Master Tao please enlighten me!"

Tao Fang leaned forward and said excitedly, "With brave hero's marvelous skills, you can block 100 men with ease. If you agree to

become my bodyguard, I can pay you 50 coppers every month, what do you think?”

Mei Canniang exclaimed “Ah!”, grabbed his arm and uttered, “That’s enough to sustain us for one year.”

Xiang Shaolong took a whiff at her face and replied, “The offer is very attractive, but we’re planning to go to Handan!”

A hint of a smile appeared at the corner of Tao Fang’s lips and he said calmly, “Hero must not have heard of the great name of our Master Wu. He is the finest ‘King of Livestock’ in Handan. After collecting enough horses all over the place, we will send them to Handan. If hero will become my bodyguard, won’t it be killing two birds with one stone.”

Xiang Shaolong replied joyously, “But I’m going to bring her along!”

Tao Fang looked at Mei Canniang and laughed, “Don’t worry! Besides buying fine horses, we also purchase beauties from various places, so there’s no problem at all if hero wants to bring your beauty along.” He furrowed his brows as he looked at his clothes and continued, “I’ll order someone to clean up a place for you and your wife to rest as well as get you some new clothes. We’ll return to Handan at the break of dawn tomorrow. What weapons do you use, if it’s swords, I’ll immediately give you a good sword made by an old blacksmith in Handan. You can throw away the one you picked up earlier.”

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing, and asked “How long will it take to get to Handan?”

Tao Fang has obviously taken a liking to him and replied without irritation, “On a fast horse, about 10 days. But the way we are going to travel, and having to purchase horses and beauties on the way, we’ll take at least a month.”

Xiang Shaolong was in a good mood, and once he thought that he’ll be able to find Emperor Qin in Handan, he immediately said there’s no problem.

So this matter was thus settled.

Tao Fang ordered someone to bring him to a camp near the market. The person who led the way is Li Shan, also a bodyguard. He was very impressed with his skills, so naturally he was extremely respectful.

The camp was heavily guarded, with a guard in front of the 30 odd tents, either to prevent the beauties from escaping, or to prevent thieves.

Next to the camp there was a temporary erected horse enclosure, with more than a hundred horses kept in there.

Li Shan introduced Xiang Shaolong to the head of the bodyguards Dou Liang. The fierce looking warrior sized him up coldly and said disdainfully, “Since Brother Xiang is so capable, I must exchange

pointers with you when I have the chance.” After he spoke, he eyed Mei Canniang lecherously, obviously disregarding Xiang Shaolong’s presence.

Li Shan was a little embarrassed and led the two of them to a tent at the edge of the camp and left after a few words.

The two went into the tent.

Mei Canniang lowered her head and did not speak, but it was obvious she was troubled.

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and said gently, “There’s no need to be afraid of that Dou Liang. Sooner or later I’ll find a chance to teach him a lesson. I, Xiang Shaolong is not afraid of any bullies at all.” And he can’t help but think of Black Faced Deity.

Mei Canniang said quietly, “City folks are all deceitful, I’m afraid I won’t be used to that kind of life.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that modern folks are a hundred times worse than you ancient people, but he assured her, “With me to protect you, what is there to fear?”

Mei Canniang’s eyes reddened, collapsed into his arms and cried piteously, “Everyone who lives in Mulberry Forest Village are good people, our lives fulfilling, getting better year by year. And now that the bullies Jiao Du and his men are dead, it’ll be even more peaceful. Husband! Why don’t we return there to stay, happily

until we grow old and die, and I'll have children with you, isn't that better?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly, he's so used to indulgences in life, how will he ever get used to such a life. He said gently, "Why don't we do this! I'll borrow 100 coppers from Tao Fang, that'll be enough for your living expenses for 2 years, and I'll forge a path in Handan. Once I am successful, I'll come back for you, won't that benefit both of us?"

Mei Canniang stammered, "Won't it mean that I'll have to part from you?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "At the earliest it'll take a few months, the latest one to two years, I will definitely return. Don't forget that I am sent by Heaven, so I'll definitely not die."

Mei Canniang wailed, and just when Xiang Shaolong was at a loss, she came to a decision and tearfully agreed to Xiang Shaolong's suggestion.

Once they thought of the impending parting, the two of them engaged in joyous acts in the tent until dinnertime, when they left the tent to join Tao Fang for dinner. He brought up the topic of paying his salary in advance and without a second word, Tao Fang gave him 200 coppers straightaway. Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel impressed.

But that head of bodyguards Dou Liang was extremely jealous.

Tao Fang asked in passing again Xiang Shaolong's origins, but Xiang Shaolong still insisted that he's from Mulberry Forest Village, so Tao Fang did not press the issue.

Early that night they returned to the tent and continued in their engagements until the next morning. After an unwilling parting, Mai Canniang returned to Mulberry Forest Village alone while Xiang Shaolong followed Tao Fang towards the unknown Capital of Zhao, starting on his journey to look for Emperor Qin.

Book 1 Chapter 4 – Surrounded By Danger

They walked for less than 2 hours when it started raining heavily.

The 100 odd warriors wore their straw raincoats, escorting 12 horse carriages and almost 200 fine horses and moved forward with much aplomb.

Xiang Shaolong thought about Mei Canniang, thought about her tears as she parted, and felt an indescribable sadness. He almost had the urge to turn back and look for her but he remembered he had taken 200 coppers from Tao Fang and stopped himself. He is not someone who will go back on his words. He must at least work for a few months as a bodyguard.

The rain only stopped at dusk and the entourage stopped and pitched tents. 60 odd young girls came out of the horse carriages, all of them young and beautiful. A few among them were exceptionally pretty, comparable to Mei Canniang.

Although they all looked tired, but they were all in high spirits, not like slaves who have just been bought at all. They even helped to cook and talk and laugh with the warriors, which baffled Xiang Shaolong.

The girls realized that now there's another handsome man, Xiang Shaolong, so they all made eyes at him. A pity that he has lost the mood to flirt because he missed Mei Canniang and instead he went for a walk outside the camp.

The wilderness after the rain was crisply green, the air refreshing.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel sentimental.

No matter how pretty nature is, how alluring the world in front of him is, but surrounding him was undeveloped land, endless forests. It's only the beginning of man's destruction towards nature. But by the 21st century, they have reached the end of this path of no return, and humankind had to suffer the consequences.

If he has the power to change all these, would history be re-written?

“Shh!”

Xiang Shaolong was startled.

Amidst the rustling leaves, a Baiyi girl wearing a sleeveless top and short skirt, which revealed her rounded thighs, jumped out. It turned out to be the prettiest Baiyi girl he met the other day at the market.

She went to him excitedly and looked up to him, saying, “I've been following you for 2 days and nights.” She pulled him and said nervously, “Escape quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong pulled her into his arms instead and holding her tightly by her waist, kissed her lips.

The Baiyi lady reacted fierily, even hugging his strong neck, not at all shy.

Xiang Shaolong is believing more and more that women of this era, once they meet a man they like, are more direct than women from the 21st century, and felt his spirits lifting.

The Baiyi girl left his mouth, her pretty face blushed an endearing red and said hurriedly, “My name is Xiu Yi, come back with me to Mount Baiyi! If you follow those Zhao people to Handan, you’ll certainly be killed by Hui Hu and his group of horse thieves.”

Xiang Shaolong listened to her melodious voice, enjoying her voluptuous body, and his desire was just rising when he was suddenly shocked and asked, “What did you say?” In reality he only understood about 30 to 40 percent of her words.

The Baiyi girl Xiu Yi slowed down and said each word clearly, “A few days ago, our tribesmen received news, Hui Hu and his 800 horse thieves were preparing to lay an ambush for the Zhao people at Dashi Valley to steal their women and horses. If you go with them, you’ll surely be killed. They’re a lot more formidable than Jiao Du and his men.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood, his two ill-mannered hands continuously caressing her chest and buttocks and laughed, “Don’t

worry! I have a way to deal with them.”

Xiu Yi smiled coquettishly, using her chest to press against him and her arms to rub against him, asked with a smile, “I know you will not abandon your friends to save your own life, I shall not force you. But I’ve given you such useful information, how are you going to thank me?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly, “Besides copper coins, you can have anything else.”

Xiu Yi disentangled herself from his arms and turned a circle in front of him, saying with a flirtatious smile, “Everyone says that I’m pretty, do you agree? I still do not know your name!”

Xiang Shaolong stared at her, all his worries gone and replied, “I’m Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiu Yi repeated it a few times, and suddenly loosened her clothes, revealing a fair body that can make any man dizzy. She said with a smile, “Would this be prettier? The men in the tribe all love to look at my body.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong has seen a girl like that, he breathed in deeply and ordered, “Come here!”

Xiu Yi threw herself into his arms, and as she took off his clothes, she moaned, “It’s always men who have begged me, but this time I’m begging you. Come! Lover! I have not gone home for 2 days, if

you did not come out I'd have gone into the camp to look for you."

Xiang Shaolong returned to camp all relaxed and looked for Tao Fang. He pulled him to a corner and told him everything that just happened.

Tao Fang's expression became very somber and after a while, reached out and placed his hand on his shoulder and said, "You have saved my life this time. The problem now is not those horse thieves, but there's a spy among my people."

Xiang Shaolong nodded, "Master Tao must have kept the route you're taking to Handan very secret, not many will know about it. So if Hui Hu knows that you will be passing by Dashi Valley, there must be a spy who supplied him with this news."

Tao Fang was extremely surprised at his quick wit and complimented him, "I was right about you. Not only are you good looking, but intelligent and brave as well. Good! As long as I am still in power, I will not treat you badly."

Xiang Shaolong laughed to himself, it'll be more like it if Emperor Qin said these words to him.

Tao Fang hesitated for a moment before saying, "The spy must be Dou Liang. There's two reason why I'm so sure it's him. Firstly he excused himself from the group for two days, so he must have met up with Hui Hu. Secondly, out of the few who knows our route, he's the only one from Wei, and people from Wei cannot be trusted."

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed, “Since the Weis cannot be trusted, then why did you employ him?”

Tao Fang replied, “Shaolong, you have been living in the mountains, naturally you’re not familiar with the situation in central plains.”

Xiang Shaolong replied earnestly, “I really want to know!”

Tao Fang explained, “We have to start the story from the partitioning of Jin into 3 states, that was the beginning of the division of the whole era. It was said that the powerless King of Zhou isolated the states and after the split, Wei, Han and our Zhao kingdoms were forged and no one paid any heed to Zhou. If the past can be described as a peaceful stream, now it’s a torrential river. The change within the last ten years almost equals the change that has happened over the last 100 years. Those who are incapable will be ousted.” And he can’t help but sigh as he spoke.

Xiang Shaolong cannot imagine that a horse trader like him would be so knowledgeable, and felt the urge to tell him that no matter how they struggle or fight, Emperor Qin would be the one who unite the world in future. But of course he can’t say it out loud, and even if he did, no one would believe him. So he tried to get some information, “Is Qin the strongest and biggest state now?”

Tao Fang looked at him in surprise and said slowly, “Ever since Qin used the reformative policies suggested by [Gongsun Yang](#),

from the Wei ruling family, they've indeed become stronger and wealthier. They even destroyed Zhou 5 years ago but also incurred the wrath of the everyone else. Therefore after our state's great general Le Cheng, Yan She defeated Qin's army badly and 3 years ago Wei invaded and captured Tao Ju, Qin's most important city in the east, their strength was greatly diminished." He was obviously still concerned about the matter of the spy and was not in the mood for further discussion so he said, "Shaolong! I want you to kill that spy Dou Liang for me."

Xiang Shaolong patted his chest and said, "Leave this to me, but if the wrong person was killed, won't the enemy be even happier."

Tao Fang smiled coldly, "You're new here, Dou Liang have not figured out your background. You could test him with words, I'm sure he'll fall into the trap."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that he's smart, and nodded his head in agreement.

Tao Fang's attitude to him changed totally and said, "Anyone from Wei can be killed. It's only recently that I found out that he's from Wei, and have decided to stop using him after the completion of this task, but I did not expect him to strike first." He took out an exquisite sheathed dagger and handed it to Xiang Shaolong, saying, "Make it a clean job, after this I'll tell others that I sent him somewhere else on a mission. This dagger is made by a famed blacksmith specializing in making swords in Yue, and can easily cut a strand of flying hair. I'll give this to you, let it drink it's fill of that Wei thief's blood."

Xiang Shaolong saw that he spoke of murder like an everyday affair and was secretly startled. However, all the training he received taught him how to kill, so as long as it's the bad guys he's killing, he won't feel too sad about it.

Tao Fang was suddenly in the mood to chat again and said, "The Weis occupied our capital Handan for 2 years, and thankfully the State of Qi helped us force the Weis to retreat. But a lot of Weis were still left in Handan, and they became traitors and spies. That is what Dou Liang is, so you must not have any sympathy when you strike."

Xiang Shaolong went back to camp. All the other warriors were respectful towards him and now that the sun is setting, the land started getting darker.

From a corner of the camp sounds of girls laughing could be heard. In any case, Xiang Shaolong had to find Dou Liang, so he might as well walk over and take a look, and was immediately stunned. It turns out that the small river was filled with naked girls, all bathing and having fun in the water.

My god! Why are ancient women even bolder than the western ladies in Caen or Miami Beach?

A few warriors were at the side of the river enjoying this marvelous scenery, and one of them was Li Shan. He walked forward with a smile and said, "The quality of this batch of girls is very good, does Brother Xiang want to ask Master Tao for two to have some fun? He seems very impressed with you?"

Xiang Shaolong asked in bewilderment, “Where did you find so many pretty women? Don’t they feel that it’s very sad to be traded like goods?”

Li Shan asked curiously, “Isn’t Brother Xiang from the mountains? If women aren’t goods then what are they? If they were sold to some poor village or isolated place, they would have to serve the whole family of 10 odd men alone, isn’t that worse? Now they can go to the city, and if they’re lucky, they may capture the eyes of someone from a wealthy family. They’ll be able to wear jewelry, how much more proud can they be!”

Xiang Shaolong may be lecherous, but he’s always respected women so he finds it difficult to accept such an attitude. Therefore he can only stop talking about this subject and instead asked, “Where is Dou Liang?”

Li Shan smiled evilly, “Just because he’s the head here, he chose the prettiest girl and went into the tent, what do you think he’s going to do?” Xiang Shaolong was secretly furious and after finding out where his tent is, walked towards it.

Before he reached the tent, he could hear a man panting and a woman moaning.

Xiang Shaolong guessed that he will certainly emerge for dinner so he waited at the side. Indeed, after a while, the girl came out first with her clothes in disarray, followed by Dou Liang.

Xiang Shaolong walked towards him and as he walked past, said quietly, “Come alone with me if you have the guts.”

Dou Liang laughed sinisterly and followed him out of the camp.

They came to a dense forest and Xiang Shaolong turned around, taking the opportunity to hide the dagger behind his back and said respectfully, “Brother Dou, I am sent here by Hui Hu to help you.”

Dou Liang’s hand was already on his sword but once he heard that, he looked at him in extreme shock.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing secretly to himself and said, “There’s been a change in plans, Hui Hu has decided not to strike at Dashi Valley, and told me to inform Brother Dou.”

Once Dou Liang heard him mention the name Dashi Valley, he was finally hooked and said furiously, “What the heck is Hui Hu trying to do. What other better locations can there be other than Dashi Valley?”

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to step forward and said, “It’s at...”

Dou Liang shouted, “Stand there and talk!”

Xiang Shaolong drew out his long sword and threw it aside, saying with a bitter smile, “Brother Dou is too overly suspicious.”

When Dou Liang saw him drawing his sword, he drew his in retaliation as well but when he saw him throwing it aside, he was relieved and replaced his sword back into the sheath. His expression calmed a little and he said, "That old fox Tao Fang is quite formidable, how can I not be careful."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly stared at a spot behind him, his expression full of fear.

Naturally Dou Liang would turn his head back for a look and when he saw no one, he knows he has fallen for the trap. He felt a coldness on the side of his neck, stabbed by Xiang Shaolong's dagger, fresh blood flowing out from the vein and he died on the spot.

Xiang Shaolong walked over to his body and sighed, "When it comes to killing, who can be better than me, who is from the Special Task Force and well versed in anatomy?"

Xiang Shaolong returned to camp and other than the warriors on patrol, everyone else were gathered at the open area in the middle of the camp. There were 20 over tables, the girls taking 10 tables, and there was a campfire banquet. There was a wide array of food, and maybe because of this, the women were willing to become goods.

He walked towards Tao Fang, sat next to him and lifted 2 fingers in a sign of victory, to indicate he has taken care of Dou Liang.

Naturally Tao Fang did not understand his signal, but looking at his spirited expression, he knows that he has succeeded. He was secretly complimenting him, thinking that this lad has killed a man and yet there's no change in his expression, he's indeed a first rate assassin and killer. He said, "Shaolong, go and take a look at the ladies' table, if there's anyone to your liking, just take a few into the tent for fun, no need to be shy."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself, now why would he be shy. It's just that my body is not made of iron after all, after dealing with that insatiable Baiyi wanton, he has no more energy to enjoy another woman, much less a few. He spoke into Tao Fang's ear, "Is Master Tao interested in making a night journey, so that the enemy's spy will suddenly realize tomorrow morning that he's lost our whole camp?"

That night Tao Fang ordered his men to cover the horses hooves and the wheels of the carriages with soft cloth. Leaving behind a few empty tents and some straw men, they journeyed in the dark of the night until dawn before they pitched camp and rested hidden away in a small valley.

Xiang Shaolong slept soundly in his private tent, now he has become the head of the bodyguards.

When he woke up he realized that there's a pretty lady in his tent.

The beauty knelt on the floor, her forehead touching the ground and said respectfully, "I am Ting Fangshi, and have been ordered by Master Tao to serve Master Xiang on this journey."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly commending Tao Fang for his kind thoughts. He might as well enjoy the feeling of being a master, so he said, “Sit up!”

Ting Fangshi sat up straight, her voluptuous bosom straining to escape from her clothes.

Xiang Shaolong took a while to shift his gaze back upwards, and immediately recognized her as the beauty Dou Liang took into his tent yesterday. He remembered her tender moans and immediately felt desire, secretly hating Dou Liang for being able to pick a fine specimen. He sat up with a smile, reached out and pinched her face and said gently, “Who can bear to sell you?”

Ting Fangshi lowered her head and said quietly, “It’s my husband!”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, “What? How can there be such a man who does not know how to treasure a woman?”

Ting Fangshi guffawed, covered her little mouth and said, “Master Xiang talks so funnily, you’re different from the others.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, of course it’s different, we’re from a different time period! However he asked, “Is he inept?”

Ting Fangshi asked in alarm, “What is ‘inept’?”

Xiang Shaolong explained patiently, “It means a man who is incapable of copulating with a woman.”

Ting Fangshi finally understood and she shook her head, “That’s not the problem, but because he already had over 10 wives, and all of them snubbed me and backstabbed me, saying that I was flirting with other men with my eyes. So he sold me.”

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened, and felt that beauties truly have a hard life. Because her beauty has incurred the jealousy of the other evil wives. So he asked nonchalantly, “So did you flirt with other men?”

Ting Fangshi gritted her teeth and said, “Not initially, but I did later. Because I had hoped that a stronger man than him will come and save me. As long as I can get him and his wives out of my sight, I am willing to make any sacrifice.”

She then chuckled and said, “Master Xiang is different from other men. They can’t wait to take off their clothes and jump onto me once they see me, only Master Xiang will talk to me like this. I am very grateful.”

Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of pity, the women of this era really have hard lives, like a rootless duckweed, their fate totally controlled by men. His enthusiasm was dampened, the fire of desire he felt early disappeared totally. He stood up and said, “I think there’s a clear stream towards the east, I’d like to go there for a cold bath.”

Ting Fangshi did not really understand what he said, so after he explained again, she hurriedly stood up and said, “Let me serve Master Xiang with your bath.” She then added quietly, “That would be my greatest honor.”

The two of them stood naked in the waist high stream, with Fang Tingshi helping to scrub him. Xiang Shaolong was so comfortable he almost wanted to sigh.

Her pretty face blushed and her eyes shone, appreciating his strong muscles, and she can't help but move her slender hands from the back to the front, gently caressing his chest which is wider than an average man.

This is the first time she has seen such an endearing handsome man, and can't help but feel desire.

Xiang Shaolong was totally drunk on the feeling of unhindered contact with this beauty, feeling her generous bosom rubbing against his back and remembered how her chest looked like as it was straining tightly in her clothes and felt his desire rising again.

Suddenly he heard Tao Fang's voice on the shore, “If Shaolong is satisfied with this woman, then let her follow you in future.”

Ting Fangshi exclaimed, “Ah!”, her expression overjoyed. If she can become this man's mistress or maid, she'd be willing even if it means death.

Xiang Shaolong obviously knows that this is Tao Fang's way of bribing him, so after thanking him, asked, "Have the scout returned with any news?"

Tao Fang's eyes settled on Ting Fangshi's peaks, which was trembling slightly. When he bought this woman, he inspected her body personally so he knows how smooth and supple her skin is, so now he felt something. He swallowed his saliva and said, "Shaolong has guessed correctly, there's 3 thieves running after us but they've been killed. We have lost Hui Hu for the time being but we must not let our guard down. The horse thieves are good at tracking, and added with our slow speed, they will catch up sooner or later."

During his life in the army, Xiang Shaolong has long become accustomed to bathing together with his teammates, so he's not uncomfortable at all that Tao Fang is seeing him. However, for Ting Fangshi to be admired by him thus, he felt a little taken advantaged of, so he said "We'll leave immediately after the meal and see how far we can travel. Give me 10 odd men, I will hide the tracks of the horses and carriages." Tao Fang is getting more and more confident of him, so he nodded and said, "We'll depend on you, enjoy yourself!" and left.

Ting Fangshi turned towards him and said while hugging him, "Master Xiang! I will be yours in future."

How can Xiang Shaolong withstand the sight of her alluring body, so he carried her up and kissed her lips hardly and invaded her body.

It's the first time Ting Fangshi enjoyed such tenderness from a man, so she used all her might to express her willingness and joy.

Familiar moans and groans sounded in Xiang Shaolong's ears again like music from the heavens.

Xiang Shaolong showed all his moves gently, and let this beauty who has suffered in the hands of men enjoy a sweetness that she can never imagined.

Book 1 Chapter 5 – Display Of Invincibility

As far as they can see all around them, the land was a large lush plain of green, peppered with wild forests and winding rivers and streams. Nature is so breathtakingly beautiful.

Tao Fang suddenly sighed and said, “I’m in conflict when it comes to the Weis as well. The southwest of Great Jin has a corner separated by the Yellow River, followed by treacherous mountains. It effectively sandwiched the Qin’s only entrance in the east. After the separation of the 3 states, this section was taken by the Weis, and as long as they remain strong, the Qins will be trapped in the west and cannot conquer towards the east. Hai! So do we wish for the state of Wei to be strong or weak?”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Why does Master Tai hate the Weis so much?”

Tao Fang’s expression turned somber and he said, “Ever since Marquis Wen of Wei reformed Wei, he kept invading others, not only weakening us, but made the Qins stronger and become a danger to us. The chaotic situation now is all the result of the Wei’s actions. Secondary are the aberrant Qis who goes back on their words. When we joined forces with Chu and Han to attack Qin, they came to attack us and gave Qin the opportunity to eliminate the 2 states of Ba and Shu, thus expanding their land. All of them are short sighted people.”

Another warrior interrupted, “But the most idiotic would be King Chu. The Qins used only 600 miles of land to entice him to break off friendly ties with Qi. In the end they were left isolated

and without reinforcements. The Qins defeated them badly at Danyang and they lost 80,000 men, Hanzhong, northwest of Chengdu and Pingxiao which resulted in a huge setback for their state. Later he was lured by the Qins to go to Wu Pass and was captured by them. In the end he died of an illness in a foreign land. One does not know whether to pity him or laugh at him.”

Xiang Shaolong got excited upon hearing all these. In the 21st century there's no turmoil like this where the outcome can be determined by war. Only here can he show off his capabilities like a fish to water. By now he is thinking less and less about returning.

After the few of them discussed about their strategies at Shantou, they split up to follow up on their respective tasks.

Xiang Shaolong led 30 odd men and set traps and dug holes on the surrounding slopes to prevent the enemy from attacking them in the cover of the night. He also confirmed the emergency back up plans with Tao Fang, who nodded with consent as he listened.

During these few days, Xiang Shaolong would practice on his swordplay and archery whenever he is free. He had learnt all these in the past, but of course such skills were not as important as practicing their marksmanship at that time, so now he has to work harder in these areas.

To a full time army personnel like him, he is more adept at using weapons than anyone else. However he humbly sought advice from other warriors and improved on their swordplay, creating for himself a powerful yet unconstrained style of swordplay that is most lethal. Although he felt that it's still not good enough, but he

can't find a good teacher in such a short time, so he'll have to make do with it.

He only returned to the camp to rest late at night.

The beautiful and coquettish Ting Fangshi, who has been nourished by love, had just woken up and was about to change his attire for him when Xiang Shaolong stopped her and said, "I'll sleep in this tonight! I have a feeling the thieves will come tonight."

Ting Fangshi was so startled her face turned pale and she stammered, "What should we do then. If I end up in the hands of those horse thieves, I will surely be defiled, and face a fate worse than death."

Xiang Shaolong hugged and assured her, "Don't be afraid, with Xiang Shaolong around, I will guarantee your safety, I may stay behind to fight off the enemy, you'll go with Master Tao to Handan first and I'll meet up with you later."

Ting Fangshi's expression turned stricken and she sobbed, "I ask that Heaven have pity on me and protect Master Xiang. In the past I felt that it doesn't matter which man I follow. But now I know that if I don't have Master Xiang, I would not want to live a single day longer.

Xiang Shaolong knows that this enticing beauty has developed feelings for him and suddenly felt desire again. He licked the tears off her face, his other hand reaching into her top and working its

way around her bosom. For a moment he remembered Mei Canniang, and secretly thought that it was a good idea not to let her come along, or else she might have been frightened to death now.

Ting Fangshi's petite body shivered, her face red and burning, fire coming out of her eyes. Her little mouth gaped open, sighing and moaning, the expression of desire on her face thoroughly enticing.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly stopped, and said "I have to conserve my energy tonight to deal with any situation that might arise. Can you wait for a night?"

Ting Fangshi gasped and moaned, she has no choice but to nod her head in agreement. But once he saw her rapidly heaving bosom, he knows that she is now in a heat of desire that cannot be extinguished.

For the first time, Xiang Shaolong thought that how idyllic life will be if there's no war.

Ting Fangshi blew out the oil lamp and fell into this man's arms, making him out of control.

Xiang Shaolong hugged a ball of fire and snuggled into the blankets. He asked gently, "I forgot to ask you, have you ever had an affair with another man behind your husband's back?"

Ting Fangshi curled up and nibbling his ear, said softly, “He was very strict with me, but I frequently have to accompany the men he singled out. When he’s happy, he’ll let his relatives and friends have fun with me. Luckily it’s a lot better serving other men than serving him.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed to himself, women in this era has no standing at all, but just the slaves of men. From what she said, a married woman is not that much different from a prostitute. When he thought of the Emperor Qin in the movie, his mother was the favorite concubine of Lu Buwei, who offered her to his father, and no longer felt that such a situation is strange.

Under extreme exhaustion, he slept.

He suddenly woke up, and heard urgent footsteps coming nearer and nearer. Ting Fangshi was frightened awake.

Xiang Shaolong ordered her to stay in the tent and quietly took his sword and left the tent. He met a nervous looking Li Shan and knew that something’s wrong so he hurriedly followed him to the top of the eastern hill.

Tao Fang and all his warriors are all awake, crouching at the top of the hill looking at their surroundings.

Under the majestic stars, in the seemingly quiet plains, birds were startled into flight, and there were roars from ferocious tigers.

Tao Fang turned pale and exclaimed, “They’re coming!”

Xiang Shaolong is adept at observing his enemy’s movements, and guessed that their enemy is still far away and have not grouped up in force. He suggested, “Why don’t’ Master Tao escape with the women first, but leave the horses here. I will lead 50 men to engage the enemy and we will meet in Handan at a later date.”

Tao Fang knows that the horse thieves outnumber them and they’re all vicious and fearless, and felt a chill in his heart. He reached out and grabbing his shoulders, said with gratitude, “I’ll leave everything to you. You must keep your life and come to Handan to look for me. I will take good care of Ting Fangshi for you.” And he left in a hurry after speaking these words.

After a moment, Tao Fang and the women went up the horse carriage and under the protection of the other 60 odd warriors, left by the other passage that has not been laid with traps.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest immediately busied themselves, improving their defenses, increasing the depth of the trap holes, putting more ropes to trip the horses and such.

3 hours later, the horse thieves finally came. The horses on the hills neighed as the thieves surrounded the small hill. Murderous horse thieves were all around them, causing a chill down the various warriors’ heart, because they are really greatly outnumbered.

Xiang Shaolong felt himself getting numb and kept reminding

himself to calm down.

Suddenly footsteps were heard, 2 teams of 100 odd horse thieves ran up the hill from the east and west.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the other party is just testing them, so he instructed everyone to stand by their positions and not make any rash moves.

The 2 teams of horse thieves started making their way up, whooping shrilly, and causing anyone who heard them feel a cold shiver.

Halfway up the hill, the horse thieves split up and charged quickly forward.

The horse thieves at the forefront fell over, either falling into the pike holes or their horses tripped over the ropes, causing the men and horses to roll down the hill and knock into the charging horse thieves behind. Under this chain reaction, more than half of the 2 teams of almost 200 men were either dead or injured.

The warriors cheered, their confidence greatly boosted.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked the good luck, knowing that the enemy lost because they were careless and over confident, that's why they fell into the trap. He hurriedly ordered everyone to move to the bottom of the slope and hide in the holes without the pikes and prepare their arrows to launch a third attack to the enemy.

A few hundred torches lighted up the surrounding area, throwing the whole hill into fiery brightness.

A burly man with huge graying beard walked out from among their enemy, sitting proudly on a horse. He pointed and shouted, "Those damned Zhao devils. If I, Hu Hui, allow anyone of you to die with an intact body, then I will retire immediately."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly berating the other party for being stupid. Once he said that, won't he be forcing his opponents to fight with all their might?

Xiang Shaolong felt that his arm is stronger than others, and shot an arrow towards Hui Hu. The light weighted arrow lost its momentum before it even reached its target and dropped about 10 meters away from Hui Hu. However, this is enough to cause apprehension among the horse thieves. Who has such incredible arm strength?

The warriors were secretly cheering, but none dared to make any noise, afraid that the enemy will find out their location.

The horn blew and the horse thieves all came down their horses and split into two groups to attack from all sides.

Horse thieves with shields and spears, who under the light of the torch, made their way carefully up the slope, led the first wave of attack, spoiling the trap that Xiang Shaolong had laid.

Behind them were archers, who kept shooting arrows towards the hill, covering the ascent of the men with spears. However they did not know that Xiang Shaolong is already hiding in the middle of the hill in a hole designed to avoid arrows.

By now all the warriors were impressed with Xiang Shaolong's prediction of the enemy's moves and their confidence soared.

By Xiang Shaolong's estimation, the enemy still has about 700 men who can fight. Even if they can get rid of the 400 odd men who are making their way up now, their enemy still outnumbered them greatly. Besides, there's no way they can kill all the troops who are advancing now without causing casualties to their own people. He had an idea, and instructed Li Shan, who was by his side, "When the fight starts later, bring 10 men to the horse enclosure immediately. When you hear the signal of 3 long and 3 short horns, break the enclosure immediately and let the horses out. Let them charge down from the east, then we'll escape from the west."

Li Shan immediately agreed and went to look for his partners.

By now the first batch of horse thieves have reached the midsection of the hill, slowly coming closer. The atmosphere was tense.

Hui Hu and the remaining of his 300 men sat on their horses at the east side arranging their formation. They rubbed their fists and palms, getting ready to charge up and kill.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is in such a situation, and his heart beat wildly for a moment. He ordered, “Release the rocks!”

The barrier of 10 odd piles of tree trunks and rocks, which were hidden behind the bushes and grass, was removed and they rolled down like waves, breaking the enemy’s shields and causing them to fall.

Xiang Shaolong shouted, “Release the arrows.” All the warriors who were hidden in the burrows immediately showed themselves and their arrows fell like rain. The enemy was in chaos and could not retaliate at all. They were struck by arrows and rolled down the hill, suffering another 200 odd casualties.

The morale of the warriors were greatly boosted and they cheered.

Hui Hu was jumping mad and after retreating the injured men, he immediately regrouped his men for the third attack.

Xiang Shaolong observed how the other party was moving and knew that they’re putting their main force on the slope at the east. That area is not as steep and secretly thanking heaven for helping him, he ordered all the warriors to retreat up the hill.

There are advantages to having less men, the enemy will not be able to detect their movements so easily.

When they have all retreated up the hill, Xiang Shaolong told them to lead their horses and told them his plan. When the warriors heard that they can escape, their morale were boosted and they were all united, with no one making any objection. Until now, none of their men has been injured so naturally they think of Xiang Shaolong like a deity now.

The horn sounded, the horse thieves charged up again from all areas but most of the remaining 500 off horse thieves were coming up from the east.

Xiang Shaolong waited until the horse thieves were halfway up the hill before he ordered his man to sound the signal. Horses neighed and hooves drummed, a hundred odd wild horses were chased out of the enclosure and the warriors all hurriedly helped to steer the horses so that they ran madly down the eastern slope. They even used their long spears to poke the horses buttocks so that they will become even wilder. Amidst the flying sand, the wild horses galloped down the slope, directly into the horse thieves who were on their way up.

Xiang Shaolong has no time to observe the outcome and leading his 50 warriors, ran towards the western slope, running all the way down the safe path.

Only a hundred odd horse thieves met them, and because they were unprepared, they were quickly defeated.

Xiang Shaolong knows that his plan must be beyond the

expectations of the enemy. Hui Hu does not know that all the women have been sent away, so he couldn't have imagined that only 51 riders were left to charge out of the siege.

The eastern slope may be in chaos, but the horse thieves from the other 2 sides all came to help and for a moment, the sounds of killing filled the air.

Although Xiang Shaolong had learnt to ride in the army, but he's naturally not as adept as the warriors and horse thieves who grew up on horseback. When they reached the foot of the hill, he's already lagging behind the other warriors, who thought that he is so brave as to risk his own life to cover their retreat.

By now only about 30 out of the 50 warriors remained, and they hurriedly escaped.

With his amazing arm strength, Xiang Shaolong killed a few horse thieves who were pursuing him with his spear. He was about to catch up with his team when he felt a sharp pain on his shoulder, shot by an arrow.

Xiang Shaolong roared and urged his horse to run faster. In his haste he did not see where he is going at all, but only knows he must move forward quickly. In a short moment, he was all alone, riding forward in the vast plains.

The horse suddenly lost its footing and threw him off. He stumbled into the bushes and even the end of the arrow was snapped. The horse finally collapsed and died of exhaustion.

Xiang Shaolong felt his body getting weak and his head giddy, with a fiery pain behind his shoulder. His body was stained with fresh blood from the wound. He gritted his teeth and stood up. Taking the dagger Tao Fang gave him, he endured the extreme pain and cut out the flesh surrounding the arrowhead, and after that haphazardly bandaged the wound with his shirt.

He was parched, and knew that this is an indication of losing too much blood so he climbed up with much pain.

A ray of light shone from the eastern side of the plains. They have ran the whole night, no wonder the horse could not take it any more. He looked at the horse in apology and continued on his way.

He walked for 20 odd days in the deserted wilderness. Xiang Shaolong experienced the most difficult journey in his whole life.

The first few days he depended on wild fruits to stave his hunger. Later when his wound gradually healed after he applied mashed herbs on it to prevent infection and inflammation, his strength returned and he hunted wild rabbits for food. He was disheveled and dirty with tattered clothes.

Following Tao Fang's instructions, looking at the sun during the day and checking out the stars at night, he walked towards the direction of Handan. One day he came to the bottom of a huge mountain and looking at the tall and dangerous looking cliff, he had no choice but to walk around it. But he walked for more than

10 days and yet he was still walking around the winding mountain area. By the time he left the mountainous area, he was totally exhausted. Even his sword was broken and just as he was despairing, he found an official road outside the forest. He was overjoyed and bounded towards the road. By this time even his boots were torn.

On the way he met two groups of traders with a dozen men but when they saw his bedraggled look, they hurriedly moved away, totally ignoring him.

Xiang Shaolong sighed about the heartlessness of men. After walking for three more days, he reached another large city in the state of Zhao, Wu An, which is west of Handan.

By this time, the weather will turn cold at night, so cold that he'll be shivering. He wanted to go into the city but was chased out by the Zhao soldiers. He realized that all who enters the city must pay taxes and have their identities checked. The way he looked, like a beggar now, not to mention that he is penniless, there's no way he can enter the city.

Never did Xiang Shaolong imagine that he would become a pest that no one wants. Luckily he has been through rigorous military training and was especially resilient. He did not give up but waited for a chance outside the city gates.

He decided that after gaining into the city, he have to get clothes, food and a horse even if he has to steal or swindle. And after he finds out the route to Handan, he'll go there immediately to look for Tao Fang so that he can end this painful existence.

That night he ate wild fruits to appease his hunger, huddled up in the forest next to the road, tolerating the biting cold night.

When the sun shone on him as the day broke, he finally fell asleep.

Without knowing how long he slept, he was suddenly jarred awake by the sound of carriage wheels.

He opened his eyes for a look, and it turned out to be a group who was carting sheep. He was ecstatic and when no one was noticing, he hid himself in the last sheep cart amongst the sheep and stole into the city.

This city of the State of Zhao during the Warring States Period has a lot of elderly with tall and large buildings. The place was crowded, but it seems that there are more females to make. Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that this must be the after effect of Changping where the Qin generals killed 400,000 Zhao soldiers.

He was wondering if they have gigolos here, if there is, with his ability, he'll be able to make the ladies happy. He can then earn enough for traveling expenses, a good horse and fresh clothes to Handan.

Once he thought about this, he himself felt that it's hilarious, and jumped off the cart.

Once the people on the street saw him, they all gave him despising looks.

Xiang Shaolong touched the beard on his face and almost wanted to cry. Before he came into the city, he had a purpose, which is to figure out how to come into the city. But now that he's really in the city, he is at a loss instead.

He felt ashamed of himself and turned into a deserted lane, but was discovered by a group of children who were playing in the courtyard. They ran after him and made fun of him as if he's a monster, and were so mischievous they even threw stones at him.

When he turned around to scare them, the dozen or so children immediately scattered. One little girl could not run away in time and fell down.

When Xiang Shaolong wanted to help her up, the little girl was so panicked that she wailed loudly.

Immediately a few adults holding knives, spears, rods etc ran towards him with cries of murder.

Book 1 Chapter 6 - Leader Of The Mohist School

Xiang Shaolong did not want to fight them, so he can only run away. He later ended up at a dilapidated and isolated temple, walked in there and sat cross legged, hidden in a corner.

What should he do? Why don't he go back to Mulberry Forest Village and look for Mei Canniang and live the rest of his life there. Once he thought of this, he really felt that heroes are short-lived.

Suddenly, there was someone else in the temple.

Xiang Shaolong looked over in surprise. It turns out to be a middle-aged man wearing linen clothes, his feet bare. No wonder he did not hear any footsteps.

That man was tall and well built, almost as tall as him, his features plain, his expression calm. However his eyes were alert, and besides the cloth he bun his hair with, he wore no other accessories, looking a little like a monk on a pilgrimage.

The two of them eyed each other.

The man suddenly came towards Xiang Shaolong, squat down and asked, "Where did Brother come from?"

Xiang Shaolong did not know what the other party has on his

mind, so he said, “I was on my way to Handan to visit my relatives but lost my way and ended up here. If Sir can tell me how to get to Handan, I’ll be very grateful.” By now his accent and speech is about 70 to 80 percent similarity to how the people at that time talked.

The man smiled and said, “I’m not a sir, it’s just that I saw that you’re strongly built and good looking but although you ended up in such a state, you still have pride in your eyes, that’s why I asked out of curiosity. Tell me, what are you good at?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing, but he has to find out the route to Handan so he swallowed his anger and replied, “I don’t know anything, but I have brute strength. I’m not afraid of hard work or fighting.”

That man smiled, “Do you know how to use a sword?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

The man said calmly, “Come with me!” He pushed open the back door of the temple and walked in.

In any case, Xiang Shaolong has no place to stay now, so he followed him in. Behind the door there’s a world of it’s own. It’s an abandoned courtyard with high walls surrounding the four sides with a dried up pond in the middle. On the other end is a small stone house.

That man walked out of the house with two wooden swords and threw one of them to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked when he caught hold of the sword. It's actually a few times heavier than his previous sword, the wood was black, and he wondered what kind of tree is it made from.

That man saw his look of surprise and said, "This is a heavy sword made from a 1000 year old pomegranate tree. Fine! Show me some attacks."

Xiang Shaolong waved the sword a little, shook his head and said, "No! I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

A look of appreciation shot through the man's eyes and he smiled, "If your sword can touch my clothes, I'll give you a detailed map to Handan as well as traveling expenses and clothes immediately."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked when he heard that and quietly thought that this person is even more conceited than him. He laughed and said, "In that case I'll oblige." He went forward and was 5 steps away from the person when he made a fake move. He leaned towards the left, then moved to the right, his sword sweeping over, force meeting force, using the strength in his arms to shake his opponent's wooden sword away.

Who would have expected that that person did not move at all, but just moved his wrist. Although he struck later, his sword reached his opponent first and slashed diagonally at his sword,

then the tip of the sword slid forward as if it's going to stab Xiang Shaolong's face.

Xiang Shaolong was startled and took a step back. His opponent's wondrous swordplay made it difficult for him to use his strength. He felt piqued and with a roar, leapt forward like a ferocious tiger. Continuously for 7 moves, he danced madly with his sword like leaves falling on a strong, windy night, suddenly attacking the top or bottom, sweeping and chopping, attacking towards him.

The corner of the man's lips seem to curve up in a smile and yet he did not move, but no matter how he slashed, his opponent would just be able to block off his sword. His following sword moves were able to force him back, and there's no need for him to fight with him on strength. Although he only defended and did not attack, there's no way he can get close.

"Pak Pak" the sound kept ringing in his ears.

When he was striking for the 72th time, Xiang Shaolong was finally exhausted. He stepped back and panted, looking at this gentleman in front of him incredulously.

That man exclaimed in surprise, "So you really do not know the art of swordplay, but only depended on your strength and nimbleness. But if an average swordsman was to meet you, he'll surely have difficulty fighting you."

Xiang Shaolong gave him back the sword dejectedly, and admitted his loss, "I admit I can't be compared to you. Hai! To

think that I actually harbored the wish to roam the world. It turns out that a real swordsman can be so formidable. Farewell! I'll return to the mountains now and just live out the rest of my life." When he finished his words, he really felt completely discouraged and thought about the era he is so familiar with. If they're dueling on marksmanship, he'll definitely be able to win this swordsman.

That man laughed, "From the way Brother moves and talks, you're poor but yet you're not and your bearing is excellent. Obviously you're an upright and extraordinary person. Come! Have a bath and change into some clean clothes. I'll cook and we can have a good chat."

After eating 2 bowls of rice, Xiang Shaolong's spirit was restored.

The man saw that after he has shaved, combed his hair and changed into linen clothes, Xiang Shaolong seemed to have changed into another person and his eyes revealed a look of admiration. He said smoothly, "Just now Brother said you wanted to make a name for yourself, I wonder what kind of name are you looking for?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a moment, and replied with a little embarrassment, "I'm actually not too sure, but just taking things as they come. Now that I have clothes, I'm thinking of changing this dagger for some money, and it'll be best if I can buy a horse to bring me to Handan."

That man furrowed his brow and said, "A man in society all alone, how can he not have goals or aspirations. Only those who create opportunities are true heroes."

Xiang Shaolong was irked and asked, “What aspirations do you have then?”

That man smiled condescendingly and replied, “Very simple, which is to eliminate ‘the greatest bane to the world’, and to accomplish ‘the greatest benefit to the world’.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “These sentences are so vague, what can be considered the greatest benefit and the greatest bane to the world?”

The man was not offended and said calmly, “The greatest bane of the world, is like the strong preying on the weak, big states conquering small states, the intelligent suppressing the foolish. And the root to all these problems, is because there’s not enough love between people. If we can all love one another, hand over our possessions, then we can all share the wealth. There’ll no longer be fights over jealousy, and accomplish the greatest benefit to the world.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, “So you’re a believer of [Mohism](#).”

That man was baffled, “What Mohism?”

Xiang Shaolong asked excitedly, “Is your grand-teacher Mo Zhai, his teachings are very famous, on the same standing as the Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism and it’ll be passed on forever!”

That person was totally perplexed, but since he knows the name Mo Zhai, obviously he wasn't talking nonsense, so he nodded and said, "Mo Zhai is indeed our first Juzi, are you really from the villages?"

Xiang Shaolong asked, "What is Juzi, that I do not know."

That man thought for a while and explained, "Juzi is the leader of the 'Mohist Unit'. When we first started, we hoped to stop fights with fights, but we will only defend and not attack. A pity that the unit now has evolved greatly, and has split into 3 units, named after the place they are in, which is Qi Mo, Chu Mo and Zhao Mo. I am the previous Juzi, Meng Sheng's disciple and the purpose of my journey is to unify the 3 units again and fight for our dreams."

Xiang Shaolong asked solemnly, "Why are you telling me such a big secret?"

That man sighed and said, "Because I have the Juzi Token, so I thought it'll be an easy task to reunite the groups. But I did not expect that when I found the leader of Zhao Mo in Handan, he'd actually send his men to kill me. Therefore I escaped to this place and felt that a single person will be weak and helpless, so I must gather all my men before I can have a chance of unifying the 3 Mo. So how can I lightly let off someone with character and skills like yours."

Xiang Shaolong kept shaking his hands and said, "No way, I will not spill my blood over such illusionary and hopeless dream that

will never come true. Hai! Trust me! The idealism of Mohism will never be fulfilled. Once wealth is equally distributed, you'll get a lot of useless people instead. There'll only be improvement if there's competition."

That man's body shook when he heard this, and closed his eyes, deep in thought.

Xiang Shaolong begged quietly, "Why don't you tell me how to get to Handan. As for giving me clothes and food, I, Xiang Shaolong, will never forget your kindness."

That man opened his eyes, a gleam shooting out of it and said with a smile, "Nothing in this world is free. Learn swordplay from me! The day you can defeat the wooden sword in my hand, will be when I'll accompany you to Handan. If you're a man, then agree to my request! Or else even if you can reach Handan, but once you meet a real swordsman, you'll still end up dead."

Xiang Shaolong thought that it sounded reasonable, and asked with hesitation, "You won't force me to join your unit, right!"

That man laughed, "Not only will I not force you to join, I can forget about accepting you as my disciple. We're just friends exchanging pointers on equal standing. My name is Yuan Zong, you can call me Brother Yuan if you like."

Therefore Xiang Shaolong lived in this temple, waking up before the cock crows to practice swordplay with Yuan Zong, and discussed with him ways to attack and defend.

Even Yuan Zong was impressed with the speed of his improvement and praised him. A month later, he was able to attack and defend in his duels with Yuan Zong.

Yuan Zong will leave the temple everyday, leaving Xiang Shaolong, who is now obsessed with swordplay, to practice on his own. At dusk, Yuan Zong would return with food.

Three months passed hurriedly like that.

This day, Yuan Zong returned only at night, his expression somber. He called him into the house and thought for a moment with furrowed brows before he said, "They've chased their way here."

Xiang Shaolong has now forged a deep friendship with him, and asked with concern, "Who is here?"

Yuan Zong sighed, "It's Zhao Mo's Yan Ping. I was able to escape only after I injured 18 of his men. What he wants is the Juzi Token I have, because with it, he can conveniently become Juzi." He paused, then shook his head and said with a bitter smile, "What an irony, even within our own unit we are unable to love everyone, and yet we talk about our ideals."

Xiang Shaolong does not know how to console him.

Yuan Zong took out a square brass, with a single word 'Mo' on it,

It looked like a big square seal. He gave this to Xiang Shaolong and said, “Take this token and run towards Handan immediately. I’ve drawn a map for you, and over the past few months I’ve earned enough for your traveling expenses. Leave quickly!”

Book 1 Chapter 7 – Rising Reputation

Xiang Shaolong was extremely touched and he said determinedly, “No! We’ll leave together!”

Yuan Zong smiled slightly and said, “Does Shaolong knows why I wanted to teach you Mohism’s unparalleled swordplay?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head at a loss.

Yuan Zong explained, “I have traveled the various states and observed the people and in the end I changed my thinking. If we want the world to be at peace, the only way is to eliminate the separation of the states, and let one ruler govern everyone. Only this and a person capable enough to unify the world can fulfill the idealism of Mohism and accomplish the greatest benefit to the world. And this person is you, that’s why I taught you all I know.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed to himself, he knows that indeed there will be one person who will unify the world, and that is Emperor Qin. While he, Xiang Shaolong is just someone who ingratiates powerful people, hoping to find the young Emperor Qin and fight with him so that he can enjoy fame and riches. He secretly felt guilty once he thought of this.

Yuan Zong saw him lowering his head and not talking, and thought that he has been deeply moved. He patted his shoulder and said, “If you’re really grateful to me, then do as I say! All the men Yan Ping brought are expert swordsmen, and even if there’s only a hundred odd of them, the two of us will not be able to

handle them. I have tools for climbing the walls, I'll lure them away and you'll take the opportunity to escape. A man must not be hindered by small details if he wants to do something great. If you continue to be wishy-washy, both of us will lose our lives in vain. If the Juzi Token ends up in the hands of evil, I will not die in peace."

Xiang Shaolong reached out and took the Juzi Token, and it felt icy to the touch, obviously it's not made from ordinary brass. No wonder Yan Ping could not make a fake one. He sighed and said, "I really do not know what to say."

Yuan Zong laughed, "There's no need to be so pessimistic, it's not so easy for them to kill me. We may still have a chance to meet in future! There's a pair of shoes in the temple. Since you're not part of our clan, you need not walk barefooted. It'll be terrible if you step onto dog poop or something similar."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but burst out laughing, his tears rolling down his cheeks uncontrollably.

Suddenly a frightening thought crept into his mind.

If the despotic Emperor Qin, Ying Zheng was killed, how would history be changed?

That night Xiang Shaolong scaled past the city walls feeling grief and indignation as he left Wu An, knowing that he will never see Yuan Zong again.

This intelligent man with superb sword skill and lofty aspirations, after witnessing the disintegration of his own sect and how the Mohists became power hungry people, his motivation for saving the world died. He decided to sacrifice himself, hoping that his death can stir up Xiang Shaolong's blood so that he can use another method to fulfill his wish of accomplishing the greatest benefit to the world.

But how can Xiang Shaolong change China's history on his own? He's not Emperor Qin. But can he influence Yin Zheng, like how Yuan Zong influenced him?

Will the change be a bane or bonus to China?

The sun set and the moon rose, the stars changed. Without knowing how many days has passed, he finally reached the heavily guarded walls of the outskirts of Handan.

During this journey, he was totally immersed in the sword play that Yuan Zong taught him, which originated from one of the best master of the time, Mo Zhai. He also included modern society's most horrible assault tactics from somatic psychology and mechanics into the sword play. With such a task at hand, he forgot about time. Sometimes he'll stay more than a dozen days in the wilderness, staving his hunger by hunting wild beasts with the bow and arrows he made.

His physique became even stronger under such harsh conditions.

He had wanted to steal into Handan, but once he saw the tight

security, he has no choice but to walk obediently to the pass and told the guards the great name of Tao Fang's boss, 'King of Livestock' Master Wu.

The guard stood immediately at attention and went to look for an officer to see him.

After the young officer eyed him for a moment, he asked, "What is your name?"

Xiang Shaolong replied truthfully, "I'm Xiang Shaolong."

The expressions on the officer as well as the 10 odd Zhao soldiers surrounding them changed.

The officer barked, "Bold miscreant, how dare you impersonate a hero. He has already perished heroically half a year ago while saving his comrades in the battle with the horse thieves. I have a friend who saw with his own eyes that he blocked the pursuing men on his own."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, he did not expect that he'd become so famous. He let the Zhao soldiers apprehend him without a struggle, and said with a laugh, "What is the name of your friend?"

The officer said a name, and Xiang Shaolong hurriedly gave a description of that person's looks and build.

By now someone took out from his clothes the dagger Tao Fang

gave him. The officer no longer has any doubts once he saw it, and his attitude changed immediately. After asking what happened that day, and at the same time sent a man to report this matter to Tao Fang, who is in Handan immediately, he personally escorted him to the capital of Zhao.

That officer is called Ning Xin, and as he rode next to him, he said, “Master Wu is one of the most respected men in Handan. If not for him going around buying war horses, and donating to the country’s coffer time to time, I’m afraid our State of Zhao would have been destroyed long ago. Now the Yans have come to attack us, luckily our two great generals Lian Po and Le Cheng eliminated all of them and attacked Yan instead. How fantastic!”

Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to ask why since there are more females to males in Zhao, they still wanted to go all over the place to look for beauties. However, he’s afraid the other party will feel embarrassed and controlled himself from asking the question.

Amidst the talk and laughter, Handan appeared ahead.

Compared to Wu An, Handan is at least 3 to 4 times bigger, the river protecting the city is wide and deep, with tall and thick city walls, and it has the power to withhold ten thousand men with just one man. There were 2 camps of Zhao soldiers outside the city, extending to a fair distance, with a sea of banners, the scene enough to strike fear in anyone. Outside the tower, it was filled with sentries, with their swords drawn and the atmosphere tense.

Before they went into the city, a group of riders rushed out, and the person leading them is Tao Fang, whom he has not seen for a

long time. The remaining were all his comrades who went through life and death with him, with Li Shan being one of them.

When they met, naturally there was surprise all around, and Tao Fang and the warriors went into the city with him happily.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but asked, "Is Ting Fangshi well?"

Tao Fang's expression turned somber, and he said apologetically, "I'm sorry! I thought that Shaolong has died at the hands of those thieves, and after waiting for 3 months, I followed the Master's order and gave her to someone to become a courtesan dancer." He continued with a smile, "But don't you worry, I'll specially choose another 2 beauties who are prettier than her to serve you."

Xiang Shaolong felt as if he was punched in the chest, and he turned pale. It was only a moment later that he was able to ask, "Who was she given to?"

Tao Fang was secretly startled, he did not imagine that such a handsome and flirtatious man like him would actually have feelings for a bought woman. He sighed, "Sorry, I can't tell you, Shaolong..."

Xiang Shaolong said furiously, "Don't say further, if it has not been proven that I'm dead, you should not have given her away."

Tao Fang hid his feelings well, there was no trace of unhappiness at all and said, "Shaolong, go and have a rest and a bath first, I'll

help you think of a way. The Master will come and see you personally tomorrow. This is the greatest honor the warriors in our household can have, so don't miss the opportunity."

Xiang Shaolong's excitement was totally extinguished, and just roamed around the streets like a walking corpse, not interested in the grand buildings surrounding him at all. His mood was at the lowest point.

Without his protection, will this pitiful woman land from the hands of one devil to another?!

Is she being defiled right now by some other men.

Just as he was feeling despondent, Tao Fang gave him a push, telling him to stand to the side with them.

Xiang Shaolong was slightly awaken, and looking up the street, he saw the pedestrians and horse carriages all moving to one side, letting a grand looking horse carriage protected by 20 odd riders move past.

Tao Fang said into his ears, "This is the carriage of King Xiaocheng's sister, Lady Ya. She is a famous beauty in Handan, and married to Zhao Gua but a pity he died in the battle of Chang Ping."

The carriage slowed down, and suddenly stopped in front of them.

Just as everyone was still startled, a soldier rode over and invited Tao Fang over. Tao Fang was surprised and hurriedly came down from his horse and walked over to the lowered carriage curtain. After talking with Lady Ya, the horse carriage moved away. Tao Fang bowed as he sent them off before returning to his men. He smiled mysteriously at Xiang Shaolong, but did not reveal the contents of their conversation.

Xiang Shaolong reached the guesthouse and stayed in a solitary house. Tao Fang especially sent 4 pretty maids to help him bath and change. That night, he set up a feast with 21 tables at the great hall in the main building of the guesthouse and besides the warriors who fought with him that day, there were Master Wu's other capable assistants as well. There were dances and performances to entertain the guests and the atmosphere was celebratory.

But Xiang Shaolong thought of Ting Fangshi and Mei Canniang whom he has not met for a long time, and remembered the friends and family from his own era whom he may never meet again, and can only drown his sorrow in drinks. He was absolutely drunk and totally concussed even before the feast ended. In his daze, he seems to feel that Ting Fangshi has returned to him, and together they soared among the clouds.

When he woke up, he was lying on the carpet in the bedroom, the sunlight shining in from the window.

Sleeping next to him was a naked beauty, but she's not one of the 4 pretty maids.

There's not a flaw at all on her exquisite face, with distinctive outlines, and unbelievably sweet. She's definitely younger than 18, her black lustrous hair spread onto the blanket, in contrast to her fair skin and ruby lips, and her snow white arms really tugs at one's heart.

The beauty looked like a flower sleeping in spring, there seems to be tears on her pretty face, but she's also filled with the peace and satisfaction after a violent thunderstorm, emanating a soul-capturing brilliance.

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed 'oh my god', what has he done to this young girl who is even prettier than Ting Fangshi and Mei Canniang?

He can't help but quietly lift the blanket higher.

The gleaming hair of youth, a body perfectly proportionate, the beautiful scenery of breathing peaks appeared before his eyes. It seems that there were some remnants of a red stain beneath the tender and smooth long legs with the beautifully rounded buttock.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and put the blanket back.

The tears on her face must be related to this. He was drunk and muddleheaded last night, and has not touched a woman for almost half a year and actually mistook her for Ting Fangshi and was reckless with her. How can an inexperienced and tender young girl take it, no wonder she cried from the pain. He felt very apologetic,

but it's too late now.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and walked to the window and looked out. He saw 2 of the pretty maids watering the plants in the garden and when they saw Xiang Shaolong, they curtsayed shyly, yet they can't help stealing glances at his magnificent body.

One of the maids said, "Master is awake, I'll bring you a wash basin and help you dress up immediately."

Behind him he heard the soft moan of the beauty who was shocked awake.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly told the two maids, "Hold on!"

The pretty maid was understanding and she covered her smiling mouth and said, "If Master would like me to serve you, please call me anytime. Heh! My name is Chunying, her name is Xiaying, the other 2 are Qiuying and Dongying. It's so easy to remember, I guess Master won't forget!"

Xiang Shaolong was concerned with the beauty behind him, so he smiled and said, "Once I see the two of you, I won't forget for the rest of my life." And he turned around.

The beauty whose chastity was just taken by him sat up, the blanket sliding down to her waist, revealing her firm upper body. She lowered her head shyly, not daring to look at his face, and in a sweet and melodious voice said, "Shu'er pays her respects to

Master!”

Xiang Shaolong felt sorry for her and sat next to her. He held her petite chin with his hand and lifted her pretty face.

Her large and lively eyes immediately lowered once they came into contact with his gaze, her heart beating like a running deer. The way she looked, shy yet happy, the allure of a young girl, is indeed dazzling to the eyes and takes one's senses away.

Without hesitation, Xiang Shaolong is sure that she is the most attractive woman he has ever encountered, and was secretly thinking that Tao Fang is really formidable to give such a pretty girl to him so that he will work for him. He asked gently, “Is it still painful?”

Shu'er shook her head, then she nodded her head shyly, her blushing cheeks immediately spread, until her ears and neck were burning as well.

Xiang Shaolong immediately had the most primitive reaction, and Shu'er's lowered gaze happened to look at it directly and she was so shocked her body shivered, and she stuttered, “Master...”

Xiang Shaolong knows that right now she will certainly be unable to withstand a second storm, so he gently kissed her small lips, lightly nibbling the tip of her tongue, then kissing her eyes and face, followed by her neck and chest. Only when her whole body started trembling did he let her go and said with a smile, “There's no need to be afraid. I was muddleheaded after drinking

last night, but I won't be so violent in future. Have a good sleep now!"

Shu'er looked at him invitingly and said breathlessly, "No! Shu'er wants to serve Master."

Xiang Shaolong asked with concern, "Can you stand up?"

Shu'er's slender hand pressed down on his broad shoulder, thinking of using him as support to kneel up first, but her dainty brows rose and she sat back down again, her cheeks burning.

Xiang Shaolong is used to being flirtatious, and on seeing such alluring movements from her, can't help but reach out and fondle her chests before laying her back on the carpet and covering her with the blanket. Just as he was about to leave, Shu'er suddenly pulled his hand.

Xiang Shaolong looked at her in surprise.

Shu'er asked shyly, "Does Master still want Shu'er now?"

Xiang Shaolong reached out and caressed her face, saying with a smile, "I only want you to take a good rest now. Tonight I'll let you become the happiest and luckiest woman in the world." And he suddenly remembered Ting Fangshi and felt a tightness in his chest.

Shu'er used all her strength to grab hold of him, her gaze

meeting with his bravely, and said with feelings, “Last night Shu’er has already become the luckiest and happiest woman. I will never forget that ecstatic pain.”

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but kissed her hardly again, and even reached inside the blankets, delicately touching her lower body and slender legs, making her delirious before he left for the hall.

The 4 maids walked towards him and served him meticulously. The tallest among them, Chunying said, “Master Tao is here, he’s waiting for Master in the hall now.”

Book 1 Chapter 8 – Master Red Crown

While he was enjoying the earthly pleasures, Xiang Shaolong's mind was in a turmoil.

When he arrived here, everything felt surreal, like a dream. The era he sees before him has got nothing to do with him at all, so he went all out to enjoy himself without feeling any pressure from the society or the people, because he may suddenly be captured by Crazy Ma's machine and be sent back to the 21st century.

He's like a child who does not need to take up any responsibility at all.

But after suffering from injuries and his wanderings, this dreamy world suddenly turned into real flesh and blood.

The martyrdom of Yuan Zong, the sufferings of Ting Fangshi, various setbacks, all threw him deeper and deeper into this world mentally and spiritually.

Although he enjoys beauties and riches now, but he lost his most treasured freedom and independence.

In this warring states period, nothing is more valuable than a talent. One legalist Li Ke and one strategist Wu Qi, is enough to make the state of Wei a strong state immediately. Shang Yang is even more formidable, he single-handedly made the state of Qin the biggest threat to all the states in the east.

And the Xiang Shaolong now, because he stopped an army of almost a thousand ferocious horse thieves with fifty men, has also become a talent.

The various states only has 2 attitudes towards talent, either to keep for their own use, or to kill without mercy to prevent them from being a powerful opponent in future.

Right now Master Wu is trying to bribe Xiang Shaolong, using riches and beauties to make him sink deeper in. Therefore if he were to reveal even a little about his intention to look for Emperor Qin, Ying Zheng, he can be sure that he'll lose his life immediately.

To try and escape from such heavily guarded city walls is akin to a fool's dream. If Ying Zheng's father did not have the help of Lu Buwei, a wealthy trader similar to Master Wu, he can forget about escaping back to the capital of Qin, Xian Yang.

Even if he can find Emperor Qin, there's no way he can get him out of the city.

Will he have to work for the Zhaos indefinitely? If Master Wu asked him to kill people from other states, what should he do?

Xiang Shaolong sighed and walked towards the hall to see Tao Fang.

Tao Fang was hugging a pretty maid in his arms, his hands

roaming over her. He released her when he saw him, and warmly invited him to take a seat and to join in the scrumptious breakfast.

Tao Fang smiled slyly, “Shaolong you don’t know how much the Master likes you. Shu’er is a famed beauty from a noble family in the State of Yan, who was given to Master by the ruler of Yan. It’s obvious that he thinks of you highly since he is willing to give her to you.”

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, “Aren’t we at war with the State of Yan?”

Tao Fang was obviously very impressed by his choice of word ‘we’, and said frankly, “If we’re not at war, why would the ruler of Yan be willing to present such a beautiful virgin. It’s precisely because he’s not doing well in the war, so he’s trying to bribe our Master with such a huge gift, hoping that our Master will help put in some good words for him in front of our King. Hei! Now Master has given the Yan beauty to you, so it’s obvious that he will not help speak up for the Yans.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself that this is such a complicated situation, and changed the subject to ask about Ting Fangshi.

Tao Fang smiled mysteriously, “I’ve spoken to Master about this, he’ll certainly give you an answer, so don’t worry! As long as you have more accomplishments, the King would even give you his Princess, much less a dancer.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that things are not going well, but he had no choice at all. This feeling of being controlled by others is extremely frustrating.

Tao Fang added, “Now I’ll take you to the Wu’s Mansion to meet Master, don’t accept any invitations from your beloved brothers tonight. There’s someone who wants to meet you, but I cannot reveal to you now who that person is.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart lurched, and he remembered that Lady Ya who was hiding behind the curtains of the horse carriage.

The Wu’s Mansion was the grandest building north of the city, it might even be more appropriate to call it a castle. Tall and thick walls surround it with a moat going around, and the only entrance is a large drawbridge. There are no residential areas outside the walls, only gardens. The grandeur of the place exceeds even that of nobility.

During the journey there, it was the first time Xiang Shaolong really took notice of the people, the things in the city and the buildings. If not for the obvious fact that there are more women than men, it’s not easily detected that this prosperous city has just experienced war, and was even conquered by the Weis for 2 years.

According to Fang Tao, excluding the soldiers, there are about 100,000 families, each family has between a dozen to a few hundred people. Therefore this huge city has an estimated population of over a million people.

Inside the city there were farms, paddy fields and warehouses, so if they are being besieged, those in the city can still be self sufficient for a long time.

Xiang Shaolong followed Tao Fang and went into a side door past the drawbridge into the Wu's Mansion huge property.

After they went in the main gate, there was enormous training field large enough for a few thousand people, and an imposing huge mansion was facing the gate at the other end. Houses lined both sides of the mansion, and it seems that one day is not enough to tour the whole place.

There were a few hundred people on the training ground separated into groups practicing swordplay, horse riding, archery, and some were even wearing newly made armor and letting others hit them with various weapons to test the sturdiness. But the most exciting place seems to be the archery field, with almost a hundred warriors watching from the side, giving out thunderous cheers once in a while.

Tao Fang's expression suddenly looked awkward.

Xiang Shaolong unconsciously walked nearer, and saw that the archer is a heroic looking young man wearing a red crown, a yellow warrior's robe with a dragon sewn on it and black leather warrior's boots.

He's almost the same height as Xiang Shaolong, maybe an inch or half inch shorter, extremely well built, muscular and full of

charisma.

His eyes were shining, his forehead high and wide, his eyes and nose straight, his lips pursed into a line, with an indescribable air of arrogance and confidence.

Such a handsome and suave man is truly rarely seen.

Sitting on his horse, he placed his arrow on an especially large bow, the hand that pulled the string of the bow was holding another 2 arrows as well.

The string of the bow clanged thrice in quick succession.

The 3 arrows went one after the other, shooting out like a meteor. The first arrow struck the bull's eye of the target about 200 steps away, and the 2 other arrows shot right into the first arrow successively.

The audience was totally enthralled and cheered.

Xiang Shaolong was dumbstruck at the sight. He would not have believed such out of the world archery skill if he had not seen it with his own eyes.

Tao Fang whispered into his ear, "This 'Master Red Crown' Lian Jin is recruited by my nemesis Wu Hei. Regardless of swordplay, horse riding or archery, he's the best in the mansion. This time I lost more than a hundred horses and Wu Hei is already spreading

tales in front of Master. Luckily I now have Shaolong, so I managed to save a bit of face, but Wu Hei and Lian Jin will not let us off.” When he finished his words, his expression looked pained.

Xiang Shaolong sucked in a breath of cool air. His swordplay may be comparable to this Lian Jin now, but as for riding and archery he is far behind. He was just about to reply when he saw a white cloud floating out from amongst the audience. A lady with incomparable beauty dressed in white, with figure slightly better than Shu’er’s ran excitedly towards Lian Jin and spoke to him intimately. Lian Jin immediately handed the large bow in his hand to someone and spoke to her politely. His grace is indeed enough to enchant any beauty.

Xiang Shaolong’s breathing stopped, and he sighed appreciatively, “This must be our state’s most beautiful lady.”

Tao Fang sighed, “This is our Master’s most beloved granddaughter, Miss Wu Tingfang. She’s a little interested in Lian Jin, but Master seems to have the intention of marrying her into the royal family and Lian Jin is worried about that now. Come! Master is waiting for us.”

The two of them left the crowd and walked towards the great mansion.

Someone shouted from behind, “Master Tao please slow down!”

The two of them turned around in surprise.

That Lian Jin came towards them from the crowd, following behind him is the rare beauty Wu Tingfang.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but look at Wu Tingfang, his eyes made contact with her lively and mischievous eyes, and he felt his heart beating wildly.

Heavens! She look even prettier than a flower, unparalleled in her beauty when seen up close.

When seen from afar earlier he only noticed her chest, waist and legs etc, and already he felt that she's a little better than Shu'er, but she looks even more outstanding when seen close up. The unhidden freshness seems to gush towards him, taking one's breath away. Even though Xiang Shaolong had always prided himself on being a flirt, but now on seeing her he began to feel unworthy.

Like a cottonrose emerging from the clear pond, like nature's carving.

Her natural beauty seems to be made from the tools of the gods, her shoulder carved with a knife, her waist bounded by silk, her neck long and tender, her skin smooth and white, her bright eyes looking around prettily, her dimples sunken in a slight smile, her hair that floated like the clouds, with a jade green hairpin in it, wearing a warrior's clothes with pearls decorating it, her feet wearing tiny calfskin boots, looking exactly like a fairy who came from heaven.

Wu Tingfang saw him staring at her and showed her unhappiness.

Xiang Shaolong was startled from his daze and immediately looked at Lian Jin.

Lian Jin was sizing him up coldly, his expression none too polite.

Tao Fang is a wily old fox indeed, and hurriedly introduced the two of them.

Wu Tingfang said coldly, "Oh! So you're Xiang Shaolong, Grandfather is very impressed with you!"

Lian Jin moved a little closer to Wu Tingfang, to show his familiarity with this beauty, and said with a smile, "I am also very impressed with Brother Xiang, why don't we find a good day and exchange some pointers, and let me see the divine sword that can block an army of 800 horse thieves."

Xiang Shaolong can tell that although his words sounded polite, but it was full of sarcasm, hinting that Tao Fang had been exaggerating about this matter and he was secretly upset. He was thinking that if he can have a freestyle boxing match with this conceited man, he'll surely beat him up until his head is swollen like a pig. But if the competition is on other things, then he'd better avoid it if possible, so he can only smile humbly and replied, "Brother Lian's archery skills is unparalleled, I cannot be compared to you. I'm not qualified enough to exchange pointers with Brother Lian, but would hope that Brother Lian can give some

advise when you're free."

When Wu Tingfang thought that they were going to have a duel, she was quite excited but once she heard his reply, she was disappointed and chided him, "Coward!" before turning around and leaving.

Lian Jin is obviously very satisfied with Wu Tingfang's reaction, and he looked heavenward and laughed, "Brother Xiang really disappoints me, in that case I shall not make things difficult for Brother Xiang!" He turned around and ran after Wu Tingfang.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling calm instead, and with a nonchalant laugh, continued walking with Tao Fang towards the huge mansion.

Tao Fang nodded his head, "It's good to tolerate for the time being. Shaolong may be highly skilled, but I'm afraid you're still not his match." He continued with a low voice, "That lad has been going around Handan looking for people to duel with him, and everyone is scared of him after a few fights. I really hope someone can take him down a peg or two."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he's trying to instigate him, so he smiled and said, "If Master Tao can make it such that there's no restrictions in my duel with him, I am 70% confident that I can teach him a good lesson."

Tao Fang exclaimed happily, "That's easy, let me find a suitable location for Shaolong to show off your ability. How I wish I can see

that Wu Hei's expression immediately."

Book 1 Chapter 9 – Never-Ending Hatred

Xiang Shaolong finally saw Master Wu at the side hall, this person who is not of the nobility, but has the powers of a nobility, controlling the economy of the state of Zhao, the extremely wealthy man who earned his fortunes from keeping livestock.

Xiang Shaolong has never seen a man more grand than him.

Just the crown on his head was encrusted with two rows of 12 glittering purple jewels of similar size.

This rich merchant is large and fat, like a mountain of flesh lying horizontally on the seat, in the arms of a beauty who was cleaning his ears. Another 4 females were carefully filing his fingernails and toenails. Such an ostentatious display, even the emperor may pale in comparison.

The yellow silk robe he wore was twined with dazzling pearls with an air of luxury, the belt around his waist was stunningly bright, with gold and silver pieces reflecting off one another.

He was on a raised platform, about 3 floors high, and below the platform there were 18 warriors standing in 2 rows. Any coward who witnesses such a display would have been scared out of his wits.

When Xiang Shaolong and Tao Fang knelt down to pay their respects, Master Wu sat up and dismissed his maids. His thin and long eyes opened, looking at Xiang Shaolong piercingly, and after

sizing him for a moment, said with a cold snort, “Xiang Shaolong, why didn’t you accept Lian Jin’s challenge. Is it because you don’t live up to your reputation at all, but only relied on your commanding looks?”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked.

Tao Fang was about to speak up.

Master Wu gave a loud shout and raised his hand to signal Tao Fang to shut up. His face was already swollen with flesh, and now his features are all scrunched up even more tightly together in the middle of his face and he said with displeasure, “Lian Jin may be a valuable talent, but he’s still from the state of Wei, and not from our state. That’s why I specially ordered him to challenge you so that we Zhaos can show off our prowess. Now that you backed down from the challenge, what else do you have to say.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing him, but he said without arrogance or servility, “What Shaolong learnt was for killing, and not for such games such as exchanging pointers.”

Master Wu laughed icily, “What’s the difference between the two.”

By now Xiang Shaolong has figured out the character of this rich merchant of livestock, and said haughtily, “The way to kill, is to use all methods, to be ruthless, to kill the enemy at all costs. But exchanging pointers in a duel, is just to see whose swordplay is more beautifully executed, it’s more a game than a battle, so

naturally it's another matter altogether."

Master Wu's expression warmed slightly, but he was still not satisfied, and said each word clearly, "I can't possibly ask you to kill a few of my men just like that, so how do I know if you're really that capable?"

Xiang Shaolong's eyes gleamed, and stared back at him without fear. He said with a slight smile, "Since Master has such expectations of me, I will have a duel with Lian Jin, but there must not be any rules on my methods of winning him."

Master Wu stared at him for a while before bursting out into laughter and said, "Very interesting child. His Majesty has always wished that a Zhao would be able to humiliate Lian Jin and help our state of Zhao regain some face. Fine! Then let me arrange a feast, if you can defeat Lian Jin in front of his Majesty, I'll give Fang Tingshi back to you."

Xiang Shaolong knelt down happily, secretly thinking that if he doesn't beat Lian Jin up like how he thrashed Black Faced Deity, he'll write his name Xiang Shaolong backwards.

Master Wu and Tao Fang looked at each other, extremely baffled at his joy and confidence.

Could it be that he really thinks that he can defeat the unparalleled Lian Jin?

They have just returned to the guest house and Xiang Shaolong was about to slip away to find Shu'er when he bumped into Li Shan and two warriors who is quite close to him at the main door and they dragged him out to celebrate his return.

The 4 of them roamed the streets happily, flirting with the beauties they saw, thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Li Shan said with a laugh, "Handan's beauties are famous for being easy to woo, with Brother Xiang's capabilities, you only have to hook your fingers and I guarantee all the beauties will queue up for Brother Xiang to choose from."

The warrior called Han Dong added, "But Brother Xiang need not find women on the streets today, we've especially found some sweet ladies to accompany you."

Another warrior Zha Bei put his arms around his shoulder and said, "Don't ever think that we're finding some used goods as obligations. We've specially prepared for Brother Xiang the noble daughter of a high-ranking officer, who is outstandingly beautiful. She can only blame her father for antagonizing the Emperor, so she was demoted to become a prostitute for officials. I guarantee that Brother Xiang will be satisfied."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows when he heard that, and began to understand why Yuan Zong wanted to change this world. Ai! But how can he have the capability to fulfill his dream. What he can do is to give these ill fated women who has become prostitutes a little more gentleness and love, and by the time he thought of that, he was already pushed into a grand mansion by the other

three.

A skinny man of about 40 wearing a splendid outfit welcomed them, “Welcome Master Xiang, Sirs please come to the guest room on the second floor.”

The 4 of them sat down on the rug in the room, and after the maids sent in wine and dishes, a procuress by the name of Hong Niangzi came is. Although she’s middle-aged, but she took great care in dolling up, and her figure is still well maintained. Coupled with her intoxicating style, she’s still able to stir some blood. On seeing such a handsome man like Xiang Shaolong, she was especially warm in her welcome and said with a coquettish smile, “The lady will be here immediately to accompany Master Xiang, would Master Li and the rest want to try someone fresh.”

Li Shan and the rest agreed with a laugh and Hong Niangzi went out of the room with her plush hips swaying.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that it’s no wonder that prostitution is the oldest occupation in the world, and it’s always the same method and atmosphere. But why is it that in the past when he was in the bars going after the beer ladies, he never felt his conscience pricking, but now he kept feeling this is not quite appropriate?

The sounds of jewelry clinking can be heard from the corridor outside, followed by the whiff of a fragrance and 3 pretty young ladies wearing a thin gauzes walked in with a smile. They sat in the arms of Li Shan and the rest, but were making eyes at Xiang Shaolong, obviously they were more interested in him.

By now Hong Niangzi has brought in a tall, slim and fair lady, who looked extremely pretty and bright, with a graceful air about her. Indeed she looked extremely pure.

Li Shan and the rest stared, looking greedily at the magnificent scenery beneath her thin veil of clothes.

Hong Niangzi laughed, “I did not lie to you, right? Good daughter, have you ever seen a better looking and loving man than Master Xiang?”

The beauty lowered her eyes sadly, refusing to lift her head up at all.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't bear to see this and was about to say something when Hong Niangzi pushed her into her arms, sitting on his lap.

The thighs touching his, a wave of intoxication spread over him, and the well-proportioned body covered by a thin veil, seemingly revealing the luscious bosom, made Xiang Shaolong's eyes blurry. He can't help but hug her tiny waist and took a sniff of her face.

Su Nu lowered her head and did not speak.

Hong Niangzi made eyes at Xiang Shaolong, walked behind him and leaned over, pressing her bosom tightly into his back, going between the two of them and said softly, “Master Xiang is the

lady's first customer. If not for the fact that Master Li used the name of Master Wu, I wouldn't have let this good girl accompany Master Xiang before her training is done. Because of this, if Su Nu has offended you in any way, Master Xiang please forgive her." And she left with a smile.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the lady's slender fingers, listening to how Li Shan and the rest were teasing her, and he felt a rush of anger in his chest. He whispered gently into the Su Nu's ears, "Don't worry! I won't be disrespectful towards you like them. We'll just chat and drink, all right?"

Su Nu was stunned for a moment, and finally lifted her head up to look at this strange man who is being so intimate with her.

Xiang Shaolong smiled at her.

Su Nu blushed and immediately lowered her head, but she's no longer so afraid. She can't help but steal another glance at him, and her heart started beating wildly, thinking to herself that this man is really good looking. And it's rare that his gaze looked so upright and honorable. Oh heavens! Why did she have to meet a man like that only at a place like this?

Xiang Shaolong felt his desire rising as well, but once he thought of his promise, he hurriedly suppressed his fire.

Su Nu gritted her teeth, raised her head and looked at him shyly and said, "I thank Master for your kind intentions. Master need not feel pity that I have been reduced to such a situation, besides

there's no use in pity as well. Anyone here can tease me at will."

Xiang Shaolong felt a sadness in his heart and sighed.

Su Nu was perplexed and she hugged his neck, asking, "Master seems to be troubled!"

Xiang Shaolong looked at Li Shan and the rest, and saw that those 3 men's hands and mouth were already roaming around the ladies in their arms, totally engrossed in doing various unspeakable things. He said with a bitter smile, "I only wish to leave now, and have no wish to witness further the sad things that happened in this world."

Su Nu was surprised and exclaimed, "Master's thinking is really different from the others. All the men that came here has never thought of our sadness and pain." She continued quietly, "I'm not lying to Master, but now I really hope that Master will be impolite to me, just like that 3 friends of yours."

This time it was Xiang Shaolong's turn to be surprised, "Why would you think that?"

Su Nu said shyly, "Maybe I'm affected by them, and my desires have been flamed, or maybe I have fallen in love with Master. I'm not sure myself!"

The girl Li Shan was hugging stood up at this point in time and said breathlessly, "The night is short, why don't we go up to our

own rooms for more fun. Brother Xiang must not forget Master Tao's appointment tonight."

Just as they were about to step out of the room, Hong Niangzi came in looking miserable and said, "Sirs, I am in a difficult position!"

Li Shan was extremely surprised, and pulled the official courtesan to sit on the rug and asked in bafflement, "Hong Niangzi is in charge of the official courtesans in Handan, who would dare to make things difficult for you. Just tell us, and we will settle it for you."

Hong Niangzi looked at Li Shan with a little disdain, and turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, "I don't know who leaked the news, Prince Shaoyuan just came with a dozen or so of his men to the officials brothel and demanded that I hand Su Nu to him."

The expression on Li Shan and the rest changed, obviously this Prince Shaoyuan is someone so powerful that even they cannot afford to offend him.

Su Nu went "Ah!", her pretty face turned pale, her body shook, like a little lamb waiting to be slaughtered.

Hong Niangzi sighed and said, "No one in Handan now can afford to offend Prince Shaojun. We can only blame Su Nu's beauty for being so famous. Su Nu, come with me!"

Su Nu screamed, “No!” and hugged Xiang Shaolong in a death grip as she stood up crying, making others pity her even more so.

Li Shan and Han Dong exchanged looks helplessly and explained to Xiang Shaolong, “Prince Shaoyuan is the son of Prince Pingyuan, who passed away last year and the family’s power has been passed to him. Even our Master has to be careful of him and his Majesty has been protecting him on account of Prince Pingyuan. If we were to clash with him, we may not be able to win the swordsmen under him, and even if we did, Master will not forgive us. Brother Xiang, we did not expect such a killjoy would happen as well.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged Su Nu’s burning and helpless body, hot blood rushing through him and said with a cold snort, “A man has to be responsible for his own actions. You will leave immediately, and you won’t know what happened.”

The expression on the three changed.

Hong Niangzi quite liked Xiang Shaolong, so on hearing that she sighed, “Master Xiang is indeed a hero, but is it worth it to end your future and life thus? Prince Shaoyuan only wants Su Nu’s virginity, won’t it be the same if Master Xiang comes a little later to look for Su Nu?”

Li Shan and the rest tried to dissuade him as well.

Su Nu suddenly gave a hard kiss on Xiang Shaolong’s lips, a look of resolution on her face and whispered in his ear, “Don’t worry!

Su Nu is going.” She stood up, her expression wooden and told Hong Niangzi, “I will follow you!” After taking a loving look at Xiang Shaolong, she walked slowly away.

Hong Niangzi sighed and ran after her.

Xiang Shaolong punched the pillar, the wood shattered, anger rising up inside him.

This is an era where power is reason. On when riding on others can one have control over their own fate and protect the woman one loves.

Looking at it from another angle, he’s only another kind of prostitute, selling his wits and skills.

The rest may have patriotic ideals and are willing to lay down their lives, but he, Xiang Shaolong will never follow orders from anyone blindly. Because half a year ago he is not even related to this era at all.

What Yuan Zong said was correct, only when all the states are unified, will there be a chance for everything to be changed and an ideal system will appear.

And the most important task now is to establish his position in the Wu family, there’s no other way besides this.

By now, their mood totally spoiled, the four of them left

hurriedly.

Xiang Shaolong had just stepped into the garden at the guest house when he felt the strange atmosphere. Two warriors were standing guard outside the main door, and he seemed to hear Shu'er's cries from inside the house.

Xiang Shaolong was still fuming, and he's not someone kind or religious, but forced by circumstances to bear with that bully Prince Shaoyuan. Now that someone is trying to climb over his head, he dashed into the door like a mad tiger.

The 2 warriors snickered and extended their hands to stop him.

Xiang Shaolong roared madly and forced his way between the two men, elbows and knees striking and the two of them fell down screaming immediately.

The scene that appeared before him was even more terrible.

Shu'er was naked from the waist and being hugged by a finely dressed gentleman on the rug, her bosom insultingly handled. However she dared not struggle but just cried piteously.

Lian Jin and another 10 odd warriors were sitting at the side, looking at this violent scene with smiles.

By now that well dressed youth was just removing his hands from Shu'er's skirt and was about to take it off.

When the warriors saw Xiang Shaolong dashing in, they all jumped up and drew their swords, while Lian Jin was calm and composed, the corner of his mouth curled up in disdain, looking at him icily.

Because the wooden sword was too heavy, Xiang Shaolong did not carry it with him all the time, but for a man like him who has undergone the most scientific and rigorous training, would he be afraid of these men. Before his opponents are steady on their feet, he'd already dashed into the crowd of warriors and cornered one of them, throwing a heavy punch at the person's chest and snatched his long sword from him.

He turned around with the sword, executing the Mozi swordplay that originated from the Master Mo Zhai, slashing hard at the sword of the warrior who came attacking towards his right.

"Clang!". That person roared, and before his sword reached the ground, he was already kicked in the groin and knelt down in a painful shout.

A look of surprise flashed though Lian Jin's eyes and he stood up, standing in front of that young master. Shu'er saw that Xiang Shaolong has come to save her and without knowing where she found her strength from, pushed that young master away and ran crying towards Xiang Shaolong.

But Lian Jin extended his feet to trip her and she immediately fell to the ground. Lian Jin stepped on her naked back, and she was

unable to move at all.

Xiang Shaolong was almost bursting with anger on seeing this, and with a sweep of his sword, blocked the 5 swords that was attacking him, and with a change of his swordplay, another 2 men fell immediately.

By now he's only about ten odd steps away from Lian Jin and that young master, but between them there are 12 fierce warriors. On seeing that Shu'er is about to fall into the hands of that young master again, Xiang Shaolong picked up a pile of swords and threw them beneath the feet of the warriors who were running towards him.

Those warriors have never fought in such a way before, the swords struck their waists and legs and they fell to the ground.

When Xiang Shaolong jumped up, he is already face to face with Lian Jin, staring into each other's eyes.

Lian Jin kicked Shu'er aside, his hand moved and he drew his long sword from the scabbard. The sword gleamed and made its way towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect his opponent's swordplay to be so exquisite. He executed the essence of the Mozi swordplay clumsily and lashed out with his sword.

A crisp "Clang!" was heard and Lian Jian's sword was parried off.

He retracted then attacked again, as fast as a meteor.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to block that attack but 2 warriors were coming up from behind him so he had no choice but to step back and block the two opponents first.

Lian Jin smiled icily but did not give chase.

“Stop!”

A loud shout came from the door and Tao Fang dashed in with 10 odd warriors towards Xiang Shaolong, forcing Lian Jin's men to retreat to one side, resulting in a face-off between the two groups.

The half naked Shu'er got up and threw herself into Xiang Shaolong's arms, crying.

Tao Fang saw the young master behind Lian Jin and his expression changed immediately, “Old servant here does not know that Grand Young Master is here, would Grand Young Master please forgive me.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged Shu'er and realization dawned. No wonder Lian Jin had the guts to create trouble here, so he has the backing of Master Wu's grandson.

That Grand Young Master came next to Lian Jin and ignoring Tao Fang, pointed to Xiang Shaolong with a murderous look in his eye and asked, “Who do you think you are, what's the big deal

about me having some fun with your woman.”

Lian Jin smiled icily and said, “It should be his honor!”

Tao Fang smiled condescendingly and said, “It’s just a case of misunderstanding, Shaolong did not know it is Grand Young Master who has come!”

That Grand Young Master stared at Shaolong angrily.

Xiang Shaolong stared back so unwaveringly, that even a bully like Grand Young Master felt a shiver in his heart.

Lian Jin shouted, “What audacity! How dare you be so rude to Master Tingwei, kneel down now.”

Tao Fang advised from the side, “Hurry up and apologize to Grand Young Master!”

Xiang Shaolong looked heavenward and laughed for a long time before saying, “Master is the only one whom I will obey, if Grand Young Master is not happy about that, then tell someone to kill me!” He lowered his head and said to Shu’er, “You’ll go back to the room first!”

Shu’er lifted up her tear stained face, and after taking a loving look at him, ran into the house.

The atmosphere became extremely tense.

Lian Jin hurriedly went to Wu Tingwei and whispered something into his ears.

Xiang Shaolong knows that Lian Jin has received news that he will be dueling with him in front of Emperor Xiaocheng, so he has no wish to fight with him first now.

Indeed, Wu Tingwei nodded his head and stared at him angrily, saying, "I'll see how many more good days you low-down slave will have ahead of you." And left with his men in fury.

Lian Jin deliberately brushed past his shoulder and said with a smile before leaving, "You blocked well with your sword, but lack experience. It'll be rare if you can block 10 attacks of mine."

Xiang Shaolong calmed down and was secretly dreading being reprimanded by Tao Fang, but after Tao Fang waved his men away, he sat closely next to him and sighed, "Now my fate is intertwined with yours. If you lose to Lian Jin, I won't have the face to stay on in the Wu Family as well."

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely guilty and apologized.

Tao Fang looked at him for a moment before he suddenly smiled, "You're really someone who treasures relationships, but this has got nothing to do with you. Among the 12 servants, Master trusts Wu Hei and me the most, and we've always been on opposing ends.

This time Wu Hei went around spreading rumors that because I lost a hundred odd horses, I made up a story about you single handedly fighting 800 horse thieves. Now the Master is giving me no choice but to let you fight a duel with Lian Jin. Shaolong you must help me vent my anger.” He continued with a smile, “Just now you felled almost 10 of Grand Young Master’s warriors in front of Lian Jin, now that may not be a bad thing, because one news of this gets to Master’s ears, he’ll look at you differently. If you can win Lian Jin, then the world will belong to you and me.”

Li Shan hurriedly walked over and said with shock, “Before Su Nu went to see Prince Shaoyuan, she made an excuse to change and freshen up but hanged herself instead. Prince Shaoyuan is extremely furious and said that he’s going to look for Brother Xiang to vent his anger.”

Xiang Shaolong felt as if the earth has shattered, and is so livid that his limbs turned cold, his eyes and mouth opened in shock, but his tears rolled uncontrollably down the corner of his eyes.

For the first time in his life, he felt a strong, burning desire for revenge.

Xiang Shaolong made mad love with Shu’er on the rug in the room.

Only her alluring body can offer him a form of escape in this cruel era where power is everything.

Only at this moment did he understand why Mei Canniang would

rather suffer the parting and pine for him then to come to Handan.

No matter how difficult it is, he will use the most brutal method to kill Prince Shaoyuan at all costs to avenge Su Nu.

The two of them held each other and lay down, their limbs entangling, enjoying the warm atmosphere in the aftermath of their coupling.

Shu'er suddenly exclaimed, "Xiang Lang*! Shu'er is really afraid that we won't have such happy times very soon."

*Lang – similar to the term husband

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "Don't worry! Tao Fang will explain to Master Wu that if his grandson and Lian Jin keep harassing me, I will definitely lose at the imperial duel due to agitation. Therefore before the duel, you'll be safe."

Shu'er was a little assured, and said resolutely, "If anything bad were to happen to Xiang Lang, Shu'er will definitely follow you in death."

Xiang Shaolong kissed her tiny lips and said gently, "Don't worry! I definitely will not lose."

A knock on the door was heard, and Chunying's voice filtered in, "Master Xiang, Master Tao has ordered us to help you bath and change."

Shu'er sat up and said happily, "Let Shu'er serve you wholeheartedly this morning."

Book 1 Chapter 10 – Spending The Night Together

Tao Fang spoke to Xiang Shaolong quietly through the carriage window, “I know that Shaolong has long guessed that it’s Lady Ya who wants to see you. Ever since her husband Zhao Kuo died in the battle of Chang Ping, that wanton has been hunting handsome men everyday to become her intimate guests. If she’s satisfied after trying them out, she’ll keep them as her lover, and Lian Jin is one of them.”

Xiang Shaolong asked quietly, “Does her brother Emperor Xiaocheng know about this?”

Tao Fang replied, “The whole city is full of spies, how could his Majesty not know. It’s just that in the past his Majesty was tricked by Fan Ju from the state of Qin, and replaced [Lian Po](#) with Zhao Kuo, refusing to listen to the advise of the then Prime Minister Lin Xiangru. He sent Zhao Kuo, who can only talk but doesn’t know how to strategize a war, to fight the Qin soldiers at Changping, and caused the 400,000 brave soldiers to be almost totally annihilated. Zhao Kuo died in the battlefield, and only about 240 survivors returned. His Majesty felt guilt towards his sister, so he condones her actions. Therefore Lady Ya holds a certain amount of influence over his Majesty, so don’t you offend her.” He signaled the footmen to start the journey.

Xiang Shaolong felt that the entire situation was hilarious.

When he reached Wu An initially, he had thought of becoming a gigolo to earn money for traveling expenses. Who would have

expected that now he would have no choice but to really become a gigolo, and his customer is that Lady Ya.

He has suffered enough setbacks and anguish, and has no mood to enjoy the changing scenery outside the window because his heart is in turmoil.

His thinking in the past was quite naïve, thinking that with his military training he will be able to excel in this era. But he did not expect such complications, and like the same across all eras, brute strength is not enough to accomplish anything.

If he wants to control his own fate, he'll have to use extreme measures, and step on everyone else so that he will not have to be led around by the nose.

The most important thing right now is to defeat Lian Jin. But in the earlier fight with him, this person's swordplay is truly at his peak. Even if he were to include wrestling in the duel, he might still not be able to win.

Besides, what Lian Jin said was correct, he has only learnt the Mozi swordplay for a few months, and is not that experienced yet, so how can he win him.

When they dueled earlier, Lian Jin was exceptionally calm and composed, just like what Yuan Zong said a true swordsman should achieve. But he on the other hand was rash and impulsive, if he can't change this, he will certainly lose, so what should he do?

Suddenly he had an idea, and thought of that extreme beauty Wu Tingfang.

If he can win her heart, what kind of a blow will it be for Lian Jin who thinks the world of himself? When it comes to wooing ladies, it has always been his forte, so there's no way that hateful babe Wu Tingfang will be able to reject him. The problem is that in ancient times there's no such thing as phoning to arrange a date, so how can he get to her himself?

By now the carriage has gone passed a huge mansion, with guards standing at the door. He saw people wearing clothes that doesn't seem to be usual outfit for the Zhaos walking in and out so he asked the footman who was driving the carriage.

The footman replied, "That's the house in Handan which belongs to people from other states."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly overjoyed, and thought that maybe the Qin Emperor Ying Zheng is staying in there, and he can't help but feel uplifted.

The horse carriage turned right into another main road made from cobblestones, and proceeded towards a huge mansion.

Xiang Shaolong collected his composure and told himself, "Xiang Shaolong! This is the time for you to change, you cannot be so trusting towards others anymore or let feelings rule your head."

Fine!

Then let me try something, and conquer this Lady Ya first to give Lian Jin his first heavy setback.

After changing into a set of fitting warrior's clothes with a cloak, matched with a long sword at his waist and his hair combed neatly into a crown, Xiang Shaolong followed 2 lovely maids and stepped into Lady Ya's grand mansion.

The pretty maid invited him to sit on the rug and gave him scented tea before leaving him sitting alone in the spacious hall.

Xiang Shaolong was bored and started observed his surroundings.

The hall was exquisitely decorated, with a silk painting on palace people on the wall, the colors vibrant.

There was a large rug in the middle of the hall woven with pictures of clouds, the color clean and simple, very pleasing to the eyes. The few cupboards against the wall were full of playthings. If he can just take any one of them back to the 21st century and put it up for auction, he'll be rich for the rest of his life.

Right at this time, he had a feeling of being watched.

Xiang Shaolong glanced nonchalantly at a large folding screen on his left which was made up of 8 paintings, and seem to see from the

gap in between the reflection from an eye. He was secretly laughing, and knew that this must be Lady Ya who has come to inspect the goods.

If he appears to be uneasy or do anything embarrassing while waiting impatiently, this wonton Lady Ya who loves toying with men will surly despise him. Once he thought about this, he became mischievous and stood up, sweeping his cape aside to reveal his manly body that can intoxicate any female. He stretched and walked to a large window and looked out so that Lady Ya can just see his chiseled left profile.

He stood straight like a mountain, one hand behind him, the other hand resting on his sword, a look of deep thought in his expression, very immersed in his acting.

He did not bring his wooden sword, because that's his secret weapon and he did not wish to reveal it to anyone before his duel with Lian Jin.

The garden outside the window looked especially pretty and calming under the rays of the setting sun.

A gentle breeze blew, uplifting his spirits.

For a moment he forgot that Lady Ya is peeping at him, and remembered his own era.

In that era, the rule of strong eating the weak has not changed,

but there are still laws, and regulations between different countries. But in this warring states period, the ruler's order is law, the words of the state is maxim, so it seems that Emperor Qin did not do anything appalling at all. If he did not unify China, they will be eaten by other countries sooner or later. It is Emperor Qin who built the Great Wall that helped China maintain its unity for a long time.

Footsteps were heard.

The pretty maid came to invite him in to see Lady Ya, and to remove his sword.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has passed the first round, so he removed his sword and followed the pretty maid in.

He had just stepped into the door and immediately he saw a pretty lady lying down on a long couch at the other end, looking totally relaxed with a hand supporting her chin. A pair of alluring yet dreamy looking eyes was sizing him up coldly, her fair legs peeping out from her skirt, creating a picturesque scene of a beauty lazing that is enough to make any man fall head over heels.

The small hall was not lighted, the setting sun shone in from two large windows with floral carving from the west.

The pretty maid went out, leaving Xiang Shaolong standing in front of the door. He really has no idea what the material that Lady Ya, who was still lying in the chaise, was made of. Maybe it's made with silk mixed with something else, as it was radiating. Her

earrings were made from pretty jade, a golden hairpin gleaming in her hair, pearls decorating her clothes, her skirt light and sheer, her body emanating a heavy fragrance.

The shape of her face is extremely pretty, her brows well drawn, her smooth skin fair with a tinge of red, extremely alluring.

The most intoxicating part is her idle yet alluring pose, her mature and enchanting ways, compared to Wu Tingfang, she is another kind of beauty who certainly did not fare any worse.

She cannot be any older than 25, right in the prime of a woman's life.

Xiang Shaolong's interest is already piqued, but in order to conquer this beauty, he deliberately pretended to be unaffected and proud, and walked boldly forward, stopping 5 paces in front of her, bowed and said, "Xiang Shaolong pays his respects to Lady Ya." After he finished speaking, he stared boldly at her alluring body but did not reveal any lecherous look at all, and looked as if he's just admiring a plaything on one of the shelves at the outer hall.

Lady Ya laughed coquettishly, emitting a clear, crisp voice that sounds even nicer than bells and said gently, "Xiang Shaolong! Take a seat!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled slightly and sat down suavely. He looked deeply into her pretty eyes, but did not speak.

Madam Ya said unhappily, “I’ve never seem someone who look at me with such disrespect and audacity, don’t you know my status?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled lazily, and replied with indescribable confidence, “How would I not know Lady’s status, but it still does not change the fact that I am a man and you are a woman. I’m admiring Lady the way a man will look at a woman, and this shows that Lady’s allure is enough to make me forget about your higher status.”

Lady Ya was stunned, and sat up straight.

Xiang Shaolong’s gaze dropped to her perk bosom, this time he is not pretending.

Lady Ya exclaimed angrily, “How rude! What are you looking at?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that it’s time to stop, so he said with a serious and respectful expression, “Since Lady does not like me revealing my true feelings, then feel free to punish me.”

Lady Ya was a little helpless as she replied, “Forget it! Do you know why I summoned you.”

Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to say of course he’s here to sleep with her, but of course he dared not reveal this, so he said calmly, “Of course I do, Lady wants to see if Xiang Shaolong is the thing that Lady has been looking for all this time.”

Lady Ya's pretty eyes lighted up, and after exchanging a long look with him, said, "Humph" and laughed, "I've never seen a man more conceited than you."

Xiang Shaolong stood up with a smile and bowed, "Since you are so displeased with me, then I shall take my leave." And turned around to leave.

Lady Ya did not expect him to do this and exclaimed angrily, "Stop there, or don't you want your life anymore."

Xiang Shaolong turned around and said with a charming smile, "Lady please don't be upset, actually how can I bear to leave. I just wanted to see if Lady will ask me to stay and spend the night."

Lady Ya was in a flurry after being attacked by his brilliant eyes, overpowering charisma and strong words, making her look even more alluring.

The last ray of the sun finally disappeared from the west under the plains outside the city of Handan.

The small hall became dark, throwing this couple into a mysterious environment.

Xiang Shaolong walked to a small table at Lady Ya's side and knelt on the rug, reached out his hand, took the kindle from the table and lighted the exquisite lamp made from jade.

Under the light, Lady Ya's eyes became two round and bright rare black precious stones.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself, this is the first time since he arrived that he tasted such a romantic ancient atmosphere. He must have the beautiful body beneath that fine silk tonight no matter what, and totally conquer both her body and her mind.

This is the dream of every man who has ever seen her, and he is no exception.

He moved towards her as he knelt, grabbed her shoulders and said gently, "Do you want me to treat you as a Lady or a woman, would Lady please tell me."

Lady Ya realized that there's no way she can play coy any further, so her body softened and she fell into his arms and said with a soft sigh, "Why must Xiang Shaolong force me thus?"

Xiang Shaolong lifted up her delicate chin, tilting her head up and kissed her gently a dozen times on her lips before giving her a hard kiss. He used all his kissing skills learnt from porn movies and comics as well as his most tried and tested effective skills to flirt with this beauty. He took the opportunity to move his hand down, sweeping past her bosom and soft waist, his palm pressing down on her taut and fiery tummy.

Lady Ya's writhed her body, her whole body lightly trembling,

her breathing getting more and more rapid, her tongue's reaction getting more and more intense. Obviously she is starting to get aroused.

Xiang Shaolong left her fragrant shoulder, looking at her heavy-lidded eyes lovingly and asked emotionally, "Is Lady happy?"

Lady Ya revealed a look of loss and said quietly, "Am I happy? No! I never dared to think of this question."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, beautiful women always have hard lives, and the responsibility of course falls on the men. But beauty is as short lived as a dream, so there's not a lot of beauties who can be happy when their beauty is slowly fading.

Ancient beauties are thus short lived, never allowing others to see them growing old.

Therefore Lady Ya wants to hunt handsome men for pleasure while she's still in her prime. But modern research papers have pointed out that such mindless sex will not make one happy.

So Xiang Shaolong came straight to the point and asked her this question. Lady Ya immediately revealed her true feelings unconsciously, because he has touched a sore spot.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to remove her belt.

Lady Ya smiled coquettishly, and grabbing his hands, suddenly

pulled him up and said happily like a little girl, “But I know I’ll be very happy tonight. Here! Come to my room, I’ve prepared food and wine and we can chat and drink at the same time, all right?”

Lady Ya placed the wine cup at Xiang Shaolong’s lips, a flirty smile on her pretty face and said, “This is the first cup of wine, Shaolong shall we each drink half of it?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing that no matter how noble is her birth or how high is her status, she is still a woman who needs the love and care of a man. So with this point, he will be able to make himself irresistible to her.

The only way to conquer her is to treat her like an ordinary woman, and the most important thing is to make her feel that it’s better to be a woman than a Lady.

He’s very confident that he can accomplish this.

The only question is how important Lian Jin is to her, because he is also a very attractive man.

Lady Ya can be considered to be another battlefield for him and Lian Jin.

He drank half a cup of wine from Lady Ya’s hands, and suddenly kissed her on the mouth, slowly passing the fine wine into her tiny mouth.

Lady Ya gurgled but she has no strength to push him away, so she can only drink his half-cup of wine obediently. Her pretty face blushed, and even her enchanting dimples were reddened.

Xiang Shaolong left her tiny mouth, gently taking over the cup from her fingers, and before she had the chance to protest, poured it into her tiny mouth that was panting quickly. He said gently, “This half cup is mine, so don’t you drink it into your pretty belly.”

Lady Ya rolled her eyes at him coquettishly, her fragrant lips already locked with his, the wine in her mouth sucked dry by him.

The two of them separated. Either Lady Ya is a bad drinker, or she is too heated by desire, but she moaned and collapsed into his arms.

Xiang Shaolong has no wish to conquer this noble beauty so soon, so he tilted her face up and scattered hot kisses on her hair, face, ears and neck.

Lady Ya finally removed all her barriers and guards, and was panting and moaning, unable to control herself.

Xiang Shaolong’s hand slipped into her clothes, lovingly kneading the smooth and supple thighs and tummy, teasing her tender and soft skin inch by inch, not missing a single spot and said gently, “Do you have they feeling of being toyed by a man now?”

Lady Ya asked, “Are you really not leaving me with any dignity at all?” and she continued moaning.

Xiang Shaolong’s hands stopped but he did not take them out of her clothes. He tilted his head and looked at this beauty with a head of messy hair, disheveled clothes, with a pair of fair legs and half her bosom exposed to the air. The corners of his mouth curved into a slight smile and he asked, “Can I take a close look at Lady Ya’s body?”

Lady Ya replied hoarsely, “You have touched it so many times now, and yet you’re still asking me?”

Xiang Shaolong looked heavenward and laughed loud and long. The heroic air he exudes melted Lady Ya’s heart immediately, and she lowered her head and said submissively, “Look then! You can look all you want.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he’s getting closer to success, or else she would not behave with such abandon and obedience.

His hands immediately started, at times gentle, at times wild, and a little brutish as well, beginning the actual attack on her.

The night passed like that.

She is no longer a lady of noble birth, but a shameless woman in heated desire enjoying her lover’s ministrations.

Every second is filled with fiery desire.

The joy between a man and a woman drove into Lady Ya wave by wave, making her delirious. She cried out the name of this lovely yet hateful man madly, touching and hugging this perfect male body, feeling his explosive strength and his seemingly endless intense attacks, reaching the fiery peak where soul meets desire time and again. In the past when she was with other men, she'd always chase them away immediately after the act and sleep alone, even Lian Jin was no exception. But tonight she has no wish to leave this man's embrace even for a moment.

But only for tonight.

Everything will be different tomorrow, no man will be able to make her surrender.

She only wants to capture men, but does not wish to be captured, because that would be too torturous.

She fell into a deep sleep in her daze, and when she woke up it's already late in the morning.

Xiang Shaolong is already gone, only leaving behind on the blanket a yellow chrysanthemum freshly plucked from the garden.

Lady Ya clutched tightly at the stem, a sweet and satisfied alluring smile appeared on her pretty face.

Book 1 Chapter 11 – The Affections Of A Beauty

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the guesthouse, Tao Fang is already waiting for him.

After Chunying and the rest of the maids carried in their breakfast, they left.

Tao Fang sniggered and asked, “Is that flirtatious horse exciting?”

Xiang Shaolong replied from the bottom of his heart, “Extremely exciting.”

Tao Fang stopped smiling and said seriously, “Master brought up the issue of your duel with Lian Jin to his Majesty, his Majesty was very happy and chose the duel to be at dusk the day after tomorrow. I think it’s best that you do not tangle with women for these few days, conserve your energy. You must win this duel.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with some embarrassment, “Don’t worry! I’m the kind of person that, with more women I have, the more energetic I am. If there are no women, I’m more lethargic instead.” When he saw that he looked doubtful, he added, “Don’t forget that on the night we dealt with the horse thieves, Ting Fangshi was sleeping with me.”

Of course Tao Fang does not know that he did not copulate with

Ting Fangshi that night, and after looking at him with admiration, said, “Now you’ve become the center of attraction in Handan, and on the same par as Master, even Guo Zong, who made his fortune from ironworks, was asking about you.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “What? There’s actually someone else who is equally wealthy as our Master?”

Tao Fang replied, “There is only one such person in the state of Zhao. If we were to measure the number of Master’s livestock using valleys, then the weapons that Guo Zong made from iron can be measured using ships. Not only did he supply weapons for the whole of Zhao, but also to all the other friendly states, earning a large sum of money.” He lowered his voice and continued, “Because of this, his Majesty is more fond of Guo Zong than our Master, because Master’s Father is a half-Qin, that’s why he has such a strange name.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart lurched, as if he has a hazy idea, but is unable to describe it clearly.

Tao Fang added on, “I received confidential news last night, that rascal Wu Tingwei is very displeased with you, and very much wanted to have your Yan nobility, Shu’er. That’s why he has decided to disregard Master’s orders and will kill you before your duel with Lian Jin. It seems like I will have to bring you along to pay a call to Young Master, so that that rascal will not dare to make any rash moves.”

Xiang Shaolong was still thinking about the matter regarding Master Wu having Qin blood in him. No wonder he wanted so much for a Zhao to win Lian Jin, but maybe that's not what he truly felt, but did this to show the Zhao Emperor that he is totally on their side. That's why he refused to speak up for the Yans, and instead gave a beauty like Shu'er to him because of this thinking of his.

In the warring states period there is nothing more important than bloodline, so from this it can be seen what a difficult task it would be to unite the people from so many different countries. When he heard what Tao Fang said, he asked, "Will Lian Jin be helping that rascal deal with me?"

Tao Fang is really open with him now, and did not try to hide anything, saying "Even if you put a sword to Lian Jin's neck now, he would not dare to start the fight first. That scoundrel went around picking fights because he wanted to get his Majesty's attention. However his Majesty has always ignored him, and even told the people around him that he's not happy that our Master have found a foreigner to make our own swordsmen look bad. Not that he's got this chance, he would not want to spoil it."

Xiang Shaolong thought that this King Zhao is so narrow minded, how can he ever accomplish anything great. He said with a laugh, "Without Lian Jin, I'm not afraid of that rascal, he can't possibly find a few hundred people to attack me, right?"

Tao Fang was extremely impressed with his humor and chortled, "Of course not, and besides, he has to do this secretly. But it's still better to pay a call to Eldest Young Master. Among Master's 17

sons, Eldest Young Master is the most capable and is in charge of all business with other states. And he has a beautiful daughter Wu Tingfang who may have the opportunity of becoming the empress, but his Majesty is still hesitating about accepting Young Grand Missy because of Master having Qin blood in him. The nobility in the royal family are all objecting to this.”

Xiang Shaolong is getting all confused from all these. Things that look very simple on the surface, is actually extremely complicated, so he nodded his head and replied, “All right! I’ll pay a call to Eldest Young Master once I have the chance.”

Tao Fang replied, “What chance or no chance, I’ll take you to see Eldest Young Master immediately. We need to gain the upper hand and not let Wu Tingwei strike first.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows and said, “At least let me change my clothes first!”

Tao Fang laughed, “Hurry up! I’ll wait here for you.”

Xiang Shaolong slipped back into his room hurriedly.

Shu’er and the 4 maids were rushing to make his warrior clothes so that he can wear it to see the King of Zhao. Xiang Shaolong’s mood turned for the better, and his hands started roaming over the 5 ladies and enjoying their careful ministrations at the same time, making his one mistress and 4 maids all blush to their ears before he left with Tao Fang on horses to the Wu residence.

They came to the bustling martial arts practice field, went around the large mansion where they say Master Wu the other day, walked past a garden to another grand courtyard.

The two of them were invited to wait in the large hall.

After a while, a warrior walked out and invited Tao Fang in, leaving Xiang Shaolong alone, who wondered why that Eldest Young Master did not see them both?

At this point in time that warrior walked out again and told Xiang Shaolong, "Would Master Xiang please follow me!"

Xiang Shaolong followed him and went into another side hall first before abruptly turning left into a garden.

Xiang Shaolong was suspicious, and that warrior's steps quickened suddenly. Right at this time, there was a flash of sword, and 2 long swords shot out from the bushes on either side, aiming straight at his left and right side.

Luckily he has an intuition long ago, and without advancing or retreating, just stood on the spot and drew out his sword. "Clang clang", not only did he force his enemy to retreat, but he also injured one of them.

30 odd warriors came out from the bushes and behind the tress, and one of them is Wu Tingwei, and he was heavily surrounded.

Xiang Shaolong stood there holding his sword, obviously not afraid at all.

Wu Tingwei hid behind the warriors and called out arrogantly, “Dog slave, let’s see where you can escape this time.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled suavely and replied, “This time? I don’t think I was the one who escaped the last time, right?”

Wu Tingwei had thought that he would beg for mercy, and did not expect him to be so merciless with his words. He was furious and roared, “Kill him for me.”

Xiang Shaolong is such an experienced fighter, and he understands the logic of striking the enemy first, especially since he is outnumbered now. Wu Tingwei has just opened his mouth but he has already turned into the crowd of warriors with his sword, slashing and kicking, like a tiger in a herd of sheep, seriously injuring a handful of them, thus interfering with their movements.

The warriors have never fought in such a way that is totally without rules but seeks only efficiency, besides they are afraid of this action that will clearly defy their Master’s orders, and on seeing his bravery, most of them just stood there for show.

Xiang Shaolong was furious with Wu Tingwei for molesting Shu’er yesterday, so he was totally ruthless in his attacks, executing the Mozi swordplay to perfection. His movements were mysterious, ever-changing, broad movements yet his techniques

were exquisite, suddenly attacking and retreating, with a flying kick once in a while. In short time, his opponents were all staggering in chaos.

Under the orders of Wu Tingwei, the warriors had no choice but to charge, and they fell one by one, either stuck by the sword or a kick. None of the attacks are fatal, but just enough to make them lose the ability to fight back.

In the blink of an eye, only the 10 warriors standing in front of Wu Tingwei protecting him were left.

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort, his pair of cold and aggressive eyes staring icily at Wu Tingwei, his sword pointing forward, walking strongly and steadily step by step towards Wu Tingwei and that 10 warriors.

Wu Tingwei did not expect him to be so brave and sharp, felling 10 odd men and yet he's not even panting. He felt a shiver, and while ordering his men to attack, he retreated towards the back instead.

Xiang Shaolong will certainly not let him off, so he dashed forward, his sword slashing. One of the warriors raised his sword to block him, there was a 'clang', and that warrior actually fell and rolled to the ground with the impact. Obviously the strength of his arm is extremely frightening.

All the warriors were startled, afraid that he will injure Wu Tingwei, and they all converged with their swords ready to attack.

But this time Xiang Shaolong did not press on his attack, instead he executed a series of movements to defend himself.

Two of the warriors thought that he is now exhausted and were about to take the opportunity to attack but they suddenly realized that their opponent's defense was so tight that they have no way of attacking. Even more alarming is that his defense secretly allows him to attack at will as well, holding them at bay, giving them a feeling that they can no longer retreat.

That is the essence of the Mozi swordplay, hiding an attack while defending. When Xiang Shaolong was fighting with the last Juzi of Mohism, Yuan Zong, he was unable to execute any offensive moves at all. The 2 men now is far worse than he was in the past, so naturally their attacks are negligible.

The 2 of them panicked and were about to retreat when there was a flash of sword and the two warriors fell back bleeding.

Xiang Shaolong took this opportunity when everyone else was in a frenzy to dash past his enemy's protective barrier and go straight towards Wu Tingwei.

Wu Tingwei hardened himself to stand still and defend with his sword.

But who would have expected Xiang Shaolong to rapidly retreat again, right into the midst of the advancing warriors.

After felling 4 warriors, he leapt towards the retreating Wu Tingwei.

“Clang!”

A series of 7 sword attacks, Wu Tingwei was forced into the woods by him and the remaining warriors collapsed on the ground.

“Dang!”

Wu Tingwei’s sword flew out of his hands, his back knocked onto a large tree. His face paled and he yelled, “What a bold slave, how dare you be rude.”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes shot out an icy cold stare and said frostily, “If you have the guts, call me slave again.” The tip of his sword pointed at this conceited young man’s throat.

Xiang Shaolong is not at all concerned that others may come here, because this is something dishonorable, so Wu Tingwei must have made arrangements to send the nearby servants away.

Wu Tingwei was frightened by his forcefulness that even his body started shaking and asked hoarsely, “Do you dare to hurt me?” but he still do not have the guts to take the risk of calling him slave.

Xiang Shaolong's face was expressionless and asked quietly, "Where is Master Tao?"

Wu Tingwei was almost crying when he said, "I only sent some people to hold him back!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself that he wouldn't dare to go overboard anyway, so he smiled and asked, "Grand Young Master, you don't believe that I'll hurt you? All the more I want to blind you in one eye, let's see if you'll believe me."

Wu Tingwei saw that his smile was cold and heartless, and is even more chilling than if he was fierce and furious. He finally broke down and exclaimed, "No!"

Xiang Shaolong's long sword continued towards its goal.

At the same time Wu Tingwei was screaming, a dainty gasp was heard from behind Xiang Shaolong.

Wu Tingwei thought that his eye will be lost, his whole body weakened and at the same moment that he peed in fright, the long sword slanted a little, brushed past his face and pierced into the tree trunk, the difference of only a few millimeters.

"Bang!"

Xiang Shaolong's right leg kicked his thigh.

Wu Tingwei flew to one side, Xiang Shaolong turned around with his sword and blocked the sword of the beauty Wu Tingfang.

Xiang Shaolong looked at her coldly and asked quietly, "So is Grand Young Missy involved as well?"

Wu Tingfang was so furious that her face reddened, and she gritted her teeth and uttered, "I'm going to kill you." Her sword came attacking like the Changjiang River, her swordplay far better than her elder brother's, just that she lacks the strength and experience.

Xiang Shaolong had an idea, and he retreated as he fought, and in short time he lured her deep into the isolated woods.

Wu Tingfang saw that she could not defeat him even with her ferocious attacks and the more upset and impatient she was, the more distracted she became. She was panting, and after slashing 2 more times, her sword flew out of her hands with a 'dang'.

Xiang Shaolong returned his sword to his scabbard, took a step forward and hugged her. He carried her up and pressed her to a tree, looking at her sweet and dainty face with his head tilted to one side.

Wu Tingfang was totally exhausted, so she only made a show of trying to struggle before collapsing in his arms, asking in fear and anger, "What do you want?"

Xiang Shaolong replied gently, "Compensation of course."

Wu Tingfang was startled and tried to struggle again with her remaining strength, but Xiao Shaolong took the opportunity to use his chest and legs to rub against her sensitive, prohibited spots, and her struggle soon became a strong reaction to his movements.

Since she was born, this is the first time she has been teased so rudely by a man this way.

Lian Jin has hugged her before as well, but she pushed him away immediately. This is the first time something like this has happened.

She was angry, but her body started feeling waves of strange pleasure.

She did not take part in Wu Tingwei's plan at all, but she saw the whole process when she went after him after finding out that there's something amiss. She saw Xiang Shaolong's heroism, frighteningly accurate strategies and swordsmanship that is comparable to Lian Jin's. And there's something that even Lian Jin cannot compare, this person seems to have endless stamina. When he is cold he makes one shiver, when he is gentle and smiling he looks suave, and even now when she is being molested by him, she finds it difficult to really hate him.

When the pleasure in her body became stronger, she moaned, and her lips were locked with his.

Wu Tingfang was shocked and embarrassed, his tongue attacked through her locked teeth. She moaned and was lost in her first kiss with a man, the thought of Lian Jin disappearing far from her mind immediately.

Sounds of people walking could be heard from outside the woods.

Xiang Shaolong left her lips, nibbled on her earlobes and said, "To be able to kiss Grand Young Missy's sweet lips, even death would be worth it." He let her go and walked out with large strides.

Wu Tingfang's body weakened and she slid down the truck, collapsing on the ground, all her hatred disappearing without a trace. Her body still felt that shameless excitement and pleasure.

When Xiang Shaolong walked back to the path outside the woods where he was attacked, a large burly man with a gold belt and huge eyes were reprimanding the kneeling warriors and Wu Tingwei.

Tao Fang stood at the side with his head lowered, and when he saw him coming, signaled him with his eyes.

Xiang Shaolong made way for a seriously injured warrior who was being carried away before he walked towards the burly man, knelt down and paid his respects.

He was careful when he struck with his sword, only making the

other party lose the ability to fight, but his first few blows were a bit harder since he was trying to scare them.

That burley man turned his head around and asked coldly, “Where is Tingfang?”

Before Xiang Shaolong could reply, Wu Tingfang’s voice could be heard from behind, “Tingfang is here. His swordsmanship is really good, I was unable to hurt him.”

The burly man’s expression cleared a little, and he turned to Wu Tingwei and his men first and bellowed, “All of you scram!”

Wu Tingwei dare not even take a look at Xiang Shaolong, and scuttled off with his warriors like a defeated cock.

The man turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, “Get up!”

Xiang Shaolong stood up respectfully, and realized that Wu Tingfang was standing next to him, and glancing at him.

Tao Fang was totally perplexed and kept looking at the two of them.

That man looked at his daughter for a moment before turning towards Xiang Shaolong and said, “Excellent! Injuring 30 odd men and yet none of the attacks are fatal. This is the first time I’ve seen such swordsmanship. I, Wu Yingyuan will bet on you winning the duel with Lian Jin.”

Xiang Shaolong was quietly laughing that no one in this era will understand human anatomy better than him as he uttered self-effacing words.

Wu Yingyuan sized him up again and said with a smile, “There are very few Zhaos who are as tall and large as you, but for Qins it’s not a very rare trait.”

Xiang Shaolong had a strange intuition, and felt that this Wu Yingyuan seems to take pride that he has Qin blood in him. Maybe he has this thinking because he has traveled much, thus more open-minded and knows how great the Qins are.

Wu Yingyuan seemed quite impressed with him and said, “I’m going to inspect the large farm 20 miles north of here, Shaolong come with me then!”

Wu Tingfang called out, “Father! I want to go too.”

Everyone was surprised and looked at her.

Wu Tingfang lowered her pretty face, her fingers twiddling with the corner of her clothes, looking exceptionally adorable.

Book 1 Chapter 12 – Love At The Maple Tree Valley

Xiang Shaolong and 150 warriors accompanied the Wu father and daughter and left via the north gate, galloping into the large plains.

Wu Tingfang was in high spirits and rode way ahead. Wu Yingyuan was concerned that something would happen to his daughter and was about to order his warriors to give chase when Xiang Shaolong saw this as an opportunity. It seems that Wu Tingfang is deliberately creating a chance for him, and immediately volunteered himself and went after her.

The two horses ran wildly for more than 10 miles one behind the other, and came to a valley before Wu Tingfang slowed down. By now the two horses were puffing from the run.

Xiang Shaolong went next to her and turned his head around. Wu Yingyuan and the rest were long gone.

Wu Tingfang laughed daintily, “No need to look! This is a shortcut that only I know. They won’t be coming here.”

Xiang Shaolong need no further instructions, and just turned around, picked her up and hugged her. Ignoring her weak pretexts, he started kissing her neck, and finished up with a hard and hot kiss on her soft little mouth.

Wu Tingfang's reaction was passionate, obviously it's the first time she experienced this and can't get enough of it.

By the time they got tired from kissing, they have already left the valley.

Wu Tingfang laid her head on her shoulder, looked at him and said shyly, "You're really bold, no other man has dared to be as rude to me as you."

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be serious as he replied, "No, no! I'm just a coward!"

Wu Tingfang knows that he still remembers the other day she called him a coward. She laughed and said "Tingfang knew right away that you're not a person who easily obey anyone, grandfather is the same."

Xiang Shaolong shockingly said "Even what you think is right or wrong, don't tell it to anyone else, if it gets to master's ear my life will be in danger".

Wu Tingfang laughs and sits straight up, steering the horse to stop and says "Look there! Crossing the valley ahead and over a small hill you'll be able to see the gate to the pasture. In the valley there's a small beautiful river, running through the pasture, why don't we go there and have fun while father isn't here yet?"

Xiang Shaolong already calculated that in this era if he can

capture a girl's heart she will be braver than any girl in the 21st century. He's happy inside because he defeated Lian Jin, laughs and says "Anyone who doesn't want to have fun with you is stupid and crazy!" He steered the horse into the valley after he said.

It's beginning of fall season, the whole valley is filled with leaves, beautiful like heaven on earth, a small river's current running from a rock and created a small pond.

Wu Tingfang is still childish, she happily jumps down from the horse and runs to the river bank.

Xiang Shaolong runs after her hugged her belly, his hands takes her belt off.

Wu Tingfang shocked, catches his hands and asks "What are you doing?"

Xiang Shaolong laughs and says "The water is clear like this, don't you want to swim?"

Wu Tingfang lowers her head and says "I can't! If my hair gets wet father will definitely find out about us and would not forgive us."

Xiang Shaolong says "We can just swim in shallow water only. I guarantee your hair won't get wet."

Wu Tingfang flushed, releases her hand and whispers "All right! Don't let my hair get wet, you think I don't know what you want to do?"

Xiang Shaolong is happy, thinking to himself a beauty like this, even if he dies he won't let go, his hands begin their actions and taking her clothes off.

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "I remember now there's no dry cloth to wipe my body, and it's inappropriate. Why not I seek compensation from you now, listen to how refreshing the waterfall sounds."

Wu Tingfang was about to listen closely when Xiang Shaolong kissed her hard, his hands willfully and rudely roaming her naked body.

How can she remember to listen to the sound of the waterfall? The intoxicating feeling earlier has not fully receded and it began crashing towards her again. Amidst her urgent moaning, her limbs unconsciously wrapped tightly around this man who has captured her heart.

Xiang Shaolong may be a flirtatious man, but he's not lecherous. It's just that he knows that a girl like Wu Tingfang who has just experienced romance is especially fickle and pliable. If he did not strike while the iron is hot and claim her for himself first, maybe when she sees the handsome Lian Jin, she will turn onto his embrace again.

But if he takes her for the first time, he will become the first man in her life, and even Lian Jin will find it difficult to rock their intimate relationship when that happens.

And with Lian Jin's intelligence, it's not difficult to realize that this beauty has already given him her most precious chastity, and this is the blow that he wants to give Lian Jin. No matter how nonchalant Lian Jin is, this matter involves a man's pride and attraction, so that fellow will surely be unable to take it.

And his have to achieve his goal of attacking Lian Jin.

If the Wu family were to find out about this matter, it's no big deal as well. As long as he can defeat Lian Jin, the King of Zhao will certainly look at him differently and the Wu family would not dare to do anything to him. Maybe even Lady Ya will protect him as well.

Once he thought about this, he knows that he is beginning to become more ruthless in order to reach his goals. But in this era where the strong is the leader, he has no other choice.

So with this mentality in mind, he used the gentlest and pleasing method to make this beautiful young lady lose her chastity to him. He followed up the act with tenderness and honeyed words to let her enjoy the sweetest pleasure a woman can get from a man.

When the two of them reached the big pasture that was miles wide, Wu Yingyuan's men just started to show up from afar.

The person in charge of the pasture welcomed them warmly, especially when he saw the proud Grand Young Missy leaning against him daintily, he fawned even more towards Xiang Shaolong.

The big pasture is a huge piece of land surrounded by mountains and water on three sides, and the only flat piece of ground is in the east where a large river flowed horizontally across. The hanging bridge is the only way in and out, and with high walls on each side, making it look a country of its own.

There were 10 over camps of Zhao soldiers outside the pasture, obviously the uncountable number of horses, cows and goats in the pasture is the lifeline of Handan.

The 2 of them were looking around when Wu Yingyuan came over with his men. He lightly chided Wu Tingfang for a moment before turning to Xiang Shaolong and said, "Come! Let me bring Shaolong around!"

Xiang Shaolong was flattered and after changing his horse, he galloped into the pasture. Wu Tingfang was of course following him.

Wu Yingyuan recounted the joys and pains of running a pasture, showing that he is extremely experienced and insightful.

The 3 of them came to a little hill full of sheep in the end. Wu Tingfang's inner child came out and she jumped off the horse to play with the sheep.

The two stood side by side on their horses, viewing the beautiful scenery of the majestic mountains.

Wu Yingyuan seems to remark offhandedly, “Fang’er seems to like Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong is unsure of his hidden meaning, and was awkwardly silent.

Wu Yingyuan smiled slightly and said, “That’s good too! I’ve never liked Lian Jin. This person is unfathomable and is in cahoots with Wu Hei. It’s just that Father trusts them, so there’s nothing I can do to them.”

Xiang Shaolong had a thought, Tao Fang must be Wu Yingyuan’s man, that’s why he trusted him as well and revealed his true feelings. He probed, “I heard Master Tao said, Master has the intention of marrying Grand Young Missy into the imperial family...”

Wu Yingyuan gave a cold snort and said, “My numerous arguments with Father is precisely because of this. Father is getting on in age, and cannot see clearly the situation now.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “Young Master!”

Wu Yingyuan looked at him, his eyes glaring and asked coldly, “Shaolong! Tell me honestly, where did you come from, what blood flows in your body.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that if he has to make up a story, he

cannot hesitate and immediately replied, “Since Young Master thinks so highly of Shaolong, I dare not hide anything from you. Actually I am the offspring of a Qin man, who has wandered into the mountain regions, and a local woman. I did not even tell Master Tao about this.”

Because Wu Yingyuan already had such a thinking in his mind, he was not suspicious at all. He thought for a moment and asked, “If I were to give Fang’er to you, would you promise to love her well for the rest of your life?”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, but immediately asked dejectedly, “But why would Master agree to it?”

Wu Yingyuan replied impatiently, “Forget about him first.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly made his promise.

The corners of Wu Yingyuan’s mouth curved up into a slight smile and he said joyfully, “I admire you not wholly because of your outstanding swordsmanship, or your outstanding reflexes and intelligence when dealing with the horse thieves. The most important matter is that you risked your own life and stayed behind to fight the thieves so that your comrades can leave safely. Such loyalty to your master and friends is what reassures me into giving Fang’er to you. This is a secret agreement for now, and besides Tao Fang, you must not let a 4th person know about this, and that includes Fang’er.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that he seems to have some plans in his

mind, and needs his wits and swordsmanship, so he lowered his voice and asked, “If there’s anything Young Master needs Shaolong to do, just let me know.”

A look of surprise flashed past Wu Yingyuan’s eyes, and he complimented him, “Tao Fang was right about you, with your keen observation, you will certainly be someone famous in future.”

He paused for a moment before continuing, “Father is really getting old, and does not know that the situation is rapidly changing.”

He added, “Ever since the 3 states declared independence, the first to attack among the 3 states Zhao, Wei and Han is Marquis Wei. The Qin in the west, Qi in the east, Han and Chu in the south, Zhao in the north, none of them were spared from his attacks. Even Handan, this sturdy large city was captured by him for 2 years. If not for the state of Qi’s help, the Weis would not have retreated.”

That 3 months when Xiang Shaolong was with Yuan Zong they often talked about the affairs of the world, and is not as ignorant as when he first arrived. He added, “But later on the Wei soldiers lost in the battle of Maling under Wu Qi and Sun Bin. Later Qin, Qi and Zhao continuously attacked Wei, making them lose able generals and soldiers and a huge piece of land so now they’re not as powerful as before.

Wu Yingyuan was very impressed with his knowledge and nodded his head, “There’s not many in Handan who has your insight. Shaolong, tell me, who do you think is the strongest.”

Xiang Shaolong replied without a thought, “Of course it’s Qin, the world will ultimately be conquered by Qin.” He secretly laughed to himself, not only is there no one in Handan who has his insight, but no one in the entire warring states will be as confident of this as he is.

Wu Yingyuan was startled, “Although I thinking highly of Qin, but I’m not as sure as you are. Why would you have this thinking?”

Xiang Shaolong was almost speechless, luckily an idea flashed past and he replied, “The key point is whether the various states in the east can join forces to repel Qin, and looking at the war between Yan and Zhao now, we know the outcome of that.”

Wu Yingyuan replied, “What you meant is ‘Lian Heng’ and ‘He Zong’.”

The former means the weak joining forces to attack one strong force.

The latter means one strong force attacking all weak forces.

These are the two extreme policies during the warring states period.

Qin is in the west, the other 6 strong states, Qi, Wei, Zhao, Han, Chu and Yan are at the south. Any state that joins forces with Qin will be a unification between the south and west, and thus named

‘Lian Heng’. If the 6 states were to join forces, it’ll be unification of the north and south, and they’re referred to as ‘He Zong’.

The situation now is getting more and more obvious, the 6 states are gradually losing the ability to fight against Qin on their own. Although there were small victories, it’s not enough to change the whole situation. But if they were to join forces, their strength will far surpass Qin. Therefore what Qin fears most is the unification of the 6 states. As the saying goes, ‘the only fear is the unification of the world against oneself’.

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head like an expert and said, “At the moment which state in the southeast is willing to maintain status quo. All the rulers wants to take this opportunity to expand their land and fight for gains so that they can become ruler of the world, so it’s impossible for them to unite.”

Wu Yingyuan looked at him in shock and said, “Luckily you are not my enemy, but my future son-in-law.”

Of course Xiang Shaolong understood his underlying meaning, which is to say that if that is not the case, he’ll certainly get rid of him. He was about to speak when Wu Tingfang returned and said with a dainty smile, “Father has never enjoyed a conversation as much as this, Shaolong is really capable.”

Wu Yingyuan looked heavenward and laughed for a long time before saying, “Father has to take a look at the account books, Fang’er will accompany Shaolong around!” and he left on his horse.

Xiang Shaolong jumped down from his horse.

Wu Tingfang smiled coquettishly at him and rolled her eyes, “It seems that Father likes you a lot? When will Shaolong ask him for my hand, then Fang’er will be able to be with you everyday, so don’t you find me irritating then.”

After Xiang Shaolong swore to heaven that he will not change his heart, he walked slowly while holding the 2 majestic horses saying, “After I win Lian Jin and have fame and status, I’ll marry you immediately. My only fear is if I will pass your Grandfather’s barrier.”

Wu Tingfang’s eyes reddened and said, “If Grandfather does not agree, Fang’er will die in front of him.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “You mustn’t do that, I could always elope with you and they won’t be able to find us.”

Wu Tingfang tugged at his sleeve happily and said with joy, “A man must keep to his words, you must not regret in future because you can’t bear to give up fame and riches or because you’ve found a new love. I’ve even given myself to you, you must treasure me for the rest of your life!”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly said some assuring words. This beauty’s happiness is totally in his control now, so how can he not make her happy. He did not expect that he would be able to have wives and concubines, but in order to support them, especially a

rich young lady like Wu Tingfang who is used to luxury and being served, is not going to be easy. When he thought about how penniless he was while in Wu An, he still feels a little fear.

Wu Tingfang suddenly said, “You have to be careful of Lian Jin, he’s really formidable. And I think that even though he dare not kill you, but he will at least try to maim you before he gives up.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed and said, “Don’t worry! If I cannot defeat even him, then I’m not competent enough to marry a pretty girl like you.”

Book 1 Chapter 13 – Comparison Of Love

When Xiang Shaolong returned to Handan, it's already dusk. After saying sweet farewells to Wu Tingfang, he hurriedly rode back to the guest house.

The biggest benefit he got from this trip is the beauty Wu Tingfang and establishing friendship and understanding with her father. Also, under Wu Yingyuan's instructions, he is more familiar with the behavior of horses and the techniques of riding.

For someone like him who was in the elite force undergoing strict training, what he has learnt in a day is equivalent to what an average person will learn in a year.

When he reached the guesthouse, he was shocked to see Zhao soldiers standing guard at the entrance. Luckily he bumped into Li Shan and found out that after the King of Zhao heard about the matters regarding Prince Shaoyuan and Wu Tingwei, he warned everyone not to touch Xiang Shaolong and even transferred his guards to protect him.

On one hand he was surprised at how well informed the King of Zhao was, but he has this feeling that this duel is not as simple as it seems.

He was still deep in thought when Li Shan told him, "Lady Ya ordered you to go to her residence immediately after you come back, the horse carriage is waiting for you!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting. He's not superman, these few days he has been making love day and night with the 3 beauties Shu'er, Lady Ya and Wu Tingfang, and each time he did his best. He had just been involved with Wu Tingfang, so how should he satisfy Lady Ya now.

He is so tortured that he almost groaned. He hurriedly went back and changed his clothes, consoled Shu'er who could not bear to let him leave, went up the horse carriage and fell asleep, ignoring everything else. When he woke up he realized it's deep into the night and he's already in the Lady's residence. Lady Ya slept curled up next to him, like a tame little cat.

Xiang Shaolong felt a warmness surrounding his heart and after calling her twice, realized that she's still having sweet dreams. He gently kissed her face, eyes, nose, mouth before carefully covering her with the blanket and stood up to walk to the window.

He stretched lazily and felt refreshed and recharged, thinking to himself that if he has to handle a few women now, his stamina would be able to take it.

No matter what, after he wins Lian Jin, he must go and look for Ying Zheng, it'll be good even if he can take a look at him. If he did not see this great man who created China single handedly, he'll not die in peace.

But there's one thing that he can't figure out. Handan is such a heavily guarded city, how is an important person like him who has the criteria to ascend the Qin throne going to slip out? If he doesn't return to Xianyang, how can he ascend the throne then?

The Handan city in movies is just an unguarded city, but it's totally different in real life. How will Ying Zheng return to become Emperor Qin?

In the past Ying Zheng's father Yi Ren had the help of the wealthy Lu Buwei before he could escape successfully. Since the Zhaos had this as an example, they would not let the same thing happen again. Even if Lu Buwei is not coming, and the Zhaos have forgotten about what he has done, it'll still be difficult to use the same ploy again.

Besides it's not something that can be accomplished in a few days. From the time Lu Buwei met Yi Ren, until the time Yi Ren returned to Qin, it took more than 10 years. If not for the battle of Changping where 4,000,000 Zhaos were killed by the Qins, Yi Ren and Lu Buwei would not have taken the risk to return to Qin for fear of revenge. And they had no choice but to leave behind Zhao Ji and her son Ying Zheng.

How old is Ying Zheng this year, does he look as tall and large as the Qins? He really wants to know, if only there is someone he can ask.

“Shaolong!”

Shaolong was just thinking that he'll be executed if someone finds out about this, so he was really startled when he heard his name.

He turned around.

The extremely beautiful and flimsily dressed Lady Ya was looking at him with a coquettishly smile.

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I thought you were asleep, you really startled me.”

Lady Ya moved over and hugged him tightly from behind, her slender arms twining around his neck and said, “If I don’t pretend to be asleep, how I can test if you’re really gentle. I thought you were lying to me, but when I saw that you were really startled by me, I realized you really did not know that I was feigning sleep.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling guilty. He was deep in thought about betraying the state of Zhao, but he accidentally hit the right note instead, which is really lucky.

Smelling her intoxicating fragrance, feeling the touch of her skin, Xiang Shaolong’s hands can’t help but start caressing and kneading her back, and of course he will not let her perky bottom off as well.

Lady Ya closed her eyes and enjoyed his loving touches, and mumbled dreamily, “You don’t know how heavy you are, 4 soldiers had so much trouble carrying you in, I’m afraid you’ll crush me to death one of these days.”

Xiang Shaolong had a lusty thought and replied with a laugh,

“But last night Lady was complaining that my movements were not strong enough.”

Lady Ya rolled her eyes at him and left his embrace. She held up his hand and said, “Actually once I saw you, I wanted to make love with you immediately, but I don’t know why now I feel like having a heart to heart talk with you instead. Come! You should be hungry by now, shall we go to the little pavilion in the back garden and enjoy the moon and a feast?”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong heard her talking to him in such an agreeable manner, and saw that she is not only looking for carnal satisfaction from him and knows that this wanton has started to develop feelings for him. He has a sense of accomplishment from conquering this difficult woman. Just as he was about to speak, his stomach started rumbling.

Lady Ya was amused and after laughing coquettishly, cast a flirtatious look at him and led him out of the room.

The clear moon hung high up in the sky, illuminating the whole garden and the little 2-story pavilion.

Lady Ya sighed quietly and said, “When I woke up this morning, I actually made up my mind not to look for you again, or maybe not to look for you so soon. But in less than an instant I ordered my men to bring you here, but later I thought it was inappropriate. So I changed to getting my servants to fetch you in a horse carriage. Who would have expected you to have gone out of the city with Wu Yingyuan and his daughter so early in the morning, making me wait a whole day restlessly for you. I didn’t want to see anyone

else, even when my brother asked for me, I feigned illness not to go.”

Listening to this ultimate beauty revealing her true feelings, Xiang Shaolong only felt sweetness in his heart.

Ever since the time machine brought him back to this warring states period 2000 years ago, things have been crashing in him wave by wave, not giving him the chance to think properly all that has happened. He can only struggle to survive.

Now he is suddenly clear minded. Heavens! He's really in the ancient world, coming into contact with those people of a different era, talking, even fighting and making love.

His only regret is he was unable to ask that crazy Ma a few more questions, regarding what this is all about.

Hasn't all these already happened? Why is it now he still has a past, present and future, just like his old reality.

If he were to change what has already happened, what repercussions will it have on the future?

Or are there countless past, and what he is facing now is only one of them.

Everything is as surreal as a dream.

The most realistic time, will only appear when he is embroiled with beauties.

Just like Lady Ya before his eyes.

“What are you thinking!”

Xiang Shaolong was jolted from this thoughts, and smiled bitterly. He may never be able to reveal his inner thoughts.

He removed his cape, walked towards her and draped it over her. He moved to face her, hugging her tightly and at the same time grabbed her slender hands, asking gently, “Why are you so honest with me? Aren’t you afraid I’ll see through your weakness and control you?”

Lady Ya smiled, “Of course I’m not! Control me all you want! I’ve been troubled the whole day, and thought about it the whole day, and realized that I really have never been happy. Hai! I’ve been numb about the matters between men and women long ago. If you grew up in the palace or a duke’s household, you will understand my meaning.”

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, “You were born into the royal family, you should not want of anything, and able to get everything you want. Why is it that when you talk about the palace, it seems like you’re talking about the scariest place on earth?”

Lady Ya snuggled deeper into his arms, as if she is trying to get security and warmth from him and said sadly, “It seems that during the Zhou dynasty in the past, the royal family and dukes’ family were restricted by traditions and ceremonial etiquettes, and it’s a rule to choose a wife from the other royal and dukes’ families. Everything has to be done according to the law, no one dares to override it. But today, the palace has become the most ugly and promiscuous place. I saw with my own eyes the countless evil licentious acts my father, brothers and elders engaged in. For example they kept a few boys and wanted them to wear make-up, it’s truly disgusting. My imperial uncle likes to draw on the walls of the hall, embarrassing pictures of men and women coupling, and even invited lots of his officials to drink and make merry with the palace maids, and I... hai! I really do not want to say further.”

Xiang Shaolong vaguely guessed that something incestuous may have been involved, and he did not want to think about it either. He nodded his head and said, “It’s better left unsaid, forget about it then.”

Lady Ya’s eyes reddened, and said piteously, “Shaolong! Only you can help me forget the frightening past.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, and took the opportunity to say, “But first you can no longer be with other men.”

Lady Ya was stunned, “You know about it!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly to himself, the whole city knows

about it, how can I not know? He nodded his head.

Lady Ya looked at his face for a long while, turned around and lightly pushed him away.

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed and lowered his head to scrutinize her expression.

Lady Ya's alert and jet black eyes stared at him, her countenance turning icy and said flatly, "Are you looking down on me in your heart?"

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming on, this woman is really unpredictable, but he knows at this time he cannot back down. He replied coldly, "If you continue to live the life of having countless 'face heads', I will really look down on you."

Lady Ya is totally helpless when she sees his chauvinistic attitude, and she softened and called out, "Shaolong! Hug me."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said, "If you do not promise me, I cannot obey you."

Lady Ya was in a frenzy as she replied, "But you cannot accompany me the whole day, and sometimes you will go out to war. Don't you know that loneliness can kill?" And she sighed sadly, "I have everything, and don't care for anything. Only obtaining different men, can give me the feeling of novelty and excitement for the time. All right! If you promise to stay by my side

the whole day, I will chase all the other men away.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “If there’s no suffering from pining, how can there be joy from reunion. Going too far will not accomplish anything. You will only value something if you get it after much suffering. If Lady does not learn this rule for happiness, you can forget about being happy in your life, it’s no use even if I try to help you.”

Lady Ya thought for a moment, a look of admiration flashed past her pretty eyes and said quietly, “Your thinking is very unique, very refreshing, making me think about things I’ve never thought of before. I’m exactly going too far and not accomplishing anything, that’s why I don’t have the feeling of happiness.

She continued with a coquettish laugh, “This is the first time I feel that it’s interesting to have a conversation with a man.” Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, of course it’s interesting. Such a oft-talked about topic in the 21st century, of course it’ll be a breakthrough in thinking for people like you. Suddenly, he knows for sure that he will be able to snatch Lady Ya from Lian Jin’s hands as well, because Lian Jin lacks the knowledge of 2000 years.

My god! That is such a long distance away!

Lady Ya rolled her eyes at him and asked, “Your smile is very hateful, are you laughing at me.” And she changed back to a naïve and lovable young girl.

Is she a little girl who has never grown up or matured because

she has always been pampered?

Xiang Shaolong had an idea, and pointed at the moon and told her the story of the cowherd and weaving girl. He ended with a sigh, “The meeting of the golden wind and jade dew, surpasses everything else on earth.”*

*Poem by Qin Guan from Song Dynasty – Immortals on a magpie bridge

Lady Ya was engrossed in the story, and looked up at the empty space beside the clear moon, imagining the magpie bridge there and sighed, “Shaolong thought of these two sentences, the intonation is good, and the image brought up intoxicating.”

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to say, “Of course I thought of it, have you heard anyone else saying it?”

Lady Ya laughed, “You don’t have to be so uptight. Tell me, why do you want me to listen to such a sad and helpless story?”

Xiang Shaolong came to her side and leaned into her, and said nonchalantly, “I only want you to guess, when the cowherd and weaving girl meets once a year, what would they do.”

Lady Ya chuckled and said with a flirtatious smile, “Of course they’ll do what we were doing last night!”

Xiang Shaolong was aroused by her flirtatious moves and said a

little roughly, “Answer me quickly if you want Xiang Shaolong or other men like Lian Jin. You can only choose one, once you promise me I will carry you into the pavilion immediately.”

Lady Ya stared at him with concentration for a moment, and replied with a smile, “If you can make another 2 poem verses, something as moving as the earlier verse, I will promise to become only your woman.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly elated, and thought he will use the god of poem Li Bai’s famous words to excite her, and said offhandedly, “Have you never seen them grieving in the mirror over their white hair, silky black at dawn, snowy white at dusk.” These 2 verses, to a woman, is really a sore point.

Lady Ya’s body shivered, and she lowered her head and recited it twice, limitless love flowing out from her bright eyes and she said gently, “Xiang Shaolong! You’ve won, carry me inside!”

The 2 of them had just entered the pavilion and was about to go into the bedroom when a pretty maid hurried up to report, “Lady! Master Lian is here.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken and put Lady Ya down, staring at her icily, naturally he meant to say that since Lian Jin is allowed to come into your residence at will, therefore he can go into your room anytime to look for you.

Lady Ya first instructed the pretty maid, “Go and stop him, tell him I don’t wish to see him tonight.”

After the maid left, she looked at Xiang Shaolong in reproach, “Didn’t I make myself clear already?”

Before Xiang Shaolong could reply, Lian Jin’s voice can be heard from downstairs calling out, “Since Lian Jin is already here, why won’t Lady let me hear even a few words of your melodious voice?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly complimenting Lian Jin for really having a way with women.

Indeed Lady Ya’s expression showed she is at a loss, obviously Lian Jin has stirred some beautiful memories.

Lian Jin added, “The night is clear with the moon bright, the scenery is breathtaking. Won’t Lady be lonely sleeping all alone?”

Lady Ya was shocked awake, she secretly stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong and saw his unhappy expression. She suddenly felt dislike for Lian Jin and said coquettishly, “Now you’ve heard my voice, leave quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong saw that she did not make things clear with Lian Jin, and knew that she still harbor some feelings for him. He felt discontented and snorted unhappily.

Lian Jin immediately called out furiously, “Who is up there!”

The guards started shouting, followed by the sounds of weapons clashing and groans of pain. Suddenly footsteps were heard coming up the pavilion and Lian Jin walked up, with guards running after him.

Lady Ya commanded the guards, "It's nothing of your business here, go down."

Lian Jin stared at Xiang Shaolong, his usual calm lost, his eyes seems to be shooting flames and he said each word slowly, "It's you again, Xiang Shaolong."

Lady Ya was about to reprimand Lian Jin when Xiang Shaolong led her towards the door and said, "Lady please go into the room."

Lady Ya has no intention of leaving these two rivals here alone, but she knows that if she does not listen to Xiang Shaolong's instructions, it would mean letting Lian Jin win. She will then forever lose this proud man, so she bit her lips and went into the room obediently.

Lian Jin saw this beauty who has never really surrendered actually surrendering to Xiang Shaolong's 'lascivious power', he was so furious that he almost coughed out blood, and was unable to speak for a moment.

Xiang Shaolong's ferocious eyes shot icily at him and said with a stern voice, "Was it you who instigated Grand Young Master yesterday to touch my Yan woman?"

Lian Jin is an extremely deep person, and after his anger subsided, his calm returned. He smiled nonchalantly, “Not only the Yan woman, even that Su Nu of yours, I was the one who informed Prince Shaoyuan to snatch her away.”

Xiang Shaolong looked heavenward and laughed sadly, and when he looked at Lian Jin again, he was expressionless. He said quietly, “Fine! If I, Xiang Shaolong, allow you to live beyond the day after tomorrow, then I will change my surname to that of yours, scum!

Naturally Lian Jin does not understand what ‘scum’ is, but he knows it’s nothing good. He laughed and replied, “This is exactly what I want to say to you.” He then called out into the room, “When Lian Jin comes again the night after, Lady will not reject my request to be your bedroom guest!” He laughed loudly and went downstairs.

Xiang Shaolong really felt like running after him immediately and have a duel to the death. But if he kills him, he may be executed for going against the imperial edict, so he had no choice but to swallow his displeasure.

The person responsible for Su Nu’s horrendous death, now he knows clearly who is it!

But he will not let that Prince Shaoyuan off as well.

“Is your anger appeased?”

Xiang Shaolong turned around and after looking at Lady Ya who was leaning against the door for a moment, he walked over and carried her up and into the room.

Right now he feels no gentleness or sweetness at all.

What he has now is a thunderstorm of hatred. He needs to appease the pain in his heart, and his candidate is Lady Ya.

Lady Ya hugged him tightly and cried out, “Shaolong you’re so good! You took me up to heaven, no man has ever treated me so wildly and strongly like you, it’s really exhilarating.”

Xiang Shaolong, whose anger is finally appeased, was dumbstruck. He treated her in such a beastly manner, yet she praised him from the bottom of her heart, it seems that she is really a little masochistic.

Lady Ya asked, “Why aren’t you talking? I will listen to you in future, all right?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, “That’s more like it.”

Lady Ya wriggled a little in protest, and after a while fell into a deep sleep.

However, because Xiang Shaolong took a nap earlier, and he was feeling upset about causing the death of Su Nu, he spent the whole night with his eyes wide open, thinking. He was only able to fall

asleep due to weariness just before dawn.

By the time he woke up the sun was already high in the sky and secretly exclaimed to himself. If he lets himself go on like this, he won't have the energy to fight with Lian Jin tomorrow. He hurriedly got up and made up his mind not to touch women from now until his duel.

He walked out to the hall.

And was immediately stunned.

The Lady Ya who was usually dressed in finery, has changed into a simple set of clothes worn by an average woman, with a thin layer of makeup on her face. She's not even wearing her earrings, and exudes a different kind of intoxicating beauty.

She was standing on the stairs, obviously just on her way up.

When she saw Xiang Shaolong she smiled broadly at him and came up to hug him, saying "Let common girl serve Master in your routine."

Xiang Shaolong laughed and asked, "You'd like to become a common girl very much?"

Lady Ya immediately nodded her head, "I want you to accompany me today to go shopping and eating."

Xiang Shaolong is now in a dilemma, he had promised Wu Tingfang last night to visit her, and Tao Fang will certainly have things to discuss with him. He also wants to find some time to accompany the lonely Shu'er. Hai! If only he knows how to split himself up.

He really felt like hardening his heart and reject Lady Ya.

But he saw that she's all excited and her expression so looking forward to the day, he can't bring himself to say anything.

After a short conversation, the two of them strolled out into the streets.

Unknowingly, as they talked and laughed, they came to the huge mansion he passed by the other day while on his way to Lady Ya's residence, which belonged to someone from another state.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to ask, "Who lives in there, why is it so heavily guarded?"

Lady Ya replied, "Most of them are the hostages sent to us as peace offering by the states that we defeated."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Are there anyone who has any special background?"

Lady Ya replied, “All of them are royalty, but the most important person would be Yi Zheng. He’s the only son of Zi Chu from the state of Qin. Hai! But it’s better not mentioning this person.”

Xiang Shaolong asked curiously, “Do you know him?”

Lady Ya blushed, and replied a little unwillingly, “Not only do I know him, but very well too!”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brow and asked, “Don’t tell me he’s one of your chamber guests as well, isn’t he just a child?”

According to the depiction in the movie, Emperor Qin was only 13 when he ascended the throne, so won’t he be only 8 or 9 now. Lady Ya won’t even let children off?

Lady Ya replied, “Where did you hear that from, he’s at the most 2 to 3 years younger than you!”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, could it be that the history books have recorded it wrongly.

Lady Ya grabbed his arm and shook it, saying, “Just take it as my fault, will you please stop digging out my past affairs?”

Xiang Shaolong dared not continue his questions for fear of arousing her suspicions, secretly thinking that he’ll have more chances in future. Maybe he will be able to get to know this extraordinary famed man through her.

He suggested, “Why don’t we return to the guesthouse first, see if there’s anything important requiring me.”

As long as she can be with him, Lady Ya has no objections and happily replied, “All right! Let me see how pretty is the Yan beauty you have hidden.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled, “You know about Shu’er as well?”

Lady Ya was so happy like a carefree little girl. She puffed up her chest and said smugly, “Knowing oneself and the enemy, will win all battles, this is taught in the Art of Sun Zi. I also know that silly lass Wu Tingfang have fallen for you. Lian Jin has really lost badly to you in the battlefield of love.”

Xiang Shaolong felt numb and his heart chilled on hearing it. He knows that the Wu residence is filled with King Zhao’s spies, because he does not trust the Wu family who has Qin blood flowing in them.

This is no small matter, he must find a chance to tell Wu Yingyuan, or else he may face the possibility that the whole family will be executed.

He was nervous as he walked with the beauty, strolling in the busy Handan streets, stepping on the ancient pathways.

Is this a dream created by crazy Ma's machine?

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt at a loss.

But he knows that no matter how frightening is the future, he has already fallen deeply in love with this ancient era and the beauty next to him.

End of Book 1

Book 2 Chapter 1 – Marquis Zhao Mu

Xiang Shaolong and Lady Ya who was dressed as a commoner walked towards the guesthouse, talking and laughing along the way happily.

Lady Ya replied, “I’ve heard much about the guesthouses for warriors, but everyone advised me not to go, saying that the people in those places are complicated. The Wu guesthouse and Guo guesthouse are the most superior, warriors without some status are not even qualified to stay in there,”

Xiang Shaolong’s interest was a little stirred and he said, “So the guesthouse I am staying in is so superior? I don’t even know that, I’m not even sure how many warriors are staying there and who they are.”

Lady Ya asked, “Don’t tell me you don’t even know that Lian Jin is staying there!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Really?” No wonder he brought Wu Tingwei there the other day.

He went back in a fury last night, would he do something to Shu’er? Once he thought of that, he wished that he could sprout wings and fly back to the guesthouse.

Lady Ya was about to speak when the expression on her face suddenly turned awkward.

Xiang Shaolong followed the direction of her gaze and saw that among the passers-by at the opposite street, there's a group of 10 odd warriors surrounding aggressive looking burly man with a scarred who stood tall and straight, wearing brocade robes. He had just turned his head around and was staring at them.

Lady Ya lowered her head and told him quietly, "Go quickly!"

She walked quickly forward with Shaolong running along behind her, full of questions.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw 2 of the warriors leaving the group and dashing across the busy streets filled with traveling horse carriages. They ran after them and one of them called out loudly, "Lady please hold!"

Lady Ya stopped and sighed helplessly. Xiang Shaolong can only stop together with her.

The two went up to them and gave an unfriendly stare to Xiang Shaolong first before bowing respectfully towards Lady Ya and said, "The Marquis invites Lady Ya over for a meeting."

Xiang Shaolong thought that Lady Ya would certainly refuse, but instead she sighed and said, "Go back first, and tell Marquis I will go and see him after leaving some instructions."

The two of them looked at Xiang Shaolong rudely before walking

back to the street opposite.

Lady Ya looked at him in fright before lowering her head and said, “Shaolong! I’m sorry! I can’t accompany you today, can I look for you a little later?”

Xiang Shaolong felt fury rising in him for no reason and asked, “Who is that Marquis? Why is it that he can take you away from me with just one word?”

Lady Ya pleaded, “Please don’t ask, I’m going!” and left.

Xiang Shaolong looked as Lady Ya walked towards the scar faced burley man dressed in finery among the group. He put his arms around her tiny waist and hugged her, and Xiang Shaolong felt as if someone has given him a punch to his chest.

He’s getting more and more confused about the relationships among these people. With Lady Ya’s status, why does she seem afraid of this Marquis, and allowed him to hug and embrace her in front of him, obviously making him lose face in the process.

He stood there stunned for a moment, with difficulty breathing, feeling extremely humiliated but with nowhere to vent his frustration.

It’s really bad to get involved with a slut, you’d never know how many other men she has. He didn’t even want to know anything about this Marquis, and don’t even want to see Lady Ya ever again.

Sounds of hooves beat were heard.

Xiang Shaolong was jolted from his thought and looking up, saw Li Shan and a few warriors rushing towards him in a frenzy, calling, “Brother Xiang! We just went to Lady Ya’s place to look for you and were told you just left with Lady Ya.”

Xiang Shaolong had a bad feeling and asked, “What is the matter?”

Li Shan cried out sadly, “Shu’er has been raped and killed!”

These words sounds like lightning striking from heaven, and he retreated several steps in shock, knocking into a wall behind him, the blood totally gone from his face.

He flipped the blanket open, Shu’er’s naked and wounded lifeless body laid coldly on the ground, the fresh blood flowing out from her eyes already coagulated into a dark black.

The thing that killed her was the red road twined around her neck, and it had cut deep into the neck. Her lower body was in a mess.

Shu’er is dead! Murdered in the most humiliating and cruel way.

Xiang Shaolong felt his body turn icy, unable to accept this

reality in front of him at all.

Su Bu's death happened away from him, he did not see with his own eyes. Besides, coming to this era 2000 years ago, everything seemed surreal, and even death seems like a joke. He may have been sad but he was not overwrought, so when he was busy with other matters, he could easily put aside the matter of Su Nu's suicide, or even forget about it. But Shu'er is another matter altogether!

His heart is bleeding!

The voice of Tao Fang, who was standing next to him seems to be coming from some place far away, saying, "When Chunying went into the room this morning, Shu'er is already like this. Hai! I really don't know what to say either, the murderer must be someone in this guesthouse."

Xiang Shaolong has no wish to ask anything at all.

The only people who would dare to touch Shu'er would be Wu Tingwei and Lian Jin. He doesn't believe that Wu Tingwei will have the guts, so the murderer must be Lian Jin. He knows that there's nothing he can do to him, at least he dare not touch him before the duel.

So he will try to deal blows to him unscrupulously.

And no one would speak up for a gift from Yan, including Tao

Fang and Wu Yingyuan.

He has never felt like killing a person so much.

Tao Fang added, “Why don’t you move in and stay with me! My wife and daughters all want to meet you very much.”

Xiang Shaolong calmly covered Shu’er totally with the blanket, shook his head and said, “No! I am going to sleep here, but from this moment on I won’t need anyone to serve me, and don’t let anyone come here. Let me help Shu’er prepare for her last rites! I want to be alone with my thoughts.”

Tao Fang said worriedly, “Shaolong! Don’t torture yourself, tomorrow night is the crucial night where you will have your duel with Lian Jin, now the whole city is waiting to find out the outcome.”

Xiang Shaolong became as calm and cold as ice and said calmly, “Don’t worry! No one places more importance to the appointment tomorrow night as much as I do.”

After going through so many cruel setbacks, he finally kept his blithe behavior aside and turned back into the killing machine that his era has trained him to be, a cold warrior who will use any methods in order to complete a mission.

Xiang Shaolong stayed in the room where Shu’er was murdered for the whole afternoon.

He did not wail, nor did he weep.

Only the weak will feel sadness.

In this warring states period, in this period that most people will do anything, even evil, if it can benefit themselves, only the strong will survive. When he took a look at Shu'er's body again, he deeply felt the cold heartlessness of reality, felt that this is a lawless society where the strong will rule.

If he wants revenge, he'll have to become the strongest.

When Tao Fang and the rest left the courtyard, he picked up the wooden sword and concentrated hard on practicing his swordplay, studying the intricacies of the Mozi Swordplay.

After his heart melded with his soul, he repeatedly practiced the most intricate 10 moves in the swordplay.

Mozi Swordplay places more importance in defense rather than offense, but each defensive move also hides an opportunity to attack.

If he can improve on the attacks, then the swordplay that only defends will be able to turn into something that can attack and defend at the same time. Once he thought of this, he felt an overwhelming joy. He waved the sword and for a moment the movements were unpredictable, powerful and unconstrained.

He was getting into the swordplay and he jumped out into the hall, using the wider area to practice and at the same time incorporating his knowledge of anatomy and mechanics into the swordplay.

The sword swished, one moment it's unpredictable and formless, another moment it's powerful and free.

Every attack is an evolution from the defensive moves in the Mozi swordplay.

He roared and struck continuously over a hundred times, none of the moves using any form of defense.

He retracted his sword, moving the wooden sword to between his brows, staring straight at the sword.

A petite person ran into the hall, crying out in alarm, "Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong put his wooden sword down and Wu Tingfang has already thrown herself into his arms, crying piteously, "Shaolong, Shaolong!"

On one hand Xiang Shaolong pointed the sword to the floor, and with the other hand held the beauty in his arms. Once again he thought of thought of Shu'er's horrible death and felt as if all his innards are twisted together. He said sadly, "You know about

Shu'er."

Wu Tingfang nodded her head, sobbing uncontrollably, feeling sad for him.

He lifted her pear-shaped but tear stained face and looked at him through her tears, saying, "Master Tao came to look for Father, asking about Brother's whereabouts. I was still upset with you then for not coming to look for me, but once I heard about Shu'er I ignored Father's opposition and came here immediately. Shaolong! Brother has been locked up by Father since yesterday morning, he definitely is not involved in this."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, "Don't worry! I already know who the murderer is."

Wu Tingfang lowered her head and asked quietly, "Are you suspecting Lian Jin. He... may be a proud person, but he is actually... hai! It can't be him, right?" Xiang Shaolong sighed, "He is pursuing you, naturally he will pretend to be a gentleman in front of you. Tell me, who lured your brother to look for Shu'er?"

Wu Tingfang was at a loss for words, but she still looks as if she cannot believe Lian Jin would do something so cruel.

A dry cough sounded from outside the door and the two of them hurriedly separated.

Tao Fang walked in and made an eye at Xiang Shaolong,

indicating that he has something to tell him.

Xiang Shaolong told Wu Tingfang, “Why don’t Miss go back first, I’ll come and see you immediately after I’ve settled some matters.”

Wu Tingfang said impatiently, “No! At the most I will wait for you at a side.

Tao Fang looked at her in surprise, he did not expect such a spoiled and pampered Miss would actually be so clingy and obedient towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong said helplessly, “All right then! You can sit here for a while, I’ll go with Master Tao to the garden and have our talk and ask him to do something for me!”

Wu Tingfang saw that he did not allow her to listen to his conversation with Tao Fang and was initially unhappy, until she heard the last sentence, and she agreed happily.”

The two of them went to the garden and Tao Fang’s expression was somber. He was quiet for a moment before saying, “Does Shaolong know who is the person who really wields power in Handan?”

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, “Isn’t it his Majesty?”

Tao Fang surveyed the quiet garden, and after making there there’s no one around besides the warriors near the entrance, he

put his hand on his shoulder and said quietly, “On the surface it seems that he has the greatest power, but there is one person who can influence and control him. This person is the real ruler of Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “Who can influence his Majesty?”

Tao Fang smiled bitterly, “It’s his man?”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, “What?”

Tao Fang sighed, “It’s a known fact that our Majesty likes men. According to the news from the Palace, every time our Majesty sees this person, he will change into female clothing, do you understand my meaning!”

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, “Who is this person?” And secretly thought, no wonder Wu Yingyuan has no wish of marrying Wu Tingfang into the Palace, and the King of Zhao is willing to give up a great beauty like Wu Tingfang.

Tao Fang lowered his voice, “It’s the Marquis of Julu, Zhao Mu. This person is the best strategist and swordsman in the state of Zhao. He also has a lot of highly skilled exponents under him, and he often has strange and mysterious guests from all over the world. He is the most powerful person after our ruler Zhao Sheng.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the Marquis who forcefully

summoned Lady Ya, without a doubt he must be Zhao Mu. No wonder Lady Ya is so afraid of him, and asked, “Is Lady Ya his woman?”

Tao Fang was stunned and asked, “How did you know?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly told him what happened that morning.

Tao Fang’s expression looked even worse and after asking more questions, he said, “To the Marquis of Ju Lu, Zhao Ya is only one of his interesting toys. He possesses countless beautiful women and men, and in the past he bet on the fact that once Prince Pingyuan passes away, he will have no more worries. Now, besides my Master, Guo Zhong and a few senior generals, the rest all paid him no heed. The rest of the royalty is angry with him but dare not speak out.”

Xiang Shaolong felt this is all a headache, but at least he is now clearer on the power balance in the state of Zhao.

Tao Fang added generously, “Before the battle of Chang Ping, our state may be isolated further away, our people and land are less comparatively, but our army is unparalleled in the world. We have well versed strategists like Lin Xiangru who kept thwarting the evil plans of the Qins, military men like Zhao She, Lian Po, Li Mu and Prince Pingyuan Zhao Sheng is both well versed in literature and martial arts. With him as the premier, there’s nothing the Qins can do to us. But after King Hui and these generation of famous officials and generals passed away, our King Xiaocheng does not even use his head. Instead he listened to the words of Zhao Gua, the son of Zhao She, and resulting in the terrible battle at

Changping, making us turn into a weak country from a strong one. What a pity.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that the person responsible for this battle of Changping, Zhao Gua, is the husband of Lady Ya, so he took the chance to ask, “Why did his Majesty use Zhao Gua to replace Lian Po?”

Tao Fang shook his head and said sadly, “It’s all because he’s eloquent. This person is born good looking, and good at analyzing, adept in the art of military studies. When he debates, even his father Zhao She, who has defeated the huge Qin army with a lot less men cannot win him. But Zhao She thinks that he’s not good enough to be a general. That’s why when his Majesty wanted to appoint him as a general, even Madam Zhao She objected. It’s just that his Majesty was persuaded by his pretty words and grand plans and insisted on his decision.”

Xiang Shaolong was baffled, “Why would Zhao She think so badly of his son?”

Tao Fang sighed, “Because Zhao She can see that his precious son thinks too highly of his own intelligence and refuses to listen to others. He only knows how to theorize and is obstinate. No one can win him in a debate, but he cannot win anyone in a fight.”

He continued with anger, “The battle of Changping, he was at a most advantageous position, and the previous commander Lian Po did the groundwork for him as well, cutting the resources of the Qin soldiers who are far from home and tiring them out. Who would have expected that once he arrived, he ordered the whole

army to leave the city and rashly went into the enemy's territory. In the end not only did the Qins counterattacked and forced them back into the city and cut off their line of supply. In slightly over a month their rations were used up and the city taken over. The Qins attacked and went on a murderous spree that is the most cruel in history. There's no way his Majesty can defend himself on his decision, if he had not changed Lian Po with Zhao Gua, this would not have happened." He then lowered his voice and continued, "Eldest Young Master Yingyuan is disillusioned with his Majesty because of this matter, does Shaolong understand now?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that Tao Fang has received instructions from Wu Yingyuan, and totally trusts him now. He asked, "Why did Master Tao suddenly mention the Marquis of Ju Lu, Zhao Mu?"

Tao Fang said seriously, "Because he came with Lian Jin last night to the guesthouse, and only left at dawn. And to use red ropes to kill beauties, happens to be one of his many hobbies, he has done it quite a few times."

Xiang Shaolong was startled, "What?"

Tao Fang replied, "Don't be agitated, and you must not act rashly, or else you will be killed. Although he usually does not bother about Zhao Ya's affairs, but for the first time Zhao Ya kept you overnight for 2 nights, so his jealousy is certainly aroused. After the instigation and plan offered by that evil thief Lian Jin, who knows how to use others to do the killing best, this happened. That's why Lian Jin has his support in the duel tomorrow, and will certainly try his best to kill you. But if you kill Lian Jin, he will

maneuver his Majesty into punishing you. I've discussed this situation with Eldest Young Master, and decided to let you know the situation."

Once again Xiang Shaolong wishes that he has a heavy machine gun in his hands, a pity that he only has a wooden sword. There are some things that even the Master Wu cannot help, much less Wu Yingyuan or Tao Fang.

Tao Fang advised him, "You better not leave the house so often for these few days. If you can defeat Lian Jin and gain the trust of his Majesty, Zhao Mu may change his attitude towards you. By then Eldest Young Master will have another grand plan, but everything can only be revealed after the duel."

The corners of Xiang Shaolong's mouth revealed a slightly cruel smile and said, "I know what to do."

Tao Fang felt a shiver down his heart and reminded him, "When you see Zhao Mu, you must pretend that nothing happened. This person is narrow minded and if you offend him, he will certainly take revenge."

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly in his heart, what kind of a world is this.

By the time he returned to the room, Wu Tingfang is already pouting from the wait.

Xiang Shaolong is still pained over the death of Shu'er and has no mood to be intimate with her. After having a short heart-to-heart talk with her, he asked, "If there comes a day I have to leave the state of Zhao, would Fang'er be willing to let go of everything else and come far away with me?"

Wu Tingfang was stunned, "But what about Father and Mother?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Let's not think about them first, I'm only asking for your thoughts."

Obviously Wu Tingfang is not used to having her own ideas, and replied after some hesitation, "Of course I will follow you, but Father and Mother must not be affected."

Xiang Shaolong replied understandingly, "Of course, I won't care only about myself and not care about your parents and family."

Wu Tingfang shifted over happily and threw herself into his arms, pouted her cute little mouth and asked, "Shaolong! Will you kiss me?" It's the first time she's experienced this, naturally she's not sick of it yet.

There's no way Xiang Shaolong could reject her, and besides this is not a painful task, so he hugged and kissed her.

In a short while Wu Tingfang was writhing, her face burning, and proactively massaged his shoulder blades.

Xiang Shaolong remembered that he has to preserve his strength and was secretly startled. He left her sweet mouth, and coercing and pacifying her, managed to force her to go home.

Tao Fang and a large group of warriors are already waiting for her at the main door with horses, and when he saw Xiang Shaolong escorting her out, he heaved a sigh of relieve.

After what happened to Shu'er and Su Nu, no one dared to be lax about any woman who is close to Xiang Shaolong. Although Wu Tingfang's status is different from the other 2 women who died terribly, but no one can guarantee that the same thing will not happen to her. And no one will be able to take responsibility for that outcome.

Before she got up the horse, Wu Tingfang held Xiang Shaolong and said, "I can only see you tomorrow night. Grandfather has promised to bring me into the Palace to see your duel, you must not lose!"

She was about to get up the horse when Lian Jin walked out from the guesthouse and called loudly, "Grand Young Miss, please hold!"

When enemies meet, they cannot see eye to eye with each other.

But Xiang Shaolong already has a plan, and did not reveal any of his inner feelings at all. He even moved to the side to look at the reaction Wu Tingfang has towards this ex-boyfriend.

Lian Jin did not even glance at Xiang Shaolong or Tao Fang, but just took large strides towards Wu Tingfang.

Wu Tingfang stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong, and replied a little helplessly, “Brother Lian! I’m in a hurry to go home.”

Lian Jin looked at her deeply, his face broke out into a smile that will charm any woman and said gently, “Then let brother here send you back!”

Wu Tingfang was surprised and after stealing another look at the expressionless Xiang Shaolong, she shook her head, “There’s no need! Master Tao will send me back.”

Lian Jin looked heavenward and laughed, sweeping an unhappy gaze and Xiang Shaolong, Tao Fang and the rest before sneering, “He can’t even protect his own woman, so how can they be good enough to protect Grand Young Miss.”

The expressions on Tao Fang and the 10 odd warriors darkened at once, but Xiang Shaolong was calm as usual, not revealing the anger burning in his heart, but only watching with cold eyes.

Tao Fang exclaimed furiously, “Lian Jin you better be careful with your words.”

Wu Tingfang was never really that polite to Tao Fang in the past, but because of Xiang Shaolong, she likes whomever he trusts, and said, “How can you say that, go back quickly, I don’t need you to

escort me.”

Lian Jin looked at Xiang Shaolong from the side of his eyes and said with an icy smile towards Wu Tingfang, “Has Grand Young Miss forgot our everlasting oath to each other?”

Wu Tingfang threw a glance at Xiang Shaolong in fear and stamped her feet, “Don’t talk nonsense, who made everlasting...”

Lian Jin smiled and said, “We’ll argue after tomorrow night!” And he told Xiang Shaolong confidently, “Just wait and see! Now even Lady Ya will not be able to protect you.” And left after saying these words.

Wu Tingfang has never been thus humiliated and she cried out, “I am going to tell Grandfather.”

Lian Jin’s reply is a loud laughter, as if he can’t be bothered about Master Wu as well.

Xiang Shaolong and Tao Fang exchanged a look, both feeling that something is not right.

Will Zhao Mu really back him up, why else would he be so haughty?

Xiang Shaolong has just returned to the room when someone reported to him that Lady Ya has sent a horse carriage for him.

Xiang Shaolong remembered what happened this morning and fury rising up so he rejected her.

After dinner, he studied the Mozi swordplay again, and felt that it is really profound and marvelous to be able to push the human body beyond borders.

As he was engrossed in it, Lady Ya has arrived personally.

Xiang Shaolong continued ignoring her, until she threw herself into his arms before he asked with furrowed brows, “Why do you still come here?”

Lady Ya cried sadly, “Shaolong! I’m sorry.”

Xiang Shaolong was about to speak when he felt as if his neck has been bitten by a poisonous mosquito and he looked at her in surprise, only to see her holding a fine needle in her slender fingers. The sharp end of the needle shone with a strange green tint, he felt his senses getting hazy and lost consciousness.

Book 2 Chapter 2 – The Trap Of Lust

When Lady Ya's men were carrying him up the carriage, Xiang Shaolong woke up but his body still felt weak.

Lady Ya sat in the carriage and let him put his head on her lap, gently caressing his hair, once in a while sighing, obviously unaware that he has regained consciousness.

Xiang Shaolong did not find it strange at all. Because she does not know that he has undergone 'anti-body training' for drugs before and was injected with many kinds of antibodies, and is able with withstand many times more than the average person various kinds of medication and poison.

The poison from the needle could have been cultivated from plants. It can cause him to lose consciousness and strength temporarily but will not harm his body or cause long term damage. By now he feels that his body is slowly regaining its strength.

Why would she want to deal with him?

He felt a strange sensation on his face, it turns out to be Lady Ya's tears dripping onto his face.

The carriage moved, obviously no one dared to stop her carriage.

Lady Ya sighed daintily and mumbled, "Shaolong do not blame me, I am forced to do it. If I don't, we'll all end up in a bad state."

Xiang Shaolong is not an idiot, so how can he not guess that this is the plot of the Marquis of Ju Lu, Zhao Mu. However he could not figure out why he would plan this, no matter how bold he is, he wouldn't dare to harm him so openly right? But why would he help an 'outsider' like Lian Jin deal with him who should be 'one of his man'?"

Lady Ya's anxious breathing calmed, and she remained silent.

Naturally Xiang Shaolong continued to pretend to be unconsciousness and took the opportunity to rest so that he can deal with the enem's next step.

The carriage suddenly stopped.

Followed by the sound of the door opening.

Lady Ya's dainty body shook and she quietly exclaimed, "Marquis!"

The Marquis came into the carriage, the door closed and the carriage continued on its way.

Lady Ya's breathing hastened again and she asked in shock, "What are you going to do?"

A melodious and deep voice said, "Nothing! Just testing his

reaction.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly sneering to himself, already know what the other party is planning to do and thought to himself that he knows how this is done as well. He concentrated and willed his body to relax.

Indeed he felt a sharp pain on his thigh, and he was stabbed by the other party's sharp weapon.

Lady Ya asked, “Do you not trust me?”

Zhao Mu laughed, “It's better to play safe, how would I know that you will not join forces with him to trick me.”

Lady Ya was thinking of protesting when her body suddenly leaned forward and her tiny mouth made gurgling noises, obviously the other party is now kissing her.

Xiang Shaolong even felt the Marquis hand going over his prone body, roaming all over Lady Ya's body. Listening to the sound of the clothes, Zhao Mu's hands must have reached into Lady Ya's clothing.

Lady Ya moaned daintily.

Zhao Mu laughed lecherously, “You slut, getting more and more well endowed.”

Lady Ya panted, “Haven’t you tortured me enough today?” and she continued moaning again.

Although Xiang Shaolong could not see, he can imagine all the awful things that is happening and felt a surge of jealousy. He forced himself to suppress that feeling and vowed never to harbor any more love for Lady Ya. Especially when this wanton is writhing so much, obviously unable to withstand the ministrations of the other party.

The Lady Ya now is worthless in his mind.

Zhao Mu let go of Lady Ya and smiled evilly, “You want it again?”

Lady Ya leaned weakly on the back of the chair, her whole body heated and did not make a sound.

Zhao Mu said with a chuckle, “If I were to marry you, Zhao Ya will you give up this lad and follow me?”

Lady Ya sighed and said, “Marquis don’t make fun of me, the one you took a fancy to is Wu Tingfang, why would it be a hated and used person like me?”

Zhao Mu who is sitting opposite her reached his hand out to caresses her breast again and laughed, “It’s so bouncy, so how can it be used. Fine! I won’t force you, as long as you listen to me and work for me, this lad will be yours tomorrow night.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood, no wonder Zhao Mu hated him so much, it's all because of this exquisite beauty Wu Tingfang.

Lady Ya allowed herself to be molested and moaned, "I really do not understand, even if Xiang Shaolong lose, Master Wu will definitely not give his precious granddaughter to you, so what's the use of you dealing with Xiang Shaolong?"

Zhao Mu replied smugly, "I have my plans, you do not have to concern yourself. Hei! Tell me, between this lad and me, whose touch gives you the most pleasure?" He increased the intensity of his touches.

Lady Ya stammered, "Of course it's you who makes me feel better."

Zhao Mu's voice turned icy as he asked, "Then why is it when I used this lad to do an exchange with you, you surrendered immediately?"

Lady Ya exclaimed quietly, "Marquis your hands are hurting me."

Zhao Mu asked furiously, "Answer me first!"

Xiang Shaolong was so furious he almost wanted to draw his dagger and kill him, but of course he cannot do that, because he has a bigger goal, which is to kill Lian Jin.

Lady Ya replied helplessly, “Because you only have lust for me, but for him, besides lust, there’s love as well.”

Zhao Mu released Lady Ya, and after a long moment he calmed down enough to say, “After he’s awake, Cuiniang will feed him one ‘Lust’ pill. If you cannot handle it yourself, then ask Cuiniang to replace you, you must not force yourself. After that let him sleep deeply for 6 hours before waking him up.

Lady Ya asked worriedly, “Will it really be alright?”

Zhao Mu smiled icily, “Look at how concerned you are over him, I really feel like killing this lad. Don’t worry! Besides expanding a lot of energy because of the aphrodisiac, everything else will be the same. It’s just that he will be destined to lose in that duel with Lian Jin. Remember, you have to accompany Lian Jin tomorrow night, and after that I will not bother in your affairs in future”

The carriage stopped.

After Zhao Mu left the carriage, the horse started moving again.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly exclaiming that it’s a close shave. This is indeed a devious plan, using women to cause him harm without leaving any trace, formidable indeed.

Luckily he is Xiang Shaolong. If it’s anyone else, that person won’t even know how he died, and may even blame himself for not

being able to control his lust.

Xiang Shaolong was carried into Lady Ya's bedroom and after the servants left, only Lady Ya and that woman called Cuiniang whom the Marquis has ordered to supervise them were around.

He was secretly cracking his brain, how can he hide from these 2 women? If the aphrodisiac melts on contact with the mouth, he won't have enough time to spit it out.

Footsteps were heard moving away.

Xiang Shaolong took the risk and peeped through his lids, and saw Lady Ya with a voluptuous and flirtatious looking woman standing a distance away, arguing about something.

He had a flash of idea, and tore away a corner of his shirt and stuffed it into his mouth, sealing the food passage.

The two ladies walked back again and Lady Ya exclaimed unhappily, "Is the Marquis really that distrustful of me!"

Cuiniang replied obsequiously, "Lady please forgive me, the Marquis ordered me to witness the whole process. He's already giving Lady face, or else he loves to see such things the most. If it is not me but him watching the whole thing, Lady would be even more embarrassed."

Lady Ya did not protest further, and quietly accepted this

arrangement. He could hear the sound of the wax pill being opened, followed by a strange fragrance wafting into his nose.

A pill about the size of a thumb was stuffed into his mouth, dropping right into the piece of torn cloth.

Cuiniang said with a laugh, “Done! This pill melts on contact with the tongue and will flow into the throat. No matter how chaste or strong willed that person is, he will not be able to fight it.”

The aphrodisiac may have been separated by a piece of cloth, but it’s swiftly melting.

Cuiniang said as she walked away, “Let me get some water to wake him up.”

Lady Ya ran after her and asked, “What if he wakes up and found out that I’ve given him aphrodisiac, won’t he hate me then?”

Xiang Shaolong was afraid that the aphrodisiac will seep through the wet cloth into his throat and was just lamenting about it when he saw this chance to hurriedly spit out the cloth and hid it under the pillow.

Cuiniang replied with a laugh, “Don’t worry! He’s under the influence of the drug and will be in a semiconscious state. The only thing he knows is that he must do his best, so Lady just enjoy yourself! I can see that he’s as strong as an ox, maybe Lady will beg

me to take over later!”

Lady Ya gave a cold snort, feeling offended.

Cuiniang does not seem to be afraid of her and left with a coquettish smile.

Lady Ya returned to his side, heaved a sigh, and loosened his clothes.

After a moment Cuiniang returned and cleaned his face with cold water, and was baffled, “This person’s constitution must be really unique, his skin has not even turned red.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed secretly to himself, and with a roar, pretended that the drug has taken effect and hugged the two women, at the same time using the moves he learnt from military training, he used his thumb to press hard on the acupoint behind their necks. Before they have a chance to scream, they collapsed from the pressure of the thumb.

They will only lose consciousness for a few minutes, but it’s enough for him to start his plan.

He took out the damp cloth from under the pillow and after feeding them half of the melted, gluey aphrodisiac each, Xiang Shaolong sat calmly at the side.

In a short moment their skin turned fresh red, they started

twisting and moaning, and slowly regained consciousness.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly exclaiming that the drug is formidable, and retreated to a corner to see what will happen. When the 2 women were in the throes of passion, they do not care if the other party is male or female. When they started tearing each other's clothes, he put his mind at ease.

So a little aphrodisiac is already so formidable, if he were to swallow the whole pill, he won't be able to take it even if his body is made from metal. Lady Ya and Cuiniang's actions were becoming more and more intolerable, the bedroom was filled with their moans and screams.

Xiang Shaolong closed his eyes and meditated according to how Yuan Zong taught him, eliminating all thoughts from his mind, blocking out the sounds in the room. Without knowing how much time has passed, when the two ladies were finally quiet, he opened his eyes.

The two women were lying in a messy heap on the rug, their chests heaving, and asleep from extreme fatigue.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, burned the piece of cloth over the lamp before lying down between the two women and pulled the blanket over the three of them and went to sleep.

That night he dreamt of a bleeding Shu'er, crying piteously for him to avenge her. HE screamed and struggled to wake up from this nightmare, and it's already noon.

The 2 ladies were gone and only a pretty maid was waiting at the side. When she saw that he's awake, she immediately knelt down and paid her respects, saying, "The Eldest Young Master Wu is waiting for Master Xiang at the main hall, is Master Xiang all right!"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be trembling and dizzy and called out, "Water! Get me some water!"

The pretty maid smiled, "Master Xiang has over-exerted yourself last night, Lady was like you too."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing that the maid is just like the mistress, she doesn't seem to be of good character. He reached out and grabbed her tender bosom.

The pretty maid left with a smile.

Xiang Shaolong put on an act and pretended to be uneasy on his feet, staggering into the hall.

Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang was accompanied by the listless looking Lady Ya, and on seeing him, they both looked furious, thinking that he has let himself down so terribly.

When Lady Ya saw him coming out, she looked guilt-stricken. She stood up and was about to speak when Xiang Shaolong fell over and fainted on the floor.

This move spared the need for all talk.

He decided to hide this from Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang for the time being as well so that Zhao Mu and Lian Xin will really believe their plan worked and will fall into his trap instead.

Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang were angry and anxious, and hurriedly sent him back to the guesthouse.

When they put him on the rug, Wu Yingyuan said seriously, "Something's wrong, I think Shaolong has been deviously tricked by Lady Ya. Master Tao, go and get Miracle Hand Huang here, see if he can recover his strength before the duel." After he spoke he heaved a long sigh, full of regret and anger.

Xiang Shaolong snapped open his eyes and sat up.

The both of them were startled, and stared at him dumbly.

Xiang Shaolong smiled helplessly, "If I were to keep on pretending to be unconscious, it'll be more difficult than giving me a beating."

The two of them were ecstatic and hurriedly asked him what was happening. After Xiang Shaolong told them the whole process, the two of them laughed so hard they were clutching their bellies.

Wu Yingyuan hurriedly told Tao Fang to instruct the other warriors to guard the guesthouse and not allow anyone to come in.

Tao Fang sat down after he returned and said, “Shaolong is really formidable. The poison from the needle must have been cultivated from the sap of the fainting grass. Once injected into the bloodstream, even a horse will lose consciousness, but I didn’t expect that you’ll have no fear of it.”

Wu Yingyuan replied, “Heaven must be on our side, how does Shaolong intend to make use of this advantage?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I’ll just react according to circumstances! I will definitely shock that Zhao Mu and Lian Jin.”

Tao Fang said, “Lady Ya sent someone over to ask about your situation earlier, I’ve chased that person away. If she comes and see you personally, do you want to see her?”

Wu Yingyuan replied, “It’s better not to meet.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “The aphrodisiac may be formidable, but hearing what Zhao Mu said, it seems that one will recover some of his strength after sleeping for a few hours, but will definitely not be able to handle an intense fight!”

Wu Yingyuan replied, “That is the reason, or else if Lian Jin was to win without a fight, how can he show off in front of his Majesty and all the court officials.

Xiang Shaolong agreed, “I agree with Eldest Young Master’s words. I should not see anyone at all, and let the enemy think that I’m trying my best to regain my strength, then I won’t have to put on so much of an act tonight.”

Tao Fang replied, “But at least Shaolong must pretend to be tired. Before we leave I will put some gray powder on your face, then nothing will go wrong.”

Once they said this, the three of them can’t help but chortle again.

The Zhao Palace is in the middle of Handan city, surrounded by walls everywhere, the river moat deep and broad, it’s almost like a city within a city.

The feast will be held in the Xiangrui Great Hall in the Palace.

The King of Zhao’s imperial seat was on the north facing the main door, on both sides there were each 40 tables placed, all facing the large empty plaza in the middle. There were 2 rows of tables front and back, each table can seat 10 people. Those seated in the front rows are naturally for royalty and the senior court officials, while the tables behind are for their families and warriors with special status.

The nearer the tables are to the King of Zhao, the higher ranking the people. Master Wu and Guo Zhong, the two most wealthiest people, are seated on the third table on the left and third table on

the right respectively. As such it can be seen how important these two people are in Zhao.

After all the guests entered, they went to their own tables and sat down. They placed their heads close to each other as they spoke, not daring to make any loud noises. The atmosphere was tense and serious.

When Master Wu walked in with the dazzling dressed Wu Tingfang and Wu Tingwei, they immediately captured the attention of everyone, firstly because of Wu Tingfang's outstanding beauty, but all the more because the two contestants in the duel tonight are both swordsmen from the Wu Mansion.

Guo Zhong, who was already seated, stood up and walked over. After saying a few polite words, he went nearer to his ear and whispered, "I heard that last night Xiang Shaolong even went to Lady Ya's place for fun. How can he accomplish anything great if he lets himself down thus, it seems that he will certainly lose tonight."

This Guo Zhong was average sized, about 40 years old, his face fair and without a beard but his eyes were bright and smart. When he spoke he is full of expressions, and seems like a person with no ill intent. But all who know him will know how good he is at hiding daggers behind his smiles.

Master Ma, who is at least two sizes taller and larger than him was secretly furious, on one hand unhappy that Xiang Shaolong is so lax, on the other hand because Guo Zhong was insinuating that he is blind to place his bets on the wrong person to duel with the

invincible Lian Jin. He can only smile condescendingly and said, “You have a lot of men under you, why don’t you find someone for a duel and let us have an eye-opener.”

As the two of them were debating, Zhao Mu, with a long sword scar starting from the lobe of his left ear and ending on the corner of his mouth, together with the beautiful yet tired looking Lady Ya arrived under the protection of a few warriors. All the court officials hurriedly paid their respects to him, which shows how unique his status is.

Zhao Mu stood straight, his shoulders broad, the scar on his face did not make him become ugly, instead it added to his male attraction. Although he is more than 30, he is very well maintained and handsome looking. His brows are exceptionally thing, the bridge of his nose hooked like an eagle, paired with his long and slim yet shiny eyes, he gives others the feeling that he is not to be trifled with.

He saw Wu Tingfang who is next to Master Wu and his eyes shone immediately. He went forward and said, “Miss Tingfang, it’s been a long time since we met.”

After Wu Tingfang paid her respects, she said coldly, “Marquis, how do you do!”

Master Wu and Guo Zhong dared not be rude, so they turned around and greeted him as well.

Right at this time there was a commotion near the door, it turns

out to be Wu Hei who has come in with the proud and handsome looking Lian Jin who is dressed in warrior's attire.

Lian Jin looked energetic and smug, greeting everyone with a smile, and at the same time flirting with the beauties with his eyes.

By now almost all the guests have arrived. The women tied their hair up in the palace fashion and were formally dressed for the feast, either wearing jewelry that was embroidered on their clothes, swaying along or they were wearing long robes reaching the knees, revealing the underskirt, with a coat hanging on them. When their hands extend from the broad sleeves, matching gold bangles coiled around the arms, with jade rings on their slender fingers and pearls on their ears. The jade belt around their waist hung fragrance pouches, and for a moment the fragrance and the dazzling display is enough to make one dizzy.

The men were wearing crowns on their head, long robes, the back of their robes sewn to look like a swallow's tail, and looked like an opposing complement to the ladies.

Wu Tingfang has heard about how Lady Ya forcefully invited Xiang Shaolong to her residence, and saw that everyone's attention was on Lian Jin. She moved over to Lady Ya's side and whispered angrily into her ear, "Why did you harm Shaolong. If anything happens to him, I will not let you off."

Lady Ya was stunned for a moment, and when she was speechless, Lian Jin had walked over with large strides. She thought of how she has to accompany him tonight, and for a moment felt shame and anger, and lowered her head.

Wu Hei (Hei = black), who is next to Lian Jin, really lives up to his name. His face and eyes were dark, his body short and stout with a square face and large ears, but his eyes were long and narrow. He made Lian Jin who is at least a head taller than him look dashing in comparison.

Lian Jin first paid his respects to Zhao Mu, Master Wu and Guo Zhong but when his gaze shifted over to Wu Tingfang and Lady Ya, a strange, complicated expression flashed past his eyes.

By then another few senior court officials joined their circle, and the atmosphere became more celebratory.

Lian Jin was thinking of slipping over and flirting with the 2 ladies when Zhao Mu suddenly said, "If Boss Wu agrees, I would like to invite Lian Jin to be seated at my table."

Everyone was stunned. By saying that, Zhao Mu is opening asking for Lian Jin from Master Wu, to place Lian Jin under his banner.

Lian Jin did not expect him to do this and was extremely surprised. The expression of Wu Hei's face changed. If Lian Jin were to agree, then he can forget about staying on in the Wu family.

Master Wu was secretly furious, but he smiled on the surface and said, "If Lian Jin wants to, why would I not agree." Obviously he's making Lian Jin decide.

Lian Jin was secretly cursing Zhao Mu. It must be known that people in this era places much importance on loyalty between master and servant. A mercenary must be loyal to his master, never to waver in his whole life. Now that Zhao Mu has forced him to make a decision, if he agrees, others will certainly ostracize him. In the end the only way he can survive is if he works only for Zhao Mu.

But he is now placed in a difficult position, so he gritted his teeth and replied, "I thank Marquis for your compliment, how dare I refuse."

Everyone was quiet, and looked at Master Wu.

After all Master Wu has been through a lot of experiences, and he laughed loudly, "Lian Jin you must try your best to fight for his Marquis's glory tonight, you can only win and not lose!" The underlying meaning is that if he loses, he can forget about staying on in Handan.

Lian Jin and Zhao Mu exchanged looks and laughed at the same time.

Master Wu and Guo Zhong are all wily old foxes, and once they heard the smugness hidden in the laughter, they knew that something must be going on, and both looked towards Lady Ya who still had her head bowed at the same time.

Naturally Lady Ya knows why the two of them were laughing so

happily, and suddenly felt an overwhelming regret. She thought of how Xiang Shaolong will be humiliated in front of others later, and quickly walked towards the 2nd table on the left to hide herself.

“Dang!”

The bell sounded, reminding everyone to be seated.

Master Wu was even more unhappy with Xiang Shaolong, and was secretly cursing Tao Fang and Wu Yingyuan, blaming them for being late.

Close to a thousand royalty, officials and families hurriedly went to their seats, the 80 tables on both sides filled to the brim, preparing for the grandest palace feast after the feast they had when the Yan soldiers were defeated.

Everyone were just seated, and before the arrival of the King of Zhao, Xiang Shaolong arrived calmly into the hall with the wooden sword hung on his waist, accompanied by Tao Fang and Wu Yingyuan.

Everyone there had more or less heard about how he was carried out of Lady Ya's residence this morning, and when they saw him arriving, they began sizing him up.

Besides looking a little ashen, Xiang Shaolong looks quite normal. His beautiful physique and his height, which is a little taller than Lian Jin, really makes him the dream hero of all girls.

Zhao Mu and Lian Jin, who was next to him, exchanged looks, secretly laughing that the Xiang Shaolong now only looks good on the outside, but is totally useless.

Lady Ya can't help but steal a look at him, her heart quietly crying tears of regret. She has caused him such harm, the whole city already knows about it, so how can he not know? Will he forgive her? And she can't help but hate herself for caving in under Zhao Mu's lustful force, but it's too late for regrets now. If Lian Jin goes back on his word and harms him, she can only kill herself to repay him.

Master Wu saw that his steps were still steady and was relieved. He chuckled, "Shaolong, come over!"

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly walked towards him.

Book 2 Chapter 3 – The Duel In The Palace

Xiang Shaolong sat down next to Wu Tingfang and she hurriedly leaned over and asked with concern, “Shaolong are you all right! I am so worried, and last night you were even at that slut’s place.” And she pinched him hard on his thigh under the table.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the delicacies filling the table, reached his hand out and caressed her thigh and laughed quietly, “Don’t worry! Just trust your future husband!”

Wu Tingfang’s body went soft under his touch, and on one hand wanted him to be even bolder but on the other hand afraid that she may not be able to take it and let others see through her. She was so frightened that she hurriedly sat properly, and luckily Xiang Shaolong’s 5 fingered army finally retreated.

A tall and thin gentleman with a pale face seated at the 2nd table in front turned his head around and stared at Xiang Shaolong who was seated on the 3rd table at the back row, his glance filled with the intent to create trouble.

Tao Fang who was next to Xiang Shaolong told him, “That would be the Prince of Shaoyuan, Zhao De.”

Xiang Shaolong looked back at him coldly, his eyes shooting out rays of ice. That Zhao De did not back down but stared back at him, and the warriors seated at the surrounding tables also turned back and stared at him angrily. The air was charged with explosives.

“Dang!”

The bell rung again.

The sounds of bamboo instruments are heard, a group of musicians blew on their instruments as they walked in and stood at the two sides, continuing with the music.

Only now did Prince Shaoyuan took back his stare and looked at the main door.

With the accompaniment of his concubines, King Xiaocheng of Zhao, aged around 30, walked into the hall, with over 100 followers walking behind him. Half of them went to stand around the tables, the other half following the King of Zhao towards the main seating area set aside for him.

The King of Zhao has a pale face tinged red from alcohol, his features quite handsome, his eyes bright and forehead broad, quite good looking overall. However he’s just a little thin, his lips are not thick enough, and looks like a young greenhorn.

On his head he wore a headgear with a board, rounded in front and squared behind, with 10 strands of pearls stringed with red and green threads hanging from the end of the board, signifying his status as King.

His dragon robe was sewn with diagrams of the sun, moon, stars,

dragons etc, looking extremely grand.

He walked alone to the main table, his concubines sat at the 3 tables behind him while the guards stood protectively at the 2 sides and the back. He really exuded the aura of the King of the state.

Everyone knelt on the floor, waiting for him to be seated.

After the King of Zhao sat down, he said gently, “Please rise and take a seat.”

After everyone called out greetings, they returned to their seats.

Naturally there are palace maids who will pour the wine for the guests.

The King of Zhao raised his cup and said, “King Xi of Yan thinks too highly of himself, and sent Li Fu and Qing Qin to attack us but were badly defeated by us. Now General Lian Po has brought troops to surround Yan under my orders. I think King Xi of Yan can forget about a good night’s sleep. Let’s drink a toast to us defeating Yan!”

Everyone cheered and the atmosphere was celebratory.

The King of Zhao suddenly stood up, and the rest were so startled they hurriedly stood up as well. He laughed, “The success of defeating Yan this time is due to the hard work of all my beloved officials. If Master Wu did not provide the warhorses and food

supplies, Master Guo did not supply weapons and ships. I'm afraid we would not have succeeded. Let us all drink a toast to both of them."

Everyone took another drink heartily.

Master Wu and Guo Zhong were both overwhelmed and ecstatic.

Xiang Shaolong who did not have a initial good impression of him, had a change of heart and secretly thought that a person who can become the ruler, his bearing is indeed different from others.

After the King of Zhao invited everyone to be seated and enjoy the dishes, his hands clapped, emitting a crisp sound.

The musicians who had retreated to both sides of the main door immediately started playing again.

A group of nearly 200 beauties with their hair combed like a swallow's tail, wearing light veils made from translucent material danced into the hall like flying birds. The semi hidden bosoms and silken legs made various marvelous poses, capturing one's attention.

Everyone clapped and cheered, the applause was deafening.

Xiang Shaolong watched as the dancers sang and danced daintily, and can't help but think about Ting Fangshi, who was given away, and think about if he defeats Lian Jin, he will be able to get her

back, and can't help but feel a gush of bravery.

Wu Tingfang whispered proudly in his ear, "Fang'er's song and dance is a lot better than theirs. I will let you have a good look when there's a chance."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "But you must not wear any item of clothing."

Wu Tingfang rolled her eyes at him, and gave him a sweet smile.

Zhao Mu and Lian Jin, who were keeping an eye on Wu Tingfang, was fuming at the scene, and were consoling themselves that Xiang Shaolong will be in trouble later.

The dancers retreated, leaving behind only their fragrance.

Everyone's gaze shifted to the King of Zhao, holding their breath and waiting for him to speak.

The hall was huge, but it's so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

The King of Zhao sat alone at his dragon throne, overlooking his subjects. He laughed long and loud and said, "The State of Zhao started with a military background, and we have a lot of famous generals, Zhao Shuai, Zhao Dun, Zhao Wu were our distinguished forefathers, their military exploits unparalleled at their time. After they established the country, those without military contributions cannot be appointed officials. If not for their advocating of

military strength, our country would have been long gone.”

Everyone voiced their agreement.

The King of Zhao looked at them with pride, and his gaze settled on Lian Jin, and said happily, “I did not expect that such a tiny state of Wei, would actually produce an invincible swordsman.”

Lian Jin hurriedly went to his table, knelt down and bowed his head, “There is only Great Zhao in my heart now. As long as your Majesty gives a command, I am willing to lay down my life without a word.”

Master Wu secretly gave a cold snort, obviously he despised him because he defected to Zhao Mu’s side.

Maybe the King of Zhao has been influenced by Zhao Mu, his attitude towards him changed greatly and he said joyfully, “We must use the talented, as long as you’re loyal to me, I will certainly treat you well.”

Lian Jin as ecstatic and hurriedly voiced out his promise.

The King of Zhao raised his voice to ask, “Where is Xiang Shaolong?”

Xiang Shaolong gave a slight smile and answered as he walked out and knelt opposite Lian Jin. He greeted loudly, “Xiang Shaolong pays respect to my King.”

The King of Zhao's eyes brightened, and said, "You single handedly defeated 800 horse thieves with your wits, and you're loyal and brave. For your comrade's sake, you risked your life to stay behind and fight the enemy. This act has brought up the fame of Great Zhao, I am very impressed with you."

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly voiced his gratitude and modesty, but in his heart he was secretly laughing that the story is getting more and more exaggerated.

The King of Zhao smiled with satisfaction, "The two of you are the dragons among men. I want you to come into the Palace for a duel, because I want you to become our country's role model, and spread the spirit of martial arts so that they will have the ability to kill our enemies to repay the country."

The two of them agreed unanimously.

The King of Zhao laughed loudly and said, "I, as well as my officials, are all impatient to watch your display of legendary swordplay. But you must remember that this is just an exchange of pointers, you must not endanger each other. I will appoint the winner as imperial swordsman immediately, and he will be able to lead an army into battle."

Zhao Mu raised his voice, "Your Majesty, I have a suggestion."

The King of Zhao replied in surprise, "Marquis Ju Lu, please speak."

Zhao Mu stood up and said respectfully, “If your Majesty decrees that they cannot endanger each other in this duel, they will certainly not dare to go against your orders and will control themselves in the duel. That way, it’ll be difficult for them to fully show off their sword skill, would your Majesty please reconsider.”

On hearing this, Lady Ya’s body trembled. She stood up and fluttered, “Knives and swords are emotionless, if a life is lost, won’t it turn a joyous affair into a sad one.”

The King of Zhao looked at Lady Ya in bafflement and said, “Imperial Sister, Official Zhao please take a seat, I know what to do.”

Zhao Mu stared coldly at her before returning to his seat. He was feeling secretly overjoyed, because Zhao Ya’s reaction tells him that Xiang Shaolong was really drugged, and she is clearer about that more than anyone else.

By now everyone in the hall knows that there is something wrong with Xiang Shaolong.

The King of Zhao looked at Master Wu and asked nonchalantly, “Does Master Wu have any thoughts about this?”

Master Wu secretly thought to himself, if Xiang Shaolong lost because of women, he can only blame himself and he’ll be better off dead. But if he can kill Lian Jin, he’ll be able to help appease this anger he felt, and he nodded in agreement, “Shaolong once

told me, he only knows how to kill, and is not well versed in performing swordplay at all. So if you want to see his real skills, we should not limit him at all.”

By saying that, he's obviously means that this is going to be a duel to the death.

Lady Ya's body trembled, and finally wept over her own stupidity. Xiang Shaolong saw this, and his despise for her lessened a little.

Everyone in the hall became excited and were talking amongst themselves eagerly.

“Dang!”

It was the sound of the cup shattering, and the atmosphere was immediately serious.

After the King of Zhao threw the cup onto the ground, he said coldly, “To kill the enemy, is to use your life as a stake. The way of battles, is the way of life and death. Fine! I will not impose any restrictions, the winner will be my imperial swordsman.”

Xiang Shaolong and Lian Jin who were in front of the dragon throne agreed at the same time.

The King of Zhao cried out, “The duel begins.”

The hall was deathly quiet, silently waiting for a good show to start.

Lady Ya fell into the arms of her sister Lady An, who was next to her, unable to witness the horrific scene where Xiang Shaolong will be killed.

Wu Tingfang's face turned pale and she leaned towards her father and asked, "He won't lose, right!"

"Clang!"

Lian Jin pulled out his famed Golden Ray Sword and stood steadily in the middle of the hall and took a bow, a smile seemingly on his face.

Xiang Shaolong stood up, took off his robe with one hand and threw it aside, revealing the warrior's clothes specially designed for him by Shu'er and the 4 maids. The clothes made him look even more broad and heroic.

Everyone felt that Lian Jin was good looking and heroic, but on comparison, Xiang Shaolong had a little more upright and valiant air about him, making the men sigh in compliment and the women lose their hearts.

When Xiang Shaolong drew his wooden sword, everyone gasped in surprise.

He stood next to Lian Jin and bowed with the sword.

The King of Zhao asked surprisingly, “Shaolong is using the wooden sword to duel, aren’t you afraid of being at a disadvantage?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled a little and replied suavely, “Your Majesty, do not worry. This wooden sword is made specially for me, it’s not afraid of any swords or sharp weapons.”

Lian Jin was secretly sniggering to himself, let’s see how capable this empty shell can be now.

Lady Ya can’t help but raise her head and took a peep at him. Looking at him standing so heroically, she felt even more guilty and collapsed into Lady An’s arms again, unable to bear taking another look.

If one must find someone who is in most pain there, she must be the one.

Before Xiang Shaolong, Zhao Mu is the one who controls her heart, and ever since Zhao Gua died in the battle of Changping, Zhao Mu took the opportunity and conquered her.

Initially Zhao Mu was very taken with her mesmerizing body, but in less than a year his attention was taken by pretty men and women from other countries. These few years he treated her hot

and cold, so due to loneliness and revenge, she began a wanton life hunting for men. Only when she met Xiang Shaolong, did she manage to slowly replace Zhao Mu.

This time she was tried by Zhao Mu to deal with Xiang Shaolong, on one hand because she's afraid of his control, afraid that he will harm Xiang Shaolong and spoil their good times together. But more importantly, subconsciously she is used to obeying his orders, which resulted in her silly decision and causing her much hate and regret.

After Zhao Mu snatched her from Xiang Shaolong's hand yesterday morning, he used all his ways, drugs and skilled ministrations, combined with threats and benefits. After having fun with her for more than half a day, he finally succeeded in getting her to proceed with his devious plan.

The deal is he will not hurt Xiang Shaolong, and after the duel he will help her and Xiang Shaolong get together and will never harass her again.

Now of course she has realized that Zhao Mu had lied to her.

Right at this nerve breaking point, Zhao Mu laughed and said, "Since ancient times heroes have been matched with beauties. To increase the excitement, and to make everyone in our country understand your Majesty's ideals in developing martial arts, I have another suggestion."

The King of Zhao really treats this 'lover' of his differently, and

said, “Marquis Ju Lu’s suggestions have always been very good, say it quickly!”

Zhao Mu’s sharp eyes swept past the whole hall and said slowly, “I suggest that the winner of the duel today, will be able to choose any one of the beauties in this hall as his wife. In this way he gets both beauty and official appointment, won’t it be the best thing in the world. I ask that your Majesty approve.

Everyone made a ruckus.

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but secretly praise Zhao Mu for his plans. He could see through his devious plot. Obviously, if Lian Jin defeats him, he will be able to take Wu Tingfang for himself, and by then he can offer her to Zhao Mu. Zhao Mu would then get what he wants.

Master Wu’s expression immediately changed. He can tell what the other’s nefarious plan is, but is in a difficult position to voice opposition. Because that would imply that the winner will certainly choose his granddaughter, and indirectly mean that Wu Tingfang is the prettiest among all, the other beauties are all not qualified.

The King of Zhao was a little stunned on hearing this, and thought of Wu Tingfang. He secretly felt that if he did not convey this order, it would tell everyone here that he is afraid of Master Wu. He was silent for a moment before raising his head heavenward and laughed, “The sword will win the beauty. This way, the palace duel tonight will be the talk for centuries to come. I will follow Marquis Ju Lu’s suggestion, the winner will be able to

choose from here any lady without a betrothal to become his wife.”

Once he has spoken, this became a set deal.

Everyone’s attention returned to Xiang Shaolong and Lian Jin.

Lian Jin could not conceal the look of happiness on his face. He and Zhao Mu made a secret agreement that Zhao Mu will have Wu Tingfang for the first 3 days, and in future this beauty will belong to him. It may not be perfect, but it’s a lot better than not being able to have her at all.

Xiang Shaolong on the other hand is so calm that it borders on emotionless, having entered into the realm of calmness of the Mozi swordplay.

“Dang!”

The duel began.

Lian Jin turned towards Xiang Shaolong and struck a pose, both his feet steady on the ground, as if he’s atop a horse, his upper body leaning a little back. Under the firelight, his dazzling Golden Ray Sword pointing at Xiang Shaolong, who is 20 steps away from him. He held the pommel of the sword tightly in front of his chest, making one feel his immense strength waiting to be unleashed.

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes were lowered to the ground, his wooden sword touching the ground, like an old monk meditating. He was

facing the King of Zhao, with Lian Jin at his side.

Although the two of them have not started the fight, but everyone can strongly feel the opposing calmness and movement, the atmosphere so tense that it makes breathing difficult.

Lian Jin has no idea that this calmness is the essence of the Mozi swordplay and thought that his opponent is afraid because he is weak. He laughed loudly, “Is Brother Xiang frightened!”

Lady Ya sat up straight and looked at the plaza, a dagger hidden in her sleeves. She cried out in her heart, “Xiang Lang, do not be afraid, Zhao Ya will accompany you.”

Once the crowd heard Lian Jin say that, they all felt that Shaolong was afraid and talked amongst themselves busily. The King of Zhao and Master Wu looked unhappy while Zhao Mu laughed icily.

This does not mean that their eyes are not bright enough. It's just that the essence of Mozi swordplay which places more emphasis on defense rather than attack, is really vastly different from the other schools of swordplay and ideals during that era. When 2 enemies face each other, who would not use all their might to attack, hoping to strike a fatal move.

The corners of Xiang Shaolong's mouth curved up into a slight smile and he said nonchalantly, “Top grade martial arts, is not something that Brother Lian can understand, strike now! Don't let others misunderstand that Brother Lian is only someone who can

talk.”

Lian Jin was so furious that his eyes shot out a murderous, icy stare. He straightened his back, using the strength to propel his hand forward, the golden ray from the sword shot forward, aiming at his opponent’s shoulder, his aim accurate and vicious.

Zhao Mu and Prince Shaoyuan’s tables erupted in thunderous cheers.

Xiang Shaolong was calm, not at all affected by the cheers of his opponent’s supporters.

He knows that once he strikes, it’ll be difficult for him to pretend to be tired and weak, then he’ll certainly be defeated by Lian Jin whose sword skills is as good as his. But he can lure Lian Jin in using strategies.

Lian Jin will take advantage of the fact that he’s weak, so he will certainly use all his might to attack once he moves. Besides, Lian Jin has deep hatred for him, and wants to further weaken him, so he will surely not give any leeway in his attack. He will use all his strength in all his moves, and in that way, he will fall into his trap.

Comparing their stamina, how can Lian Jin be better than him who has gone through the strictest stamina training.

So when Lian Jin thinks that he is exhausting his energy, the truth is contrary, it is Lian Jin himself who will be exhausting his

own energy.

Besides, his advantage is that his wooden sword is 3 to 4 times heavier, so if Lian Jin wants to fight head on, he'll be at a disadvantage.

The sword's ray has reached him, aiming towards his left rib.

Without a word, Xiang Shaolong took a diagonal step back towards the right, the heavy wooden sword left the ground and came up diagonally, and struck right at the tip of the Golden Ray sword, which is exactly the weakest point of his opponent's sword.

The Golden Ray sword could not withstand this and was immediately bounced away.

This time it is the rest of the people who cheered, the loudest of course being those from the Wu family. Wu Ting Fang's palms were almost swollen from the clapping.

Even Lian Jin did not expect his opponent's swordplay would be better than when they fought the last time, and was afraid he'll take the opportunity to press on an attack. He lifted his sword back into the defend position, and was about to strike again when his opponent turned to face him, his heavy wooden sword retracted a little, as if he's getting ready to attack. He was so shocked that he took a step back.

Right at this time, the sword Xiang Shaolong was holding lightly

trembled, and dropped a little, revealing a superficial loophole.

Lian Jin was ecstatic, thinking to himself that this lad is already showing fatigue at the second strike, so he hesitated no further. With a 'swoosh', he lifted his sword for a direct slash, as if he wanted to slash his opponent's wooden sword. When his shoulder is almost parallel, his body dashed forward, his wrist flicked and the slash changed into a stab, aiming right at his opponent's face. At the same time he gave a flying kick towards his opponent's wooden sword, the moves aimed at killing his enemy with one stroke.

His movements were fluid like a swimming dragon, forming a coherent whole with a murderous intent. Everyone was dumbfounded and started getting worried for Xiang Shaolong.

Lady Ya secretly exclaimed to herself 'forget it', and while those people next to her were concentrating fully on the duel, she pressed the dagger against her belly.

Xiang Shaolong looked icily at the Golden Ray sword that was coming to him like a poisonous dragon and moved swiftly to the side. With a backhand move of his wooden sword, it hit square and hard on the Golden Ray sword.

"Clang" and the Goldne Ray sword was propelled away again.

The crowd was intoxicated and cheered loudly.

Although Lian Jin's wrist was numb from the impact, but because Xiang Shaolong used only 50% of his strength, Lian Jin thought that he is just using his remaining strength, coupled with the excellent swordplay and the heavy weight of the wooden sword to block his Golden Ray sword. He laughed loud and long, and struck 10 times, each attack aimed to force the opponent into fighting head on with him.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing, his opponent is giving up the intricacies of the swordplay, and his using his disadvantage to attack to his advantage. Therefore he retreated as he fought, with no loopholes in his defense at all. Either slashing or stabbing, he'd always managed to neutralize Lian Jin's vigorous attacks at the last moment.

On the surface, Lian Jin has gained the upper hand, forcing Xiang Shaolong to keep on retreating without a chance to retaliate at all. But only Lian Jin will know the difficulty, although his opponent seems to be in a dangerous position, but he can never seem to fully break past his last defense.

Why is it that after last night's depletion of his energy, he is still so formidable.

The crowd has never seen such startling swordplay and were cheering madly.

The King of Zhao was excited as well and kept on clapping and cheering.

Zhao Mu had thought that Lian Jin could have a swift victory, and now he was furrowing his brows. He took a glance at Lady Ya and saw her piteous look, which put his mind at ease a little.

Prince Shaoyuan shouted the most fiercely, he wished that Lian Jin would cut off Xiang Shaolong's head with one slash.

Xiang Shaolong took another 3 steps back and laughed loudly before standing steady. The heavy wooden sword slashed across with all his might, but just before it hit against the Golden Ray sword, the stance changed twice, forcing the now tired Lian Jin to change his moves twice before he can block the heavy wooden sword.

“Dang!” The sound this time actually sounded like the crisp clanging of 2 metal swords hitting against one another.

Lian Jin was stunned and realized that his opponent's strength has increased by at least half and although he did not want to, he can't help but take 2 steps back, changing his attack into defense. His relentless attacks finally came to an end.

Xiang Shaolong stared at him, electricity shooting out from his eyes, and he seems to be a totally changed person. He straightened his back, revealing a heroic air and said icily, “You've been tricked!”

He took half a step forward, roared and raised his sword to slash at his opponent's face. The wind carried his roar, piercing to the ears, and even more astonishing, this slash seems to carry with it

the fatality of a thousand soldiers and horses charging into the battlefield.

The endless cheers and roars came to an abrupt stop.

This change is too unexpected.

Many stood up unconsciously, and Zhao Mu is one of them.

Lady Ya stood up with a surprised 'Ah', the dagger in her hand dropped to the ground, a look of happiness as she gazed at her godly and heroic lover.

When Lian Jin heard his opponent said "You've been tricked", he was so frightened his senses took leave of him. But he is after all a skilled pugilist, and used all his capability and strength to forcefully meet with this unavoidable attack.

Lian Jin's stamina was not as good as Xiang Shaolong's in the first place, and coupled with the fact that he's fought for a long time and losing strength. His opponent's wooden sword was almost a hundred catties, so Xiang Shaolong's attack forced him to retreat 3 steps back.

A thunderous applause erupted from the crowd at this time.

There was no expression in Xiang Shaolong's eyes at all, he was as calm as still water. The heavy wooden sword on his shoulder, he walked towards Lian Jin step by step. The 'pak pak' sound made by

his footsteps, became the symphony of death.

His formidable imposing manner pressed further, not allowing Lian Jin any time to catch his breath at all.

Lian Jin knows that he must not let his opponent take control of the situation, so he roared and the Golden Ray sword became a shining blur, turning from a wide attacking stance back into the more intricate swordplay he is more adept at.

Xiang Shaolong's heavy wooden sword sprung up from his shoulder and was in midair as he said icily, "It's too late!"

The heavy wooden sword increased its speed. It looked like a clumsy move but in fact it was an intricate one, slashing heavily right in the middle of the shining, blurred sword.

The blur of the sword stopped, Lian Jin took a few steps back, fresh blood oozing from the corner of his mouth.

Xiang Shaolong knows that if he wants revenge, this is the time. He quietly called out Shu'er and Su Nu's names in his heart and charged forward, knocking into Lian Jin together with his sword.

The two bodies joined together and separated again.

Everything was quiet, it was as if time has been frozen at that instant.

The whole hall was so quiet that one can hear a pin drop. Besides Zhao Mu and a few other highly skilled pugilists with excellent eyesight, the rest can't really see clearly what has happened.

The two of them exchanged positions, then separated by one step, and stood back to back.

Xiang Shaolong raised his head upwards, the wooden sword back on his shoulder, his eyes filled with endless sadness and anger.

Lian Jin looked totally dumbfounded and lowered his head to look at his chest where the sword struck. He felt the broken ribs and the gradually spreading heart wrecking pain.

Everyone was flabbergasted, looking at the two quietly standing person in the hall.

Lian Jin groaned, and he knelt down.

Xiang Shaolong looked heavenward and laughed loud and long. He knelt down towards the King of Zhao, the tip of his sword on the ground and said respectfully, "It's my good fortune that I have not lost my life, and I would like to marry the young lady of the Wu family, Tingfang as my wife." His words were deliberately spoken for Lian Jin's ears.

On hearing this, Lian Jin felt a rush of anger attacking his heart, spurted out a mouthful of fresh blood and collapsed on the ground.

His stance was like he was kowtowing in prayer, and died on the spot.

Zhao Mu lost everything in this bet and was so furious his face turned pale. His fists clenched tightly, he looked at Lady Ya with hatred.

Lady Ya's pretty face revealed an alluring exhilaration, her dainty body trembling. She had just turned her head back and took a look at him, the corners of her mouth revealing a disdainful expression.

Zhao Mu suddenly knows that Lady Ya is now fully out of his control.

Everyone in the Wu family was excited.

Wu Tingfang's hands clasped her pretty face, tears of love rolling down her cheeks uncontrollably. Heavens! She will be his little wife.

The rest of the people in the hall have not recollected their emotions after witnessing the engaging duel earlier and were still looking on speechlessly. The only sound they can hear is the remaining echoes of Xiang Shaolong's words.

The King of Zhao personally poured a cup of wine and left his seat to walk towards Xiang Shaolong and said with a sigh, "Such swordsmanship has truly never been seen before. From today

onwards, not only will Shaolong be Wu Tingfang's husband, but you'll also be Great Zhao's Chief Imperial Officer. I will bestow you a cup of excellent wine."

Xiang Shaolong put his wooden sword down and after kowtowing and thanking his Majesty, he received the wine while still kneeling and drank it in one gulp.

Thunderous cheers erupted.

No one is interested to throw even a glance at Lian Jin's body.

Book 2 Chapter 4 – Regaining What Was Lost

That night the Wu's castle was decorated festively, everyone was in a celebratory mood, making merry with songs and dances.

The only dejected person is Wu Hei. After Master Wu gave him a thorough scolding, he chased him out of the house. All his men will be transferred to Tao Fang who gained great merit by recommending Xiang Shaolong.

In the mansion, Master Wu's wife and his favored concubines, 17 sons and their families all attended the celebratory feast. On top of that there were his 20 odd daughters and their husband's families, together with other relatives, there were over a thousand people gathered in the hall, the atmosphere festive.

The ecstatic Wu Tingfang dragged her husband and after seeing her Mother, she dragged and introduced him to relatives and friends, causing Xiang Shaolong much confusion and headache. Like what Tao Fang said, besides Wu Yingyuan, the rest are unable to account to much accomplishment, only interested in merry-making.

Amidst the talking and laughter, Tao Fang came over to call him aside. They came to a small study at the back courtyard. Master Wu and Wu Yingyuan are already waiting there.

The four of them sat down on the mat facing one another.

Master Wu clapped his shoulder and said, “Yingyuan told me what happened. Shaolong, not only are your sword skill unparalleled, but you’re wittier than others, or else the situation now will be totally opposite.”

Xiang Shaolong heard that his tone is warm, apparently he is already regarding him as his grandson-in-law, so he hurriedly expressed his gratitude.

A fog came over Master Wu’s expression and he said somberly, “Yingyuan told me that you have the blood of Qin in you. If it was in the past, I will certainly be very unhappy, but today I feel exceptionally close to you.”

He continued emotionally, “No matter how much effort I have put in for Zhao, the Zhaos will still treat me with suspicion. What happened to Lian Jin this time is proof of that.”

He took a glance at everyone and sighed, “To think that years ago before Wei’s Shang Yang went to Qin, the Qins have not discarded vulgarity. Fathers, sons, brothers and aunts, daughters all slept in the same room. It’s all due to Shang Yang’s reforms that made Qin leap into one of the strongest states. But look how a foreigner like him ended up. Once King Xiao passed away, his successor immediately had him killed by having 5 ox dismember his body. Hai! Now I am starting to believe what Yingyuan has said, sooner or later we will face the same fate.”

Tao Fang added, “Luckily Shaolong is now up and coming, and

can dispel this disadvantageous position of ours for the time being.”

Wu Yingyuan replied, “I’m afraid Zhao Mu will come up with another plan now that this one has failed. He will surely find a way to harm Shaolong, and we must not let our guards down against Prince Shaoyuan as well.

Master Wu gave a cold snort, “What they want is the Wu family’s riches and women. Humph! I am not one who will offer my neck to be chopped. Now that the Zhaos have revealed that they are going to deal with me, and with that Guo Zhong at the side fanning the fire, we must now plan for a rainy day so that we will not be caught off guard when the time comes.”

Wu Yingyuan replied, “Father do not worry! With Shaolong, it’s like adding a tiger to our strength, the Zhaos will not dare to make any hasty moves. Besides for the past 10 years, I have always used the advantage of being able to travel outside to plan for our future. Now that I have some headway, I will be able to present to you the whole plan very soon for your consideration.”

After Master Wu complimented his son, he turned towards Shaolong and said, “Today is your big day, we’ll find a good date within these few days and let you and Fang’er marry immediately. You can put your mind at ease and relax and enjoy yourself, the other matters can be put aside first.”

He added with a smile, “Now Tao Fang will take you to see someone, that is the reward you deserve.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic and hurriedly thanked him.

Tao Fang walked with him towards the courtyard behind the castle and said emotionally, "If I have not met you, the one being chased away today would not have been Wu Hei, but me, Tao Fang."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Is Master Tao really a Zhao, why would the Wu father and son trust you so much?"

Tao Fang replied, "Actually I'm not really sure who I am as well. If not for the previous generation's master who took me in, I'm afraid I would have starved to death on the streets. Therefore even if I have to lay down my life for the Wu family, I will not have a word of complaint."

Xiang Shaolong was astounded.

By now the two of them has reached a bungalow built with its back to the hills, and they could see lights inside.

Tao Fang said, "From tonight onwards, this house would be your home. After Grand Young Miss become yours, she will move here as well."

Xiang Shaolong saw that this house is surrounded by woods, and is very happy with it.

Tao Fang pushed him towards the front courtyard and laughed, “Enjoy yourself! But if Grand Young Miss comes looking for you, even Master would not be able to hold her back.” He left after saying these words.

Xiang Shaolong stepped on the gravel and he has not even reached the main door when Chunying, Xiaying, Qiuying and Dongying, the 4 pretty maids came out together and knelt at the 2 sides, saying together, “We pay our respects to Master.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic and he reached out his hands and pinched each of their faces, but suddenly he thought of the ill-fated Shu’er and Su Nu.

Now that Lian Jin has died under his sword, only that Prince Shaoyuan and Zhao Mu remains.

The 4 maids were understanding, and on seeing his distraught expression, they wept together with him as well.

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to look happy and cajoled the 4 maids. Once he stepped into the house, he saw that the decorations were exquisite, warm and comfortable.

Xiaying is the most petite among them, about 16 to 17 years old, and she’s the prettiest as well. She came up to him and whispered in his ear, “There’s someone waiting for Master in the room.”

Xiang Shaolong felt heat rising up his heart, reached out his hand

and grabbed her bosom before walking towards the room.

He had just pushed the door open when a fiery ball ran into his arms, the dainty body trembling, with tears of joy flowing down. Who else can it be but the long gone Ting Fangshi.

The old flame of desire started burning high.

Words were replaced but hot and wet kisses. This couple who had missed each other for so long caressed each other madly, removing the obstacles of clothing who has no place being there for each other.

Under the light of the burning lamp, they used the most vigorous movements to express the love they felt for each other, joined together as one in the most intimate way possible between a man and a woman.

In this moment, every inch of their skin belongs to the other, there is no holding back at all.

The sexy and alluring Ting Fangshi totally opened up her beautiful body, accepting her lover's most violent and intoxicating attacks.

The joy took her soul to the peak of happiness, her soul was besotted, she screamed madly, using her body and mind to make this man, who has caused her endless tears for the last 6 months, happy.

She has now received her reward.

While at the peak of her joy, this mature and voluptuous beauty's convulsed, and uncontrollably twined herself around Xiang Shaolong's perfect male body like an octopus, using all the strength in her limbs to hold on to him tightly.

Xiang Shaolong lied comfortably on her body, licking the tears on her face and asked, "Where have you been all these time?"

With her face still blushing, Ting Fangshi panted, "Right here, but not in this pretty house."

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, "Didn't Tao Fang said you've been given away?"

As long as Ting Fangshi can hug him, she can forget about what happened in the past. She said, "Do not blame Master Tao, he has been protecting me all along. Ever since we thought the horse thieves killed you, Master made me into a dance courtesan. But because of Master Tao, I've always received special treatment and I do not have to accompany guests. Then you came back alive, and even defeated the bad person, I was so excited I could die."

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "This I know too well."

Ting Fangshi wriggled coquettishly.

Xiang Shaolong felt his desire burning again, and was about to launch another attack when Qiuying's voice could be heard calling from outside, "Master! Grand Young Miss is here."

Xiang Shaolong kissed Ting Fangshi and said, "Have some sleep first, I'll be right back."

Ting Fangshi nodded her head like a little lamb. Xiang Shaolong can't help but grope her a little more before walking out of the room satisfied, and bumped right into Wu Tingfang who was walking over.

Wu Tingfang hugged him and stretched her head to look into the naked splendor in the room and laughed, "Have you just done your naughty deed?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "That's right! But it's not the end yet." He bent over and carried her up and went back into the room.

Ting Fangshi was so startled she hurriedly knelt down and paid her respects.

Wu Tingfang's slender hands twined around Xiang Shaolong's neck and she looked at the naked Ting Fangshi and half sighed, "Dispense with courtesy. Our husband is the rudest person in this world, so we can forget about any semblance of courtesy."

It was followed by joyous mating, endless loving.

The next day, before the sun rose, Tao Fang came and woke him up to go to the Palace immediately to see the King of Zhao and accept his new appointment.

Although Wu Tingfang and Ting Fangshi woke up with him, but after last night, their bodies doesn't seem to obey their wishes and they couldn't get out of bed.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing that even in this era with no alarm clocks, he still has to suffer the pain of waking up early. The 4 maids hurriedly helped him freshen up and change before he went on his way with Tao Fang.

Ever since they reached Handan, this is the first time he woke up so early. It turns out that there's a lot of people who wakes up even earlier than them. Besides the farmers and herdsman heading towards the market, they also saw troops of Zhao soldiers on their morning exercise, walking briskly and neatly past them as they shouted commands. All these activities added some excitement to this morning city.

Tao Fang rode in with him, his eyes tired and said, "I had a little too much to drink last night, and had some fun with 2 dance courtesans. I'm still having a bit of a headache now. I have to admit old age even if I didn't want to, in the past I can have 7 girls in a row and I won't feel anything."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, "7?" and thought to himself that either his memory is failing him, or he's boasting. He only had 2 girls last night and now his back still feels a little stiff. If it's 7 women, he might even have problem getting up the horse now.

When men talks about such matters, none will want to belittle themselves. Tao Fang said quietly, “If you don’t believe me you can ask Eldest Young Master, he was in the room next to mine that night and said that he could hear their moans all night. Hai! If only there’s a pill to return one to one’s youth.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought, do I really have to ask my Father-in-law, is it true that on a certain date on a certain night, Master Tao was in a room next to you doing it with 7 women and making them scream the whole night? He can’t help but smile at this thought.

By now the two of them has passed through Lady Ya’s enormous residence and turned into the main road in Handan, going towards the Palace. The sky is slowly getting brighter.

Tao Fang saw Lady Ya’s residence and said, “I thought Zhao Ya would come and look for you last night, but I didn’t expect my guess to be wrong.”

Xiang Shaolong also felt a little lost. Because he thought as well that Zhao Ya will not let him off last night, then he will be able to humiliate her so as to appease his anger at her for obeying Zhao Mu. But things did not happen to his expectations and now he is past his anger. He thought of how she opposed without concern about herself, Zhao Mu’s suggestion last night about having no restrictions in the duel. Obviously she loves him more than Zhao Mu, and he can’t help but miss her a little.

When they went past the city gates, all the guards saluted Xiang Shaolong, making him feel what his status is like now, and at the same time he thought that if he has to start work so early everyday in future, he would have to give up all merry-making at night.

When the two of them came to the plaza outside Chaoyang Hall where the King of Zhao meets his officials, they saw the steps outside the hall was filled with officials and generals in their official robes, chatting amongst themselves in small groups. The atmosphere was serious with an underlying ease.

Zhao Mu was talking to a few generals when he saw the two of them walking over. After greeting one another, Zhao Mu looked as if nothing has happened and said warmly, "Master Tao please return, you can hand Shaolong over to me, I will settle everything for him."

After Tao Fang cast a look at Xiang Shaolong, he left helplessly.

Xiang Shaolong wished that he could cut him up into pieces immediately, but he has to pretend to smile and look respectful.

Zhao Mu said with a smile, "It's the first time Shaolong is reporting here, you're surely not used to the rules in the Palace. But now that you're one of us, I will look after you."

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed him for being a wily old fox. He placed his bet on the wrong person earlier so now he's trying to get into his good books. He has no choice but to pretend and reply gratefully, "Thank you Marquis for thinking so highly of me, I am

indeed very grateful to you. If not for Marquis' suggestion, how else will the Wu family agree to marry their daughter to me."

Although it felt as if an arrow was struck through his heart, Zhao Mu doesn't know that in fact Xiang Shaolong has heard about his evil intentions towards Wu Tingfang in the carriage that night. He thought that he was genuinely grateful and hurriedly replied, "You're welcome."

By then the bell was sounded and the officials hurriedly walked into the hall.

Zhao Mu asked warmly, "Does Shaolong has anything special on tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed to himself, knowing that there's no way he can reject, but also because of the strategy he had discussed with the Wu family last night, he can only reply, "Marquis please give your instructions, I can cast everything else aside."

Zhao Mu was very satisfied, thinking to himself, you threw your lot with the Wu Family with the intention of only getting power and beauty. As long as I devise a ploy and let you know who is the real master, you'll come and work for me obediently. He laughed and said, "I'll send someone at dusk to Wu's residence to escort you to my residence for dinner. You don't have to be dressed formally, just take it that you're just going home."

Amidst the loud laughter, he accompanied Xiang Shaolong into

the hall.

This Zhao Mu is a strong handed and ambitious man, so he has the intention of pulling a rare talent man like Xiang Shaolong to his side. He also wants to cast a blow to the Wu family, so he put aside his private grudges for the time being and changed to soft tactics to deal with Xiang Shaolong. But he did not expect Xiang Shaolong will be one who place relationships and loyalty above everything else.

Shu'er's death has made the enmity between them unbreakable, only blood will be able to wash it clean.

The officials in the hall took their places on the left and right rows according to their status. Xiang Shaolong stood outside at the door of the hall, until the King of Zhao took his seat on the imperial throne and settled a few court affairs before he broke tradition and summoned him to court to officially appoint him. Only then did he order the internal official to bring him to the imperial palace's uniform department to take his measurements for his official robes and for professionals to teach him about his duties and court etiquette.

That internal official is called Ji Guang, and panders to him extremely, taking the effort to explain everything in detail. Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that the imperial guard is one of the 10 assistants under the command of the Brocade Commander, their only duty is to ensure his Majesty's safety. They have to be on duty in the Palace for 5 days every month, sticking close to the King to protect him. He was secretly lamenting that in the past he was frequently tasked with protecting politically important people,

and now that he's in this world 2000 years earlier, he's still doing the same job.

The short and fat Ji Guang smiled and said, "You don't know how much his Majesty likes you. He gave you 3 days' leave, by then your official robes will be ready. You'll surely look suave in your army uniform, no one will look better than you."

Xiang Shaolong looked at his flat and round face that looks so funny and said, "Can I leave now?"

A look of alarm flashed past Ji Guang's face, and he said with a smile, "There's still one more place to go, please come with me."

They turned this way and that in the Palace, passing through corridors and gardens, and in the end reached an exquisite little house in the back palace. He said mysteriously, "Please go in, I will wait here."

Xiang Shaolong was baffled, but looking at his expression, he knows that there's no use asking him, so he might as well walked towards that building.

He had just stepped into the hall when a beauty who was standing next to the window turned around. It is Lady Ya, whom he was just thinking of this morning.

She has totally recovered her glowing appearance and poise, dressed all in white, proud and confident. She came towards him

smiling, her rosy lips muttering quietly, “Xiang Shaolong! Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong saw her smiling so prettily, and was unable to utter even a word of reprimand. He can only walk past her coldly, going towards where she stood earlier, looking at the woods outside the window with a small stream with a bridge over it. The scenery was enchanting.

Lady Ya swayed her way next to him and said gently, “Xiang Shaolong! Shall we make a deal?”

This strange move threw Xiang Shaolong off guard, and he looked at her in shock.

Lady Ya covered her mouth and laughed. She lowered her head and said slowly, “Firstly, Zhao Ya seeks your forgiveness for falling into that villain Zhao Mu’s plot and almost caused harm to you. And also caused harm to myself.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she must have thought back about the matter and knows that he did not take that aphrodisiac, so she told him the truth first to show that she dare not hide anything from him.

Lady Ya lifted her head, her rosy lips saying quietly, “Zhao Ya wants to thank you as well. If you have not appeared, I may never be able to leave Zhao Mu’s control, but ever since last night, the thought of him makes me sick. From now on, I will not allow him to touch even a finger of mine.” She added, “And I won’t let any

man touch me. Of course, the only exception is Xiang Shaolong, he can touch any way he wants.”

Xiang Shaolong felt a lurch in his heart and almost pulled this woman whose beauty is comparable to Wu Tingfang's into his arms and let his hands enjoy themselves. However he gritted his teeth and held himself back, saying calmly, “Lady has not disclosed the terms of your deal.”

The sunlight and the shadow from the trees fell on her snow-white clothes from outside the window, which made her look as if she is wearing a robe of crisp morning ray. Her heaving bosom, her delicate and well defined shoulders, her tiny waist, her long and beautiful legs, she is so alluring that Xiang Shaolong is unable to put her together with the word ‘slut’. But she was once a slut. Such strange oxymoron, made her especially enchanting.

Naturally Lady Ya knows this point, so she's quite confident that Xiang Shaolong will accept her surrender. He raised her dainty brows slightly and said quietly, “I know you're deliberately trying to scare me. In actual fact you're no longer angry with me, but just pretending to.”

Xiang Shaolong couldn't do anything to her so he sighed, reached out his hand to grab her waist and pull her in. His face 2 inches away from hers, he asked, “You really will not touch any other men in future?”

Lady Ya threw a glance at him, “of course it's true, if you don't believe me you can take my heart out for a look!”

Xiang Shaolong is flirtatious by nature, the more wanton the woman, the more exciting it is for him. Therefore how can he ever resist the temptress Lady Ya's attacks. He sighed and said, "Although I had a crazy night with Wu Tingfang last night, but you've still managed to set me aflame, and I only wish to see the most exciting part of your deal."

Lady Ya smiled coquettishly, "That part belongs to you long ago, now Zhao Ya is only asking that you accept it from the kindness of your heart. What I am giving is Lady Ya's effective ears, to be your spy and scout."

Xiang Shaolong was astounded, "Are you trying to hint to me that I will be in great danger?"

Lady Ya used all her strength to hug him, gave him a short, gentle kiss and sighed, "How can one mountain contain 2 tigers, this is such a simple logic. One day you will ultimately clash face to face with Zhao Mu. With such a useful soldier like Zhao Ya around, how can Shaolong not accept it with a smile."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, "So once Zhao Ya escapes from Zhao Mu's grasp, she can become so formidable. I shall decide to make do with it and accept this main deal of yours."

Lady Ya was ecstatic, "Remember it's main and not side, once we leave Handan I want to become one of your main wives."

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, "Leave Handan?"

Lady Ya left him, looked out the window sadly and nodded her head, “That is the only way out for us, or else in less than a year, you and everyone in the Wu family will die.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken and grabbed her shoulders, pulling her close into his arms and asked gently, “Zhao Ya can you be more precise about this?” He was finally moved by Zhao Ya, because she would even betray the Kingdom of Zhao and her family for him, her love for him is boundless. So he changed his way of addressing her as well.

Lady Ya spoke with love, “As long as you will love me for the rest of your life, Ya’er will listen to anything you say.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at her heaving bosom as she spoke, and knows that her heart is now burning with desire. He sighed and said, “Ya’er’s bosom looks so beautiful when you’re breathing.”

Once Lady Ya heard her lover complimenting her in her chest, she turned around happily, “Continue with your compliments! Ya’er loves being pampered by Xiang Lang.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that she’s formidable, and really wanted to have fun with her immediately, but this is definitely not the right place. He pulled her and asked, “Your place or mine?”

Lady Ya hugged him tightly and sighed, “Hai! Ya’er wants it even more than you! But important matters are at hand, you and the Wu

family are in a life and death situation.”

It was as if cold water was poured over his head, Xiang Shaolong's desire evaporated completely and he looked at her seriously.

Lady Ya fell into his arms and whispered into his ears, “When Zhao Mu took me back to his residence yesterday to have fun with, I took the chance while he was sleeping to steal a look at his secret documents which he kept locked up. I found a name list, and they're all from the Wu family. The document listed when those people on the list accepted pay, and when they provided information and details like those. I have memorized and written these people's name earlier, and I've put it inside your clothes now.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “You know how to open locks?”

Lady Ya replied, “I've received training on theft and spying since I was young, and because of my status and my body, Ya'er has frequently been sent overseas to gather information. Besides my Imperial Brother and Zhao Mu, no one knows about this. Now that I've told you everything, you should know how my heart feels!”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her and said, “I, Xiang Shaolong's words are as good as gold, I will not let you down.” Only now did he understand why the King of Zhao favors her so much, and he also thought of another question, “Now that everyone knows that you have fallen in love with me, won't they be suspicious of you?”

Lady Ya replied, “Don’t worry! They’re so sure that I will not be infatuated with any man for long, and that I’m a born slut. Besides, my family name is Zhao as well, why would I help an outsider deal with my own blood family?”

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but ask, “Can you really harden your heart to deal with your family?”

Lady Ya replied sadly, “I have totally lost hope in the Zhao family. Not only are they biased against anyone who is not from Zhao, they are also biased against those Zhaos with other family names. This is the reason the totally incapable Zhao Gua can replace the great general Lian Po, which resulted in the great tragedy of Changping, causing the state of Zhao to weaken. Now I only wish to go far away with you, and not end up being the slave of a country doomed to end, and end up being a cheap prostitute.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in understanding, finally knowing why ever since her husband Zhao Gua died, she spent her life in such a intoxicated mess. It’s because she has given up hope on the future, so she’s numbing herself with her wanton lifestyle.

Lady Ya’s voice turned quiet and she said quickly and impatiently, “Wu Yingyuan’s activities overseas, my Imperial Brother has heard about it long ago and he even suspects that he is in touch with the Qins. It’s just that Master Wu controls almost half of our state’s livestock and is very reputable in Zhao, with an army of thousands of warriors, my Imperial Brother dare not make any rash moves, afraid that he will rock the stability and invite other states to take the opportunity to attack!”

Xiang Shaolong felt his skin go numb, so it turns out that the King of Zhao really intends to get rid of the Wu family.

Lady Ya said, “Last night after you defeated Lian Jin, Imperial Brother and Zhao Mu held a secret discussion and they decided to pull you to their side and make use of you to deal with the Wu family. Later Imperial Brother summoned me and wants me to use my beauty to charm you so that you cannot pull yourself away. But Ya’er knows about my own feelings, the one who got charmed instead is Ya’er!”

Xiang Shaolong remembered his appointment with Zhao Mu tonight and felt a cold shiver. He did not expect that the King of Zhao would be involved in the background as well.

Lady Ya said, “You can still drag for time now, because Zhao Mu’s men will go to Mulberry Village these 2 days to find out your background. Only when they’re sure you have no problem will they use you.”

Xiang Shaolong really felt his whole body turn cold. If they capture Mei Canniang, that’ll be terrible.

Lady Ya kissed him gently as she said, “Ya’er knows that not only is your swordplay unparalleled, but your wits is even greater. Now that I have given my life to you, we will share wealth and woes together, you must not abandon Ya’er!”

Xiang Shaolong hugged her tightly and said quietly, “Now let us put on a show, pretend that we’ve just had some fun, understand?”

Lady Ya's pretty face blushed and nodded her head in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong moved immediately, using his hands and mouth and messed up her clothes and hair before leaving in a hurry.

Book 2 Chapter 5 – Scheming Snake

The name list was on the table. Master Wu, Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang all looked somber. Surprising there was also Lian Jin, Li Shan and Wu Hei's names on it as well. Besides Tao Fang, Li Shan is the closest to Xiang Shaolong among all the warriors, but who would have expected that he is the King of Zhao's spy.

No wonder Prince Shaoyuan came asking for Su Nu at such a perfect timing, because it's all a plot. Xiang Shaolong feels the pain of betrayal by a good friend.

Master Wu said quietly, "Although Zhao Ya is highly trustworthy, but we must still try various methods to check if this name list is authentic. Yingyuan will be in charge of this."

He then told Tao Fang, "You'll send men to rush to Mulberry Village immediately and move Mei Canniang to a secret location. Then you'll bribe the people there heavily and ask them to lie for Shaolong, to cover this secret that Shaolong is a descendant of a Qin."

Only Shaolong knows his own problem, because no one there knows him at all. Therefore he can only force himself to say, "I've always hunted and stayed in the mountains, and only went to Mulberry Village recently. I've always stayed at an isolated valley..."

Tao Fang patted his own chest and said, "That's no problem, I'll get some people to disguise themselves as villagers. I guarantee

that no one will know.” Xiang Shaolong felt assured.

Master Wu sighed, “It’s all thanks to Shaolong this time that we find out how dire our circumstances are now. If not for Shaolong’s victory last night, if Lian Jin marries Fang’er then it’ll be terrible. From now on, I will not look upon myself as a Zhao. Luckily we have connections with the rich and powerful in various other states, we’ll have people accepting us no matter where we run to. The problem is how can we avoid the Zhaos coming after us?” Xiang Shaolong was feeling perplexed, why is it that Master Wu seems very confident of moving the entire clan out of the city?

Master Wu showed his calmness in the face of danger and said coldly, “It’s now time to settle the accounts for autumn. I’ll take the opportunity to arrange everything when the herdsman in charge from the various places comes and prepare to react to the situation. Since he’s unkind to me, I shall not show him any mercy either. Since King Xiaocheng wants to deal with me, I’ll drag him down at the same time.”

Wu Yingyuan added, “Keeping soldiers for a thousand days, so that they can be used for a time. Now it seems like an critical time for Zhao Wuzhuo and the death warriors he trained.” Master Wu agreed heartily. This King of Livestock who has always been loyal to the state of Zhao is really furious now.

Tao Fang explained to Xiang Shaolong, “Zhao Wuzhuo is Master’s godson, and he goes around especially to adopt orphans and give them rigorous training to become our main force. We have a few thousand people and they’re usually scattered around the pastures near Handan. Only the few of us know about this matter.”

Wu Yingyuan said, “With them helping Shaolong, it’ll be even better. Even if the King of Zhao send his troops to attack our Wu’s castle, we can still defend ourselves for about half a month.”

Master Wu said, “We’ll postpone Shaolong and Fang’er’s wedding to a month later, then on the pretext that we’re preparing for the wedding, we can cover up a lot of our movements.” Tao Fang added, “I can use the excuse that I’m reorganizing Wu Hei’s men to make changes to the troops and transfer most of the spies out of here so that the Zhaos will not be suspicious.”

Master Wu said with determination, “We’ll do it that way then.” He turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, “Shaolong has to pretend to be attracted by benefits and lust, and accept Zhao Mu’s bribes. You must also pretend to be enamored with Zhao Ya’s beauty so that the Zhao people will not get suspicious. I will give you some information to leak to Zhao Mu so that they will trust you even more.” Xiang Shaolong agreed sincerely.

Master Wu reached out and grabbed his shoulders and said with a smile, “Go and see Fang’er! She came over just now asking for you.” Xiang Shaolong wanted to smile back, but he has lost the mood for it.

In the 21st century, when he leave his home everyday, he seldom thought of whether he can return home alive. But in this warring states period, not only does he have to worry about not coming home, he has to worry about disasters falling from the sky and affecting the whole clan. For survival, everyone must make himself become the stronger one, or rely on the stronger ones to

survive.

Xiang Shaolong found Wu Tingfang who was practicing her horse riding and archery skills at the training field. After practicing with her a round of archery, he returned to his peaceful home and saw that there is a wooden sign hung outside the door that says “Hidden Dragon Abode”. It turns out to be Wu Tingfang’s work.

Ting Fangshi and the 4 maids were happily pruning the bushes and flowers, humming a song and on seeing his return, she was ecstatic. She hugged him and Wu Tingfang and took them into the house. Before they could sit down properly, a huge group of servants carrying a hundred odd large and small chests came over. Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded while Wu Tingfang said with a laugh, “What’s so strange, Tingfang already belongs to you. Father and Mother has no objections, so naturally I’m moving in to stay with you.”

Xiang Shaolong did not imagine that in this era, there would actually be cohabitation. He suddenly understood, to the Wu family talk about loyalty and piety are all unreliable words. The most reliable would be to use the Wu family’s most alluring beauty to bind his body and heart.

But he is indeed extremely fond and infatuated with Wu Tingfang, so he said with a laugh, “I have the power and the responsibility to ask you for bed tax every night before you’re allowed to sleep.”

Wu Tingfang’s pretty face blushed and she stared at him

charmingly before instructing the servants how she wants her things to be placed and how she wants the 2 rooms and side hall, which has been set aside for her at the East Chamber, decorated. Ting Fangshi came to his side and said with a laugh, “Grand Young Miss said that there’re 8 rooms in the West Chamber, the first room is mine, the rest will be for the women you marry in future. If it’s not enough, we can ask someone to build another extension.” Xiang Shaolong put his arms around her waist and asked, “Happy?” Ting Fangshi nodded her head shyly, her expression overjoyed.

To be able to make the woman he loves happy, is a man’s greatest achievement. He thought of a matter and asked, “The beauties that came with you to Handan, do you know where they’ve gone?”

Ting Fangshi shook her head sadly, and said, “I heard that some of them were sent away to become camp prostitutes. Besides me, none of them are in Wu residence.” Only now was Xiang Shaolong’s question answered. No wonder they have to look for so many beauties in the villages, so it’s to comfort the army who have left their hometown and are now stationed overseas. He can’t help but feel pity for them.

Only by unifying the various states and establishing a new law and regime, will this problem of belittling women’s rights be solved. Hai! Even if the world is unified, they still have about 2000 odd years to go before there can be some hope of civilization. This is such a far and difficult journey.

After lunch, he hugged Ting Fangshi as he took an afternoon nap and only woke up a little after 3pm. Wu Tingfang is still happily

decorating her room at this time. After Xiang Shaolong freshened up, he went to her room and looked on with interest as Chunying and the other maids worked under her instructions.

Although it's called a room, but the size is even bigger than the modern man's living room. The most eye-catching item is the huge bed which took up a quarter of the room, and it can sleep 7 to 8 people very comfortably. The bed itself is like a room. The 4 corners of the bed were 4 round wooden pillars carved with flowers, with wooden beams cementing it to the roof and hung on it were huge curtains.

Once he thought of this beauty waiting obediently every night on this bed that has layers of thick blankets, with pillows all over the bed, waiting for his love, his heart began burning.

There's even a copper mirror, huge wardrobe and chests, and soft carpet on the ground. On the table in the corner of the room there's a copper incense burner, burning an intoxicating fragrance. This is the first time Xiang Shaolong tasted such an atmosphere. In this romantic room with the fragrance wafting around, he really does not want to think about the devious world outside.

Hai! If only he does not have to go and see Zhao Mu tonight. With Wu Tingfang around, the 4 maids were more serious and dared not flirt and joke with him as usual. Wu Tingfang came to him sweating sweetly and holding his hand, asked him, "Is Fang'er's room decorated comfortably?" Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, "I appreciate the huge bed the most." Wu Tingfang took a look at him and smiled charmingly, "After you return from your feast tonight, remember to climb up the bed! I'll stay awake and

wait for you.” Xiang Shaolong chortled and pulled her as he walked out and said with a laugh, “Come! Let me serve you while you bath.” Wu Tingfang felt her neck burning and although she said no, but her dainty little feet still went after him obediently.

That evening, Zhao Mu sent a carriage to pick him up and send him to his residence at the north of the city. Surprisingly the place was not decorated, nor were there a welcoming party. Zhao Mu received him at an elegant porch in the back garden. On one side there's a huge window, and looking out the window with the drawn blinds is a breathtaking scenery. The two of them leaned on the soft cushion and sat on the carpet, separated by a huge table in between which was filled with wine and dishes. The atmosphere was nice and after the servants retreated, only the 2 of them were left.

As Zhao Mu encouraged him to drink, he also off handedly asked about his background. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly told him the story he had already made up, and spoke about how he met Tao Fang. Once he thought of the spy Li Shan, he spoke the truth as well, not hiding a single thing from him. Naturally Zhao Mu knows that he is not lying and was very satisfied and said, “Shaolong's sword skills were obviously imparted by a good teacher, I wonder who your teacher is?”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say that he learnt it from a recluse staying deep in the mountains but their eyes met and he could feel the anticipation in the other person's eyes. He had a change of mind and thought that by using a wooden sword to fight his enemy, he may already have revealed his connection with Mozi Sect.

Yuan Zong once said that Handan is Zhao Mo's base and if Zhao Mo's leader Yan Ping wants fame and fortune, naturally he will have to throw in his lot with the King of Zhao. So maybe Zhao Mu has already guessed his relation with Yuan Zong, so he hurriedly changed his tack and told him selectively about how he ended up being down and out in Wu An and how he met Yuan Zong. He stressed that because he is in pursuit of fame and riches, he refused to join Yuan Zong's organization. His relationship with Yuan Zong is purely friendship. Zhao Mu smiled when he heard this, and with a 'dang' he sounded the bell next to him, which will summon the servants. Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that it's a close shave and although he knows what is happening, he pretended to look at him in bewilderment.

Indeed, a tall and thin man wearing hemp clothes walked in barefooted. Xiang Shaolong saw that this person's bearing is serious, his face sinister, his eyes sharp like an eagle and he has the air of a highly skilled pugilist, and looks imposing. He secretly thought to himself that no wonder even a highly skilled pugilist like Yuan Zong has to run for his life. That person came up to the both of them and paid his respects before sitting down on the carpet. Although his back was rim rod straight, it doesn't seem that he feels awkward in any way.

Zhao Mu said with a smile, "This is Mr Yan Ping, who is the Juzi of the Mozi Sect in Handan, and also a guest of his Majesty. He was sitting next door earlier, and has heard everything that Shaolong said earlier." Yan Ping looked at Shaolong coldly and said, "Imperial Protector was able to defeat Lian Jin, obviously you have been taught by the traitor of our Mozi Sect, Yuan Zong. I wonder if he has handed you his Juzi token as well?" Xiang Shaolong felt a stab in his heart and knows that Yuan Zong has been killed by them. They could not find the Juzi Token after searching his body,

that's why they asked him. He pretended not to understand and asked, "What Juzi Token?"

Yan Ping sized him up for a moment before saying to Zhao Mu calmly, "I believe that Yuan Zong will not hand the Juzi token to an outsider. But as to why he would impart his sword skills to Imperial Protector, that is something I still cannot understand." Zhao Mu asked in astonishment, "How do you know that Shaolong is not the holder of the Juzi token?" Yan Ping replied slowly, "Us Mozi follows the way of being frugal and hard-working. Our abode are simple thatched huts, we use earthen bowls, drink thin soup, eat coarse grains of rice and wear hemp and deer skin. If Yuan Zong is willing to hand him the Juzi token, it will be because he has become a Mohist. But Imperial Protector is not keeping himself away from women and good food, obviously he is not a Mohist." Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Mu were equally surprised.

Zhao Mu no longer harbors any suspicions towards Xiang Shaolong and he said happily, "I admire Shaolong's honesty and selfless attitude very much." He added with a lowered voice, "If Shaolong had been lying earlier, I'm afraid your blood would have been spilled by now." Xiang Shaolong pretended to be terrified and said, "Thank you Marquis for your trust." But in his heart he was secretly cursing his ancestors. Yan Ping stood up quietly.

Xiang Shaolong said politely, "I am indebted to Mr Yuan Zong for teaching me his skills, I wonder where is he now? That time he suddenly urged me to leave Wu An, and yet he refused to travel with me. I felt that something is not quite right but at that time I was not yet aware that he is related to Mohism."

Yan Ping said icily, "It's best that you are unaware, and it's best that Imperial Protector do not ask about the affairs of us Mohists in future." He bid his farewell to Zhao Mu after he finished his words, and left. After he left, Zhao Mu said with a laugh, "Juzi is well respected, and has 300 death warriors under him, each of them highly skilled, and each one of them can fight against a hundred people. Juzi himself is the best among the highly skilled. Even when he sees his Majesty, he need not pay his respects, so he's already being quite polite to Shaolong." Of course Xiang Shaolong had to show that he did not mind, but in his heart he was thinking how he can avenge his benefactor Yuan Zong.

Zhao Mu smiled slightly, and the scar on his face twitched slightly, making his smile look especially cold and heartless. A flash of brilliant light flashed past his eyes and he said nonchalantly, "I am very pleased with Shaolong's performance, so I shall be frank and tell Shaolong what I feel." Xiang Shaolong knows that the act is coming, so he pretended to be all ears. But undeniably, Zhao Mu has a certain charm about him, no wonder Zhao Ya was infatuated with him for so many years.

Zhao Mu stared at him and said, "To me, everyone in the world is either a friend or an enemy. If you're my man, I can guarantee you endless wealth, beauties, power and status. But if you become my enemy, I will use all means to destroy you." Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, how tyrannical can you be, but he said respectfully instead, "Shaolong understands!" Zhao Mu said, "Shaolong, don't blame me for my bad choice in choosing Lian Jin, that's why I dealt with you. However I underestimated you. Until now I still do not understand why is it that even after you've been given strong aphrodisiac, you're still in control of your senses and was able to emerge the victor instead of the loser?"

Of course Xiang Shaolong cannot tell him that he overheard his nefarious plot, so he pretended to be embarrassed and replied, "I'm lecherous by nature, and added to the fact that I am very popular with women, so sometimes I cannot handle them all and have to use aphrodisiacs. Initially just one or two pills will be enough to take effect, but once I've used them too much, I have to take them in large quantities before any effect can be seen. Therefore I'm not really afraid of such things." Zhao Mu slapped the table and chortled, "So that's the case. But your body is indeed a gift from heaven, you still have very good stamina after such strenuous activities." His bright eyes roamed his body. Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling worried, if this homosexual takes a liking to him, it'll be terrible.

Luckily Zhao Mu very quickly retracted his stare, and said seriously, "In the past Shaolong belongs to the Wu family, there's no debate about that. But now that you've become his Majesty's personal protector, you need to be impartial and put Great Zhao in front of all other things. Do Shaolong understand my meaning?"

Shaolong replied seriously. "Naturally Shaolong knows who is the one I should be loyal to, Marquis please put your mind at ease." Zhao Mu said with relief, "I will test you on a few matters, once I've confirmed your loyalty, I will naturally promote you heavily to his Majesty, and I promise that your future will be bright. It won't be too far fetched thinking for you to be appointed as duke or marquis." Xiang Shaolong pretended to be overjoyed, got up and kow towed his thanks. But in his heart he was secretly lamenting, what if he wants to borrow Wu Tingfang and have fun for a few nights, what shall he do then? Zhao Mu chuckled, "Get up quickly, talk about work will end here, now it's time for us to enjoy."

“Dang! Dang!” This time Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes wide to see who will be coming in. Zhao Mu is the second most important person in the state of Zhao, so the things he show off to others won’t be too bad. Zhao Mu looked at his expression and thought to himself that this person is willing to work for Tao Fang for just 50 copper coins, and is lecherous as well, so with his lure of fame and beauty, there’s no way he won’t work for him. The sound of bangles jingling was heard and a pair of beauties walked into the porch carrying a long satin pouch.

Xiang Shaolong looked more thoroughly and his eyes immediately shone. It turns out that not only are the girls dressed similarly, with their hair piled high up, wearing a thin gauze as sheer as the wings of a fly, hiding and revealing their snowy skin at the same time. The tight inner layer bounded the voluptuous body that is waiting to burst out of its bindings, the pretty features on their faces are identical, it turns out that they are twins. Their eyes were bright and clear, only a thin layer of make up on their pretty face, but their glowing jade skin is even more eye catching than anyone else with make up. Beneath their long and slim eyebrows, their bright eyes looked lively, with 2 bewitching dimples on their cheeks, enough to charm anyone before they even smiled. Their beauty is divine, their body enticing. Their looks are prettier than Shu’er, and only lose a little to Wu Tingfang and Zhao Ya.

The 2 girls dragged the long satin pouch together, and walked daintily towards them and knelt down. They lowered their head and said at the same time, “Ladies from the State of Yue, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng pay their respects to Imperial Protector Xiang.” Only now did Xiang Shaolong regain his senses, and when he saw Zhao Mu staring at him, he smiled embarrassingly. Zhao Mu took over the long satin pouch and leaving the 2 of them to

continue kneeling, he loosened the pouch and took out an ancient sword. He said with a laugh, “When it comes to making swords, no one can surpass the sword smiths from the State of Yue, they were the ones who made the first metal sword. The swords that they made through fire is so much more effective than the previous era’s copper swords. This Yue sword in my hand is named Flying Rainbow. I see that your wooden sword is extremely heavy and not convenient to carry around, and as the saying goes, a precious sword can only match a hero, so I will give you this sword tonight.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly exclaiming how formidable. It seems that this Zhao Mu really knows how to bribe. If not for the fact that he came from the 21st century, with his own principles and attitude towards gratitude and hatred, he may really have been bought over by him. He pretended to be thankful and took over the long sword respectfully. The sword may be heavy, but it’s a lot lighter compared to the wooden sword. The 2 girls were still kneeling, their snowy white necks, their tightened waists, their puffed up bosoms, is enough to make anyone have other thoughts. Their submissiveness, makes one feel that they can be tortured at will, which adds on to one’s fantasy. Zhao Mu saw him holding the sword and looking at the 2 girls morosely and joked, “Precious sword and beauties, I think Shaolong prefers the latter. But why don’t you take a look at the sword first!”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly pulled the sword out from the sheath. A cold air and a bright reflection came out together with the sword, like the moon breaking out from behind the clouds. Flying Rainbow was five feet long, and there seems to be an intricate design on its body, the pommel was designed to look like 7 phoenix eyes inlaid with gold with blue colored glaze. The sword was straight and flat, good for slashing or chopping, the tip of the sword long

and pointed, and extremely sharp. Even for someone like Xiang Shaolong who's not really an expert, he can tell that what he's holding in his hand is a treasure.

He was still concentrating and looking at the sword when he suddenly heard Zhao Mu ask, "Will Shaolong be choosing the elder or younger sister?" Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a moment and asked, "There's isn't any difference, right!" He secretly sighed, since he proclaimed himself a lecher, naturally he'll have to put on a convincing act, but luckily this is not a difficult task.

Zhao Mu's eyes settled on the dainty bodies of this pair of sisters from Yue and said with a lecherous smile, "Usually there's no difference at all, but when it comes to the bed, you'll see the difference." He commanded with a low voice, "Stand up and take off your clothes." The pair of Yue twin sisters stood up on hearing the command, and blushing a little, obediently removed the outer layer of gauze and their innerwear, revealing their snowy white naked body. Their skin was as soft and shiny as white jade, glowing under the light reflected from the lamp. Especially the welcoming and come-hither expression on their faces, any man who sees that will feel blood rushing through their bodies and their hearts pumping in excitement.

The 2 girls were stealing looks at the handsome and muscular Xiang Shaolong, this is the first time they've seen such a fine man. Xiang Shaolong felt as if he's now in the world's most elegant and upper class brothel, enjoying how he's being treated like an emperor. He's seen many women, but it's the first time he's seen a pair of perfect, identical beauties. No wonder Zhao Mu ignored Lady Ya, because he has too many choices, and he has to deal with the King of Zhao as well.

Precisely because of this, he started having sadistic tendencies, and tortured and killed his beloved Shu'er. Now he's trying to bribe him with beauties to make use of him to destroy the Wu family. Zhao Mu's gaze roamed around the 2 women's body and said with an appreciative sigh, "Look, only Yue women's bodies are like theirs, like a tender grass bending as the wind blows. Our Zhao women are a little plumper, only Wu Tingfang and Zhao Ya are rare exceptions."

Xiang Shaolong heard the way he mention Wu Tingfang and Zhao Ya under such circumstances and was furious. But he can only remain silent. Zhao Mu sighed again and was about to speak, when Xiang Shaolong, who's afraid he is going to bring up his request about Wu Tingfang, suddenly stood up and said, "Heh! Marquis, I would like to relieve myself for a moment. I've had too much to drink." Besides the excuse that he needs the toilet, he really cannot think of any other excuses.

Zhao Mu smiled and said, "The elder sister will accompany Shaolong!" Tian Zhen agreed and walked Shaolong in.

Xiang Shaolong followed this naked beauty, looking at her alluring body, and feel embarrassed and hilarious at the same time, secretly thinking that in the past others have been saying that he's stubborn and outrageous. But compared to these royalty in ancient times, he's a small fry compared to them. But then only women in this era would be willing to serve men like that. In the 21st century, if you ask a newly acquainted lady to help you to the toilet, it'll be strange if she doesn't give you a slap first. If he can return to the 21st century, once he reveals a bit of what happens here, he's sure that the queue of men wanting to take the time

travel machine will be long enough to go round the world a few times.

Once they went behind the screen, the alluring Yue beauty knelt down and held up the chamber pot, which was placed behind the screen and waited for him to pee. Looking at her blushing face, Xiang Shaolong does not know whether to laugh or cry, and thought to himself, how can he pee like that? He could hear from beyond the screen moans and pants, and he knows without even looking that Zhao Mu is now molesting that pretty sister.

Tian Zhen's face blushed redder and stole a glance at him, chewing her lips. Obviously she is aroused once she heard those sounds. Xiang Shaolong had no intention of peeing at all, it was just an excuse to avoid talking with Zhao Mu, so he said quietly, "Put it down!" Tian Zhen was stunned but still put the chamber pot down obediently.

Xiang Shaolong pulled her up and thought to himself that it's better to do it with her here than in front of that bisexual Zhao Mu. It would be such a pity to let such a beauty off. Besides, that would make Zhao Mu more suspicious of him, so without hesitation, he pulled her into his arms and started helping himself to her. For a moment, the alluring sounds of women moaning can be heard from inside and outside the screen.

Book 2 Chapter 6 – The Death Of The King Of Qin

When Xiang Shaolong was in the carriage going back to the Wu residence, he was still reliving his experience earlier.

Either deliberately or not, separated by a screen, they were having a competition on sexual stamina with the pair of Yue beauties. In the end Xiang Shaolong deliberately lost to him and ended his act earlier. As expected when he carried the limp elder sister Tian Zhen out, Zhao Mu and Tian Feng were almost half-dead, so naturally he could not ask him for Wu Tingfang now.

By now Xiang Shaolong is aware that although Zhao Mu's swordsmanship is excellent, but his stamina cannot be compared to a warrior like him. He hurriedly bid his farewell.

Tian Zhen can't bear to let him go, and the look in her eyes shows that she wants to swallow him whole.

Zhao Mu is smart, naturally he knows that Xiang Shaolong gave in to him deliberately. He was secretly complimenting Xiang Shaolong for his consideration and knowing what to do, so he ordered his men to send him back to the Wu residence in his carriage to show how much he admires him.

The grand looking carriage drove out of the Marquis residence, traveling lonsomely in the quiet and dark streets.

4 warriors walked in front holding lanterns to lead the way for the horse carriage, another 4 warriors walked behind the carriage for protection.

Xiang Shaolong was troubled, thinking of endless people and things. Now he is totally immersed in this era, if there is a choice, he would not want to go back to his own era.

Just as he was day dreaming, he was suddenly jolted awake but the hurried sounds of hooves beat.

Xiang Shaolong became alert and looked towards the back of the carriage.

The 4 warriors were just turning their heads to look back.

The darkened street, a lone steed was running near, and by the time they could take a good look, they saw that it's a warrior dressed in black, with a black cloth covering the head and face as well, in his hand a long sword, galloping towards them with murderous intent. One look and he knows that it's nothing good.

The 4 warriors roared in unison and drew their swords, pulling their horses back to receive the enemy.

The assassin increased his speed and came towards them like a hurricane. He lifted his hand and took out something black from the saddlebag of the horse and flew towards the sky. When he leapt over their heads, it became a huge net with sharp hooks, covering

the head and faces of the 4 warriors.

The 4 warriors may be highly skilled, but their opponent came prepared, and he uses ingenious methods so that they are caught unawares and in a short moment the 4 of them were trapped.

As they yelled in surprise, they struggled to get out from the net but the sharp hooks in the net tore into their skins. Amidst their screams, the 4 of them tumbled down their horses in a heap.

When the assassin came to the side of the carriage, there was a flash from his blade and the bamboo window shattered, scaring Xiang Shaolong into scrambling to a corner. Right at this time that person throw a long thing into the carriage and when it landed on the floor of the carriage, it moved and wriggled towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong took a clearer look and secretly exclaimed. He turned a somersault and fell onto the streets outside through the window. It turned out that thing thrown towards him is a poisonous snake with its head raised. If he did not have extremely quick reflexes, he'll definitely be bitten by that poisonous snake.

While Xiang Shaolong was still rolling on the ground, that assassin slashed at the fallen warriors and shot 4 arrows at the other 4 warriors rushing towards him. In their rush, the 4 warriors did not see what was happening and were hit by the arrows and fell.

The assassin turned his horse back and ran towards Xiang

Shaolong who was still on the ground.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong encountered someone so formidable, and just as he was about to spring up, that assassin shot an arrow at him, fierce and accurate.

Xiang Shaolong has no choice but to tumble away, and avoided his opponent's 3 concessive arrows before he had a chance to jump up.

Maybe the assassin used up his arrows, so he switched to a long sword and attacked.

Xiang Shaolong did not have a chance to draw his sword and had to tumble away to avoid him again. But this time he tumbled towards the back of his opponent's horse. His opponent only managed to turn the horse around after he jumped up again and drew the Flying Rainbow sword Zhao Mu gave him.

The two of them met directly face to face.

The assassin was stunned and shouted, "You're not Zhao Mu?"

Xiang Shaolong heard the high-pitched voice, it's actually a lady, and was startled.

The masked lady shouted and dashed forward on her horse, and when she was about 5 steps away, the glare from her sword blossomed like a flower, attacking towards him like a storm.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the person she wanted to kill is his own enemy Zhao Mu, so he was not willing to hurt her. But he saw that her swordplay is extremely exquisite, and his hands began to itch and he executed the Mozi swordplay, trying to flick his opponent's sword with a diagonal slash. He was about to strike his opponent's sword but unexpectedly the tip of the sword touched empty air, it turned out his aim was out and his opponent's sword has already taken the opportunity to invade directly.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so formidable and he had to move diagonally down suddenly to avoid her.

The girl did not return for him but rode away in her horse, cursing icily, "Working for the devil." The sound of hooves beat grow further and further, into the darkened streets.

The 8 warriors were all dead, obviously the arrows and hooks were dipped in extremely poisonous substances, and even strong men like them could not hold on for long.

The streets were soon filled with Zhao soldiers looking for the whereabouts of the assassin.

Zhao Mu's expression was serious as he said, "The poisonous snake that person threw into the carriage is called 'Golden Throat Seal', its movements are swift as lightning, and extremely venomous. Once bitten the throat will become constricted immediately. Shaolong is really lucky that you were able to jump out the carriage in time."

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of cold air. He was relying on his reflexes from his many years of training. The poisonous snake was going to bite his leg and he was able to retract his legs in time and somersaulted out the window, which was indeed a very dangerous situation.

Zhao Mu patted his shoulder and said, "Luckily you helped me block off this bad luck. If it was me, she might have gotten what she wanted." He added with a cold snort, "I'll like to see where she can run to."

Right at this time a rider rushed over and after getting off his horse, he came to Zhao Mu and spoke a few words in his ears.

Zhao Mu was ecstatic on hearing the news and told Xiang Shaolong, "I have something important to speak to his Majesty about immediately, I will discuss with you about the assassin later." He went up his horse and left, with a hundred odd warriors hurrying after him.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed, what news did Zhao Mu receive that made him so excited?

But since it's no use pondering over it, Xiang Shaolong went up the horse and returned to the Wu residence with the accompaniment of 12 guards.

He had just stepped past the main door when the guard stationed at the door took him to the study room immediately. Wu Yingyuan

and Tao Fang were both there, their expressions grave. Obviously something serious has happened.

After Xiang Shaolong sat down, Master Wu said, “The King of Qin is dead!”

Xiang Shaolong looked at him blankly, thinking that the King of Qin is not your father, so what if he’s dead.

Tao Fang knows that he does not understand the critical point in this matter and said, “The successor is King Xiaowen and during the bereavement period, the state of Qin will not engage their army for some time. Therefore all the other states will make use of this time to engage the plans they set aside earlier due to their fear of Qin attacking, and this includes expanding and conquering other smaller states.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood and said, “So we have to be worried that the King of Zhao will step up on his efforts to deal with us.”

Wu Yingyuan sighed, “This is not our biggest worry. But because I’m always in contact with Qin’s Lu Buwei. This person is wealthy and scheming, and was our greatest back up, but the newly crowned King Xiaowen may seem respectful to him for saving his son, he’s still wary of him as he’s a Han. Ever since Lu Buwei went to Qin, he’s only a very wealthy guest and has no power at all, and everyone knows Xiaowen was behind all these. Now that he has ascended the throne, Lu Buwei may lose his standing and this will break off all our relations with Qin.

Xiang Shaolong thought of something and asked quietly, “Is Lu Buwei trying to get Ying Zheng back to Xianyang through us?”

The 3 of them looked immediately stunned and stared at him speechlessly, as if it's the first time they knew him.

After the 3 of them exchanged looks, Master Wu's fat body trembled for a moment before he took a deep breath and said, “Shaolong is indeed more astute than others, and your words strike close to the heart. But you must not leak any of this out, or else not a single piece of tile will be left intact in the Wu family's castle.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed to himself, “I even know that Ying Zheng is actually the son of Lu Buwei borne by Zhao Ji, and Lu Buwei gave Zhao Ji to the King of Qin and she was already pregnant at that time. So the King is only Ying Zheng's father in name. But some historians later pointed out that Emperor Qin was cruel towards Lu Buwei, so it doesn't really seem like Lu Buwei is his birth father. Such a messy affair, no one is really clear about it.

Anyway it's a fact that Lu Buwei wants to get Yingzheng back to Xianyang. Wu Yingyuan said, “Amongst the 4 great princes, Prince Pingyuan of Zhao has passed away, Huang Xie, who is Prince Chunshen of Chu is useless, and we can ignore him. Prince Mengchang of Qi is always sickly which leaves us with Wei's Prince Xinling, Wuji. This person is well versed in the art of war and has numerous capable men under him. He took care of Zhao because Prince Pingyuan's wife is his sister but now that Prince Pingyuan is dead, I'm afraid change is inevitable.”

Master Wu nodded his head and said, “The death of the king of Qin, has really further complicated matters which are already complicated, but for us there’s only advantages and no disadvantages. Because Zhao will certainly take the opportunity while the strong Qin is ceasing war to expand, so they’ll have no time to deal with us. We even have time to take a breather and plan at leisure. Heaven is indeed helping us.”

Tao Fang laughed, “The Yans are going to be in trouble!”

Wu Yingyuan shook his head and sighed, “That is called getting what they deserve. The King of Zhao will certainly take the opportunity to carve them up so that he can expand his territory. But I hear that Prince Dan of Yan is a talent, so it’s best that they can drag Zhao along for a few years, then we’ll have a lot of time.”

They continued their discussion a little longer and decided not to contact Lu Buwei for the time being, and not touch Ying Zheng, who is a prisoner of war, for the moment. They will sit and watch what happens before making a decision and after the discussion, each went their own ways.”

Xiang Shaolong went back to his Hidden Dragon Abode, and of the 4 maids only Dongying, who was the most fair and voluptuous amongst them were struggling to stay awake and wait for him. The rest of the ladies were already in dreamland.

Dongying helped him shower and change but when Xiang Shaolong saw that her clothes were all drenched, he served her instead and helped her remove her wet clothing and dry her body.

Dongying was embarrassed, ecstatic and stunned but of course she will not push him away. She could only let him wipe her body with the towel and as her body started heating up, she heard Xiang Shaolong asking her, “How long have all of you been in the Wu family?”

Dongying replied quietly, “The 3 of us were sold into the Wu family since young.” She continued in a whisper, “Now we only ask that Master does not think too badly of us, and let us serve you for the rest of our lives. That would be our greatest reward. We’ve never seen someone as easygoing as Master.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed to himself that no one else in this era respects women as much as him. Pity rose up in him and he hugged her, kissing and caressing, but still controlling himself, not daring to arouse her too much. He has been going from women to women these few days and has enjoyed this ancient era’s life of merrymaking, wine and beauties. Never has he been so uncontrolled. He just had fun with the Yue lady earlier, so no matter what delectable beauty is in front of him now, he can only let go of the opportunity for now.

He whispered into her ears, “Tell the other 3 sisters of yours, I’ll find a night to try all of you together, and let you have a taste of a man.” He secretly thought that if Tao Fang can have 7 women in one go, he should not have any problems handling 4.

Dongying was ecstatic and although she can’t bear to leave, she went back to her room.

Xiang Shaolong went to take a look at Ting Fangshi first and covered her up with the blanket before going into Wu Tingfang's room and climbed onto the bed.

That lass is actually naked, but luckily girls of her age are usually sleepyheads. Xiang Shaolong was secretly thanking his lucky stars and as he hugged her, he thought of other things. When he thought of that formidable female assassin, he was so tired he fell asleep right until morning.

The 3 maids could have heard about the 'good news' from Dongying so their attitude towards Xiang Shaolong now is even more bashful. If Ting Fangshi and Wu Tingfang is not with him having breakfast now, he might not be able to constrain himself and start feasting now that his energy is recharged.

At Hidden Dragon Abode, Xiang Shaolong felt like he's in a land of beauties and he almost forgot he's from the 21st century. He took the opportunity to touch the 4 maids while they were serving him tea and food and the 4 maids naturally bashfully allowed his rude behavior. Wu Tingfang grew up in a wealthy family and is used to seeing such things happening, so to her it's a normal situation. She did not mind at all and was even smiling. With him by her side, Ting Fangshi is already very satisfied. Besides, she's used to obeying men so she will never have the intention of interfering.

Xiang Shaolong was purely enjoying himself, thinking that he will not be sick of a lifetime of such a holiday. Just as he was lamenting that men of this era is really fortunate, he was summoned by the King of Zhao into the palace.

The ladies all grumbled while Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing the king's ancestors. But since it's an order from the big boss, he can only pack up his lecherous thoughts and hurried to the Palace.

The King of Zhao received him in a small hall adjacent to the main hall. Naturally Zhao Mu is his guest as well, but there's Lady Ya and Guo Zhong as well, something which is out of his expectations. There were 2 other people, and after some introductions, one of them turned out to be the famous great general and premier who had just fought with the Yans and had hurried back from the front line, Lian Po.

He's not very tall, but quite stout and his manner is imposing. He's about 50 years old, with a wide face which looks extremely well traveled. Although he looked tired, his deep set eyes was still bright. He looks commanding but not cruel, making one feel that he's an elder worthy of respect.

The other person is General Li Mu, who is tall and thin, only 2 inches shorter than Xiang Shaolong, but for that era he's considered quite tall. He is not older than 40, his looks are stern, carrying the solidity and grace of a soldier.

Lian Po and Li Mu were both sizing him up very carefully.

The King of Zhao told him to dispense with ceremony and offered him a seat.

Zhao Mu said with a straight face, “Shaolong you don’t know how lucky you are. You have not officially started on your job yet and now there’s an important task for you to take charge of.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing as he voiced out his thanks.

The King of Zhao said with a smile, “There’s no one else more suitable than you, because not only must this person be highly skilled and brave, he must also be intelligent and alert, to handle anything that may happen unexpectedly. If you can accomplish this mission, not only will you be greatly rewarded on your return, but you’ll be promoted to General as well.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly replied, “Please give your orders, your Majesty, I will brave through fire and water and will not decline.”

All 6 pairs of eyes were pinned on him.

The King of Zhao asked Lian Po respectfully, “Does Premier think that this person can be used?”

Lian Po’s intelligent eyes shone as he said, “Shaolong is only an Imperial Protector, but he still maintained a calm composure when he saw us, obviously he is someone who is bold and smart. His movements reveals that he’s a skilled martial artists, and it’s extremely rare that there’s no flaws in him at all. But what I admire most is that although he knows that the mission is not going to be easy, he did not reveal any fear at all, nor did he show any joy on hearing the rewards. It’s indeed the great fortune of Zhao to have such a talent.”

Lady Ya was ecstatic on hearing this well respected Lian Po complimenting her lover and she stole a glance at Zhao Mu, only to see a flash of murderous intent in his eyes. Apparently he is now harboring thoughts of killing Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking that this Lian Po indeed has formidable insight, no wonder he could become a famed general in Zhao and he immediately said his humble thanks.

Guo Zhong however was thinking that even Zhao Mu and Lian Jin could not topple you, so who else could be more suitable than him for this mission in Zhao.

The King of Zhao laughed heartily and said, "Heaven is helping my country, heaven is helping my country." He turned towards Zhao Mu and said, "Would Marquis Julu please explain this mission to Shaolong."

Zhao Mu faked a smile and said warmly, "The mission this time may seem simple on the surface, which is to let Shaolong lead 500 riders and escort Lady Pingyuan, her son and Lady Ya to the state of Wei to visit their relatives and to engage in friendly exchanges. Of course, there's something else to it as well, why don't I let Mr Guo say it personally."

Xiang Shaolong shuddered, isn't Prince Shaoyuan the son of Lady Pingyuan? Both of them are like fire and water, why do they want him to escort them? And why does Lady Ya need to go to Wei?

Guo Zhong lowered his voice and said, “Prince Xinling of Wei recently received a book, which documents the best carpenter in the state of Lu, [Gongshu Ban’s](#) detailed descriptions of the making of various weapons. In all there are 108 machineries of various sizes. One of the pages were leaked and ended up in my hands, and it describes the method of making the cloud ladder that can be used to besiege cities and this ladder is far better than any cloud ladders in use now by all the other states. If we can get this ‘Secret Manual of Lu Gong’, Great Zhao will definitely become the greatest, and the state of Wei will not be able to use this book and strengthen themselves.”

Li Mu, who has been quiet all these time, spoke up, “I’ve heard of this matter, and know that one of the pages describes the making of weapons, and using a new formula and pure fire, it can make metal become even harder. If we can get this secret manual, we will be able to have the best weapons.”

The King of Zhao said a little worriedly, “Prince Xinling is sharp and he has a lot of men under him. Luckily Imperial Sister once had a relation with him, so he kept writing to beg Imperial Sister to visit him in Wei. That’s why we can have such a good excuse to send you to escort Imperial Sister there.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, so that’s the case. He looked over at Lady Ya in surprise, and remembered that she’s an expert in stealing information.

Lady Ya is afraid that he would be unhappy to know that she once had an affair with Prince Xinling as well and she lowered her head.

Lian Po and Li Mu exchanged glances, both knowing what this is all about.

A look of hatred and jealousy flashed past Zhao Mu's face again. For such a possessive man like him, even if he is the one who has given up on the woman, he still does not want her heart and body to be taken by another man.

Lian Po said offhandedly, "Marquis Julu has recommended many people but I objected to all of them. Because Prince Xinling knows their background too well, it'll be difficult for them to accomplish much. It was Lady Ya who recommended Shaolong, so Shaolong should show your gratitude to her for allowing you a chance to excel."

Once Xiang Shaolong heard this, he was overjoyed. He knew immediately that Lian Po and Zhao Mu are not on good relationship, that's why he rebutted him publicly. He dared not look at Zhao Mu and asked instead, "When do we leave?"

The King of Zhao replied, "I've sent men to inform Prince Xinling swiftly, you should be able to leave within the next 5 days. General Li will send scouts ahead first to help you settle all the formalities needed to leave the country along the way."

Zhao Mu interrupted, "Shaolong cannot return to the Wu residence for these 5 days, you have to stay in the palace until it's time to leave. I'll send someone to inform the Wu family, and they can send people here with things for you or to visit you,

understand?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented and after agreeing helplessly, he said, “I have a few gadgets in mind that will be helpful for this mission, I wonder if I can get the craftsmen to make it for me.”

Everyone was stunned, and Guo Zhong said with a laugh, “That’s easy, I’ll send experts to serve you. No matter how difficult it is, they must finish it for you within these 5 days.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic and thought to himself that he’ll just have to make some light tools that he used to use in the special task force, and they’re sure to be far better than Lu Ban’s so called exquisite weapons. However he’ll split up the components and ask Guo Zhong’s men to make it and he will reassemble them himself in Wei. In that way the other party will not be able to learn the advanced techniques that is 2000 years ahead of them.

After the King of Zhao dismissed all of them, only Lian Po was left behind to discuss matters regarding Yan.

After they left the hall Zhao Ya happily pulled Xiang Shaolong towards the back palace and said with a smile, “Don’t pull such a long face because you cannot get to see your Wu family’s beauty! Ya’er is here to accompany you?”

Xiang Shaolong said with a bitter smile, “Actually which are the powerful men who do not have any relationship with you? Can you tell me a few?”

Lady Ya said quietly, “I’ve begged for your forgiveness long ago. Hei! You’re jealous.” And she cast a flirtatious look at him.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he cannot be too calculative over this so he changed the subject, “Is Lady Pingyuan and Prince Shaoyuan simply just going to Wei to visit relatives?”

Lady Ya waited until they were far away from 2 palace maids who were paying their respects to them before whispering in his ears, “They will not return once they go.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, “What?”

Lady Ya sighed sadly, “It’s all because of the battle of Changping. Our population has always been lower than other states, and now that 400,000 of our strong young men has died, we have been encouraging our people to give birth for these past 9 years. It’s been ruled that for girls who have reached 20 years of age and are still unmarried, the local magistrates will decide for them and anyone who refuses will be sent to the army camps as prostitutes. But unless we have another 10 years, it’ll be difficult to regain the population we have lost. That’s why everyone thinks lowly of us, or else the King of Yan would not have dared to attack Handan.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, “But we’re the winner now!”

Lady Ya brought him to a huge, beautiful garden and hidden amongst the trees, was another exquisite palace building.

She reach out her hands to hold his muscular arms and said helplessly, “What’s the use of a short victory. Besides Yan, everyone else is also eyeing our location with our east facing Yan, west facing Qin, north facing Han and Wei and south joining Humo. Others can afford to lose, but for us every single loss will weaken us more, and who knows when we will fall again. Imperial brother is useless, to place so much trust on that useless and conniving Zhao Mu.” As she spoke, she gritted her teeth, ever so hateful of Zhao Mu who have cheated and discarded her.

Xiang Shaolong finally experienced the feeling of how one will only care for themselves in the face of danger. Isn’t Wu Yingyuan having thoughts of betrayal because of this as well?

The Qin General Bai Qi is the most famous killer devil during the warring states period. Before the battle of Changping where he killed 400,000 Zhao soldiers, he had also executed almost 400,000 soldiers in the Wei army. This move is indeed very vicious, but extremely effective as well.

The 2 of them walked up the steps and the pretty palace maids knelt down in welcome. When they saw Shaolong, their eyes shone.

Lady Ya took him directly to the bedroom and said with a smile, “This is Ya’er’s palace in here, the maids all belong to me. If Shaolong takes a liking to any of them, just instruct them to serve you. For you! No woman would do it unwillingly.”

After Lady Ya instructed the palace maids to close the door, she started helping him remove his clothes and later removed her own

as well, until they stood naked looking at one another. They hugged and collapsed onto the bed and she sighed, “38 years ago, ever since Wan Xian from Han and these 2 important blacksmith fell into the hands of the Qin, their weaponry gradually became better than the other states. That’s why Imperial Brother places so much importance on this ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’ this time.”

She continued softly, “Shaolong, in order to obtain the secret manual, Ya’er may have to sacrifice her body, will you allow me to do that?”

Xiang Shaolong said with a bitter smile, “Without my permission, would things be any different? Your weapon is your beautiful body, if you don’t use your beauty is there anything else you can use instead?”

Lady Ya sighed, “If the price to pay is losing you, I’d rather not be able to take the secret manual. Ya’er is already extremely sick of wars. I only want to find a quiet place to stay with Shaolong, and stay away from this environment where everyone is fighting and killing. We’ll just spend the rest of our lives in the forest.”

Shaolong replied, “We’ll talk later about whether you need to sleep with others. That’s right! Why have I never heard you mention your own children?”

Lady Ya’s expression darkened and she said, “I’m barren, if I have a child, maybe my life would not have been so promiscuous. Shaolong! Will you not love me because of this flaw?”

Xiang Shaolong replied immediately with action. This time Lady Ya was even more heated and compliant than the last time, which Xiang Shaolong thoroughly enjoyed. He understood why for someone like Prince Xinling who can have any beauty with a wave of his hands, he simply couldn't forget this excellent specimen.

After that they slept hugging each other for a while when the craftsmen Guo Zhong sent arrived. Xiang Shaolong spent more than 4 hours before they understood what they're supposed to make.

Looking at the sketch Xiang Shaolong drew, that craftsman looks totally lost.

Lady Ya saw him talking sensibly as he was explaining the drawings but when she asked him, Xiang Shaolong only smiled and did not reply.

He did not want to make formidable modern weapons, but only hope that he can have a few equipment and tools that would be helpful for espionage and escape.

He still have to spend the next few days in the palace practicing his horsemanship, as that is his weakest point.

To be able to survive in this area and protect loved ones, the only way is to become stronger than others, and more vicious. There is no other way.

Book 2 Chapter 7 – Ladies Of The Forbidden Palace

If it was the old Xiang Shaolong, once he meets a beauty, he'll try ways and means to get her and have some fun. But now beauties are aplenty, and extremely submissive as well. However, too much of anything is never good, and having too many women will increase his burden and worries as well. No one would be able to handle all these. Seeing the pretty maids look at him with thirst and desire, he only wants to find a quiet place to be alone. But in this era where even for a trip to the toilet, there'll be a pretty maid attending, it's even more difficult than ascending heaven to find a place without women. He's slowly coming to understand why women here can click so easily. The key point is in communication. In the modern era, they only need to exchange phone numbers and would be able to contact each other anytime. But in this ancient time, manual labor is needed to send letters, and it's only something available to people of a certain standing. After meeting once, they usually will not have the chance to meet again. That's why when the Baiyi lady Yiniang saw him, she ran after him to find an opportunity to have some fun. Or else their fate may just be the end. It's the same with these palace maids. It's not that Xiang Shaolong does not want to satisfy them, but one Lady Ya is more than enough for him to handle, so how can he help the other women?

When he was bathing in the luxurious bath, all the 8 palace maids in Lady Ya's palace came out in full force, all stripped naked to serve him in the pool and to massage his body. For someone so flirtatious like Xiang Shaolong, he dared not overstep the boundaries this time, afraid that he will not be able to handle the outcome of the situation. The maids keep pouring boiling water into the pool and the hot steam rose, making the bathroom like an

enclosed sauna. Chunying and the rest of the maids have helped him bath before, but they at least wore something, not like these palace maids who were totally undressed. Obviously life in the palace is a lot more licentious and ridiculous than the world outside.

But undeniably, Xiang Shaolong is thoroughly enjoying himself right now and totally relaxed. He's relieved that without his initiation, these 8 beautiful, heated women all dared not be overly enticing with him. But it's unavoidable that they are using the opportunity to use their bodies to bump and rub against him. The Zhao people has never seen someone with Xiang Shaolong's looks and physique.

After the bath, Xiang Shaolong laid on a bed next to the pool and allowed 8 pairs of dainty hands to apply fragrant oils on him and massage him, making him so comfortable he can't even keep his eyes open. With a life like this, what else can a man ask for.

Footsteps were heard, Lady Ya came next to the bed and helped him sit up, reaching out her hand to touch his dark and thick shoulder-length hair and said with a smile, "They are maids I chose specially from my residence, and all are smart, obedient and pretty. They, as well as me, will be serving you during the journey. Give them a little something to satisfy them! They will work even harder!" The faces of the 8 ladies blushed and they lowered their head and smiled shyly. Anyone could have seen that they are extremely willing, praying for it in fact. Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to give Lady Ya a good smacking on her bottom. Maybe giving free reins to lust is a common and normal occurrence in the palace, but the military training he received has taught him the importance and need for self-control. He mumbled a reply and

pretended to fall asleep. What else can he do? Lady Ya lowered her head and whispered in his ear, “You just have to lie down and enjoy, you don’t even have to lift a finger.” Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented that won’t he become a sex toy for the 8 women instead. He could not accept this so he did not reply her and fell asleep after a while.

When he woke up, it was quiet. Lamps had been lighted in the bath and the surroundings were serene. He thought that all the women had left and was just getting up when a dainty voice cried out, “Master is awake!” 2 pretty maids immediately came over to help him dress. Xiang Shaolong saw the longing and hope on the 2 women’s face and he asked, “What are elder sisters’ names.” The extremely voluptuous one giggled and said, “Master you are making us feel bad, I am Xiaozhao, she is Xiaomei, we’re both Lady’s personal maids.” Xiaomei complimented, “Master has really good physique, we have never served any men who is more well built than you.” By then Xiaozhao had came up to him to help him with the complicated buttons, her bosom heaving. Xiang Shaolong is after all used to flirting, so he can’t help but touch her. Xiaozhao’s body trembled and leaned softly on his body, crying softly, “Master!” Xiaomei plastered her body tightly against his back, her body temperature fiery hot.

Xiang Shaolong might as well hug the 2 women and after kissing them each on the mouth, asked, “Where is Lady?” The 2 women were frightened and hurriedly continued helping him dress. Xiaozhao said with fear, “I deserve death, Lady has ordered that we bring you to her as soon as you’re awake.” Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, knowing that for now he need not fear being harassed by them to make love, but since he’s started, he might as well grope them a little more. Until they were moaning continuously did he follow them out.

Lady Ya was waiting for him quietly at the dining table and when she saw him, she knelt down on the rug and smiling sweetly, welcomed him to his seat like a wife serving her husband. They sat next to each other on one side of the table while the maids continuously served food and wine. Lady Ya poured wine for him and said with a laugh, "After living for so many years, this is the first time Ya'er feels the happiness of a sense of belonging. When I was sitting here waiting for you earlier, I don't feel that time passes terribly at all, there was not an instant of emptiness or boredom, because I know you are by my side."

Xiaozhao and the rest of the maids split into 2 groups and knelt on both sides of the entrance, 8 pairs of eyes kept glancing at Xiang Shaolong. After casting a look at the 8 women, Lady Ya said with a hidden smile, "Ya'er belongs to you! So they have also become your personal property, if you're interested, just have fun with them in front of Ya'er." She covered her mouth and continued, "Xiang Lang is not like other men at all, if it was someone else, Ya'er and the rest of them won't be so neatly dressed anymore." Xiang Shaolong laughed secretly to himself, when it comes to immorality, a modern man like him who is used to the binds of responsibility and rules really cannot be compared to them. But if he's had too much to drink, he won't know what he will do once he has loosened up under the influence of alcohol.

After Lady Ya waved the 8 maids away, she fell into his arms and said, "Imperial brother and Lian Po both regards you highly, and this will surely incur Zhao Mu's wrath. Especially he sent men over earlier to summon me but I rejected him sternly. This will certainly increase his hatred. Although you are of use to him now, he will not show his true colors so soon, but he will ultimately try to set a trap for you, and if anything happens, Imperial brother

will certainly help him and not you.” Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that he will not let him off either. How can he when he thinks of Shu’er’s death. Lady Ya saw his expression darkened and thought that he was worried about Zhao Mu, so she said, “Zhao Mu has 2 lackeys under him, one is the physician Guo Kai, the other is General Le Cheng, one a scholar and one a warrior, but they are both formidable and devious people. They’re not in Handan right now, but if you meet them in future, you must deal with them carefully.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered Emperor Qin and hurried ask, “What is the heir of the state of Qin, Ying Zheng like?” Lady Ya looked unhappy and said coldly, “This person is good looking, and taller and bigger than the average Qin person, but he’s as timid as a mouse, afraid of everything. It’ll be difficult for him to have any great accomplishments, and he only knows how to enjoy himself with women all day.” Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, “What? How can he be such a person?” Lady Ya straightened up and asked curiously, “Why do you seem to be so interested in him?” Xiang Shaolong’s mind was in a mess, Emperor Qin has always been his hope and dream. No matter what, he is still a soldier loyal to his country, so naturally he felt loyalty towards this great conqueror who created China with his hands. But if Emperor Qin is a person who is only interested in women and will not have much accomplishment, won’t he have lost his only hope and goal.

But history would not be so ridiculously wrong. It must be because Emperor Qin is trying to lie to the Zhaos and pretended to be like that. Yes! That must be it. Once he thought of this explanation, he relaxed and replied, “The state of Qin is so strong now, that’s why I am especially interested in them!” Lady Ya’s suspicions were not aroused and said, “The Qins are the most barbaric. Only they can murder thousands of soldiers, and treat

women ruthlessly and raped them, so everyone is afraid once they hear the Qin soldiers are coming. They would rather die than end up in their hands.”

Xiang Shaolong can't help but ask, “Is Ying Zheng strong physically?” Lady Ya reached out and touched his broad chest and said with a flirtatious smile, “He's a long shot away compared to you. If someone were to tell me that he just died, I would not be surprised at all. For someone like him who keeps having fun with women all the time, it's a miracle he can survive until now. He starts panting after climbing just a few steps of stairs.” She continued with a sigh, “But the blame is not entirely his, firstly his mother Zhao Ji dotes on him overly. The worst thing is that Zhao Mu and his men deliberately lured him into indulging in wine and women, teaching him to drink and be merry at the age of 11, and kept on sending him beauties from the various states. How can an innocent child resist all these.” This time Xiang Shaolong was really dumbfounded. Something like health can never be faked. Could it be that history is wrong, Ying Zheng is not Emperor Qin.

Because of this his mood was greatly affected. He drank from Lady Ya's hands 3 cups of strong wine successively, and also made Lady Ya drink a few cups. Lady Ya could not handle the stimulation of the alcohol and started to flirt. Xiang Shaolong's mind is in a mess, so he can only use excitement to numb himself. He summoned the 8 ladies in and made all of them drink and be merry. He finally learnt what the royalty in Zhao did, and spent the most outrageous night, until he can't even remember who he had intercourse with. Without Emperor Qin, would he have to stay like this in Zhao forever. Even if he can handle the conniving Zhao Mu's traps, he'd still be killed by the Qin soldiers sooner or later! Since he obviously knows his future will be thus, how can he be happy today? At this point in time he glimpsed a little

understanding as to why the royalty of the various states are wasting their lives like there's tomorrow. Because no one knows if they will still have all their possessions tomorrow.

When he woke up the next day, he was energetic and lively, making Lady Ya and the other ladies who still needed their rest surprised at him. Xiang Shaolong secretly reprimanded himself for being so outrageous. He decided not to think about Emperor Qin first. After washing up, he went to one of the practice fields in the palace to train on his horse riding and archery. The other imperial soldiers were all in awe of him and were respectful. Of course, they wouldn't dare to show it even if they're unhappy with him, because everyone knows that he is now a popular person with the King of Zhao. His immediate superior, the Chief of Imperial Guards Zhao Fang came personally to bring him around the palace, explaining the rules and things to note, saying "Our job is mainly to be responsible for the safety of the interior and exterior of the 2 palaces. The outer palace has 4 halls, 9 buildings and 10 pavilions, it's where his majesty receive his officials and work. The inner palace is separated into 3 portions, the main palace is the residence of his majesty and his concubines, the western palace is used to receive foreign emissaries while the eastern palace is the residence of the royalty. For now Shaolong can take a walk around, once you're familiar with the surroundings, I will further explain to you the roles and responsibilities." Xiang Shaolong knows that he is not aware that he'll be leaving on a trip soon, but did not correct him. Right at this time the internal officer Ji Guang came to look for him and took him away to try on the armor made for him.

The armor is mainly to protect the chest and back, with belts intertwined at the shoulders, back and waist. It has a cape that looks like wings behind, and after he wore it everyone's eyes gleamed. It's the first time they have seen a person like him who

looks like a heavenly warrior. The 10 over female workers in the armor room stared at him. Xiang Shaolong is already used to being stared at by women, and secretly laughed to himself that in the past, he was the one looking at women but now it's women who are looking at him. This should be considered the world is changing, changing from the modern to the ancient era. He wore the helmet, on it's tip there are 2 pieces of half curved armor joined together to become a round shaped top, followed by a rectangular armor with rounded edges weaved from the top, and there's altogether 7 layers, the top layer pressing on the bottom layer. The shape of the armor protecting the forehead is more unique, fitting the shape of the face. The armor piece right in the middle of the forehead stretched straight down, protecting the protruding part between the brows. Maybe they're afraid of being beheaded from the back, so the protection at the back of the neck is stronger. After wearing this imperial protector's uniform, he thought it was fun and hurriedly walked out to patrol the area.

Another warrior of the same rank Cheng Xu volunteered himself to walk with him. They came to the building at the entrance of the main palace and after introducing Xiang Shaolong to the 10 odd guards there, he pulled him aside and said, "We're all brothers now, there are some things I must tell you. Never go into the main palace alone, the more people accompanying you the better." Xiang Shaolong was surprised and pressed for the reason.

Cheng Wei whispered, "Besides the servants in the main palace, the number of concubines and maids exceed 500, and they can be capable of anything when they're bored. A robust and muscular man like you, they would not let you out once they see you, and that is no laughing matter." Xiang Shaolong heaved a breath of relief, so that's what it's all about. He furrowed his brows and asked, "His Majesty does not bother about such matters?" Cheng

Wei smiled bitterly with a hidden meaning, “His Majesty doesn’t even have time to bother with his own concubines, he won’t even bother about these matters. It’s better if one has family in the city, they can use the excuse of going home for a visit and take the opportunity to find someone for some fun. But ladies sent by other states are not even allowed to step out of the palace gates, so once they see men they will devour them.”

Naturally Xiang Shaolong understands his meaning, the King of Zhao is not interested in women at all. He remembered Lady Ya’s 8 maids, and thought that they may be considered very gentle and refined. After chatting a little longer, he slipped back into Lady Ya’s palace. He’d just stepped into the boundaries of the eastern palace when 2 pretty palace maids ran after him, and kneeling down, said, “We have been waiting for Imperial Protector for more than half a day, Lady Ni would like to seek the audience of Imperial Protector.” Xiang Shaolong was in a fix, although Cheng Wei had warned him, he thought that the only dangerous area is the main palace, but he did not expect that the eastern palace is not a safe place either. He hardened his heart and said, “Hai! Please convey my apologies to Lady Ni, I have something important and am in a hurry to meet Lady Ya...” He walked as he spoke and hurriedly escaped. The 2 palace maids wanted to run after him but he is already a long distance away. Naturally on the way he met quite a few royal ladies, and seeing their flirtatious look, Xiang Shaolong was so frightened that he kept his eyes straight. Only when he reached the boundaries of Lady Ya’s palace did he heave a sigh of relief.

He had just stepped into the hall when he was received by 2 of the pretty maids who helped him remove his armor. Xiang Shaolong forgot their names and asked, “What are elder sisters’ names?” The 2 women had fun with him the whole of last night and knows

that he's an easy-going person. One of them rolled her eyes at him and pouted, "Master only remembers Xiaozhao and Xiaomei, I've already given you my body and yet you do not remember my name." Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that he's not even sure if he had any intercourse with her, so how could he possibly remember her name. He reached out his hand and patted her plumb bottom, asking with a laugh, "Satisfied last night?" The 2 girls nodded their heads shyly. Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, secretly thinking that maybe in his muddle headed state he broke Tao Fang's record of 7 women, and thought that he's really quite good. It's just that he never had the chance to try in the past!

The other woman replied, "She's Xiaozi, I'm Xiaoyu, Master do not forget." After Xiang Shaolong repeated their names twice, he asked, "Where is Lady?" Xiaoyu replied, "Lady is personally cooking for Master." Xiaozi smiled, "We've served Lady for so many years, it's the first time we saw her do this." Xiang Shaolong thought that the food she comes out with would surely taste horrible. But he was touched, and when he thought of his wife and maids in the Wu family, he missed them. While he had women to accompany him here, they are all alone in an empty room, which is really unfair. Xiaoyu lowered her voice and said, "Third Princess came to visit Lady, she's in the kitchen now as well. Besides Lady Ya, she's the prettiest in the palace." Xiang Shaolong was stunned. These palace ladies would really do anything for a man, and she actually came here to look for him.

He had no choice but to follow the 2 maids into the kitchen. He had just walked into the inner hall when Lady Ya and another beauty dressed in palace robes came out from the kitchen and came face to face with him. Xiang Shaolong's eyes met with that beauty who cannot be any older than 17, and both pairs of eyes shone at the same time. This Third Princess looks very regal and dainty.

Although she does not have Lady Ya's devilish body, but she's well proportioned and her movements graceful, like a precious flower, emitting an enchanting air amidst her quietness. When she saw Xiang Shaolong, she revealed a pretty smile, her expressive eyes seems to be greeting him. The sleeves of her clothes are very wide, dragging onto the ground, an exquisite and large shawl hung on her shoulders. Her hairstyle was exquisite and unique, with 2 string of flowers made from pearls and silk hanging down the side of her hair, making her look especially dainty and exquisite. A curved comb decorated the front of her hair, with 3 hairpieces on both her left and right sides, and in the middle of her forehead she dotted a red beauty spot.

What made Xiang Shaolong's eyes brighten is that she's not the **** he expected her to be. She was lively and sharp, with a captivating untainted, regal air about her. Standing next to the extremely beautiful Lady Ya, they look like the spring orchid and autumn chrysanthemum, each having its strong points. When she noticed Xiang Shaolong staring at her, her pretty face blushed and she lowered her head, but there was no look of unhappiness at all. The healthy fragrance of a young woman wafted into his nose and Xiang Shaolong can't help but take a deep breath.

After Lady Ya rolled her eyes at him, she introduced the two of them. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly paid his respects to this royalty. After Lady Ya invited Third Princess into the inner hall for a seat, she pulled Xiang Shaolong aside and whispered, "No matter how interested Zhao Qian seems to be in you, you must not destroy her virtue. Because this time she will follow the group and marry into the state of Wei to become the first wife of the Crown Prince. If the Weis find out that she's not intact, they will reject her and you'll be in great trouble then." Xiang Shaolong felt that it's really a pity. It doesn't matter how many beauties he's had, he still felt that this

is an earth shattering pity. Lady Ya accompanied Xiang Shaolong into the hall and the Third Princess stood up, and avoiding Xiang Shaolong's eyes, said quietly, "Lady, Zhao Qian is going back." Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, it's good that they meet less as well, or else it'd be terrible if they can't bear with each other. This Zhao Qian gives one the feeling of being quiet but with good upbringing and inner beauty.

Lady Ya did not try to keep her, but just sent her straight to the door. When she returned she said with a smile, "Xiang Lang's charm is really irresistible to us women, even Zhao Qian is not spared and she quickly ran away because of this. I really want to see if you have the ability to deal with the most famous beauty in Wei, Shi Cainu. (Shi = stone/ rock, Cainu = talented woman)." Xiang Shaolong was perplexed, "Shi Cainu?" Lady Ya pulled him to the seat and leaned over, putting her arms around his neck and said coquettishly, "Don't think that her family name is Shi. It's just that she's extremely talented, having shocked the scholarly world at the age of 16. Although her beauty is enough to fell a country, but she's never impressed with any men. She's 20 this year yet she refuses to marry. She has rejected all the famous young masters seeking her favor from the various states. That's why it's rumored that she is a stone woman borne from heaven, and will not fall for any man." The more difficult it is to obtain an item, the more precious it becomes, this has always been the case since ancient times. Xiang Shaolong's interest was piqued and he asked, "Even if she's unwilling to marry, but can she decide on this matter?"

Lady Ya laughed, "Tempted? She and the famous Qin beauty Widow Qing each have their ways. They're famous for being able to maintain their chastity. Shi Cainu was able to keep herself safe because no one can be compared to her zither and scholarly skills, anyone who sees her will feel inferior. That's why the King of Wei

and Prince Xinling protects her, with these 2 huge mountains backing her, who would dare to force their way.” She continued with a smile, “Xiang Lang’s writing skills is unparalleled in the world, maybe you’ll have a chance to move her.” Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented his guilt and changed the topic, telling her about Lady Ni’s intention to meet him.

Lady Ya was stunned and sat up straight, looking at him unbelievably and said, “She will look for a man as well?” Xiang Shaolong said with embarrassment, “Or maybe I misunderstood her intentions.” Lady Ya replied, “How can this be a misunderstanding. I think that this beauty after having kept herself chaste for her husband for 9 years, is finally feeling restless. Hai! It’s all your fault. You were so manly the other day at the duel, who would not fall for you. It’s just unimaginable that for someone so cultivated like Lady Ni, is no exception as well. She’s also the only one who will be bold enough to fight with me for you, because she is Imperial Brother’s most respected cousin, and I am her most favored sister.” She added with a coquettish smile, “Do you need me to help you spend a night with her, or maybe the both of us will accompany you?” Xiang Shaolong shook his head guardedly, “I don’t even know if she’s tall, short, fat or thin, what if you lied to me out of love and respect for her, then won’t I become a free gigolo.” Lady Ya was not familiar with his modern words ‘free gigolo’, and after thinking for a while, she chortled, leaning on his shoulder and panting, said “Ai! My imperial protector, how can I dare to lie to you? Won’t I be afraid of being reprimanded? Do you want me to take you there and check the goods out first? I also want to see her when she abandons her troubles.”

Xiang Shaolong felt this was very inappropriate and said seriously, “Don’t be ridiculous, if you make use of me to make Lady Li embarrassed, I will not let you off.” Lady Ya sat up straight and

said aggrievedly, “I just wanted you to have more opportunities for fun before you leave for Wei!” Xiang Shaolong reached out and embraced her shoulder, giving her a very flirtatious and long kiss, and when Lady Ya totally melted, he said gently, “Don’t think that I am the same as other men, who will not be happy without beauties. I need to conserve my energy to do a good job for the journey to Wei, understand?” Lady Ya has become all languid from his kisses, and she mumbled her agreement while still lost in her senses. She snuggled into his arms, lying on his muscular chest. Right at this time Xiaozhao came to report that someone from the Wu family is looking for him. Xiang Shaolong stood up and Lady Ya immediately sat up and said, “I’m sorry, but I have been ordered by Imperial brother that I must listen in at the side.” She added with a smile, “But of course I will not reveal anything!”

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders, showing that he couldn’t care less. That beautiful move was enough to make Lady Ya and Xiaozhao’s eyes gleam, before they walked out. In actual fact his speech and movements are very different from the people of this era, and this gave him exceptional charm and debonair. It’s not a coincidence that the more handsome Lian Jin would actual lose to him so badly in the battle of love. He had just stepped into the hall when a fiery ball accompanied by a sweet fragrance ran into his arms and started crying. Of course it is the Wu family’s beauty Miss Tingfang.

Tao Fang stood in the middle of the hall and made a helpless action. There were 2 other warriors who were carrying his wooden sword and clothes. Lady Ya came next to the helpless Xiang Shaolong, reached out her hand to caress Wu Tingfang’s pretty hair, went to her ear and whispered something. These words are more effective than any miracle pills to stop crying. Wu Tingfang immediately stopped her wails and lifted her pretty face to Xiang

Shaolong, her teary eyes looking at Lady Ya and exclaimed, "Really!" Lady Ya nodded her head, and holding this pretty and dainty thing, took her into the inner hall. Of course Xiang Shaolong has no idea what Lady Ya said, but he guessed that in order to live in harmony in future, Zhao Ya will naturally try to stay on Wu Tingfang's good side. Anyone will know that if there are jealous fights, he will definitely stand on Wu Tingfang's side.

Tao Fang instructed the warriors to put down the wooden sword and clothes and to leave the room. He gave Xiang Shaolong a questioning look and Xiang Shaolong hurriedly told him about his trip to Wei. Tao Fang's brows furrowed deeply when he heard that and said softly, "Prince Xinling is exceptionally smart and has countless able men under him, he's not someone easy to deal with. You have to be careful." He paused and continued, "We have our own people in Wei as well, I'll go back and make some arrangements to see how we can help you." After they've agreed on the secret signal for the meeting, Lady Ya and a happy Wu Tingfang came out. Wu Tingfang waid with a smile, "Master Tao can go back on your own, and tell Sister Ting not to worry. Fang'er will stay here and take care of Xiang Lang." It was as if a huge load was taken off his shoulder and after thanking Lady Ya, Tao Fang left happily. Obviously Wu Tingfang had been harassing him. Xiang Shaolong's mood was greatly improved, naturally that night they were all engaged in loving acts, sandwiched between the 2 beauties Zhao Ya and Wu Tingfang, spending the warm and beautiful night together.

The next morning, with the help of Xiaozhao, he changed into his armor and helmet and went to the practice fields in high spirits to practice his horse riding and archery. The other imperial guards treated him like their new heroic idol, and because he has no airs about him, he's on good relations with everyone. While he was

galloping on his horse and he managed to shoot at the bull's eyes at the same time, the field erupted in cheers. Suddenly everyone knelt down and when Xiang Shaolong looked, he hurriedly scrambled off his horse and knelt down as well. It turns out that the King of Zhao is here, and next to him was a pretty young lady, with eyebrows like the spring mountains and eyes like autumn's water, clear and bright. However her composure was regal, with a noble air around her that will not tolerate any audacity. She is certainly different from Lady Ya's flirtatious nature. After the King of Zhao supervised the men with their training, he summoned Xiang Shaolong and said happily, "Shaolong is practicing so diligently, I am much assured."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that he's practicing so hard not because of you, but because his own life is at stake, but of course he won't say that out. The King of Zhao said, "Come! Pay your respects to Lady Ni! She has a request to make of you!" Xiang Shaolong hurriedly paid his respects to Lady Ni, and by now he realizes that he has really misunderstood her. Such a regal lady, how can she possibly try to lure men publicly? The King of Zhao added, "Lady Ni told me that Shaolong had rejected her invitation once. Initially I was unhappy when I heard it, but I later guessed that Shaolong may have misunderstood Lady's meaning, and thought it's regarding matters between men and women. There's no guilt in being ignorant, and I can see that for the sake of the mission, Shaolong is controlling yourself very well. Therefore not only will I not blame you, but I am very impressed with you." Xiang Shaolong secretly felt guilty and thought to himself that if he'd known that he rejected Lady Ni's invitation because his stamina is limited and he could not handle so many beauties, and also he does not know if Lady Ni is pretty or if her figure is good, would he still think the same. But on the surface he naturally sought forgiveness fearfully. The King of Zhao smiled at Lady Ni and said, "I'll hand Shaolong over to you for now!" And he left

with the accompaniment of the imperial guards.

Xiang Shaolong turned towards Lady Ni and she happened to be eyeing him. Their eyes locked and Lady Ni's pretty face blushed and she lowered her eyes and said gently, "Zhao Ni was rash, causing Mister to have the misunderstanding." Xiang Shaolong saw that her skin was smooth and clear, and although she's not as pretty as Zhao Ya, not as dainty as Wu Tingfang and not as fresh as Third Princess Zhao Qian, but she has another kind of alluring beauty catches one's attention. And at this time he almost wished that it was not a misunderstanding. Lady Ni said, "There's too many people here, would Mister please come to Zhao Ni's residence for a chat, and meet my son."

Xiang Shaolong thought that this matter must certainly involve her son. All the women in this era marry early, for all you know Lady Ni got married when she was 13 or 14, so although she looks like in her 20s, it's nothing strange if she has a 10 year old son. A horse carriage came over and Lady Ni went into the carriage. Xiang Shaolong is aware of the difference in status so he went up his horse and followed behind the carriage. In a short while they reached the place where the 2 palace maids waited the other day to invite him. The carriage turned into a courtyard. They sat down in the hall while 4 maids served them. Lady Ni was a little distracted and after drinking a few sips of hot tea did she dared to look at him. She said quietly, "I've invited Mister here today because I have a request." Xiang Shaolong saw that she dared not address him by his official title, but addressed him respectfully as Mister, and had already made his guess. He looked at her pretty eyes and asked with a smile, "Has it got something to do with Little Master?" Lady Ni sighed, "It's all because of this son. After my late husband perished in battle, all my hopes have been placed on him, but he's stubborn by nature and does not know how to take care of

himself, only interested in having fun all the time...” Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Don’t all children like to play?” Lady Ni’s face blushed and she said worriedly, “He does not play a typical child’s games, but has fun with the girls in the Palace.” Xiang Shaolong asked hoarsely, “How old is he?” Lady Ni said embarrassingly, “He’ll be 14 end of the year.” Looking at the dumbstruck Xiang Shaolong, she said helplessly, “I have found him many famous teachers to teach him, but none can do anything to him. He’ll disappear in the blink of an eye. He’s only a little afraid of me, but all the servants around me are afraid of him, he... Hai! I don’t know what to say. Ai! The tea has turned cold.”

Xiang Shaolong was about to drink tea when a woman’s scream could be heard coming from the backyard. Lady Ni’s expression turned somber and she stood up and walked hurriedly towards the direction of the sound. Xiang Shaolong was afraid that she’ll be in danger and hurriedly went after her. He had just stepped into the room when he saw a stout looking boy pressing a pretty maid against the wall, her top pulled down, revealing her voluptuous chest. That boy was holding onto her hands tightly, his tiny mouth biting and sucking on her right breast, not caring if there are other people nearby. Although there were 3 maids at the side, no one dared to stop him. Lady Ni was furious and shouted, “Beast! Stop your hands right now!” Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that it’s more accurate say stop his mouth. That Little Master was shocked and released the pretty maid. He turned around and said nonchalantly, “Didn’t Mother went to look for his Majesty? It was Young Prince who told me.” After he spoke he turned his gaze to Xiang Shaolong, his look full of jeer and disrespect. The pretty maid went away crying with her clothes in disarray. Lady Ni was so furious she was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong wondered why she was able to hold back her

tears. At the same time he realized that this kid learned martial arts since young and is strong. He's also on good terms with the Zhao prince, so naturally he does not fear anyone, and no one can or dares to discipline him. At such a young age and already he's stained with the lecherous nature of the palace, what a pity. The Little Master looked at Xiang Shaolong from the corner of his eye and huffed, "So you are that Xiang Shaolong, why aren't you kneeling upon seeing me." Lady Ni roared, "Outrageous! From today onwards Mister Xiang will be your teacher, you should be the one kneeling." The Little Master chortled and said, "This is where Mother is wrong, how can the formalities between a ruler and a subject be dismissed. After he's paid his respects, I still have to see how capable he is before I decide if I want him to teach me." Lady Ni was so furious she stamped her feet and was about to berate him when Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, "Lady please do not be upset, why don't all of you leave for a moment and let me have some heart to heart talk with Little Master."

The Little Master saw that Xiang Shaolong was all decked out in his armor and looked imposing and actually felt a little afraid. He smiled icily and said, "Who wants to talk to you." He turned around and wanted to slip away from the back door, ignoring even Lady Ni's calls. He was about to slip out when there was a gust of wind and the Little Master felt a coldness brush past his ear, a dagger flew past his cheek and embedded itself on the doorframe. Little Master's legs weakened and he stopped. Lady Ni and the rest of the maids were all startled, their hands covering their mouths, thinking that if the dagger is a little way off, what would be the outcome? Little Master turned around pale faced, pointing at Xiang Shaolong and stammered, "Mother! He wants to kill me, apprehend him quickly." Xiang Shaolong stared icily at him and said coldly, "What kind of capability is that, shut up immediately. When I come tomorrow morning and I don't see you waiting at the study obediently, I'll find you and give you a good thrashing no

matter where you hide. Now go!” Little Master was so furious his face paled. He stamped his feet angrily and pointed at him hatefully, saying, “Fine! We shall see!” He turned around and went out the back door in the blink of an eye.

Xiang Shaolong is not bothered about a little lad like him at all, and took the opportunity to bid his farewell to Lady Ni. Lady Ni lowered her head and said quietly, “You have not drunk that tea!” Xiang Shaolong thought to himself if the beauty is tempted. He smiled suavely and went to the door to retrieve the dagger Tao Fang gave him. He had an idea. When it comes to archery, there are a lot of people who are better than him, but what about flying daggers? There’s no one better than him. But it’s not convenient to carry daggers, but if he were to use the 5 inch steel nails he had used while in the special task force, he can easily carry a few hundred with him and it’s even more deadly. He made up his mind and decided to ask Guo Zhong’s men to make it immediately. He turned around and Lady Ni had just walked up behind him. The two came face to face in close distance, their eyes locked. Lady Ni uttered in alarm and moved 2 steps back, a little helpless. The most alluring thing to a man is when a chaste and mature beauty first feel the stirrings of her feelings. Xiang Shaolong is no exception, if not for the fact that there are other maids around, he’ll certainly flirt with her. But it’s not because he is deviously trying to lure her into bed, but he just wants to see her alluring, helpless look.

Lady Ni said, “Mister, this way!” Xiang Shaolong followed her back to the front hall and after drinking the hot tea that she personally changed for him, bid his farewell again. Lady Ni felt a real respect for him. All the men she’s ever met, besides close blood relatives like the King, all of them had designs on her once they see her. On one hand they love her beautiful body, and on the other hand they want to boast that they were able to conquer this

chaste widow. She detests those lecherous faces, and only this heroic looking man in front of her cannot make her feel any loathing at all. The way he threw that dagger earlier, full of confidence and strength, is enough to touch her calm heart who has been sick of the opposite sex for so long. Lady Ni can find no further excuse to retain him, and she personally sent him to the door, looking at him deeply and lightly sighed, "Mister please remember to come here early tomorrow, I will leave my little Pan'er to you." Xiang Shaolong almost blurted out, "What about you?" but of course he dared not be so rude. He gave a small smile and said, "The way I teach children will not be like what you imagine, I hope Lady will be able to accept that, or you may fire me from my post any time." Lady Ni said gladly, "As long as it's Mister's methods, I will accept them all. Ai! I was too anxious, and forgot to ask you the question about salary." Xiang Shaolong chortled and walked out the door, his voice drifting back, "I'm doing this because of a mother's love for her son, that would be my reward."

Book 2 Chapter 8 – The Empress Of Zhao

When he returned to the Palace, Wu Tingfang was overjoyed and after grumbling for a bit, she dragged him to the pavilion in the garden for some sweet talk.

A moment later Lady Ya returned with a shocking news. King Xiaowen of Qin who has ascended the throne for less than 3 days suddenly died, and Ying Zheng's father has taken over the throne as King Zhuangxiang.

Lady Ya said, “King Xiaowen is 53 years old this year, and has always been weak, but this time he died after eating the medicine offered by Lu Buwei, so everyone suspects that Lu Buwei has secretly done something. But because of the relationship between King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei, no one dares to say anything although they're upset. Hai! This Lu Buwei is extremely ambitious, and his methods vicious and excellent. Now all the other states are afraid that the Qin army will start to invade east very quickly.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and overjoyed at the news, and thought that the events are really similar to what was depicted in the movie. However he knows that the most important task for Lu Buwei now is not to attack the other 6 states, but to find a way to get his precious son Yingzheng back to Xianyang, then think of a way to murder King Zhuangxiang. In that way the throne will fall into the hands of his son, and he will become in a sense the Grand Emperor.

Lady Ya continued, “Lu Buwei has been a merchant for many years and traveled among the states, so he's very familiar with the

situation in all the states. If he were to come to power, the outcome will be terrible. Merchants only care about gains and not loyalty, and are not bounded by loyalty. The thought of a person like that governing the expansion is enough to make one's blood run cold.”

Xiang Shaolong was thinking about Yingzheng instead. All along, historians did not understand that when his father Yiren and Lu Buwei escaped Handan, they left behind Zhaoji and Yingzheng to avoid arousing suspicions, but why didn't that Zhao kill Yingzheng and his mother to appease their anger.

Now he understood, that is Zhao Mu's ploy, deliberately thinning Yingzheng's mind with wine and beauty, making him a useless person. They can then use him to make deals with the Qin in future, and even if he becomes the King, a useless person like him will be more bane than boon to the Qins. Killing 2 birds with one stone, the ploy is indeed vicious. It seems that Zhao Mu has now succeeded, so how can Emperor Qin unify the 6 states then?

He really has no idea.

But if he does not see Emperor Qin, he will never give up.

It's not difficult to imagine that now that Yiren has ascended the throne to become the Qin King, the value of Yingzheng who is now the crown prince will rise. Now that he's a rare treasure, the Zhaos will certainly guard him even more closely, so how can he possibly meet him without arousing others' suspicions?

Wu Tingfang came up to him and asked, “What is Xiang Lang

thinking about?”

Xiang Shaolong was jolted awake and on seeing Lady Ya’s heated eyes staring at him, he changed the subject and asked, “Who is the Premier in Qin how? What’s the situation like?”

Lady Ya sighed, “It doesn’t matter who is in power, the position of Premier will end up in Lu Buwei’s hands sooner or later.”

Wu Tingfang asked curiously, “Why is Sister Ya so afraid of the Qins?”

Lady Ya replied helplessly, “It’s not that I’m afraid of them, but there’s no one who is not afraid of them. You can see clearly from our state, who is not engaged in amorous acts, wine and beauty. When the enemy soldiers are nearing the city, they’ll pull themselves together for a while and once the enemy is defeated, they’ll return to their old ways. However the Qins still maintain the hard working nature of the barbarians and were not influenced by the ways of the southern people. Shangyang advised the Qins to prohibit philosophy books and the country will then prosper and strengthen. Although I do not know who is right or wrong, but seeing the Qins growing stronger day by day, who can say that it’s wrong of the Qins to prohibit philosophy books.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that before Emperor Qin burned books and buried Confucian scholars, Shangyang has already done this long ago, burning the books first.

Lady Ya added, “Before Fan Ju became the premier, the main

power in Qin was in the hands of the Marquis of Rang, and those in power were people under him. He used the strategy of attacking the far away states but maintaining friendship with nearby states, thus making the Qin's commanders frequently travel far away to fight battles, depleting the country's strength. King Zhaoxiang therefore made plans secretly with Fan Ju to take back military control, and changed the strategy to attacking the nearby states but maintaining friendship with far away states. They made peace with Qi and Chu, and used all their might to deal with Han and us, therefore the Changping battle happened. And Imperial brother made the wrong move as well, hai!"

Xiang Shaolong saw the look of sadness in her eyes, and knows that she is now thinking of the Zhao Gao who can only talk strategy and lost his life in Changping. He felt a great pity for her so he hugged and kissed her, saying gently, "Let bygones be bygones, don't think too much."

Zhao Ya leaned into his arms weakly, "After the Marquis of Rang lost his power, one of his great generals Bai Qi was never on good terms with Fan Ju. In the battle of Changping, Bai Qi destroyed 400,000 of our men, his methods were never more cruel. Therefore Fan Ju made a big issue out of this and in the end managed to convince the Qin King to execute Bai Qi's entire clan. This move resulted in the hatred of Qin's generals towards an outsider like Fan Ju, and finally it's now Cai Ze of Yan who is now the Premier. But Lu Buwei is riding on a high tide now, and the good days for Cai Ze will soon be over."

Xiang Shaolong felt his joy run dry on hearing this, and felt that the future is bleak. In this era, everyone will murder if it can benefit himself. He hugged the 2 women and said, "Hai! Don't

think anymore. We'll drink and be merry today, and leave all worries to tomorrow. Come! Let's go into the room immediately and have fun."

The 2 women's pretty eyes shone and they repeated, "Drink and be merry today, and leave all worries to tomorrow. Well said, Xiang Lang." They followed him obediently, their powered face burning.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself, how can he be bothered about what's going to happen tomorrow? He only knows how to fight and knows nothing about politics, it's a silly dream if he wants to change this era. Why not have fun instead, enjoy each beauty as they come, that would be more practical. Who knows if he'll still be alive tomorrow, or if he'll still be in this era?

He can't help but think of the regal and elegant Zhao Ni.

Let's see if he'll have a chance to flirt with the lady tomorrow, that would certainly be a captivating experience and would not have put his journey here to waste.

As for whether he can still return to the 21st century, he doesn't really care anymore.

Xiang Shaolong woke up before the sun rose, changed into his military uniform but without wearing his armor, left for the practice field to practice his horse riding and archery.

From now on he's not going to think about the future, but only wants to spend his time enjoying life to the fullest.

The many years of habit made him like exercising, therefore his stamina is better than others. The amorous night he spent did not affect him much. Instead, if he doesn't exercise, he'll feel uncomfortable instead.

He humbly sought advice from the other imperial guards the various techniques of controlling a horse, therefore he improved by leaps and bounds. He was able to turn and flip at ease on horseback and execute various difficult moves. He also practiced hard on charging in battle. It's just that he's not too used to fighting a battle on a horse wearing heavy armor.

After a hard practice, he let Cheng Xu take him to the soldiers quarters assigned to him and after his shower, went to Lady Ni's residence. Just as he was thinking how he should flirt with this beauty when he suddenly heard someone calling him.

Xiang Shaolong looked over in surprise and saw Lady Ni's mischievous and lecherous son waving to him from a building on the left.

He obviously knows that it won't be anything good but he's not afraid at all and walked over with large strides.

The Little Master dashed into the building.

Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed to himself and heightened his senses. He had just stepped into the courtyard when there was a ‘whoosh’ and a huge net dropped down from above.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and rolled forward, avoiding the net and jumped up as if nothing happened, tapping the dust and grass off his clothes.

In the spacious courtyard 10 odd people holding swords jumped out from their hiding place and surrounded him. Master Pan was hiding behind a bigger kid who was a head taller than him and shouted, “Beat him up!”

Xiang Shaolong took a look around and wanted to laugh. These 10 odd people were between the ages of 14 to 17, and looks like little bullies in the royal family, and they actually dared to gang up to deal with him.

The bigger kid who was shielding the Little Master could have been Zhao’s crown prince, so how can he let him have a chance to reveal his status. He laughed and drew out his rainbow sword and went towards Master Pan.

2 swords hurriedly went up in defense.

Xiang Shaolong gave 2 heavy blows which stunned his opponents and their swords dropped to the ground, before giving them a kick on their butts. The 2 spoiled kids groaned as they fell to the ground.

Xiang Shaolong laughed as he waved his sword, slashing any sword that comes forward and kicking any butt that he sees and in a short while he defeated this royal gang. He pretended to roar and frightened this group of teenagers so much that they scattered away in fear.

Naturally he will not let Master Pan off and he flipped him over on the ground and using his sword, slapped his butt more than 10 times before lifting the wailing boy up and said icily, "If you cry one more time, I will give you 10 slaps."

Master Pan has never seen someone so terrible and he immediately shut up.

Xiang Shaolong escorted him home. Lady Ni has long heard about what happened and was at the door waiting.

Once Master Pan sees his mother, he saw that he has backing and started crying again.

Lady Ni's heart ached on seeing this and was about to console him when Xiang Shaolong said loudly, "Lady will either hand him over to me, or I will never interfere in future again."

Lady Ni was startled and she lowered her head and said, "Of course I will hand him over to Mister!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "That would be best!" He lifted Master Pan by the scruff of his neck and dragged him into the

study, keeping Lady Ni and the rest of the maids outside. He sat down on the soft cushion and grinned at Master Pan who was scrambling to get up from the floor with a look of absolute hatred.

Xiang Shaolong roared, “Sit down!”

Master Pan immediately sat down.

Xiang Shaolong said coldly, “Look! Look at you, you have no ability yourself so you went to look for help, thinking of bullying others by sheer numbers. And you cry and scream when you lose, what kind of a hero is that.”

Master Pan gritted his teeth and said, “You’re not a hero, the old bullying the young.”

Xiang Shaolong humph, “If you’re afraid of me, you won’t come and find trouble with me on your own accord. You know this is not a question of the old bullying the young, but a question of who is stronger and who is weaker.”

Master Pan was dumbfounded, he did not expect Xiang Shaolong to be so formidable. He thought for a moment before he tried to scare him by saying, “Just now you kicked Young Prince’s butt, he will certainly tell his Majesty to chop off your head.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “I see that you’re so young and yet you know how to flirt with women, and I thought you’re a person of standing. But I did not expect that when you lose to others, you

only know how to use despicable methods. I was wrong about you, get lost! I do not want to see you ever again.”

Master Pan eyed his suspiciously and got up. He turned around and was about to leave when he turned back again and asked, “Why is it that when I made fun of these women, you regard me as a person of standing?”

Xiang Shaolong replied nonchalantly, “Most men are lecherous, it doesn’t matter if they’re young or old. When I saw you molesting that sister the other day, you did seem to have a hand with you and I thought your other skills would be good as well. But I did not expect you to be so useless. If you have some spirit in you then you should practice hard to be more capable than me and defeat me properly.”

It’s the first time Master Pan hear an adult admiring his evil ways, so he nodded his head and said, “Just you see! One day I will defeat you.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has successfully piqued his curiosity and thoughts of winning, so he said, “What’s the use of just saying it, just scram! I abhor those useless people who only knows how to talk empty. I hope you never have the chance to go to battle, or else it’ll not be something so simple as getting a kick on the butt.”

Youths have always idolized heroes. Xiang Shaolong is good looking and easily defeated the powerful man in his eyes, so he has long harbored a respect and fear for Xiang Shaolong. Now that Xiang Shaolong’s words sounded reasonable to his ears, he can’t

help but felt his enmity reduce and he sat back down and said, "If I listen to you, will you teach me how you fought earlier?"

Xiang Shaolong's eyes gleamed and he said, "Do you know how valuable my skills are, how can I just teach you just because of a word from your mother. If you want to learn, you'll have to pass a test first." He continued with a smile, "But if you're obedient, not only can I make you become Zhao's true hero and swordsman, I can also teach you how to become a love expert that will charm all women to death. All the beauties in the world will be yours to pick."

Using both hard and soft tactics, Master Pan's face brightened. Ever since his father passed away, he's always envied others who has a father, and Xiang Shaolong just happen to fit into this emptiness. Naturally he did not realize it himself, but in his heart he actually thirst for someone like Xiang Shaolong to appear.

He was silent for a moment before he ventured to ask, "Really! What kind of test do I need to pass?"

Xiang Shaolong know that he cannot be slipshod about this matter, so he stood up and helped him up as well.

Just as Master Pan was surprised at the attention given to him, Xiang Shaolong lifted him up and flung him over his shoulder onto the rug, laughing loudly, "First is to get a beating. A person who cannot withstand a beating is not qualified to fight."

Although Master Pan was thrown onto the floor, but he only felt

a slight pain and thought that this was fun, so he jumped up.

Xiang Shaolong taught him a few moves of Judo on how to wrestle, and allowed Master Pan to trip him, so his interest was aroused. After a round of wrestling fun, and truly like a child's character, he soon forgot all his hatred and enmity.

Xiang Shaolong tousled his head and said, "Go and look for some other people to try my methods! If you listen to instructions and are obedient, you'll certainly become like me in future, tall and strong with extraordinary abilities."

Master Pan shouted in joy and ran out the door.

Lady Ni who has been waiting outside the door all this while was dumbfounded; she cannot understand why her mischievous son would be so ecstatic?

She stepped into the study and looked dumbly at Xiang Shaolong, not knowing what to say at all.

Xiang Shaolong walked over and closed the door. He went behind her and said with a smile, "If I teach Little Master how to be close with women, what would Lady think?"

Lady Ni's body shook and she turned around abruptly and asked hoarsely, "What?" She almost knocked into him, but she retreated, and this time it was only a small step back.

Xiang Shaolong said nonchalantly, “Children are all rebellious and curious. The more Lady tries to restrict him, the more he’ll want to break the rules. So if we let him know clearly what he is doing, what would be the consequences, what responsibility he’ll have to take, he’ll learn to control himself instead.”

Lady Ni stammered, “But he’s only 13!”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “How old was Lady when you got married?”

Lady Ni blushed and she lowered her gaze, “At that time I was only 14.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart lurched and he said with a smile, “So! 13 is not considered too young, there are a lot of 15 year old males with wives and mistresses, and this is the case in the Palace as well. If Lady wants to stop him from getting close to women, it would be a very difficult task.”

Lady Ni said worriedly, “But I still keep thinking that he’s an immature kid. However Mister’s way of thinking is indeed astute and unique, I’ve never heard of anyone else who has such a thinking.”

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to look at her chest, waist and long limbs, thinking to himself that you’ll really know how unique a modern man like me is once you’re in bed.

Lady Ni was just stealing a peep at him and saw his heated eyes roving over her chest and was shocked, “Mister!”

Xiang Shaolong was embarrassed that she noticed his lecherous look and hurriedly took his leave.

Lady Ni wanted to retain him a little longer but she could find no excuse, so she can only send him out the door shyly.

Both of them were feeling guilty so they could feel that secret excitement although no words were spoken.

Xiang Shaolong returned to Lady Ya’s place and was about to have fun with the ladies when the King of Zhao suddenly summoned him, so he left hurriedly.

The guard brought him straight to the inner Palace. Xiang Shaolong remembered Cheng Xu’s warning and asked with furrowed brows, “Isn’t his Majesty working at the Outer Palace?”

The guard was expressionless as he replied, “I am only following orders, and do not know anything else.”

The 2 of them walked along the wide and long corridors in the palace, meeting ladies-in-waiting and concubines on the way and all of them were making eyes at Xiang Shaolong. All these ladies were specially chosen, so naturally they’re all beauties.

They reached an especially magnificent palace building and after

the guard passed him over to 2 servants, he left.

One of the servants instructed him to remove his sword and any other weapons before leading him into the hall.

He'd just stepped into the hall but Xiang Shaolong knows that something is wrong.

On both sides there were 10 strong, stout men standing. On a raised platform at the end of the hall, a lady with her hair piled high up, wearing a colorful and elegant robe was lounging on a chair covered with soft cushions, looking at him icily.

Sitting next to her was the young prince whose butt he just kicked this morning, and behind them sat 7 to 8 beauties who looked like concubines, and behind these ladies were 10 odd pretty ladies-in-waiting, but all of them looked unfriendly.

Looking at such a layout, naturally he knows what is happening. He hurriedly knelt down and kowtowed, "Imperial Protector Xiang Shaolong pays his respect to your Majesty."

Empress Zhao does not look older than 30, and looked regal and imposing, with a high nose bridge, showing that she's a person of steely character with a mind of her own.

Naturally she's not as beautiful as Lady Ya, Lady Ni or Third Princess, but her posture while on the dais, especially her thick lips, looks very sexy.

With one look, Xiang Shaolong can hazard a guess about her character.

This kind of woman loves men who are stronger than her.

The young prince pointed at him and said with hatred, “Imperial Mother! He’s the one who kicked me.”

Empress Zhao’s eyes turned icy and she lightly reprimanded, “You dare to offend even the prince, Xiang Shaolong do you know this is a death penalty.”

Xiang Shaolong replied without fear, “I now know my mistake, but at that time I did not know that Young Prince were among the 10 odd people surrounding and attacking me. I was only under Lady Ni’s orders to teach Master Pan well, and also to defend myself, so I made such a mistake. Would your Majesty please look into this further.”

Obviously Empress Zhao has no idea what the whole thing was about and after staring at the Young Prince, she added coldly, “What actually happened? Tell me clearly from the beginning.”

Therefore Xiang Shaolong truthfully related what happened right from the start, his voice full of confidence and persuasion, making Empress Zhao and all the concubines secretly discount what was originally told to them. When he spoke about how he taught Master Pan a lesson, he revealed a warm smile.

The Young Prince saw that the situation is amiss so he tugged Empress Zhao's sleeve and said, "Imperial Mother must help your son."

Empress Zhao furrowed her brows and asked, "What do you want?"

The Young Prince went to her ear and whispered a few words.

Empress Zhao nodded her head slightly and raised her voice, "Stand up."

Xiang Shaolong stood to his full height proudly, and for a moment he looked even better than the 20 stout looking men, making the eyes of the Empress and the concubines all light up.

It's the first time they have seen a person of such capabilities.

Empress Zhao said gently to the Young Prince, "Imperial Mother can accede to your request, and let them give Xiang Shaolong a beating so that your anger can be appeased. But if they were to lose to him instead, you will have to be like Little Pan and follow Xiang Shaolong and learn martial arts and bearing from him, will you agree?"

She saw for herself how he defeated Lian Jin the other day and knows that he is highly skilled, and now that she knows he's a good disciplinarian, she was overjoyed and thus made this request.

The Young Prince asked happily, “Will they all strike at the same time?”

Empress Zhao furrowed her brows, “How can it be that unfair, isn’t it enough for you to pick 3 of them out?”

The Young Prince was wary after the beating by Xiang Shaolong and he shook his head, “No! Not enough.”

There was an uproar among the 20 stout men, all revealing looks of unhappiness and spoiling for a fight.

Xiang Shaolong bowed and said, “Since your Majesty has agreed to Young Prince’s request, Shaolong is willing to give a try.”

Everyone in the hall gasped.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing to himself, when it comes to freestyle fighting, he’s not afraid no matter how many people there are. These men are naturally considered strongmen in this era, but they’re a long way off if compared to Black Faced Deity.

The Young Prince exclaimed happily, “That’s settled then, fight immediately.” And secretly thought to himself that he’ll surely be dead this time.

Xiang Shaolong removed his outer robe, revealing his wonderful

physique, making the Empress and the ladies' hearts all beat faster and their eyes mesmerized.

The 20 men were furious at being belittled and they all shouted in unison as they removed their tops, revealing their exquisite upper bodies and came forward to surround Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong have not had a good fight for a long time and is now in the mood for it. He followed them and removed his top as well, revealing his strong and chiseled body, and muscles with not an ounce of fat surrounding his broad chest and arms. The most impressive part is his six pack on his tummy.

Empress Zhao has always been ignored by the King and her heart was aflame on seeing this, and was speechless for a moment.

The Young Prince shouted, "Strike!"

4 men immediately pounced towards Xiang Shaolong, with 2 going to hug him from behind and the other 2 waving their fists to attack his temple and chest, and it seems that they are not pulling their punches at all.

The ladies all screamed in unison.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly retreated, his left and right elbows knocking into the 2 men coming up behind him.

The 2 men groaned and knelt down on the ground.

Xiang Shaolong pressed down on their shoulders and used the motion to propel himself into the air, his legs kicking out and striking the 2 men who were attacking from the front right in the face.

With blood flowing down their noses, the 2 men covered their faces and fell backwards.

In one instant he has dealt with 4 men.

The Young Prince was extremely nervous and kept cheering for the others.

When Xiang Shaolong landed on the ground again, he rolled forward and his legs kicked up diagonally. The other 2 men has never seen such unorthodox way of fighting and they were immediately kicked on their stomachs and sent flying off, unable to get up.

When he jumped up, a man attacked him with both his fists but he forcefully pushed the fists aside and took the opportunity to give 2 punches to the man's chest. He turned around with a kick and the kick landed on another man's chest, sending the 2 of them flying off at the same time.

His fighting style is a combination of Thai boxing, karate, western boxing and Korea's judo, mixed with Chinese martial arts, the moves welded after serious analyzing and it's not something that the martial arts of this era can fight against. It uses very little

strength to defeat almost half of his opponents and those who were stuck will lose their ability to fight.

The other men were startled and retreated.

The Young Prince was dumbfounded, looking at Xiang Shaolong who seems to be as mighty as a deity unbelievably.

Empress Zhao could not take it any longer and shouted, “Stop!”

The men all heaved a sigh of relief and helped the injured retreat.

Xiang Shaolong knelt down and said, “Would your Majesty please forgive me, Xiang Shaolong has been merciful in the fight, they’ll be fine after a short rest.”

The Young Prince was unhappy and pouted, “Imperial Mother!”

Empress Zhao stared at him and said, “It is your father and your good fortune that Great Zhao has such a marvelous warrior, what else do you want?”

The Young Prince was cowered by Xiang Shaolong’s air and for a moment was unable to speak. After a moment he stamped his feet and ran out of the hall.

Empress Zhao turned back towards Xiang Shaolong and her eyes gentle, said, “Imperial Protector please rise.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up and bowed, saying, “If your Majesty does not have any other instructions, I will take my leave.”

After Empress Zhao waved the rest of the men away, she stood up and walked down the dais and said apologetically, “Imperial Protector’s clothes are all dirty!” And shouted, “Men, bring Imperial Protector to the back palace for a bath and change.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled and thought that the situation is terrible, what difference is this from sending a goat to a tiger’s den? Before the concubines and ladies in waiting have a chance to reach him, he swiftly scooped up his clothes and signaled the ladies to stop, and begged the Zhao Empress, “I will be going to the state of Wei the day after, now we’re in a hurry to prepare for the trip, would your Majesty please forgive me.”

The more the Empress sees him, the more she is taken with him, but on seeing him so determined, she did not want to stop him, thinking to herself that in future there will be the excuse to ask him to teach the Prince martial arts, so there’ll be opportunities to see him. She smiled and said, “At least let them help you dress!”

The ladies in waiting all swarmed forward and were busy helping him dress while giggling, and of course they took the opportunity to touch him to their heart’s content.

The Empress and the concubines were all looking from the side with adoration in their expressions. However, Xiang Shaolong was worried, what if the King of Zhao were to find out about this, what would his reaction be?

He can't help but secretly lament.

Book 2 Chapter 9 – Flirting With The Virtuous Lady

He returned to Lady Ya's palace when Guo Zhong sent him the things he ordered. There were about a thousand pieces of flying needles, and the sight of it gave him a great boost. Lady Ya and Wu Tingfang were discussing the use of those strange things like springs, hooks etc, and when they saw him coming back, they immediately queried him. Xiang Shaolong hugged the 2 women and kissed and touched them until they were delirious and he totally avoided answering them. Suddenly a little esteemed guest arrived, and it's Master Pan, who was happily boasting to him how he managed to wrestle and fell a lot of people. But he added, "But they defeated me very soon again."

Xiang Shaolong asked him about the young prince's attitude. Master Pan said, "Master is really great, to have beaten that bunch of warriors. The Young Prince might not admit it, but I can see that he is quite awed in his heart. Those who have not tasted your prowess and bravely wanted to seek you out but they were all rejected by Young Prince." Lady Ya laughed, "What? Your little gang of bullies have finally met your nemesis?" Master Pan looked at her lecherously, not at all giving way and said, "Isn't Aunt Ya conquered by Master as well?" Lady Ya was so furious that she stared at him with rounded eyes, and ignoring him, left with Wu Tingfang. Master Pan stared at Wu Tingfang's perky bottom and said appreciatively, "Sister Wu is really pretty, no one in the palace can be compared to her."

Xiang Shaolong secretly reprimanded him for being a little lecher, but if they were to exchange positions, he may not be any much better than him. It's simply too easy to obtain women here.

He asked, “Lad! Tell me, have you done it with women?” Master Pan was excited as he replied honestly, “Of course, but I’m still a long way off compared to Master, even Aunt Ya has been conquered by you. I’ve long appointed you as the most attractive man in Zhao for women.” He continued with a low voice, “Have you touched Mother?” Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a moment, this little imp is really difficult to handle, how can he impart to him the correct values? Master Pan lowered his voice and added, “I’ve just asked Mother, her face turned red and she chased me out, but I can tell that she secretly likes you.” Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be angry or to laugh, so he dragged him to the garden, forced him to do a few more exercises and taught him a few basics of the Mohist swordplay. Master Pan has already regarded him as his idol, and for once he was intent on practicing. It was only after dinner that Master Pan left, sad to part.

Xiang Shaolong had been working hard the whole day so he dragged the 2 ladies to the pool for some fun while the 8 maids helped them pour in hot water. This enjoyment like that of an emperor gave him a feeling of decadence. When he’s having fun, who cares about so much. But nevertheless he is someone who will not be willingly controlled by fate, so after having his way with the 2 ladies, while still hugging them in the pool, he started asking Lady Ya about the situation in the various states. He asked, “Why is it that the other states know how formidable Qin is, but they do not unite against him? For example our trip to Wei this time, on the surface it’s a peaceful trip but in actual fact there’s something more sinister going on.” Lady Ya replied, “If you don’t stop caressing me, how do you expect me to give you a proper answer?” Xiang Shaolong released his hand that was encompassing her well endowed bosom, kissed her face and said, “Speak then!” Wu Tingfang moaned, “Shaolong! Fang’er wants to listen as well!” Xiang Shaolong laughed and moved his hand to hug her slender waist instead and asked, “Will this do!” Wu Tingfang kissed him

happily and hurriedly said, “Sister Ya speak quickly.”

After spending these 2 days together, and with Lady Ya trying to get into her good books, these 2 ladies became as close as sisters. Lady Ya arranged the thoughts in her mind and sighed, “The main reason, I think is the problem of geography. For example the 2 states of Qi and Yan, are further away from Qin, so they do not feel the pain as acutely as us. Everyone knows that to become stronger, one has to expand the territory, that’s why when the Yan saw us suffering a serious set back after Changping, they took the opportunity to invade. Who’d have the time to think about uniting against Qin.” Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, “Ya’er’s analysis is very reasonable, I’m sure the 6 states will be destroyed by the stronger Qin sooner or later, we should make plans earlier.” The 2 ladies were silent and unconsciously came closer to him. Only that way can they feel a sense of security. In this era, losing a war means death to a warrior, and to women from the royal family it means losing their most basic dignity, and end up being worse than prostitutes, as playthings for men.

In the warm water, touching the 2 alluring bodies, Xiang Shaolong’s mind began to wander, thinking about his extraordinary encounter. These few days he has not thought of which era he should belong to. All the relatives and friends are getting further and further away from him, separated by time that cannot be crossed. Something must have gone wrong with that Crazy Ma’s machine, and he will be classified as mysteriously missing. No one will bother about him, the forgetful people will soon forget him, leaving him alone with secrets that he cannot reveal to anyone, struggling to survive in this heartless warring states. He once had grand dreams as well, it was Yuan Zong’s sacrifice that fired his valor, making him think of using Emperor Qin to conquer the world and create a unified society. But the real

situation about Emperor Qin shattered his dream, and he now only wants to numb himself with wine and beauties, enjoying life to the fullest.

He's not willing to give himself up to despair just like that. But what can he do? If the trip to Wei is successful, he may face the prospect of losing his official post and his life upon his return because Zhao Mu will certainly not let him off. The King of Zhao may be treating him very nicely now, but those royalty never regarded their subordinates as 'humans'. There's no such concept as human rights in this era. What plans can he make? He can only take each step as it comes. Once he thought of this, Xiang Shaolong released the 2 ladies and pulled Xiaozhao, who was pouring in hot water for him, into the pool, and began his outrageous acts. Amidst the women's giggles, the pool bubbled with countless loving acts.

The next day Xiang Shaolong taught Master Pan the Mohist swordplay for a while, and after joking and talking with him, realized that this stubborn little boy is 4 to 5 years more mature than others his age, wild and rebellious yet strong and smart. For the first time Xiang Shaolong felt a liking towards him. Master Pan suddenly exclaimed earnestly, "Master! Will you marry my Mother? There are a lot of people who want to possess her inside and outside the palace, if someone I hate gets her, I'd rather kill myself." Xiang Shaolong looked at him in shock and said with surprise, "I didn't know that you care for your Mother that much. But even if I have the intention of marrying your Mother, I'd still need his Majesty's approval. Firstly I have not made any significant contributions, secondly my position is lowly, so how can his Majesty agree. We'll talk about this at a later date!" Master Pan said dejectedly, "What shall Mother do than, I've never seen her look at another man the same way she looks at you."

What an astute kid. Xiang Shaolong reached out and tousled his hair and was about to speak when from the corner of his eyes, he saw the fresh looking Zhao Ni walking towards them, her fragrance already preludes her presence. She saw Xiang Shaolong touching Master Pan's head, and her own son looking so obedient, a feeling of happiness she has not felt since her husband died in battle welled up in her and she said with a smile, "Good morning Mister, there's no way I can express my thanks to you, and I can only repay you in my next life." Master Pan said quietly, "Mother! Why the next life?" Lady Ni's cheeks immediately burned and she was shocked and embarrassed at the same time. She stared at him and said angrily, "Xiao Pan you really don't think before you speak, this is extremely rude towards Mister and your Mother, you..."

Xiang Shaolong knows that it is going to be difficult for her to round this embarrassment up nicely, and Master Pan is a stubborn kid as well, so he quickly said, "Xiao Pan, aren't you going to make your escape quickly?" Master Pan laughed and ran away. The atmosphere became even more awkward. Lady Ni was at a loss, it seems wrong to try to explain, but it seems even worse if she doesn't explain.

Xiang Shaolong looked at this virtuous lady looking so alluring lost, her resolution wavering and knows that the longer they stay in silence, the more the ambiguity of their feelings will increase. He thought it interesting and deliberately did not speak, but just looked at her eyes. Lady Ni stole a look at him and their eyes met, she suddenly felt her body going soft, her heart beating erratically. What should she do? How can she lose her composure like that. Xiang Shaolong saw that she's almost dying of embarrassment and thought that Master Pan was right, it's better to benefit oneself

rather than others. He asked quietly, “Shall we take a seat in Linzhong Pavilion?” Linzhong Pavilion is the deepest part of Lady Ni’s courtyard, in the dense osmanthus forest, there is a hidden and exquisite pavilion, a good place for a rendezvous.

Isn’t this considered a date.

Lady Ni was stunned for a moment and lifted her head to look at him, confusion filled her eyes, unable to speak. Xiang Shaolong knows that her heart was confused and wavering between the 2 extremes of preserving her chastity for her dead husband and to give herself to him in gratitude. He did not wait for her reply and seeing that there’s no one around, he pulled her slender hands and walked towards the osmanthus forest. Lady Ni was pulled along by him and was unable to break free so she had no choice but to follow him and lightly reprimanded him, “Mister Xiang...” Xiang Shaolong was holding her soft hand, his heart seems to be filled with sweetness. He felt the excitement of flirting with a virtuous lady so he has no time to think whether she’s willing or not. He just pulled her along the forest and his eyes brightened, the pavilion appeared right in front of him.

Lady Ni struggled hard and broke lose of his grasp. She stopped moving immediately, lowered her head and said sadly, “Will Mister respect Zhao Ni’s reputation?” Xiang Shaolong knows that the more haste, the less speed, so he said gently, “I, Xiang Shaolong is not someone who will force another, come! Let us just sit for a while in the pavilion and enjoy the fragrance from the osmanthus.” Lady Ni said quietly, “But you must first promise me that you’ll be respectful.” Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, the worse is that she will not stay, because if she’s willing to stay, there’s no way she can escape his clutches. If she can escape, he’ll

change his family name from Xiang to Zhao. He walked into the pavilion, sat on the stone ledge and signaled to her respectfully, “Lady please come in for a short stay.”

Lady Ni seems to have forgotten that Xiang Shaolong has not agreed to her condition of being respectful, and she walked daintily up the pavilion and leaned on the stone ledge next to him. Because Xiang Shaolong was sitting on the ledge, their height is now about the same. The 2 faces met straight on, 2 pairs of eyes interlocked. This time Lady Ni was braver and did not look away, just that she looked lost and her bosom heaved as her breath quickened, as she does not know how to hide her own feelings at all. Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed on seeing that she finally could not withstand his flirtations, and began to lose his control, but yet he cannot be overly anxious or she will not be able to accept it. He asked gently, “Can you smell the fragrance of the osmanthus?”

Lady Ni’s face blushed redder and she nodded and made a sound of acknowledgement. Xiang Shaolong slowly extended his right hand carefully, and touched the side of her waist first, slowly but steadily moving his hand behind her waist and around the other side of her waist. Lady Ni was standing unsteadily and with a gasp, half of her body fell into his arms, her soft bosom pressing tightly on his right chest. Their breathing immediately quickened. Lady Ni is shaking in his arms like a frightened bird, but she did not struggle or object. She was blushing to the ears, her heart is like a furnace, melting down the barrier of 9 years.

That is such a long time. Xiang Shaolong came close to her face, only a few inches away and almost kissing her fragrant lips and asked, “How can the fragrance of the osmanthus be compared to Lady?” Lady Ni was at a loss and said, “Didn’t we agree that you

will not be rude towards me?" Xiang Shaolong is an expert at handling women and knows that the more he behaves like a rascal now, the easier will he achieve his aim so he asked in surprise, "How can this be considered rude, it's a very big respect instead?" Lady Ni was shocked but she was unable to speak, because her lips were already locked by a strong and flirtatious man.

The fiery tongue teased the inside and outside of her mouth. Lady Ni has always been a regal and conservative person, even her husband before his death treated her with much respect and abided by the ancient rules. They only sleep together once a month and there's no bodily contact at all outside of bed. To her, Xiang Shaolong's invasion now is even more outrageous than what her dead husband has done to her, and this is the reason why she cannot accept Master Pan flirting with the maids. But in an ordinary royal family, the parents will usually close an eye on such matters. What is most hateful is that the way Xiang Shaolong took advantage of her is a hundred times more bold and clever than what her dead husband did. His fearlessness gave her a taste of excitement she's never felt before, until Xiang Shaolong invaded her tiny mouth did she instinctively extended her hand to push him, trying to separate the 2 lips. Her token struggle only served to fan Xiang Shaolong's desire. Initially he was only acting rashly, but now he is consumed by a burning desire, unable to stop himself.

He knows that he cannot just stop at this forced kiss, so as his tongue intertwined with hers, he hugged her closer, one hand holding her soft waist tightly and the other hand caressing her fragile cheeks, ears, hair and tender neck. Lady Ni's hands were grabbing his collar tightly, trembling and panting, her pretty eyes closed, the intention to struggle being overwhelmed slowly by the long kiss. Xiang Shaolong's hands became naughty and slipped into her collar and when it came to her smooth and voluptuous

bosom, Lady Ni gasped and her hands held his disobedient hands tightly in a death grip from outside her clothes. Xiang Shaolong knows that she is not really unwilling, but it's just a natural reaction of a woman trying to preserve their chastity so he was not disheartened. He caressed her full bosom with determined strength and moved his attack down inch by inch, and at the same time increased his attack on her mouth.

Lady Ni gasped and trembled, finally losing the defense of her chest, her bosom being taken over completely by Xiang Shaolong. The strong feeling of excitement and happiness made her hands surrender, unable to make any moves to defend at all. She lowered her hands and grabbed Xiang Shaolong's strong waist. Xiang Shaolong let his hands travel around her jade white chest, then stayed there motionless, slowly leaving her burning lips and lowered his head to study her pretty face. Lady Ni's mouth was opened due to her heavy breathing, and she slowly raised her lids, and it seems that she was looking at him angrily for a moment before closing her eyes again in embarrassment.

This look is even more effective than any flirtations. Xiang Shaolong removed his hands from her clothes and touched her taut and long legs. Lady Ni gasped in surprise and caught hold of his hand, her eyes begging him. Xiang Shaolong caressed her legs, slowly moving up while his lips came towards her mouth again.

Right at this intense moment, the sounds of maids calling could be heard. The both of them were startled and separated. Lady Ni panted, "Please, stop her, don't let her see me like this." Xiang Shaolong pinched her thigh hard before walking out of the woods and stopped the pretty maid who was running towards him and asked, "What's the matter?" The pretty maid blushed and curtsied

before saying, “Master Tao from the Wu residence is looking for Mister. Sister Xiaozhao from Lady Ya’s residence has accompanied him here.” Xiang Shaolong replied, “Will sister please ask him to wait a moment, I’ll be right there.” The pretty maid said, “Mister just call me Ying’er!” and after giving him a sweet smile, left.

Xiang Shaolong was in high spirits and when he returned to the pavilion, Zhao Ni had already slipped away. He gave a bitter smile and returned to the hall to meet Tao Fang. Tao Fang looked well traveled and when he saw him, he said in a low voice, “We just received secret news, this trip you’re making to send Third Princess to Wei’s capital Daliang is not without danger. No only are the horse thieves eyeing you, it seems that the state of Qi wants to spoil this marriage arrangement between Wei and Zhao, and they’re getting someone to spoil Zhao Qian’s chastity. Shaolong must be very careful.” Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “This should be a highly secretive affair, how did the news leak out?” Tao Fang sighed, “Naturally someone leaked the news deliberately. From what I see, this traitor would either be Zhao Mu or Prince Shaoyuan. N Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “What good will this do them? Prince Shaoyuan will be in the same boat as me, if we’re attacked, he’ll be in danger as well!” Tao Fang replied, “It may be a complicated affair, I’ve come specially to remind you, the journey will begin tomorrow.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the Juzi token, and after telling him to send someone to give it to him, sent him off after chatting for a while longer. He was just contemplating whether to return when Lady Ni’s maid Ying’er came to inform him that she’d like to see him. Xiang Shaolong was a little surprised and followed her into the house. In the study he saw Lady Ni who was now back to her respectable self. After Ying’er closed the door and left, Xiang Shaolong walked forward cautiously and asked gently, “Is Lady is

upset with me for being rude?” Lady Ni stared at him lovingly, lowered her head and said, “You’ve been rude for a long time, so how can I blame Mister?” Xiang Shaolong felt a rush of desire and grabbed her soft hands, saying with a smile, “I’m pleasantly surprised by Lady’s admiration!” Lady Ni’s pretty face blushed again, and allowed him to toy with her slender hands and complained, “Mister will be going on a mission to Wei tomorrow. Hai! How do you expect me to spend this time?” Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, on hearing such heartfelt words, he pulled her into his arms, his mouth moving over her face as he said, “Time is short, will Lady blame me for being too fast?”

Lady Ni’s dainty body softened and she shook her head, lowering it. Xiang Shaolong felt his desire burning and as he kissed her, he loosened her clothes. Lady Ni let go of all restrictions and allowed him to do as he wants, even encouraging him with her tongue’s fiery reaction, totally enrapturing Xiang Shaolong. Chaste women like this who have restrained themselves for so long, once they release their feelings, are frequently more vigorous than lascivious women. Lady Ni is like that, her long suppressed feelings erupted like water busting out from the mountains. The two of them were entwined for more than 2 hours before they stopped for lunch.

Master Pan came back excitedly and announced, “I defeated another 2 people, they all want you to become their Teacher.” He then looked perplexedly at his mother who now has a glow that is not usually seen. Lady Ni is really lousy, and she blushed in front of her son. She couldn’t bear to leave Xiang Shaolong either, and she looked thoroughly enticing. Master Pan looked at Xiang Shaolong and asked happily, “Teacher and Mother...” Lady Ni was embarrassed and overjoyed at the same time and reprimanded, “I won’t allow Xiao Pan to speak further.” Master Pan stuck his tongue out and giggled but he stopped talking and started eating

energetically instead.

Xiang Shaolong felt a rush of desire again and touched her thighs under the table, a feeling of bravery welling up in him. If he cannot protect the women he love, how can he be considered a hero. Su Nu and Shu'er are dead, he will not allow another tragedy to fall on any of his woman. Once he thought of this, he's filled with valor, and resurrected again.

Book 2 Chapter 10 – The Night Is Painfully Short

He went back to Lady Ya's place, Ting Fangshi, Chunying and the other 3 maids were waiting in the hall. With the looming parting, they all have endless sweet nothings to say. Xiang Shaolong may be flirtatious but he's never had this experience of being surrounded by beauties, gentleness and warmth. Although he was thoroughly enjoying himself, but all these attentions proved too much and he can only suffer in silence. After having a tired nap, it was already dark when he woke up. He moved a little and immediately Ting Fangshi and Wu Tingfang who were entwined around him woke up immediately. Wu Tingfang pouted, "Fang'er doesn't care! I want to go with you to Wei." Xiang Shaolong was startled and was thoroughly awakened, secretly thinking to himself that it's already a huge headache looking after Lady Ya and Zhao Qian, so how can he add Wu Tingfang into this. If the King of Zhao thought that he plans to slip away with his beauty that'd be even worse, so he hurriedly consoled her and using all his tactics managed to convince Wu Tingfang to abandon the idea.

By now the 4 maids have entered to help them wash up and change. Xiang Shaolong speedily dressed himself and went out of the room. Before he reached the hall, he could hear Lady Ni and Lady Ya talking and was greatly surprised and went in. Lady Ni saw him coming and her head lowered. Xiang Shaolong felt a loving pity well up in his heart, knowing that she is throwing aside her reputation to grab a chance to spend time with him before he leaves for Wei. He sat down between the 2 ladies and boldly hugged their waists. Lady Ya was astonished and asked unbelievably, "You have already..." Lady Ni nodded her head shyly and said, "Sister Ya please do not laugh at Zhao Ni." Lady Ya exclaimed, "And you were pretending to be proper in front of me earlier." Xiang Shaolong

pinched Xhao Ya's waist and reproached her, "Ya'er!"

Lady Ya totally obeys him so on hearing that, she stopped talking but just smiled. Lady Ni whispered in his ear, "Will Xiang Lang blame Zhao Ni for being wanton?" Xiang Shaolong chortled, "Why would I? The more wanton you are the happier I am." Lady Ni did not expect him to answer her so loudly and she was so embarrassed she tried to hide herself in his arms, but her body was heating up. Lady Ya smiled, "It seems that Ya'er will have to give way tonight, but let me discuss some business with Xiang Lang first." She blinked at Xiang Shaolong and added, "Where would you like Lady Ni to await your attentions?" Lady Ni was thoroughly embarrassed and can only listen on shyly, not objecting at all. Xiang Shaolong might as well be thoroughly outrageous and he said with a laugh, "Lady Ni shall wait for me at the pool, I'll come and frolic with you in the water later." Lady Ni stood up weakly, and left obediently like a little lamb.

The 2 of them watched as her beautiful silhouette disappeared behind the door, exchanged a glance and smiled, their hands clasped tightly together. Lady Ya said seriously, "I went to see Imperial brother, but he's unable to give us more men, how worrying." She sighed and said, "The journey from here to Daliang will take at least 3 months, and we'll need to cross a huge river and countless deserted mountains and trails. After we enter Wei, we still need to visit the 4 cities Dangying, Chaoge, Guiling and Huangchi, each step of the way could be a danger." Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before he asked, "Did Lady and that Prince Shaoyuan ever had an affair?" Lady Ya nodded her head guiltily. Xiang Shaolong was extremely unhappy and did not say anything. Lady Ya exclaimed in fear, "Shaolong! Please don't be like that, Ya'er has changed for the better now." Xiang Shaolong is after all a magnanimous person, so he sighed, "I'm already on bad terms

with Prince Shaoyuan, and now with your old relation with him, things will become even more complicated.” Lady Ya said apologetically, “Ya’er knows she’s wrong.” She tried to change the subject, “Prince Shaoyuan will bring with him his 2 most beloved concubines and 200 warriors with him, I’m afraid he’ll try to go against you at every opportunity.”

Xiang Shaolong said somberly, “I’m not afraid of him trying to be difficult with me, but I’m most afraid that he’ll gang up with outsiders to deal with us. If he’s intent on not returning from this trip, he’ll have the guts to do anything.” Lady Ya replied, “I have chosen 4 people from my own residence. These 4 people are not only brave and highly skilled, there’s no doubt about their loyalty as well. I’ve also arranged for Cheng Xu to be your assistant. This person is indebted to me because I helped him when he faced the punishment of clan extermination, so he’ll certainly work hard for us honestly.” Xiang Shaolong was a little assured and said, “I heard that the state of Qi is planning to spoil this marriage union, who are the formidable people that they have?” Lady Ya sucked in a deep breath and said slowly, “The state of Qi has a mysterious person, called Xiao Weimou. This person thinks that beasts are most favored by heaven and earth, so if men wants to return to nature and be one with heaven and earth, we must follow out desires, and the strong will devour the weak without any need for hesitation. And to become the strong, we must learn from tigers and lions and sharpen the claws and teeth. Therefore he and his disciples are all terrible warriors who rape, pillage and murder. They usually live deep in the mountains, forcing the men and women they kidnap to produce offspring for them and be part of their indecent play.”

Xiang Shaolong asked in surprise, “How can the King of Qi tolerate such fiends committing evil in Qi?” Lady Ya replied,

“Among the 6 states, Qi’s neighbour Fuyuan was second to the state of Chu. After the battle of Maling, they replaced Wei and became leader of the various states in the east, and they were even put on the same standing as Qin and they were called Emperor of West and Emperor of East. They were expanding but in the end the united forces of Qin, Chu and us attacked their capital Linzi. In the end Yan’s Yueyi took over about 70 cities, but there was a Tian Dan from Qi and the newly crowned King of Yan fell into Tian Dan’s trap and changed the commander at the last minute. Therefore Tian Dan was able to sweep the Yans out of Qi but their resources were greatly depleted as well.” Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, “I understand, its because the King of Qi has limited resources, that’s why he has to rely on and tolerate such vicious men to work for him.” Lady Ya said, “The person relying on them is Tian Dan. We’ve always suspected that Tian Dan and Xiao Weimou are from the same clan although they have different family names. This Xiao Weimou is highly skilled and can fight a lion with his bare hands, kill tigers and leopards, and his sexual appetite is higher than normal. Each night he must have at least 10 women before he can have a good night’s sleep, and he only helps Tian Dan assassinate his political enemies or travel to other states to engage in secret missions. If this person is to come personally, we’ll be in even more danger. Ya’er would rather kill herself than end up in his hands.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed at hearing all these, and after consoling her for a while, Wu Tingfang and Ting Fangshi came in. Lady Ya knew his intentions so she helped him hide from the 2 ladies so that he can go to the pool. The maids were just adding hot water into the pool, Xiang Shaolong dismissed all the maids and went to Lady Ni and carried her up and into the warm pool fully clothed. Lady Ni has always been prim and proper all her life, and did not expect that she’d ever meet with such an unconventional and unrestrained flirt. As she gasped in surprise, she immediately

became a wet lady, showing off the beautiful outline of her body. Once he thought of his journey tomorrow and the uncertain future, he immediately became uninhibited and launched an all out attack on this beauty. Lady Ni was thinking of the same thing and received his favors with all her heated feelings.

As they entangled with each other, Lady Ni begged with tears falling down her face, “Xiang Lang! You must take care of yourself and come back safe to see Zhao Ni and Xiao Pan.” Xiang Shaolong asked, “If I were to leave the state of Zhao, are you willing to follow me?” Lady Ni was startled, “Are you thinking of betraying Imperial brother?” Xiang Shaolong sighed, “I’m just planning for the worst! Zhao Mu will certainly not tolerate me, and I am not someone who will just stay and be slaughtered.” Lady Ni nodded her head, “Imperial brother is really useless to put so much trust on such a conniving man. Zhao Mu has designs on me as well, and tried many times to summon me to his place but I rejected him.” Xiang Shaolong thought that Zhao Mu may be one of the men that Master Pan fears will one day get his Mother and sighed secretly. Now that Lady Ni has given in to him, all the more Zhao Mu will not let him off.

Lady Ni said determinedly, “My heart now belongs to you, no matter where Xiang Lang goes, Zhao Ni is willing to stay by your side forever even if I have to work hard.” Xiang Shaolong felt intoxicated and kissed her hard. At the same time he made this promise in his heart, “No matter how difficult the future will be, I must strive to survive in this turbulent warring states for the ones that I love and carve out an outstanding career. Xiang Shaolong will never be blindly loyal to anyone, but only loyal to my own ideals.”

Before dawn the next day, Xiang Shaolong left, accompanied by the tears of Wu Ting Fang, Zhao Ni and the rest.

End of Book 2

Book 3 Chapter 1 – Starting The Journey

Before they left the palace, the warriors and carriages gathered in the large field. The King of Zhao personally made prayers to Heaven and ancestors in a ceremony, praying for a safe journey, but of course Xiang Shaolong knows that what he's praying for is that they can steal the 'Secret Manual of Lu Gong', and is not at all concerned about their life or death. Of course nothing has to be said about his daughter Zhao Qian's happiness.

The King of Zhao barely managed to transfer a few more men to Xiang Shaolong so that his troops now total 500. In addition to Prince Shaoyuan's 200 warriors, a total of 700 light cavalry now escort Lady Ya, Third Princess Zhao Xian, Lady Pingyuan and a group of concubines and maids who are traveling in 27 carriages, with 40 carts carrying provisions and miscellaneous items. They left with much fanfare out of Zhao's capital Handan via the southern gate, following the official roads towards their first stop Zixian.

This is still within the boundaries of Zhao, so they need not worry about safety. The great general Li Mu also sent 500 riders to escort them to the outskirts of city walls 200li away from Zixian city. Therefore Xiang Shaolong was still relaxed, if he has to worry, he'll do it after they pass the city walls and on their way to Wei's border.

What surprised him was Lady Ya's 8 maids, Xiaozhao, Xiaoyu and the rest were all dressed in armor and riding majestically on their horses, their reflexes swift and nimble.

And then he realized, in this warring states era, it's natural that all males will learn martial arts, so it's no exception for fit women as well.

He is not an expert at all in the way the troops are formed in this era, so while there's nothing to do during the journey, he started asked Cheng Xu.

Cheng Xu replied honestly, "A war is a matter of life and death, as long as there's an ounce of strength, that ounce of strength will be used to the end. In the battle of Changping, the state of Qin conscripted 15 year old boys into the army for battle. When the King of Yan attacked us the last time, his Majesty even conscripted under aged boys into the army. Luckily we could defeat Yan, if not... ai!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that Cheng Xu is Lady Ya's man, so he was a lot less guarded when talking to him. So he conveniently asked about how the army is formed.

Cheng Xu replied without hiding anything, "What the term 3 armies mean generally refers to strong men, strong women and old and weak armies. The army of strong men is the main force in battle, strong women are usually in charge of engineering, manual labor and any work that requires assistant while old and weak army are the back ups and in charge of miscellaneous work like being in charge of rations."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened. When he watched movies in the past, all those battle scenes were magnificent and epic, filled with the romanticism of heroism. So it turns out that the truth is

another matter altogether, that even women, children, the weak and old were all pushed to the battlefield to suffer and lose their lives.

Cheng Xu lowered his voice, “Although we have less men this time, but they’re all elite warriors, so obviously his Majesty is very concerned with this trip, which is very rare.”

Xiang Shaolong turned his head back for a look and saw Prince Shaoyuan’s 10 carriages and 200 warriors at the very end of the procession. He can’t help but sigh. He thought that if anything were to happen, Prince Shaoyuan will certainly not listen to his instructions. Just this ‘internal troublemaker’ is enough to give him a headache.

The 2 beauties Zhao Qian and Zhao Ya’s carriages all had their curtains lowered, and he can’t see what’s happening inside. He wondered if they’re secretly looking at him?

Once he thought of that, he moved his horse next to Lady Ya’s carriage.

As expected Lady Ya immediately rolled up her curtains, revealing her pretty face and aside with a coquettish smile, “Does Imperial Protector want to come up for a seat?”

Xiang Shaolong said with a bitter smile, “Your subject is on a mission, how can I be so rude?”

Xiaozhao and the rest of the maids who were behind the carriage all covered their mouths and sniggered.

The 4 highly skilled and loyal warriors Lady Ya mentioned were split into 2 groups and protecting her on both sides, and on seeing Xiang Shaolong, all acknowledged him respectfully.

Lady Ya said, “The 4 of them are all orphans, so they follow my family name and are named Zhao Da, Zhao Er, Zhao Wu and Zhao Qi, if there’s anything you can just give them orders.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that the oldest among them, Zhao Da, is only a few years older than him, while Zhao Qi is about 16 years old at the most. But they all look like strong and muscular youths with some skills, so he said with a smile, “My instructions to them would be to stay by Third Princess and your side at all times, that is enough.” And secretly thought to himself that the state of Zhao may be the country with the most orphans and widows in this time.

Zhao Da and the rest all made their promise.

That day they traveled for more than 30li, luckily the scenery was picturesque along the way so Xiang Shaolong treated it as an outing, chatting with Lady Ya and the maids while he’s free so he don’t find it lonesome at all.

Zhao Qian and her 2 personal maids were hiding in their carriage and did not reveal themselves.

Although Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to see her, he must control this impulse. No matter what she is of an esteemed status now and cannot talk with men so easily. Besides he knows that she's going to marry to the state of Wei, so it's better not to be tangled with her.

At dusk, the entourage pitched tents to rest. There were more than 200 tents set up on the field next to a small stream.

In Xiang Shaolong's Commander's tent, Xiang Shaolong, Cheng Xu and the assistant commander Li Mu sent, Ding Shou, as well as 2 other military leaders Zi Ji and Ren Zhen. The 5 of them sat around a table and enjoyed dinner.

For warriors like them, the topics talked about are naturally about war and strategy. Right now the very experienced general Ding Shou was talking about the changes in war and the situation like an expert.

Ding Shou said, "The wars last time were a lot simpler, winning or losing depends only on one direct clash, and the results will be known in just a few days. Even if it's a siege testing stamina, it will last only 20 to 30 days. King Chu Zhuang's besiegement of Song lasted 9 months, and that is an extremely rare example. Not like the wars now, each can last 3 to 5 years, the suffering endured can be endlessly related."

Xiang Shaolong was curious and asked, "Why is the change so drastic?"

Cheng Xu interrupted, “Your honor has just recently joined the army, naturally you do not know the circumstances behind it. This can be explained several ways. Firstly, the population has increased thus the army has become stronger as well. The larger states in the past like Jin and Chu, the army is only about 4000 strong, they can’t even find 10,000 people. But now if you include the female soldiers, the old and weak, you can have an army of hundred thousands. Secondly is the defense of a country...”

The commander Zi Ji added, “Imperial Protector Cheng is correct, in the past the defense of a country only centers around its capital, it’s only later that they slowly build up the nearby stockades into cities. But the rest of the place, the enemy forces can still pass through at will, it’s like stateless land.”

Ren Zhen chipped in, “Now it’s a different thing altogether, the different states are now erecting their own city walls and castles. If you want to conquer another state, you’ll have to attack the cities one by one, and there are other problems as well. So once a war is mentioned, everyone is troubled.”

Cheng Xu continued, “The aims of battles in the past were to obtain goods and force the enemy to concede. But now the main task is to occupy the land and kill the enemy. The losers will perish with the thought of hatred and the loss of a country. Therefore everyone will fight the enemy to the death. Wars are really getting more and more difficult and violent.”

Ding Shou sighed, “Also the large scale skirmishes for foot soldiers and cavalry and besiegement attacks have replaced the old strategy of using carriages as the main force of attack, which was

neater and looks nicer as well. The art of war is becoming more complicated, and as the saying goes, a soldier will turn to every trick available, so now there's ambushes, luring the enemies, surrounding them, attacking them in the middle, waiting games etc. In order to defeat the enemy and ensure a victory, every possible idea has been used."

Cheng Xu said with a laugh, "In those days both sides will first choose a time and location and make an appointment. On the day of battle they will both use war carriages as the main force, foot soldiers as support troops and position themselves nicely before beating the drums to signal an attack. Everything is simple and quick. But now there's no such thing. It's best if your enemy doesn't even know that you're right outside their gates so that they will be caught unawares." He continued with a big sigh, "Fighting for territory and killing people in the fields, fighting for cities and killing people in the cities."

Ding Shou sighed as well, "In the past we'd just temporarily conscripted the farmers to be soldiers, but now warfare is getting more and more professional, not only are there full time soldiers, even the training is stricter as well."

Xiang Shaolong could feel their fear and how fed up they are with wars. He thought to himself that if soldiers like them feel this way, all the more Lady Ya and Master Wu would feel as such too. Especially after the battle of Changping, the state of Zhao was in a dangerous position and everyone only looked out for themselves. It seems that there really is not much time left for Zhao, so how can he escape with all the ladies to a safe place in time so that they will not end up casualties of the impending doom.

Just as he was deep in thought, noises can be heard from outside the tent.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest were surprised and they all rushed out.

They saw Lady Ya's camp area were full of soldiers, and sounds of argument could be heard.

A soldier rushed over at this time and huffed, "Something bad happened, Prince Shaoyuan's man Xu Hai killed someone."

Xiang Shaolong and Cheng Wei exchanged a glance, and they could all tell it's a way Prince Shaoyuan is belittling them.

The one killed is Lady Ya's family warrior Zhao Er.

It turned out that while Xiang Shaolong and the rest were in the tent dining and chatting, Prince Shaoyuan took the opportunity to lead the 3 of his most formidable family warriors Xu Hai, Pu Bu and Liu Chao as well as 10 odd fighters to barge their way into Lady Ya's private tent. Obviously he's trying to resume their old relationship and at the same time cause Xiang Shaolong a loss of face.

The guards naturally dared not stop him, until they reached the restricted area of Lady Ya's private camp, separated by a curtain, and which is where Zhao Da and the rest stopped them. Before they had a chance to inform Lady Ya of the new arrivals, Prince

Shaoyuan who was deliberately looking for trouble has already ordered his men to attack the 4 of them. They were caught unawares and were greatly outnumbered, the 4 of them were all injured. Zhao Er's throat was slashed by Xu Hai and died on the spot.

The guards behind the curtain felt that something was wrong and they all charged out and surrounded Prince Shaoyuan and his men, thus blocking their way.

Prince Shaoyuan's family warriors heard about the news and were rushing to give aid but the imperial soldiers under Xiang Shaolong's command stopped them. For a moment everyone was in a deadlock.

By the time Xiang Shaolong, Cheng Xu, Ding Shou and the rest rushed over, Lady Ya was surrounded by Xiaozhao and the rest of the maids, the blood stained Zhao Da, Zhao Wu and Zhao Qi. Her pretty face was pale with fury and she was staring at Prince Shaoyuan with hatred.

But Prince Shaoyuan and his men stood around with a look that said there's nothing anyone can do to them. When he saw Xiang Shaolong arriving, he ignored him and spoke to Ding Shou instead, "What is all this, what's the big deal about me killing a rude person who offended someone of a higher rank than him. Assistant Commander Ding, you'd better chase all these people away."

Ding Shou was furious but he understood the way of the political world and he did not try to undertake the problem. He said somberly, "Imperial Protector Xiang is in charge of everything

here, I am only in charge of everyone's safety along the journey."

Lady Ya moved next to Xiang Shaolong and said quietly, "Kill Xu Hai for me, I'll bear all consequences." Zhao Da and the rest were close like brothers with Zhao Er, they knelt down and said, "Would Imperial Protector Xiang please decide for us."

Prince Shaoyuan sniggered coldly and crossed his arms in front of his chest, looking insolently at Xiang Shaolong, deliberately making him look bad.

By now the curtain has been pushed to the ground, the imperial soldiers surrounding them saw how disrespectful Prince Shaoyuan was towards Xiang Shaolong and they felt the same belittlement from him as well. They all roared, the situation was tense and anything could have triggered it off.

Xiang Shaolong raised his hand to signal everyone to be quiet. His heart filled with old hatred and new enmity, he really felt like killing Prince Shaoyuan right now but of course he cannot do that.

Even if he ignores the fact that he's supposed to protect Prince Shaoyuan until the state of Wei, he has to consider that the second in command in Wei is Prince Shaoyuan's uncle, so how can he ever get to Wei if he kills him. Prince Shaoyuan is certain of this point that's why he deliberately tried to belittle Xiang Shaolong on the very first day of their journey.

But if he were to let this past and swallow the insult, no one will ever respect him in future.

This is an era where only heroes and the strong are respected. Maybe even Lady Ya would change her opinion of him.

Everyone's eyes were centered on him.

Xiang Shaolong's gaze landed on Zhao Er's body, which has been moved to the side and coldly uttered, "Xu Hai!"

The tall, thin and sturdy Xu Hai who looks fierce and icy was about to respond when Prince Shaoyuan stopped him, "I gave the orders, if you want you can come after me!"

Xiang Shaolong's eyes were piercing as he looking as Prince Shaoyuan and said, "If Xu Hai can block 3 of my sword attacks without dying, then this thing shall come to an end!"

Everyone turned quiet.

Some even thought that Xiang Shaolong is just trying to do a slipshod job.

Although Xiang Shaolong's swordplay is excellent, but to kill an expert like Xu Hai within 3 strokes, is something unimaginable.

Naturally Prince Shaoyuan does not believe that 3 sword attacks would be able to kill Xu Hai and he was secretly ecstatic, thinking that if his 3 attacks came to naught, his reputation will be in

tatters. However, his expression remained unperturbed and said, “If Imperial Protector is injured by Xu Hai, then you cannot blame anyone.”

Xiang Shaolong looked heavenward and laughed loud and long and with a ‘clang’, drew the precious Rainbow Sword which Zhao Mu gave him, pointed it at Xu Hai and said, “Come!”

Men from both sides retreated to form an empty area.

Xu Hai sniggered and pulled out his sword as well.

He has seen Xiang Shaolong and Lian Jin’s duel in the palace and is aware of his swordplay. He thought to himself, did he think that he couldn’t even block 3 sword attacks? He made up his mind to be on the defensive and to move quickly and constantly so that there’s no way Xiang Shaolong can execute his skills.

Cheng Xu, Ding Shou, Lady Ya and the rest all thought that Xiang Shaolong is using this as a chance to back down. They secretly sighed, thinking that it’s the best choice out of the worst.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath, supported the Rainbow Sword on his shoulder and walked towards Xu Hai.

Xu Hai’s arm extended, his long sword held horizontally in front of his chest, pointing from afar at Xiang Shaolong’s throat, trying his best not to give Xiang Shaolong a chance to get close to him. His strategy is appropriate.

The audience on both sides all seems to foresee the outcome of the duel, where Xiang Shaolong will retreat empty-handed.

At this time Xiang Shaolong advanced to the area about 2 steps away from the tip of Xu Hai's sword. However, he seemed to step on something and slipped a little. He lost his balance and leaned to the side.

Lady Ya and the other women were all concerned about Xiang Shaolong and they screamed in alarm.

Prince Shaoyuan and his men were ecstatic, and they all cheered for Xu Hai.

Xu Hai is an expert in swordplay, so how can he let go of this one in a million chance. He roared and rushed forward, his long sword aiming towards Xiang Shaolong fast as lightning.

Who would have expected that the swordplay Xiang Shaolong is using now was what they had discussed earlier, 'a soldier will resort to all tricks'. Because under normal circumstances, he would not be able to kill a professional swordsman like Xu Hai even with 10 attacks, so the only way is to lure him to strike so that he'll have an advantage.

Just as the sword was about to reach his chest, he quickly steadied himself and at the same time using his amazing waist strength to bend over backwards, his body almost bent at a 90-degree angle like a bow.

The long sword slid over above him.

Never in his dreams would Xu Hai imagine his opponent would execute such a weird move. His sword struck air and because he used too much strength in the attack, he was still moving forward with the force. Just as he was about to wave his sword and slash downwards, Xiang Shaolong has already given a kick to his nether region.

Xu Hai screamed from the pain, the long sword flying out of his hands while his body staggered back in a fall.

Xiang Shaolong's waist straightened again, the Rainbow Sword which was perched on his shoulder morphed into a flash of light and sliced past Xu Hai's throat.

“Peng!”

By the time Xu Hai collapsed onto the ground, he has already become a lifeless corpse.

Everyone was silent in that moment followed by thunderous cheers from Xiang Shaolong's side.

The faces on the men on Prince Shaoyuan's side all turned ashen, their bravado gone.

Xiang Shaolong looked at Prince Shaoyuan icily and said nonchalantly, “Prince Shaoyuan is of an esteemed status and we dare not offend you, but if your servants comment any wrongdoing, don’t blame me for being severe.”

Prince Shaolong stared at him with hatred, his lips trembling but no words came out. He stamped his feet furiously, turned around and left.

Xiang Shaolong called out, “Hold on! Is Master going to leave your servant’s body out in the wilderness?”

Prince Shaoyuan was embarrassed and furious and after ordering his men to carry Xu Hai up, left in a huff.

The imperial soldiers broke out in thunderous cheers, even Cheng Xu and the rest had an expression of awe and respect, thinking that Xiang Shaolong handled this matter beautifully and there’s no way Prince Shaoyuan can raise his head over this.

After Prince Shaoyuan left, Xiang Shaolong felt something was amiss and after giving some instructions, he returned to his commander’s tent. He ordered men to stand guard outside, to stop all visitors and laid out the metal instruments Guo Zhong made for him on the ground.

These instruments gleamed, the workmanship exquisite, which greatly impressed Xiang Shaolong. He did not expect that in this warring states period, the standard of metal works would be of such high quality.

The first thing he has to assemble is a metal hook that can be used to climb over walls. That is one of his must have treasures while he was in the special task force. They used a projectile to launch the long hook over the walls or any place that can support the weight, before attaching the rope to the hook around their waist. In that way they can climb up or slide down walls freely.

They used steel ropes in the special task force but now he can only use soft ropes as replacement.

Even though the contraption is simple and Xiang Shaolong has always been interested and familiar with such gadgets, he still had to work late into the night before he got most things done.

He was just looking at his handiwork with satisfaction when he could hear Lady Ya's unhappy voice outside the tent, "Who has the audacity to stop me!"

Xiang Shaolong wanted to keep his things but there wasn't enough time. Lady Ya has rushed in and on seeing the weird things on the floor, she asked in astonishment, "Shaolong! What are you doing?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled embarrassingly and kept the 2 separate hooks back into the chests and said with a bitter smile, "You don't have to obey me anymore?"

Lady Ya immediately softened and went into his arms, saying sadly, "I sent Xiaozhao over many times to look for you but was

stopped by the guards. I thought you were unhappy with me over Prince Shaoyuan's matter and I was in a panic, so I came to look for you. How would I dare to disobey you!" She can't help but ask, "What are those things?"

Xiang Shaolong said condescendingly, "Just some toys, but sometimes they have unexpected uses."

Lady Ya's slender hands reached out and took a ring of long and thin metal pieces, some curved and some with a small fork at the other end. She thought about it and asked, "Is this used to open locks?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he can't hide this from an expert like her and nodded his head helplessly.

Lady Ya turned her body around, a look of shock flashed past her pretty eyes. She looked at him for a while before saying, "I'm beginning to feel more and more that you are unfathomable. Just now you tricked and killed Xu Hai and avenged Zhao Er and at the same time helped me vent my anger. Ya'er is really grateful to you and am willing to do anything for you."

Xiang Shaolong saw how obliging she looks and gave her a long kiss as a reward before whispering in her ear, "Promise me! Don't tell anyone what you saw, all right?"

Lady Ya was dizzy from his kiss and nodded her head blissfully, her pretty eyes half closed and said coyly, "Xiang Lang's words are my most important orders. Since I know you do not wish me to ask

about such matters, Ya'er will never ask you again in future."

Xiang Shaolong was assured by her kind understanding and took the opportunity to ask her to find someone to help him sew something to be tied around the waist so that he can keep those thousand odd flying needles. To be able to do something for her beloved, naturally Lady Ya agreed happily.

That night they enjoyed themselves amongst indescribable warmth and love.

They continued on the journey early the next morning.

Prince Shaoyuan's side has quiet down and staying right at the back to show that they're a separate group but they did not do anything new to antagonize the others.

The sense of unease Xiang Shaolong felt became even stronger.

For a spoiled brat like Prince Shaoyuan, he's definitely not one to swallow an insult. Now that he seems to be controlling his temper, it must be because there are traps to deal with him once they enter Wei.

Third Princess Zhao Qian stays in her carriage all day long with the curtains lowered. Even when she left the carriage, a veil covers her face and she'd hide immediately in her tent, not taking even a step out, which totally irked Xiang Shaolong.

Traveling in the day and resting at night, by the 4th day they finally reached the stockade nearest to Zhao's border, District Ci. The general guarding the city, Wa Che was extremely respectful to this wedding entourage and hosted a feast in the General's Manor for them. Zhao Qian and Lady Ya are royalty, so naturally they did not attend the feast while Lady Pingyuan and her son excused themselves. Luckily this Wa Che is a humorous person full of anecdotes, so the guests and the host all enjoyed themselves.

After the feast Wa Che took Xiang Shaolong to tour the border of the state of Zhao, the rolling hills surrounding the endless city walls.

Standing on the city walls, Xiang Shaolong remembered that in future Emperor Qin will join the walls of the various states and become one of the world's 10 miracles, the Great Wall of China, and allow China to be able to unify all the states for a long time. He can't help but feel a string of emotions well up inside.

These city walls were thick and high, the moat in front of the city deep and wide. It's indeed the best way to defend against an enemy in those times. In the distance a huge river surrounds them, the rushing torrents extremely breathtaking.

Wa Che pointed to an empty plains outside the city walls and said with a smile, "That would be Great Zhao's ugliest place, but it's man-made. Every once in a while, we'll have to chop down all the trees outside the city, not leaving even a stone. Anything that can be moved will be moved into the city, not allowing enemies to find anything useful to attack the city with."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that this is what they call fortifying the walls and clearing the wilderness. Looking at the watchtowers that was built after every hundred feet or so, he sighed with compliment, “With such defenses, who’d be afraid of the enemy attacking?”

Wa Che pointed at the huge river in the distance and said, “Our city walls which spans a few hundred li also depends on the natural defenses like the possibility of floods and the layout of the land to defend ourselves mainly against Wei and Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed, “It is of utmost importance that the border city is situated at a dangerous and important location. Our city walls are backed against mountains and that in itself is a location that is easy to defend but difficult to attack.”

The long city walls are like the strong arms of a giant, hugging Zhao tightly and safely in his arms.

Wa Che said proudly, “In order to deal with the enemy’s hundred and one weird methods of attacking a city, for example piling soil to raise the height, cloud ladders, digging tunnels, attacking with water, lining up along the walls like ants, or even using ballista, nest vehicles etc to attack the city walls and we had to make repairs to the walls on many occasions. Now I’m not trying to boast, but even with the vicious Qin army and us not having any reinforcements, we can still block them for quite a few months.

He then took him to look at the various weapons for defense like cross bows, halberds, spears, axes, long mallets, long sickles, long axes, stone ramparts etc. As well as various carriages used to ferry

soil or people, which is a real eye opener for Xiang Shaolong.

There's a huge amount of water and sand on top of the walls as well as containers like water jars, wooden and tiled jars. There are even stoves and cauldrons. All these are used to defend against the enemy using fire to attack them, or used to attack enemies who are climbing up the walls.

Xiang Shaolong stored all these information in his memory, thinking to himself that there may come a day where he'll need to use such prehistoric tools to attack a city. At least he won't be at a loss then.

Lastly Wa Che said, "The key points in defending a city, besides having all the defenses up, is to have enough rations and fuel, and the most important is to have sturdy soldiers who stand their posts inside, as well as reinforcements outside. As the saying goes, if there's no army worth saving, then there's no city worth defending."

Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and listened to the lesson, but when he thought of how few men are left in Zhao, he can't help but feel anguished! He really feels like dragging the conniving Zhao Mu here and let him have a taste of facing the enemy with the possibility of perishing under the city walls so that he will never dare to hide safely Handan plotting how to get rid of loyal officials all day long.

Only at dusk did Xiang Shaolong return in high spirits.

He returned to the huge military mansion where they are staying when Xiang Shaolong suddenly had an idea. He used the excuse of paying his respects to Lady Pingyuan and went to the east wing to visit this lady whose power extends into the two states Wei and Zhao.

Coincidentally Prince Shaoyuan is not around and after the servants conveyed his presence, Lady Pingyuan received him in the main hall of the east chamber.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong met Lady Pingyuan, and saw that she was graceful and beautiful. Because she took good care of herself, she looked a lot younger than she really is and from afar, she looks like she is in her 30s. Only on a closer look can one see the fine wrinkles below her eyes, but these did not spoil her beauty.

Her hair was combed into a high bun, slanted to the side, which seems to tremble falteringly, making her look even more womanly.

She's wearing an embroidered silk skirt, silk shoes sewn with flower patterns, the hairpieces on her head inlaid with turtle shells, with pearl earrings. She looked very captivating and attractive.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect that after having such a grown up and wicked 'kid', she can still maintain such regality. He was secretly surprised and after paying his respects, he took a seat below.

Lady Pingyuan, with 4 maids standing erect behind her, was scrutinizing Xiang Shaolong closely but her expression remained cold. There was not a trace of happiness at all, making the atmosphere extremely awkward.

Xiang Shaolong started by saying, “Lady must have had a hard journey, if there’s anything that I have not done well, please do not hesitate to reprimand me.”

Lady Pingyuan looked at him calmly and said, “Who’d dare to blame sir?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that because he has offended her son, she is keeping herself aloof and was about to find an excuse to leave when Lady Pingyuan dismissed her maids and said seriously, “A good man is one who understands the time and situation, and I wonder if Imperial Protector Xiang is one who understands the time and situation?”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that the show is about to start, and said respectfully, “Would Lady please enlighten Shaolong.”

Lady Pingyuan said icily, “If you can’t even comprehend the situation you are in, I do not wish to waste my time talking to you.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought her formidable and said, “A good bird will choose a tree to nest in, but if there are rotten trees everywhere, then won’t it have no nest to rest itself even if it has

lofty aspirations of flying high up into the sky?”

It must be known that what the two of them are discussing is akin to betraying Zhao, so Xiang Shaolong deliberately used metaphors so that Lady Pingyuan will not be able to use this to trap him.

Firstly he doesn't really think that it's a great deal to betray Zhao, and secondly, if he can get into the good books of this woman, maybe the trip to Wei will be a lot more easier. Or else if she were to say something about him to Prince Xinling, he'll be in big trouble.

Lady Pingyuan seems very impressed with what he said and a trace of a smile could be seen from the corners of her mouth and she said nonchalantly, “The strongest now is Qin. But the Qins are barbaric and extremely discriminatory against other races. Even with Shang Yang's many meritorious reforms in Qin, his entire family was still executed, so for a good bird to choose a tree, there are many other factors to consider as well.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly surprised at her opinions, and for a moment couldn't decide if she is trying to acquire him so he tested her, “Is Lady aware of the situation between me and your son?”

Lady Pingyuan's pretty face turned frosty and said, “Useless young thing, looking for his own humiliation, Shaolong can ignore him. Since when is it his turn to make decisions?” She continued with a smile, “If not for the fact that you're excellent in both martial arts and scholarly pursuits, and you were able to lure Xu Hai to his death under such circumstances, I won't even be

bothered to say all these to you.”

Xiang Shaolong felt his heart run cold, the people in this era really treat a human life as nothing. Seeing that she’s so astute and formidable, he knows that he cannot offend her, so he said respectfully, “Would Lady please guide me.”

Lady Pingyuan’s attitude warmed up and said gently, “Shaolong should be very familiar with the situation in Zhao. The King of Zhao favors Zhao Mu and this person hates you, but do you know the reason why?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “It seems that it’s because I took his Lady Ya away from him.”

Lady Pingyuan’s sharp eyes shot an icy look at him and said with a cold humph, “You think too lowly of Zhao Mu, why would he give up a rare and capable talent like you over a slut that everyone can have.”

On hearing the way she described Zhao Ya, Xiang Shaolong naturally felt very uncomfortable. But he has to admit that what she’s saying is true, or at least that was what Zhao Ya was like in the past. At the same time he was curious and asked, “What could be the reason then?”

Lady Pingyuan smiled mysteriously and said, “Because his Majesty has taken a liking to you.”

Xiang Shaolong immediately felt himself go numb and he exclaimed hoarsely, “What?”

On seeing his expression, Lady Pingyuan giggled, “You’re really muddleheaded, if not because Xiaocheng is looking at you differently, why would he give you such a good task.” She continued after staring at him intently, covered her mouth and smile, “Anyone who likes men will not let you off, Shaolong you’d better be careful,”

Xiang Shaolong saw that her eyes seems to be speaking volumes now and she looked coy. His gaze can’t help but drop down to her perky chest and felt an itch in his heart. However he quickly thought of the great enmity between him and her son over Su Nu’s death and had to stop himself from uttering the flirtatious words that was about to come out from his mouth. He sighed and said, “I understand, that’s why Zhao Mu will use all methods to kill me, but I’m also worried that Prince Shaoyuan might be secretly plotting against me!”

Lady Pingyuan smiled mysteriously and regained her icy expression and said, “Let’s not talk about this first. Shaolong, tell me honestly, in the whole wide world now, who has the capability of stopping the thieving Qins from attacking eastwards?”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, as he’s still not that familiar with the situation in the warring states period now and cannot think of such a person. But he has to reply her or Lady Pingyuan will surely be offended.

As he was thinking, Lady Pingyuan hinted gently, “Don’t tell me

Shaolong doesn't even know the person who helped Handan during its difficult period 6 years ago?"

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "It's Prince Xinling!"

258BC, the King of Qin sent his generals to attack Zhao and heavily surrounded Handan while Wei sent Jin Bi to help but the King of Qin threatened them. The King of Wei was frightened and actually ordered Jin Bi not to move his troops. Later Prince Xinling used Hou Ying's trick to obtain the military token and told his man Zhu Hai to kill Jin Bi and to usurp his troops. That year Prince Xinling defeated the Qin army greatly right under the walls of Handan and even Qin's main general Zheng Anping surrendered to the Zhaos.

This battle caused the reputation of Qin to fall greatly while Prince Xinling became a respected man by everyone. But because of this, Prince Xinling offended the Wei king and was unable to return home. After staying in Zhao for a many years, he only returned to Wei last year after the death of Prince Pingyuan.

Now it's Lady Pingyuan's turn to return to Wei, and of course it's because once again Prince Xinling has solidified his power and is inviting Lady Pingyuan back.

Lady Pingyuan gladly commented, "Now Prince Xinling is the only one who can gather the world to fight against the Qin, so unless Shaolong wants to throw in your lot with the Qins, or else the only place that you can stay on will be this choice. If I am willing to recommend, I guarantee that you will be highly regarded."

Xiang Shaolong knows that the only way is to try to delay. Luckily no matter how smart or formidable she is, she will never guess that he has Emperor Qin as one of his moves, so he got up and thanked her, “Thank you, Lady, for your recommendation!”

The 2 were about to continue their conversation when Prince Shaoyuan rushed in excitedly and shouted, “Mother!”

Lady Pingyuan said angrily, “Shut up!” She turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, “Imperial Protector will you please go back first, I’ll discuss with you in details what we’ve talked about at a later time.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that Prince Shaoyuan has come at the right time, so he hurriedly bid his farewell and left.

Book 3 Chapter 2 – Tribulations In Love

When Xiang Shaolong returned to his residence, Cheng Xu came up and told him, “Someone from the Wu family is looking for you.”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly surprised and with Cheng Xu’s accompaniment, went to the quiet side hall.

A tanned man of about 35 or 36, with 2 exquisite ‘lian’ made of steel crossed behind his back, looking like swords without scabbards, standing straight in the middle of the hall, his eyes shining, with an imposing aura about him.

The pair of ‘lian’ is about 5 feet long, and it looks like something between a spear and a halberd, just very much shorter.

That person saw Xiang Shaolong, a gleam shot past his eyes and he knelt down, “Wu Zhuo pays his respects to Grand Young Master-in-law.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed as he knows that he is the leader of the Wu family’s secret army and hurriedly helped him up. Cheng Xu thoughtfully made his exit.

After they were seated, Wu Zhuo said, “Under Master’s orders, we’ve been scouting ahead for Grand Young Master-in-law, and indeed we found out something.”

Xiang Shaolong saw his somber expression and was secretly alarmed.

Wu Zhuo continued in a low voice, “I don’t know who leaked the news, but the most vicious horse thieves between the borders of Wei and Zhao are aware that you are bringing treasures and Zhao’s prettiest ladies and traveling towards Daliang. The situation is extremely unfavorable for you.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “The Weis won’t just sit by and do nothing right?”

Wu Zhuo replied, “Someone from Wei secretly told us that not only will King Anli not send anyone to protect you, he even supplied horses and weapons to one of the biggest group of horse thieves called Hui Hu and secretly ordered them to attack your convoy.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, “Isn’t that Hui Hu the one who attacked us within the borders of Zhao? Why did he go to Wei?”

Wu Zhuo replied, “It’s the same person. At that time they suffered heavy losses after their attack failed, and later the Zhaos pursued them, that’s why they escaped to the Wei border and gathered dissidents on the way. Now they have more than 1000 men, not a force to be taken lightly.”

Xiang Shaolong is getting a headache over all these. Firstly why would the King of Wei send men to deal with him, secondly how did he end up working with Hui Hu’s group of horse thieves.

Wu Zhuo added, “All along, we’ve suspected that the few groups of horse thieves within the Zhao border has the backing of the King of Wei so that they will weaken Zhao’s strength. That’s why every time they are in danger, they will escape to the borders of Wei and now this has affirmed our theory.”

Xiang Shaolong is getting a splitting headache, the more he finds out about the relations between the various states, the more he feels that the complicated relationship is making him even more confused. He furrowed his brows and asked, “But this time we’re giving the Third Princess of Zhao to the Weis, why would the King of Wei use such methods to receive us?”

Wu Zhuo replied, “I’m not very sure of the real reason, but we can guess that this involves the power struggle between the King of Wei and Prince Xinling. Ever since Prince Xinling stole the military token and defeated the Qin army, his accomplishments is considered greater than his master, so naturally this will incur the wrath and jealousy of the King of Wei. Besides Prince Xinling has stayed in Handan for a long time, so if the King of Wei can destroy the marriage agreement, the most affected by this will naturally be the relationship between Prince Xinling and the Zhaos.” He continued, “And the marriage agreement is brought about by Prince Xinling single handedly.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself ‘Heavens!’ Why are the relationships between the people in the warring states period so complicated and incomprehensible. Lady Pingyuan was trying to recruit him on behalf of Prince Xinling earlier, and the Zhaos have a more sinister plot to steal Prince Xinling’s ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’. What kind of a relationship is all these?

Wu Zhuo whispered, “We have spies in Hu Hui’s camp, and apparently Hu Hui hates you to the core and is determined to capture you and all the ladies alive and rape all of them right in front of your eyes in order to give vent to his anger.”

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort, “That’s only wishful thinking on his part.” He sighed and continued, “Are there any news of that person who does not wish to be a human but wants to be a beast instead, Xiao Weimou?”

Wu Zhuo shook his head, “This person is famous for being mysterious, every time he attacks it’s a surprise, there’s no clue about an impending attack at all. He’s a lot more frightening than Hui Hu.”

Xiang Shaolong is so vexed he felt like pulling out his hair, and said seriously, “The route to Wei was planned by Zhao Mu long ago, with the approval of the King of Zhao, so it cannot be changed. If the person who leaked the news is Zhao Mu, this means that the enemy will be very familiar with our route, so we’ll always be in a situation where we can only react to circumstances.”

Wu Zhuo smiled meaningfully, “Would Grand Young Master-in-law be someone who listens to orders blindly?”

Xiang Shaolong chortled and nodded, “You really understand me.” He thought to himself this time he will have to use all his tricks and make use of the modern military knowledge he learnt to deal with the various traps laid along the way.

Wu Zhuo added, “I’ve brought with me a hundred good fighters, to become Grand Young Master-in-law’s family warriors. Hei! To be able to work under Grand Young Master-in-law, we’re all very excited.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, and after the two of them secretly discussed the details, Wu Zhuo left in a hurry.

He’d just stepped out of the hall when he learnt that the pretty maid Xiaozhao had been waiting patiently for him for a long time.

Xiang Shaolong told her to return first. He found Cheng Xu and told him briefly the dangerous situation.

Cheng Xu’s face turned pale on hearing it and said, “I’ll find Zha Yuanyu immediately to discuss this matter and tell him to bring more rations and increase fortifications so that we can deal with the thieves’ attacks.”

Zha Yuanyu is Cheng Xu’s assistant, and also the rations officer for this trip, in charge of setting camp and all coordinations. If the enemy were to attack, they’ll either look for dangerous spots to lay a trap, or to steal their rations. Therefore it’s a must to increase the defenses of the camp.

After Cheng Su left, Xiang Shaolong recollected his thoughts and went to the inner courtyard.

Xiaozhao, Xiaoyu and the rest of the maids were all in the hall, happily sewing the armor for him that he will be using to hold his steel needles.

When they saw him arriving, they surrounded him and frantically helped him remove his heavy armor, and tied the inner armor made from cowhide, filled with small and long pockets, with strings around his waist. As if it's a game, they laughed as they slipped the needles into the sturdy pouches, revealing only about an inch of the tip of the needles.

He tried a few moves, rapidly pulling out the needles and throwing them towards the wooden door, hitting it with a 'chook chook' noise. He realized that although he's wearing about 20 over catties of flying needles and his armor, but he could still handle the extra weight without any hindrance to his movement and speed.

Xiang Shaolong's mood changed for the better and after bantering with the maids for a while, he went towards Lady Ya's room.

The 8 maids continued working hard to make this needle pouch more sturdy and perfect.

Inside the bedroom Lady Ya seems lost in thought.

Xiang Shaolong walked over and saw that Lady Ya was standing with her back to him next to a window, looking out at the woods, deep in thought.

Zhao Ya has changed into a robe with 2 long silk tassels hanging down, draped with a well tailored and eye catching robe, her hair combed into 2 buns. Contrasted with her slender waist and fair skin, she looks utterly bewitching.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself this is truly nature's finest specimen, no wonder she can charm so many men and become the most famous wanton in Zhao. He tiptoed behind her and grabbed her shoulders, pressing his body against her pert buttocks.

He had just uttered the word 'Lady' when Zhao Ya shook violently and struggled.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and let his hands go.

That Zhao Ya ran to a side and turned around, her face filled with fury, and surprisingly it's the royal Third Princess Zhao Qian.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he's in trouble and hurriedly knelt down but he was at a loss as to what to say.

Zhao Qian saw that it's Xiang Shaolong and her anger subsided. In replacement she blushed deeply, stamped her feet and ran away.

Zhao Ya could be heard calling after her outside but obviously she did not manage to stop her.

Xiang Shaolong stood up, her fragrance still lingering on his body, his heart beating erratically.

Lady Ya walked in and she looked unhappy. She stared at him and walked over, asking icily, “Shaolong! What have you done to Zhao Qian?”

Xiang Shaolong was very unhappy with her tone of voice and attitude. Besides he was not in a good mood after hearing Wu Zhuo’s news so he thought to himself, so be it that you do not trust me, why should I explain to you. He gave a cold snort and walked out the door.

After all Lady Ya is one who is used to having her orders obeyed, and although she loves Xiang Shaolong extremely, she is firstly annoyed that he touched the untouchable Third Princess, and because she could not tolerate such an attitude, she cried out angrily, “Stay there!”

Xiang Shaolong stopped walking, and thought of her promiscuous past and also how she drugged him with aphrodisiacs to help Zhao Mu deal with him, and how she allowed Zhao Mu to take liberties with her while in the carriage. He’d suppressed all these feelings usually but now they’ve come bubbling up to the surface and he felt extremely upset. He stared at her coldly and asked, “What instructions does Lady has?”

Lady Ya’s heart turned cold on seeing his look and she softened. She moved to him and asked a little fearfully, “Don’t you know you cannot antagonize Zhao Qian?”

Xiang Shaolong was not appreciative of her change in tone at all

and said emotionlessly, “Your servant will not dare to do so in future, may I take my leave now?”

Lady Ya thought to herself that she has not blamed him wrongly, so how could she tolerate such an attitude from him so she stamped her feet and said, “Fine! Xiang Shaolong, get lost now.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of the past and felt that without this woman, he’ll save himself a lot of troubles. Although life in future may not be so easy, but he can’t really be bothered now and left. Of course he did not forget to take the inner armor with him as he left.

That night Xiang Shaolong did not step into Lady Ya’s abode at all. After dinner, he went to the garden to practice his flying needles and after happily practicing for a while, his anger towards Lady Ya ceased as well. Just as he was pondering if he should look for her, Zhao Da suddenly came and knelt down on seeing him, his eyes filled with unshed tears of fury and helplessness as he said, “Master Xiang please decide for us brothers. That conniving thief Prince Shaoyuan came to look for Lady and after talking to her in private for a moment, Lady invited him into her room.”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Prince Shaoyuan had just killed Lady Ya’s loyal subordinate Zhao Er, and now this wanton is inviting him to his room. No wonder Zhao Da is so furious and for him to come and complain to him, it’s obvious that he is prepared to lose his life over this.

Xiang Shaolong helped him up and instructed, “Take it that you’ve never come to look for me, understand?”

Zhao Da was livid, “I’m not afraid of anything now.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed and instructed him not to follow him. He went towards Lady Ya’s residence and deliberately took a detour and went through the back garden. Naturally the guards dared not stop him but when he reached the inner courtyard from the back garden, Xiaozhao and the other maids were all shocked and their faces turned pale, thinking of blocking his way.

Xiang Shaolong had a murderous look and uttered coldly, “Give way!”

The ladies dared not really stop him and they retreated.

Xiang Shaolong went to Lady Ya’s bedroom and kicked the door open with his leg.

Prince Shaoyuan and Lady Ya cried out in alarm at the same time.

The two of them were sitting next to each other on a long chair, Prince Shaoyuan’s hands reached out and hugged Lady Ya tightly, as if he was going to kiss her lips while Lady Ya was trying to push him off, her face coy. The scene is enough to make Xiang Shaolong burn with fury.

Prince Shaoyuan stood up angrily and pointed at him, “What audacity!”

Xiang Shaolong recollected his thoughts and thought that if it comes to reasoning, he really does not have the authority to barge in like that and spoil their fun. But in this era where the strong represents everything, what counts is talent, so there's nothing much to be said. Besides, Prince Shaoyuan caused the death of Su Nu, and he can't wait to rip him apart. His eyes glaring murderously, his hands on the pommel of his Rainbow Sword, he stared at him unwaveringly, making Prince Shaoyuan's heart turn cold.

Lady Ya actually had no intention of canoodling with Prince Shaoyuan, but because Prince Shaoyuan came to look for her saying that there's something about Xiang Shaolong and Lady Pingyuan that he has to tell her in secret, that's why she invited him into the room. Who'd expect that after he said his words, he tried to force himself on her and Xiang Shaolong happen to barge in right at this time, scattering her wits.

It was just a lover's quarrel for them earlier but now that Prince Shaoyuan is involved, this has turned into another matter.

She saw that Xiang Shaolong's expression was icy cold, as if he's going to kill someone. She was so frightened that she jumped up and stood between the two of them, screaming, "No!"

Naturally Xiang Shaolong knows he cannot kill Prince Shaoyuan, and he heard the footsteps of Prince Shaoyuan's men hurrying over from the outside so he took the opportunity to step down and said, "Protect him if you want! From today onwards, I shall not be bothered with your private affairs."

He turned and left, ignoring the curses of the shocked Prince Shaoyuan.

He bumped right into Prince Shaoyuan's 4 warriors in the hall.

The 4 of them were overcome by his aura and moved aside, watching as he left.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his own room and felt relaxed instead.

All this time he has been troubled by Zhao Ya's scandalous past.

He's never had the experience of engaging with wanton women. Even on the day that he was sent to this era by the time machine, he was having fun with the queen of bars Zhou Xiangmei, but that was just a one night stand, and he'd never think of living with her.

Now that Zhao Ya has stated that she wants to change for the better and follow him, that is another matter. He saw for himself the 2 of them hugging and it doesn't matter if any force was used, the fact is Zhao Ya invited him into her room. Obviously wantonness is already in her nature, and never thought of defending herself against men. This point is enough to make him furious.

The door opened, Zhao Ya walked in looking sad and angry and after she closed the door, she leaned against the wall at the side,

looking sadly at the calm and composed Xiang Shaolong who was sitting on the rug.

Lady Ya lowered her head, “It’s my fault for misunderstanding you.”

Xiang Shaolong said emotionlessly, “You’ve asked Third Princess?”

Lady Ya nodded her head slightly, and asked angrily, “Why didn’t you explain to me? I have feelings of jealousy as well!”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “This doesn’t matter now, it’s late! Lady please return and rest! We have to be on our way again tomorrow.”

Lady Ya looked at him in shock, and on seeing his cold expression, she threw herself into his arms, her arms going around his solid neck and cried in alarm, “Shaolong! Please listen to my explanation, he tried to force a kiss on me, I...”

Xiang Shaolong remained unmoving as a rock, not even twitching the muscles on his face. He looked at her coldly and said, “If you can explain why you invited a man who has just cruelly killed your loyal subordinate, and an enemy of mine, as well as a lecherous ex-lover of yours into your room, I will forgive you.”

Lady Ya was at a loss for words.

For someone like her who grew up in a rich and powerful family, she wouldn't be overly bothered about the life and death of a subordinate. As for letting Prince Shaoyuan into her room, although it was Prince Shaoyuan who initiated it, but at that time she really harbored the thought of having her revenge against Xiang Shaolong. Of course she did not expect Xiang Shaolong to barge in.

Hot tears rushed out.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Lady! I am not bothered about how you and Zhao Mu joined forces to harm me, because I thought that you will concede to me with all your heart from now on. Only today did I realize it's just wishful thinking on my part. Even if you want to copulate, you don't have to do it with Prince Shaoyuan! There are a few hundred strong young men around here, choosing any one of them will make me feel better."

"Pak!"

A handprint appeared on Xiang Shaolong's face.

Lady Ya covered her face and wailed as she retreated, crying out wretchedly, "You insult me, I really..."

Xiang Shaolong raised his voice, "Shut up!" He touched his cheek and added, "This slap will signify the end of our relationship, you can be with whoever you like, I will not be bothered. If you find me a hindrance to your eyes, just ask your imperial brother to kill me. But don't blame me for warning you, whoever tries to kill or harm

me, will have to pay a bitter price.” And he walked out of the room furiously.

Lady Ya screamed, “No!” and tugged his clothes.

Xiang Shaolong pushed her away and left.

Extremely furious, he thought of his 2 greatest enemy.

What kind of a world is this, he obviously knows that Zhao Mu and Prince Shaoyuan has committed atrocious crimes, how can he continue to let them strut about so publicly.

No!

I must become this era’s strongest person, by then I need not bend over backwards just for survival, and live so unhappily.

In order to avoid Lady Ya, he hid himself in a dark corner. As expected, Lady Ya ran out in tears looking for him.

Xiang Shaolong went back to his room, thinking to himself that he won’t be able to get a good sleep tonight, so he might as well practice with his newly set up climbing equipment to see if it works.

Once he made up his mind, he felt like a little kid who is going to have fun. He changed into a black outfit, brought his equipment

and climbed out his window into the courtyard.

The only target for his practice is naturally Lady Pingyuan and her son. Under the cover of the night, he used his ability and swiftly and quietly made his way to the courtyard where Lady Pingyuan is staying.

When that lone building came into his sight, he saw that security was tight. Unless one can morph into a bird, he can forget about slipping in. Lamps were lighted in the hall, and voices could be heard.

Luckily Xiang Shaolong has the ability to climb up high.

He first chose a tall and sturdy old tree about 10 feet high and shot out his hook, aiming at the branches about 3 feet away before attaching the rope to the clasp around his waist. Making use of the pulley he pulled on the rope and rose up, and in a short while reached the horizontal branch.

He continued on like this and after a while he was almost at the top of the wall, about 8 feet high, the scene in the courtyard right below his eyes.

He looked out for an opportunity and once again shot the hook out with the projectile, hitting right on target the wall on the other side of the courtyard. When the hooked which was wrapped in soft hide landed on the tiles, it only emitted a very faint noise.

Xiang Shaolong tugged on the hook, until the hook was tightly embedded on the wooden beam of the roof. He tested its sturdiness before hooking it to the clasp on his waist again and leapt off the tree, and quietly slid down to the roof opposite.

He then leaned down and took out a hollow and round metal tube, with the hole on one end bigger than the other. He pressed the wider hole tightly on the tile while he plastered his ears to the narrow end of the hole. Like a modern doctor with his stethoscope, the sounds in the room immediately amplified and filled his ears.

He heard Prince Shaoyuan said angrily, "If not for that Xiang Shaolong barging in, I'll surely be able to deal with that slut. Humph! Let's see if she dares to disobey me."

Lady Pingyuan was heard saying, "My child why be so impatient now. Zhao Ya is yours sooner or later, and even Zhao Qian won't be able to escape from your clutches, humph!"

Xiang Shaolong felt his skin go numb, he did not expect that Lady Pingyuan to actually be of the same thinking with her son.

Lady Pingyuan continued, "You better not go and bother Xiang Shaolong, this person can be made use of greatly by your uncle."

Prince Shaoyuan said angrily, "He treats me so badly, how can I take this lying down. Unless Mother can tell me clearly what you intend to do to him, or else I will certainly be at odds with him." He then tried cajoling, "Mother! I'm all grown up now, I should be able to share you and Uncle's burdens!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly prayed, hoping that she'll reveal it.

Luckily Lady Pingyuan has always spoiled her son and couldn't withstand his begging and said, "Do you know why Uncle kept pushing for the marriage between Zhao and Wei, and deliberately leaked the news about the 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual' to the Zhaos?"

Xiang Shaolong felt his body turn cold on hearing this, so it turns out that 'Lu Gong's secret manual' is part of the plot. From this one can see that how Prince Xinling, one of the 4 Princes of the Warring States period, is so formidable.

Prince Shaoyuan begged, "Mother! Tell me quickly!"

Lady Pingyuan said, "This is a big secret, besides you and me, not a third person must know of this, understand?"

Prince Shaoyuan hurriedly gave his promise.

Lady Pingyuan was silent for a moment before she said, "I have no choice but to let you know as well, because we'll need you to coordinate with the skilled pugilists Uncle sent to put this important mission into motion."

Prince Shaoyuan tapped his chest and said, "Leave it to me."

Lady Pingyuan said, “In order to steal ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’, the Zhaos will certainly send their best warrior to Wei. Now that they’ve sent Xiang Shaolong, this person is both skilled in swordplay and intelligent, just the right person for us.”

Prince Shaoyuan is not an idiot, and he uttered in shock, “Is Uncle trying to recruit him/ But he and I...”

Lady Pingyuan interrupted him coldly, “Don’t worry! Your enemy is my enemy, I’ll make sure he’ll die without even a proper burial place.”

Prince Shaoyuan said happily, “That’s really great.”

Xiang Shaolong who was eavesdropping from the roof was furious and really felt like leaping down and stabbing both of them.

So it turns out that Lady Pingyuan has an ulterior motive with him.

Such a vicious woman, is really a fine specimen of this era where the strongest will survive.

Lady Pingyuan said in a low voice, “Once we bribe that fool, we can arrange for him to assassinate the useless King of Wei. With your uncle’s help and that fool’s excellent martial arts, it will certainly succeed.”

Prince Shaoyuan shivered and asked hoarsely, “What?”

Lady Pingyuan humph, “Look how alarmed you are, as soon as Xiang Shaolong succeeds, your uncle’s men will kill him on the spot and there’ll be no witnesses left. Then we’ll push all the blame to the Zhaos, and by then your uncle will be able to openly send troops to attack Zhao and gain control of military power. By then won’t the state of Wei will be in his pocket?”

Xiang Shaolong felt cold sweat running down his body on hearing it. Only now did he understand why Lady Pingyuan said Prince Shaoyuan will be able to get both Zhao Qian and Zhao Ya.

Prince Shaoyuan exclaimed joyously, “This is indeed a perfect plan, but Xiang Shaolong is no fool. I’m afraid that he might pretend to be on our side but later complain about us to the King of Wei. That would be terrible.”

Lady Pingyuan smiled icily, “Do not belittle me and your uncle. I married your father in the past with the hope that he can ascend the throne. Unfortunately he was unable to succeed and died early as well, or else you could have already be the King of Zhao. We have thought of a way to deal with Xiang Shaolong, and that is to force him to a dead end so that he has no choice but to throw in his lot with us.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brow, and thought to himself what are the ways they have to force him to a dead end?

Naturally Prince Shaoyuan couldn’t guess as well and kept

pressing Lady Pingyuan for the answer.

The regal lady who is beautiful on the outside but venomous as a snake on the inside said with a lowered voice, “As long as Zhao Qian’s virginity is lost, where else can he go?”

Xiang Shaolong almost exclaimed out loud on hearing this, and at the same time was glad that his unplanned trip here has allowed him to overhear such an important plot. Naturally he concentrated hard to continue to listen in on the plans this mother and son team has for Zhao Qian.

Book 3 Chapter 3 – Turbulence In The Camp

That night Xiang Shaolong did not sleep a wink after he returned to his room, and spent the night thinking. Under Ding Shou and Wa Che's escort, the convoy passed the Zhang river and entered the wilderness that belongs to the state of Wei. Lady Ya knows that he is still angry so she stayed inside the carriage and did not bother him. Xiaozhao and the other maids looked unhappy and sad, because Lady Ya has given strict orders and they dared not speak to him. Prince Shaoyuan deliberately showed his uncooperativeness by lagging behind and slowing down the group. Xiang Shaolong was confident and was not bothered at all. By dusk, they've only managed to travel about 20 odd li.

By now Xiang Shaolong's attention was solely on the enemy who will appear any time now. He chose a highland with a mountain backing it to set up camp. Xiang Shaolong placed his own commander's tent as well as Lady Ya and Zhao Qian's tents in the middle next to the mountain, the remaining 500 warriors split into 3 groups to set up their tents to the extreme right. Prince Shaoyuan's tents were set up at the extreme left, which shows an obvious divide in the camps. Naturally Xiang Shaolong knows what he is up to, because tonight the highly skilled martial artist sent by Prince Xinling will infiltrate into Zhao Qian's camp from his side before setting off drug inducing smoke so that he can sneak into Zhao Qian's tent and despoil her. And the person who volunteered to do this is Prince Shaoyuan. If not for the fact that Xiang Shaolong is aware of their plot, it's very possible that they have a high chance of success. Who would think that they'd have to be on the alert against an inside thief?

Xiang Shaolong stood straight at the highest point of the mountain, looking at the rolling hills below him and secretly

thought to himself that no wonder Prince Xinling's men would choose this place to strike. That's because even when one is near the area, they will be difficult to spot and Prince Shaoyuan knows this secret, that's why he deliberately delayed the journey. By now Cheng Xu has come up to him and commented, "I did not know that Imperial Protector is so well versed in setting camp. Even Zha Yuanyu who thinks of himself as an expert was complimenting your layout for being convenient and flexible and he's extremely impressed." Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that he's had 2000 more years of experience since their time, naturally he's good at it but when he replied, he was very humble instead. Cheng Xu lowered his voice, "I've sent my trusted aide to make contact with your man Wu Zhuo and told him not to come to the camp for the time being. Hei! I think Sir feels that something is happening." Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that this is not a feeling, but a 'fact'. He is dealing with Prince Shaoyuan tonight so he does not want Wu Zhuo's men to be embroiled in all this so that things will not be even more complicated. Right at this time Zha Yuanyu who is in charge of setting up camp came to them to report that his task is accomplished.

Although Xiang Shaolong knows that no matter if it's Hu Hui who has an old enmity with him, or Xiao Weimou and his team of assassins from Qi, they will only strike when he's deep into the state of Wei so that he won't be able to run back to Zhao. Therefore he instructed Zha Yuanyu to remove the 40 carts from the mules and line them along the circumference of the camp so that they can be the first line of barriers against enemy attacks. This move made Zha Yuanyu even more confident about him and he went gladly on his way to work. Cheng Xu saw that he is so insightful and was even more in awe of him. Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before he said in a lowered voice, "I have something really important for you to do, but you must not ask the reason why. Find me a group of soldiers with good arm strength

and prepare tools for digging ditches and await my orders. But you must hide it from others, especially Prince Shaoyuan, understand!” Cheng Xu thought that he was going lay traps around the camp and left to follow his orders. Xiang Shaolong prepared himself for quite some time, sighed deeply and forced himself to look for Lady Ya. In order to deal with Prince Shaoyuan, he can only make peace with her.

The soldiers were setting the fire to prepare dinner and when they saw Xiang Shaolong, they greeted this commander respectfully from the bottom of their hearts. Xiang Shaolong was secretly happy and knows that the incident where he killed Xu Hai has been imprinted in their minds. When he give them commands in future, it'll be a lot easier. The cloth that separated the camp from the tents came slowly into view. Zhao Da and the other two were chatting with a few of Zhao Qian's personal guards and they stood at attention when they saw Xiang Shaolong. After Xiang Shaolong smiled and greeted them, he went into the restricted area of the camp. There are 4 tents in there, Lady Ya and Zhao Qian stays in the bigger tents. Xiao Zhao and the other maids were preparing dinner at the empty space and was ecstatic when they saw Xiang Shaolong. Xiao Zhao and Xiao Mei even lowered their head and cried. Xiang Shaolong replied them with a smile and went into Lady Ya's private tent. Zhao Ya was sitting numbly at a corner, her eyes swollen, obviously she has been crying. Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed again, and began to understand that he is growing to love her more and more, that's why he could not tolerate her outrageous past or her being close with other men from now one. Zhao Ya saw him coming in and she stood up in alarm and joy, unable to believe her eyes and cried out, “Shaolong!” Xiang Shaolong smiled, “You're not allowed to cry, I'll leave if you cry.” Zhao Ya forced her tears back and shouted, throwing herself into his arms, her shoulders shaking but she dared not cry out loud. Naturally Xiang Shaolong's shoulder was

soon wet. Xiang Shaolong caressed her back and said gently, "Do you still dare to be disobedient in future?" Zhao Ya shook her head furiously, meek as a lamb. Xiang Shaolong hugged her and sat down, wiped away her tears and said with a smile, "Now let me test how obedient you are. Now go and look for Zhao Qian and tell her that tonight, I want all the women in here to hide in my tent. This must be kept a secret." Zhao Ya looked at him in shock, but as afraid that she'll offend him again so she kept nodding her head, looking so obedient yet pitiful. How enchanting. Xiang Shaolong can't bear to see her like that so he whispered in her ear, "I'm afraid that someone will sneak in tonight and do something bad to her!" Zhao Ya heard his gentle tone and she became bolder and kissed him cautiously, saying, "You really will forgive me?" Xiang Shaolong smiled and nodded. Zhao Ya stole a peek at him and asked, "You really won't put it to heart at all?" Xiang Shaolong sighed, "What can I do? Who told me to love you so much that I can't stay away!" Zhao Ya gave a shout of cheer and kissed him.

After a long while, Zhao Ya said with much sufferance, "You almost scared me to death, if you do that to me again, I can only die." Her pretty eyes reddened again. Xiang Shaolong felt bad for her and after consoling her, slapped her hard on her buttocks and commanded, "Aren't you setting off to work for me?" Zhao Ya stood up and holding his hand, asked, "If Zhao Qian were to ask me, how did Xiang Shaolong know that someone is going to attack her camp, how should I answer her?" Xiang Shaolong knows that she has been assured and his alertness has returned. He knows that she's using Zhao Qian as an excuse to ask him, so he laughed and said, "Don't worry! She will trust me absolutely, just do as I say." Zhao Ya was frightened and exclaimed, "Shaolong! It's not that I don't trust you! I'm just curious. And you still want to treat me like that." Xiang Shaolong saw how expressive she looked and felt his desire rising but he knows that tonight is not the time to have such fun so he kept his urge down and pushed her out of the tent. He

then went to look for Cheng Xu, “I want you to dig a few holes that can hide some people around Third Princess’s main tent, and at the same time find 20 expert archers to hide with us in the holes and enjoy the grand event that’s about to happen.” Cheng Xu was dumbfounded on hearing that. After giving instructions about the details, Xiang Shaolong chortled and returned to his tent for his meal.

The cold wind swept through the land. The crescent moon hung high up on the sky, illuminating the camp that was in total darkness. Besides the soldiers patrolling the circumference of the camp, everyone else was sound asleep after a tiring day of travel. Xiang Shaolong, Cheng Xu, Zhao Da, Zhao Wu, Zhao Qi and the 20 archers were the exception. They were hidden separately in the hidden holes at the 4 corners surrounding Zhao Qian’s tent, waiting for the grand event that Xiang Shaolong said will happen. They have fought to stay alert for many hours, and that is certainly not a comfortable stay. In another 4 hours the dawn will break.

Just as Xiang Shaolong’s own confidence was a little shaken as well, there was a sound that came from Prince Shaoyuan’s side of the camp. Everyone was immediately refreshed and using the moonlight and their eyes which has long been accustomed to the darkness, they turned towards the direction of the sound and stared.

A skinny and short shadow that looks like the size of a child snuck in quietly. He moved nimbly to the nearest tent and in his hand he was holding a pipe looking thing. A faint light was seen. Everyone could clearly see that the intruder is a wretched looking man who is as skinny as a monkey, his hand holding something that looks like a tiny stove with a round pipe attached to it, and the

fire was lighted in the stove. That person waited until the firelight in the stove was steady before he pushed the tube that was emitting smoke under the tent. Xiang Shaolong dared not even exhale loudly, looking that this person working slowly as he put the drugged smoke into the 4 tents. That person let out a bird cry, obviously the signal to summon his gang and truly, 10 odd people came over and spread out at the various important positions, surrounding the 4 tents. Another 5 or 6 people came later, one of them is naturally Prince Shaoyuan. Everyone worked quietly, not daring to make any noise. The atmosphere was tense and heavy.

Prince Shaoyuan went to the door of Zhao Qian's camp while the others moved to the tents of the maids, leaving only Lady Ya's tent, which no one touched. Xiang Shaolong was fuming as he saw this, these beasts won't even let innocent maids off. If not for the fact that Lady Ya is also Prince Shaoyuan's target, and there is no way he can split himself, she would not have escaped tonight as well. Once the stove that sent the drugging smoke was extinguished, the short man made a hand signal and Prince Shaoyuan and his men moved unanimously into the tents. Xiang Shaolong knows that it's time and he gave the secret signal. A 'chook chook' sound was heard.

The light arrows shot out from the heavy bows in the holes, eliminating the 10 odd men who were keeping a look out around the camp. Prince Shaoyuan and the rest realized the tents were empty and they cried out in alarm, but by then the 10 odd men outside already fell to the ground with a cry. Torches were lit. Another group of soldiers led by Zha Yuanyu surrounded the ladies camp. Those who snuck into the tents rushed out of it. By now Xiang Shaolong and his men threw away their bows and jumped out of the holes with their swords drawn, starting a merciless attack on them. For a moment the sounds of weapons clashing and

battle cries thundered in the air.

The person Xiang Shaolong targeted was Prince Shaoyuan so he took out a flying needle first and threw it at his thigh just as he was scrambling out of the tent. Prince Shaoyuan screamed and fell to the floor, dropping the sword in his hand. Xiang Shaolong dashed forward and kicked him hard on the groin. Prince Shaoyuan screamed like a pig being slaughtered, his cries echoing in the night sky and he collapsed onto the ground, the heart wrenching pain making him squirm violently on the floor. He does not even have the strength to strike now. Xiang Shaolong moved diagonally across, his sword shone, and decapitated an enemy who was about to retaliate. Thus the battle ended, with the enemies either killed instantly or seriously injured and captured, none escaped. The whole camp was a flurry of activity. The soldiers all ran towards them. Lady Pingyuan who was waiting for good news at the other side rushed over with her family warriors as well.

The cloth surrounding the tents were pulled down, the torches illuminating everything as if it was daylight. Zha Yuanyu's men stopped Lady Pingyuan's men from charging over. Xiang Shaolong chortled and walked over to Prince Shaoyuan who was still writhing in pain on the ground and gave him a hard kick on his waist so that he turned over in pain. He then stepped on his chest, his long sword pointing at his throat and smiled at Prince Shaoyuan whose muscles twitched so much that his face was contorted and said, "Hey! So it's Prince Shaoyuan, I'm sorry if I've offended you." Lady Pingyuan's angry and frightened voice rose up, "Xiang Shaolong!" Xiang Shaolong was still staring at Prince Shaoyuan as he shouted, "Yuanyu how can you be so rude towards Lady, quickly invite Lady over." By now Lady Ya and Zhao Qian emerged from the commander's tent and looking at the person next to Xiang Shaolong and the surroundings, they all knew clearly

what had happened.

Although a few hundred people surrounded them, no one said a word, and only the crackling sound of the burning torches were heard. Lady Pingyuan walked over furiously and exclaimed, "Aren't you going to release my son quickly." Prince Shaoyuan was about to say something when Xiang Shaolong's long sword moved forward, the tip of the sword in his mouth. He was so frightened he dared not move, and even his moans stopped. Xiang Shaolong looked at Lady Pingyuan icily and said somberly, "I, Xiang Shaolong, has been given an important task to escort Princess to Daliang. Now Prince Shaoyuan is in cahoots with outsiders and released drugged smoke in an attempt to outrage Princess's modesty. How is Lady going to explain all these." Lady Pingyuan saw her son's bloodied leg and she was at a total loss and anxiously cried out, "Let him go first before we talk." Xiang Shaolong's eyes was stern as he said determinedly, "No! I am going to execute him on the spot, and bear all responsibilities. At the most we will return to Zhao immediately and I will let his Majesty decide my fate." Lady Pingyuan turned pale and her lips trembled as she uttered, "How dare you!"

Zhao Qian's sweet voice said frostily, "Such a man is worst than a beast, Imperial Protector Xiang, kill him for me!" Although Lady Ya felt that it's inappropriate, she dared not interrupt for fear that Xiang Shaolong will misunderstand that she is trying to protect Prince Shaoyuan. Xiang Shaolong deliberately revealed a cold and cruel smile and looked at Lady Pingyuan challengingly. Lady Pingyuan looked as if she has suddenly aged, and she cried out, "Fine! What do you want before you'll let my son go." Xiang Shaolong turned his head and looked at Zhao Qian, asking with a straight face, "Will Third Princess allow your subordinate to handle this matter totally." Zhao Qian's pretty face blushed and

dared not look at him but she lowered her head and nodded slightly. Xiang Shaolong saw how gentle this beauty is and other ideas rose in his head, but he remembered that she is going to marry a Wei and thought it such a pity. He turned his head back towards Lady Pingyuan and said, “I can stop pursuing this matter, but Lady must write a letter of guarantee that Prince Shaoyuan must never again harbor such beastly thoughts towards Princess. What does Lady think?”

Lady Pingyuan gritted her teeth so hard that her silver tooth casing almost cracked. This move of Xiang Shaolong is really formidable, such that she is forced into never bringing this up in front of the King of Zhao to complain against him. Xiang Shaolong is extremely confident, because he knows that she still needs to make use of him to assassinate the King of Wei so he's not worried that she will not concede. Lady Pingyuan was silent for a moment before she finally admitted defeat, “Fine! You're good.” Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, “The one who is good is Lady, I am just a little lucky.”

Book 3 Chapter 4 – The War Between A Male And Female

The next day when the envoy was getting ready to leave, Lady Pingyuan remained unmoved and refused to leave with the team. Xiang Shaolong laughed secretly to himself and bring with him Zhao Da and the other three as well as 10 odd specially trained elite soldiers, went to pay a visit to Lady Pingyuan personally. When they reached the tent, Xiang Shaolong told his men to stand guard outside while he went to see Lady Pingyuan alone.

Lady Pingyuan was still furious and she said with a frosty look, “Xiang Shaolong you’re good, you’ve injured my son so badly.” Xiang Shaolong knows that she was talking about the hard kick he gave to the groin. He secretly laughed to himself but when he spoke, he sighed instead, “I didn’t know he is Prince Shaoyuan at all in the darkness. Luckily I realized in time or I would have killed him.” Lady Pingyuan was at a loss for words, but her anger was still unappeased so she stared at him and said, “My son is still weak and is not suited for long travels, you can go to Daliang on your own! I will only leave when he has recovered.” Xiang Shaolong looked at her fiery eyes filled with hatred and sighed, “I am in a difficult position and have no choice but to put on an act in front of Zhao Qian. Actually I’ve considered what Lady told me the other day and have come to a decision long ago.”

Lady Pingyuan was stunned for a moment, and this ignited Xiang Shaolong’s hope. She eyed him for a moment before she nodded and said, “If you really have such a thought...” Xiang Shaolong interrupted her, “But what Prince Shaoyuan did last night was obviously done with your approval, and this has aroused my doubts about Lady’s sincerity.” Lady Pingyuan immediately lost

the upper hand. In actual fact ever since Xiang Shaolong seemed to foretell her plan, which she was so confident of and spoil it, she has started fearing him and has no idea how she should deal with this man.

Her instinctive reaction was to lower her eyes. Xiang Shaolong saw that she did not try to deny and knows that she is now confused by his forcefulness. He moved boldly forward, looking closely at her tired yet pretty face and said with a smile, "Shall we talk about this after we reach Daliang? At least you should let me see Prince Xinling first!" Lady Pingyuan saw her standing so close to her and she lifted her head, her face frosty as she said, "Are you trying to be rude to me? How dare you insult your superior?" Xiang Shaolong said calmly, "I just have a secret to tell Lady, but I do not know if Lady is interested in hearing it." Lady Pingyuan was thrown off guard and she asked, "What is it?" Xiang Shaolong moved his lips closer, so close that it was only inches away from her, and deliberately pretended to be mysterious as he said, "I don't know if it was Zhao Mu who leaked out news, but a few groups of horse thieves including Hui Hu are waiting within Wei's border for us, and I heard that Lady is one of their targets."

Lady Pingyuan's face turned pale and she exclaimed hoarsely, "What?" Xiang Shaolong said with a straight face, "I, Xiang Shaolong, can swear to heaven, if I speak a word of falsehood, then let me die a horrible death." He secretly thought that people of this era is not like those in the 21st century, they will not give their vows so easily and now he is witnessing the miraculous use of this method. Lady Pingyuan did not suspect his words as expected. She rolled her eyes for a while before she asked weakly, "Is Hui Hu really part of it?" By now Xiang Shaolong is absolutely sure that Hui Hu is the King of Wei's man, and because Lady Pingyuan knows this secret, all the more she believes his words. He boldly

sat down to her right, his mouth moved close to her ear, almost touching it and said, “The news was relayed to me by the spies the Wu family planted in Wei. They even said the mastermind could very well be the King of Wei himself.”

Lady Pingyuan furrowed her brows and said, “Can you sit a little further away to talk?” Xiang Shaolong saw that although she looked irritated, her pretty face was blushing and her breathing was faster and knows she’s feeling confused whether to reject or welcome him. He can’t help but secretly laugh and was even more determined to seek his revenge. He thought to himself, since you can be unscrupulous towards me, why can’t I have a little payback, and he gently kissed her rounded ear lobes. Lady Pingyuan’s dainty body shook, and was about to reprimand him when Xiang Shaolong retreated to his original position, his mesmerizing eyes looking at her deeply. Her heart immediately started pounding, and the reprimand she was about to utter stuck in her throat.

What is happening? This person injured her son and outraged her modesty, but why didn’t she react? Once she thought of this, her face burned and she lowered her face and said quietly, “Fine! We will leave with you.”

When Xiang Shaolong returned to his troops who were all packed and ready to leave, he added Wu Zhuo’s 100 men into his group, thus increasing his control. These 100 family warriors were well built and alert, and with one look anyone can tell that they’re elite fighters. Cheng Xu who has been nervous and apprehensive all this while seems to have been finally reassured, and his smile is a lot more radiant now. Xiang Shaolong set the trap last night as if he could predict Prince Shaoyuan’s evil plot, and this has raised him to almost a god-like status amongst the soldiers. While waiting for

Lady Pingyuan's men to dismantle camp, Xiang Shaolong, Wu Zhuo, Cheng Xu and Zha Yuanyu went to a nearby hill to look at the map and discuss the route to take to Daliang.

Wu Zhuo is very familiar with the geography of Wei and he said, "From here to Tangyin, we have official roads which we can travel on. In the past the Weis set up gantries and camps along the roads, and there are watchtowers on higher grounds as well. But according to our scout, not only are the gantries missing along the road now, but we can't even find a single Wei to ask around." Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that if the King of Wei really intends to send someone to attack him, he will not want to do it too far away from the Zhao border so that he will be able to push all the blame and say that the thieves went after them from the Zhao border. Especially when Hui Hu has a personal feud with Xiang Shaolong, so this excuse can be used to shut the Zhaos up and at the same time deal a great blow to Prince Xinling. Hai! All those in power in this era are all conniving people. But he thought about the politicians in the 21st century and felt that maybe it's not so strange after all. Cheng Xu pointed at the river, which forked from the Yellow River, flowing across Tangyin and said, "After we past the river, there's another official road that goes from the east straight towards another large city, Huangcheng, next to the Yellow River. If we were to travel there instead, won't the horse thieves be least expecting that?"

Xiang Shaolong said somberly, "If I'm the horse thief, I will certainly launch an attack while you are crossing the river. They came well prepared and outnumber us, so the outcome of the fight is predictable." The other 3 were dumbfounded. Everyone knows that when crossing rivers, there's no way to defend oneself on the river as the boats are totally exposed to the enemy's catapults, and it'll be a perfect opportunity for the horse thieves to attack. Xiang

Shaolong is a soldier who went through vigorous training and after thinking for a while, he said decidedly, “No matter which official road we choose, we will still fall into the enemy’s expectations. The other party’s energy is conserved while waiting for us but we will be tired from the travels. The only way is to change this obvious advantage and make the enemy tired instead. That’s the only way we can win with our fewer numbers.” He paused for a moment before continuing with confidence, “Now we’ll still travel south on the official roads but we will not cross the river when we come to it. Instead we will travel east along the water until we reach the inlets. This is certainly not within the enemy’s expectations and they will have to come after us via the river crossing while we set up camp next to the river and wait for the enemy. This will greatly increase our chances of winning.”

Zha Yuanyu commented, “But that is not an easy route to travel on...” Wu Zhuo interrupted him, “As long as we can keep our lives, we will be able to overcome any difficult routes.” Cheng Xu agreed, “That’s decided then! We’ll increase the number of scouts who will keep a lookout on the front, back, left and right of the group. I’d rather travel slowly than to fall into a trap.”

After the decision was made, the large group continued on their journey. Xiang Shaolong personally chose a team of fit soldiers to be the scouts and they were separated into 5 in each team, with 2 teams each in front, at the back, the left and right, a total of 8 teams. They will use flags to signal to the main group once it’s safe. By dusk, they’re only a day’s journey away from the river. They chose a high ground that is easy to defend but difficult to be attacked against to set up camp. Xiang Shaolong did not sleep at all last night so he took the opportunity to hide in the tent and have a good sleep. When he woke up the surroundings were in total darkness. Beneath the blanket he sniffed a fragrance and felt a soft

body. He lit his lamp and saw that it was Lady Ya who was leaning against him fully clothed and sleeping. Lady Ya was awoken by the glare from the lamp and she complained, "You! Sleeping like a dead pig. It'll be terrible if there's an enemy attack." Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Are you the enemy?" He felt refreshed but extremely famished, before he remembered that he had not eaten. Lady Ya heard his tummy rumbling and laughed as she got up, "I came especially to send you your dinner, hai! It's all cold now."

Xiang Shaolong's mood was greatly improved and allowed this beauty who has always been served by others to serve him as he dine. By the time his stomach was full, it's already morning. They continued on the journey, following the official road down south towards the river, with lolling hills and woods surrounding them, the scenery breathtaking. Lady Pingyuan became a lot more cooperative and the carriage that was carrying her and her injured son traveled closely behind Zhao Qian's group while their 200 family warriors followed right at the back.

Ever since the conversation that morning, Xiang Shaolong has not spoken to this venomous woman. He wonders if she is thinking of any nefarious plot again. When he went past Zhao Qian's carriage, the pretty Zhao princess lifted up the curtain and called out daintily, "Xiang Shaolong!" Ever since they left Handan, this is the first time she initiated a talk with him. Xiang Shaolong was surprised. He slowed his horse down and traveled alongside the carriage. He looked at her bright and pretty eyes and asked, "Princess, what instructions do you have!" Zhao Qian boldly looked at him in the eyes for a moment before lowering her head, "Xiang Shaolong! I'm very grateful to you, but I hate you as well." She lowered the curtain as soon as she said this, cutting off his direct and greedy gaze.

Xiang Shaolong has mixed feelings. As a Casanova, of course he understood the hidden meaning in her words. By calling his name directly, it's obvious that she is treating him as a man who can be a match to her royalty. She's grateful to him because he protected her chastity but she hates him because he's giving her away to the Weis. Although it's an imperial decree that cannot be disobeyed, she can't help but feel upset with him. Feeling dejected, Xiang Shaolong can only try to concentrate on the passing scenery.

In this world 2000 years ago, the world outside the cities still preserved an alluring primitive look. It not for the fact that winter is approaching, they'll certainly see herds of animals strolling along the grasslands. This road is mainly along the lower hills or across flat open plains so although in the distance there were cliffs and mountains, dense forests and woods, the route they took is a quiet and peaceful road. They turned around a little hill and on their left a small lake as still as a mirror suddenly appeared. The water in the lake was jade green without any waves, serene and clear, and in the early morning fog it looked especially enchanting. On the opposite bank green hills lined the distance, with green bamboos and trees, looking very delicate. Xiang Shaolong secretly thought it a pity, if he is on a tour, he'll certainly stay here for a few days. Even after they've left the little lake, the pretty scene was still etched deeply in his mind. But very soon he was attracted by another valley they passed.

There were unique looking cliffs in the valley, the rocks lined intricately, the forest dense and once in a while a strange animal would appear. A stream was flowing down the cliff and under the sunlight, the water and rocks seems to be moving, the illusion captivating. Xiang Shaolong suddenly had a strange thought, if Crazy Ma's time machine can really send people back to the past and present freely, then all he has to do is set up a tour agency and

he'll be able to earn big bucks. As he went on imagining, his mood became better and by dusk, they finally reached the northern bank of the river. The scenery that appeared was enough to captivate a time traveler like him. He is the only one who understands that the damage done to earth 2000 years later can be so unacceptable. The river was about 60 odd meters wide, flowing between 2 huge rocks, with abundant weeds growing in the middle of the river. There was an unexplained beauty about the river.

Xiang Shaolong was totally engrossed with enjoying the scene until Cheng Xu reminded him and he gave the orders to set up camp next to the water. Without waiting for his instructions, Wu Zhuo had already sent someone to climb up the highest cliff to study the surroundings. On the surface, everything looks peaceful, and birds and animals would come and drink from the river occasionally, or even mingle around with their mules, enjoying the sweet river water. The camp he set up this time is the '6 petals camp', with the commander's tent and the ladies' tents, including Lady Pingyuan's right in the middle of the camp while the rest of the troops are split into 6 groups surrounding the central camp, like a flower with 6 petals. Naturally the circumference is still protected by the carriages joined together and the horses and mules were enclosed next to the river. By the time everything was settled, the sky is slowly getting darker and the various camps started their fires and smoke was seen everywhere. Xiang Shaolong, Wu Zhuo and Cheng Xu climbed up a huge rock to examine the happenings at the opposite bank.

They could hear the sounds of animals and birds fleeing in alarm from the woods on the opposite shore. The three of them exchanged glances and smiled, secretly thinking that they've had a close shave. Cheng Xu said, "Yuanyu will find some men and pretend to build rafts and let the thieves think that we will cross the river

tomorrow morning.” He continued with a bitter smile, “Tonight may be the last night of peace.” Wu Zhuo said, “The thieves will surely have men hidden on this side as well. When we change our route tomorrow and head east along the river, will they give chase in a moment of anxiousness.” Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Wu Zhuo make a guess who could it be that’s keeping an eye out for us at the bank opposite?” Without a thought Wu Zhuo replied, “Of course it’s Hu Hui, they’re the strongest amongst the horse thieves and has the capability of attacking us during the day. If it’s Xiao Weimou, he would not dare to openly launch an attack with a thousand troops within the borders of Wei. At the most he will use the strategy of attacking at night or with fire.” Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Knowing yourself and your enemy is the way of winning battles. This is the famous words of the great militarist Old Sun, so how can we let this opportunity to make him fall badly pass.” Wu Zhuo and Cheng Xu’s eyes immediately shone.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “Besides, we have an added advantage, Hu Hui does not know that we have an extra 100 elite soldiers. Just based on that we can make Hu Hui fall on his nose and when he breaths out, his beard would all be gray (hui = gray).” He lowered his voice and revealed his plan. Wu Zhuo and Cheng Wei were exclaiming how brilliant the plan was after they heard it. Xiang Shaolong asked offhandedly, “Why is it that we’ve traveled for a few days but we don’t even see a single Wei village, it’s as if we’re in no-man’s land now.” Cheng Xu replied, “This is the King of Wei’s orders, the areas 50li around official roads are not to be inhabited, for fear that when enemies travel past the official roads, they can plunder the villages for food, women and men.” Xiang Shaolong was enlightened and after going through the details of their mission a few more times, they returned to camp.

That night he had dinner at Lady Ya’s tent and Xiao Zhao and the

rest of the maids served them happily. They even helped him bath and change and he was enjoying himself amongst the bevy of beauties so much that his weariness was all gone. While he was hugging Lady Ya and lying on the rug, she caressed his broad and muscular chest and said, “I really don’t understand how you can predict that Prince Shaoyuan will launch a secret attack on Zhao Qian, and I don’t understand why they’ll want to do that?” Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before he came to a decision, and told her about him overhearing the conversation between Lady Pingyuan and her son. Lady Ya’s pretty face turned pale on hearing this and the first thing she said was, “What a good Prince Xinling, to make me think that he’s really missing me, so he’s trying to harm me instead.” Xiang Shaolong sighed, “You can’t say that he does not miss you. If I really killed the King of Wei, won’t you still end up being his?” Lady Ya was at a loss and asked while hugging him tightly, “What shall we do now?” Xiang Shaolong replied, “With me here, what do you have to fear? He has his plans of [Zhang Liang](#), but I have wall ascending ladders, humph!”

Lady Ya furrowed her brows as she asked, “What is ‘plans of Zhang Liang and wall ascending ladders’?” Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that Zhang Liang was a person who appeared at the end of the Qin era and the beginning of Han, so he’s not born at this time yet. He was dumbfounded and laughed in reply, “Anyway this is called acting according to circumstances. As long as the Weis dare not out rightly make an enemy of us, I am confident of returning home with our lives.” Lady Ya asked, “Why is Lady Pingyuan suddenly listening to you, it is because...” Xiang Shaolong slapped her butt warningly and said, “Don’t let your thoughts wander. I just analyzed to her the situation.” Lady Ya giggled, “Of course I believe you, Lady Pingyuan may be vicious but she’s very uptight about relations between men and women. I just wonder if you can make her break her defenses? Don’t forget that even Zhao Ni was unable to escape from your evil clutches!” Xiang

Shaolong said honestly, “I did flirt with her a little. In order to survive, and under this major rule of thumb, I am willing to do anything.”

Before he finished his words, Xiao Zhao came in and said, “Lady Pingyuan would like to invite Master Xiang over!” Lady Pingyuan was seated along in her tent, her hair piled high up in a bun and affixed with a gold hairpiece. She was wearing a long brocade outfit with light makeup on her face, looking absolutely radiant. Xiang Shaolong can’t help but secretly compliment this woman for knowing how to dress up, mainly because she is a born clothes rack, and looks good in anything she wears. She must have been an alluring thing when she was young, a pity that she is so vicious. When she saw Xiang Shaolong arriving, she said nonchalantly, “Imperial Protector please take a seat!” Xiang Shaolong loves flirting with especially alluring women, and she still looks so young, so he smiled and said, “Can I sit anywhere?” Lady Pingyuan stared at him, “Imperial Protector, you are getting more and more discourteous with me.” She stared at him fiercely again, as if reprimanding him for licking her earlobe the other day. Xiang Shaolong looked at her expression and knows that she is going to play along with his plan, thinking of changing her strategy to a softer one to trap him. But he is not afraid at all. Matters between men and women are like playing with fire, and one can burn oneself if he’s not careful. It’s still an unknown whether Lady Pingyuan will really fall for him in the end. Xiang Shaolong is not willing to press her too hard so he went to her side and lied down. Lying on the soft rug, he stretched lazily and gave a satisfied sigh. Lady Pingyuan turned her head around and looked at Xiang Shaolong who was lying now next to her and asked coldly, “Xiang Shaolong! Stop playing games, what do you want?” Xiang Shaolong deliberately breathed in deeply twice and said, “Lady smells so nice!” There’s nothing Lady Pingyuan can do to him, and suppressing the urge to slap him angrily, she said, “Answer me

quickly!” Xiang Shaolong felt all these exchanges exciting and said, “Right now I only want one person, Lady should know who that person is?” Lady Pingyuan calmed down and nodded her head, “Fine! If you answer one question of mine, and if I find the answer satisfactory, I will make a guess who is the person you want.”

A person of her status, by saying that is akin to agreeing to give her body to the other party. Xiang Shaolong has eavesdropped on her conversation with her son before and naturally knows that this woman has a sweet tongue but hidden daggers so he said with a smile, “Matters between men and women are not a transaction, so how can you lay down rules beforehand. Besides it’s up to you to decide if my answer is satisfactory, so please forgive your subordinate for not accepting it.” Lady Pingyuan’s gaze turned glacier and stared at him, “Xiang Shaolong are you feeling guilty, that’s why you don’t even dare to answer a question?” Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that she should be the guilty one and said, “Who has no guilt? Those without guilt has gone to see the King of Hell a long time ago.” Lady Pingyuan has lived most of her life as royalty, and now she is in an esteemed status so how can she tolerate such behavior. She felt extremely unhappy, yet she also felt an excitement she’s never felt before.

All along, she has always remained emotionless as she carried out her plans that can benefit her. She has always never cared much about relationships between men and women. When she married Prince Pingyuan, all she thought was the possibility of him replacing the King of Zhao. Marriage to her is just a transaction. Therefore she never allowed other men to flirt with her at all. This time she met the young and handsome Xiang Shaolong, and although she was a little attracted by his appearance, what moved her heart was his strong will and high handed ways as well as his unique charisma. Strangely it made her want to bow down to one

stronger than her. And slowly but surely he is advancing towards her. Now she feels as if she cannot take it any more, and yet she feels greatly excited by it all. Such dilemma is making her feel lost. By now she has forgotten that Xiang Shaolong is only a useful pawn. Xiang Shaolong could tell that this is her only weakness, that's why he deliberately used such methods to deal with her. The 2 of them stared at each other, neither wanting to back down.

Xiang Shaolong feels no love towards her at all, but her high and mighty regal status as well as her radiant and mature outlook stirred up his lust. Of course mixed with it is a strong feeling of revenge. He felt that no matter what he does to this vicious woman, there's no need to be responsible for it. And her dangerous nature is in itself a very strong lure. He sat up and moved nearer, until he lightly touched Lady Pingyuan's untouchable pale arms and slender legs before he stopped. With less than 2 to 3 inches between them, he looked at her challengingly, looking at her eyes, which showed the conflict in her emotions. Lady Pingyuan furrowed her brows tightly and said quietly, "Xiang Shaolong! Aren't you going too far?", secretly hating that touch that made her lose all her senses. Although Xiang Shaolong has the intention to flirt with her, he understands that for women like her who think so highly of themselves, the most important thing is to know when to stop, and he must strip her of her defenses bit by bit. He stood up and said with a laugh, "It seems that Lady has not gathered the courage to accept real happiness." And he left the tent.

Lady Pingyuan jumped up and cried out daintily, "Xiang Shaolong!" Xiang Shaolong stopped in his steps and turned around, his heated eyes roaming about her body a few times before asking respectfully, "Does Lady has any instructions?" Lady Pingyuan stamped her feet and said, "You have not answered my

question, I won't allow you to leave, or else just you wait and see what will happen when we reach Daliang." Xiang Shaolong walked towards her, his gaze and smile filled with conquering her. Lady Pingyuan was at a loss and actually took 3 steps back and for the first time revealed the weakness of a lady. Xiang Shaolong almost touched her bosom before he stopped, and reaching out his steady and strong hand, caught hold of her chin and forced her to look up at him. The skin under his fingers felt extremely tender. The light wrinkles around her eyes became a strange lure instead. Lady Pingyuan's hands was clasped tightly around her sleeves, her breathing quickening, the fragrance blowing directly on the other party's face. She very much wanted to close her eyes but she knows that once she do that, the other party will take a further step forward in her molestation. At this point in time she still finds it difficult to accept the idea although her physical reactions tell of a different thing altogether. She deliberately thought of how he injured her son, but still she can't find the heart to hate this man. In fact she felt the strong pressure exerted by the other party. Xiang Shaolong said gently, "Lady just ask! If I answer you honestly, Lady must allow me a kiss and you must not try to deny me that."

Lady Pingyuan's heart thumped wildly and she felt at a loss as well as extremely furious. However her body seemed to be leaning forward so she lifted her slender hand and pushed against his muscular chest but the other party did not move at all. Xiang Shaolong felt the excitement of taking advantage of a superior and released his hold on her chin, changing to grab her tender hands, which besides the dead Prince Pingyuan, no one else has touched before. He first forced her hands down and pushed it behind her before hugging her, sticking close to her thighs. Lady Pingyuan moaned quietly, her voluptuous body immediately leaned into him, pressing against him totally. Xiang Shaolong was afraid that she might not be able to take the excitement so he distracted her by

saying, “Speak! Xiang Shaolong am all ears.” Lady Pingyuan’s body trembled and like a frightened bird struggled for a moment but of course this did nothing to change the situation. She lifted her head and looked at Xiang Shaolong, stammering, “What are you doing?”

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to squeeze her and said, “If Lady is not going to ask the question, I am going to leave.” Lady Pingyuan could not withstand it any longer and with a groan, collapsed limply against him and uttered, “Xiang Shaolong! I want you to tell me, why were you able to set up a trap to harm my son?” Xiang Shaolong had long guessed that she is going to ask this same question as Lady Ya, and with Lady Pingyuan’s intellect she will certainly suspect that he has overheard their conversation. Then that would mean their other plans to deal with Xiang Shaolong has been revealed as well. If she does not clarify this point, how can she lure him. He was secretly cursing that this woman is ultimately still trying to cause him his death. He thought that no matter how interested she is in him, it would never be greater than her thirst for power. He smiled and said, “The person I wanted to deal with is not your son at all, it’s just that the man I placed in a secret location realized there are outsiders nearby and their numbers are not large, so I guessed they might be planning something against Princess. I just did not expect Young Master to be involved in this as well!”

This is a very good reply, and very reasonable as well. Because Wu Zhuo’s men are elite soldiers that Lady Pingyuan did not expect. Lady Pingyuan was relieved and her fake composure returned. She lifted her pretty face and was about to say something when Xiang Shaolong’s mouth pressed down, sealing her sweet lips. If Xiang Shaolong does not know about her evil plots, he will never touch even a hair on the mother of his enemy. Because he’s afraid he’ll be entangled in a messy relationship. But now it’s a

game of plotting against each other, each using their own tricks, so there's no emotional barrier at all. Instead, he felt the joy and excitement of taking advantage of his enemy's mother as revenge. Her body is still filled with life and suppleness, and doesn't feel old at all. Under the flirting of his lips and tongue, Lady Pingyuan's reactions started to heat up. At the most intoxicating and exciting moment, Xiang Shaolong released his hold on her sweet lips, hands and body, moved back and with a bow, said with a smile, "Thank you Lady for your favor." He ignored her silent look asking him to stay and left the tent. But he could still smell the fragrance of her body.

Book 3 Chapter 5 – Fighting Off Enemies At The River

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo's 100 men, with strong bows in their hands, lied low in a dense forest about a hundred steps away from the camp, looking at the slowly leaving troops in the gradually brightening sky.

When the sky was bright, Cheng Xu's men has already disappeared around the bend at the lower stream.

After a moment, sounds of hooves and men talking were heard on both sides of the river.

A group of almost 400 horse thieves rode out from a dense forest at the upper stream while on the opposite bank a large group of surprised thieves ran out. One of them was sitting high atop a horse, with a wave of long and coarse gray beard, and he is indeed the most famous horse thief roaming the Zhao borders, Hu Hui.

He was so furious his eyeballs were almost bulging out and kept hurrying his men to move the rafts for crossing the river out from the hiding place so that they can go after their enemies. Obviously they have lost their footing.

Sounds of hooves were heard, the horse thieves on this side of the river are already riding hard along the river.

The horse thieves on the other side are starting to cross the river.

Xiang Shaolong took a peek at Wu Zhuo and saw that in this dangerous and tense situation, he still maintained his cool and was secretly impressed.

20 odd wooden rafts, with war horses and other equipment on it, came crossing the river.

When Hu Hui's men ferried 2 batches of close to 400 warhorses and rations, they began to ferry the men across the river.

Hu Hui was on one of the wooden rafts.

By now, on this side of the river there were only about 50 to 60 horse thieves and totally unwary as they were busy moving the horses to the flat plains next to the river bank.

Xiang Shaolong gave a hand signal and a hundred odd men released a wave of arrows from the dense forest, causing chaos amongst the enemy and the horses and more than half their men were taken down.

Hu Hui and the rest were panicking as they hurriedly cocked their arrows to return fire. The small group of soldiers left on the bank screamed and scattered in all directions.

Xiang Shaolong and his men have by now moved behind the rocks next to the bank and the sound of bows clanging were heard as the light arrows flew like locusts towards the horse thieves on

the rafts who had nothing to cover them at all.

There was no way the horse thieves could avoid the arrows and fresh blood stained the rafts and river red.

Hu Hui hurriedly gave orders to retreat to the opposite bank.

Everyone aimed at him and a flurry of arrows flew towards this obvious target.

Although the horse thieves held the wooden oars high up, they were unable to block the hundreds of arrows and fell one by one.

Hu Hui saw that the situation was amiss and with an angry roar, jumped into the water and hid under the wooden raft.

The other thieves copied his move and all jumped into the water.

There were about 200 horse thieves still on the opposite bank but besides jumping and shouting, there's nothing they can do as well.

The light arrows shot into the water, fresh blood kept bubbling up from the water, followed by bodies floating up. The scene looked totally brutal.

It's either you perish or I'll die, this has always been a rock hard fact in wars.

The wooden rafts were broken and the pieces flowed downstream.

Xiang Shaolong was worried about the situation at Cheng Xu's side so he gave the orders to retreat, ignoring whether Hu Hui was dead or alive. They went up the warhorses they stole and led the horses equipped with rations downstream.

By now the battle at Cheng Xu's side is coming to an end as well.

When they reached a suitable site downstream, they used the carriages as a line of defense and Zha Yuanyu also led 400 men and spread out around the dense woods nearby, waiting for the pursuing thieves.

400 horse thieves came rushing along the river and they had just turned the corner when they saw the waiting Zhao soldiers but by then they have already fallen within shooting distance of the hiding soldiers. Just as they were at a loss whether to advance or retreat, the Zhao soldiers who were under cover behind the carriages let out a volley of arrows together and immediately men and horses felled.

The remaining men were unable to retreat in time and when they were thinking of going around the carriages via the side stream, Zha Yuanyu and his 400 hidden soldiers shot at them, causing total chaos among them.

As they hurriedly retreated, they bumped into Xiang Shaolong's reinforcements and was caught totally unawares. Less than 50

managed to escape by abandoning their horses and gear, running into the woods next to the bank.

Under this great victory, all the soldiers cheered, even those from the Pingyuan family shared this victorious atmosphere.

On Xiang Shaolong's side only 40 odd men were injured, but none of the injuries serious. The outcome was something to be proud of and once again it proved that Xiang Shaolong has an excellent military mind and flexible and effective ways of warring.

Xiang Shaolong sent 20 men to send the 300 odd warhorses they captured back to Zhao, but kept the weapons and rations for his own use. After tending to the injured soldiers, they continued to travel west along the river.

By the time they pitched tents at dusk, they're only about two and a half days away from the inner river.

Because the road along the journey was uneven and they've just had a short skirmish, the men and horses were all tired. Everyone was trying to get as much rest as possible and no one was talking throughout the night. Early the next morning they continued on their journey.

The scenery changed again, the mountains rose and fell in the distance, the trees and grass grew lushly and everything looked like a painting. Streams flowed between the mountains, with waterfalls, captivating one's eyes.

At the side is a huge and primitive forest with gigantic trees that even a few strong men holding hands won't be able to go around its circumference.

Sounds of animals and insects could be heard coming from the forest, and the Zhao soldiers hunted some wild foxes and rabbits on the way to add to their dinner.

Sometimes they will come to a high point and from there they can see the unending plains and forests.

Once in a while they will see an isolated village or farm amongst the tall grass and to Xiang Shaolong, everywhere he looks seems to be a paradise. He does not understand why humans still want to fight, and can only blame it on their inherent greed and evil nature.

Although the scenery is beautiful, the journey was arduous. Not only they need to manually open up a path, many times they have to use tree trunks to pave the roads before they can travel in between the streams.

They traveled less than 10li the whole day, and in the end set up camp at the top of a hill.

Although they were tired, the soldiers were all in high spirits, and very willing to carry out any orders from Xiang Shaolong.

Beauties will always love heroes, so Lady Ya is all the more

conceding towards him, letting him enjoy the gentleness of this exceptional creature.

Ever since Zhao Qian spoke to him that day through the window, she has been consciously avoiding him. He has no choice but to allow this situation to continue and did not make any moves to break this stalemate.

After his meal, Lady Pingyuan sent someone to invite him over again, saying there's something to discuss.

Xiang Shaolong was also curious as to her present attitude, so he hurriedly went to Lady Pingyuan's private tent.

Who would have expected that Lady Pingyuan would put 2 family warriors in her tent, and he was greatly disappointed, all naughty thoughts disappeared totally.

His relationship with Lady Pingyuan is truly a battle of wills between the 2 sexes. It gave him a feeling of committing something wrong, which gives him a stronger feeling of excitement.

Besides, which man would not like new and fresh things, much less a flirtatious man like Xiang Shaolong.

Lady Pingyuan was sitting on the floor rug with her guards up and after inviting him for a seat, she stared at him angrily and said, "This time we should be able to have a proper conversation!"

Naturally Xiang Shaolong understood her meaning. He was secretly feeling irritated but on the surface he had no choice but to say respectfully, “Lady please give your instructions!”

Lady Pingyuan stared at him again, a look filled with hate and love, but she said icily, “Now that we’re far away from the main road, where are we going actually?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “The journey has been difficult, Lady must have suffered. We are going to the river’s inlets first, before following the river towards Daliang.”

Lady Pingyuan suddenly sighed and leaned a little closer, saying quietly, “If you... I can make them leave.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic and hurriedly nodded his head in agreement.

Lady Pingyuan dismissed the 2 guards and after staring at him for a moment, she said after some thought, “You really are an exceptionally rare talent. Now no one will disbelieve that you once fought off Hu Hui’s 800 horse thieves with 50 men.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “The horse thieves are just a motley crew of men, and it’s easy to win them.”

Lady Pingyuan shook her head, “Some people are born leaders, not only can they make warriors work for them, they can also emerge victorious with their soldiers, never losing. You are one

such person.”

Xiang Shaolong has no idea what she is up to again, so he can only humbly accept the compliments.

Lady Pingyuan’s pretty face suddenly blushed and she lowered her head and said, “After passing the river inlets, and about 20 day’s journey towards the southeast, you will reach Pushui, and if continue south down the river, you will reach Fengqiu in 10 days. That city’s general Guan Po is my man, we’ll be out of danger once we reach that place.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Your subordinate will definitely follow Lady’s instructions.” He added curiously, “Why is Lady’s tender and smooth face suddenly blushing?”

Lady Pingyuan blushed all the way to her neck and said, “Are you back to your old ways again? Now scram.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was embarrassed and he felt pleased. He got up with a grin and with a bow, said, “Your subordinate takes his leave!” But his feet seems to have taken root and did not move at all.

Of course Lady Pingyuan doesn’t really mean to chase him away and seeing that his legs are not moving at all, she asked happily, “Why aren’t you leaving yet?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled evilly, “Isn’t Lady going to give your

subordinate a little reward?”

Lady Pingyuan was feeling utterly confused, and after looking at him for a moment, lowered her pretty face.

Xiang Shaolong walked over and knelt down behind her. His hands reached out and with a little pull, this regal lady fell into his arms weakly and once again he managed to enjoy her sweet lips.

This time Xiang Shaolong took it a step further, his 2 hands caressed her bosom.

Lady Pingyuan's body shook violently as she held his evil-doing hands in a death grip and moaned daintily, “Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong understands very well that the most precious thing is something that cannot be obtained. By luring her bit by bit, is the best way to ensure that she won't be able to harden her heart to harm him after they reach Daliang. So he stopped moving his hands and after having his fill of kissing her, he left, leaving this beautiful woman to spend the lonely night alone.

For the next 20 odd days, they continued traveling east and passed the inner river and the west river. They passed one of the big cities in Wei, Puyang but did not enter it, choosing to travel south on the official road from Puyang directly to Pushui.

After passing these few days in peace, their scouts once again found traces of their enemies scout, making them aware that

danger is once again looming.

They have lots of carriages and horses, and have to repair those faulty carriages often so their pace is as slow as a snail. There's no way they can throw the enemies off their back so they can only pray that these nameless enemies will not be as formidable as Hu Hui.

By now they are close to Daliang, and there are many official stops along the official road and every 10 li or so they will see the Wei's military barracks.

The attitude of the Wei soldiers was strange. After looking at their documents, although they did not try to make things difficult, but they refused to send troops to escort them, so when they reached the end of the official road, they have no choice but to travel east towards Pushui.

3 days later they left the mountain track and reached a large grassy plain on the western bank of Pushui but they need to travel another 2 days before they can reach Pushui.

The huge group stopped at the side of the grass plain.

Xiang Shaolong, Wu Zhuo, Cheng Xu and Zha Yuanyu walked to a side for some discussion, their expressions all somber.

Wu Zhuo said, "The enemies are now aware of our route and military strength but we have no information at all on the enemies

that may attack us, which is the biggest fault in military with the enemy in the dark and us in the open.”

Cheng Xu continued, “If the enemies were to attack, they’ll surely do it within these 2 days, because on such flat plains, it’s easier to attack than to defend. The enemies will definitely not miss such a good opportunity.” He continued with a bitter smile, “What I’m most afraid is the King of Wei will order his soldiers to disguise themselves as horse thieves and attack us, then we’ll be in very big trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows and after thinking hard for a moment, said, “This possibility that Cheng Xu has raised, could very well become a fact. Since that is the case, we cannot just sit and wait for death.”

The 3 of them were all ears as they waited to hear what miraculous plan this brilliant strategist has to save their lives.

Xiang Shaolong said quietly, “We might as well find a sturdy and highland around here with a mountain backing us and start setting up tents and ditches, store up on wild meat and spring water and stay here for half a month or so. On the other hand we’ll send out light cavalry to make their way towards Fengqiu, and beg the defending general Guan Po to send reinforcements. So even if the King of Wei has other nefarious plans, there’s nothing he can do.”

After much hard thinking, everyone decided this is the best plan they can come up with for a desperate situation.

Immediately after that Xiang Shaolong went to look for Lady Pingyuan to discuss the plan and through the bamboo curtains, he told her of the plan and the reason. Lady Pingyuan said quietly, "You're more experienced than me in this area, you shall decide on everything."

Xiang Shaolong has never heard her speak so gently and so obediently towards him before and he felt lust arising, so he asked, "Would Lady like me to visit you tonight?"

Lady Pingyuan sighed, "Shall we talk about this after we've reached Daliang? My son is already very unhappy that I was alone with you on a few occasions, and now that he is slowly recovering, I don't want him to get upset over us."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Prince Shaoyuan and his mood disappeared. He left her carriage and went to inform Lady Ya of the plan and told her to convey the message to Zhao Qian.

After scouting for half a day, they finally find a flat piece of highland with a mountain backing at a stream next to the plains and started setting up camp.

The whole army began busying themselves and at the same time they sent out 20 light cavalry carrying Lady Pingyuan's handwritten letter with her seal and went to Fengqiu via 10 different routes to ask for assistance.

The process of setting up camp this time is vastly different when compared to the past, with ditches being the main form of defense.

Along the circumference of the highland they dug ditches one foot deep and five feet wide. The soil that was dug out was piled in front of the ditches and stones were added, making it into a short mud wall about half a foot high, with holes in it for the usage of bows and arrows and it was quite sturdy. They then pushed the carts along the inner circle of the wall to fortify the wall against the force of the enemy's attacks.

Outside of the short wall, the slope was filled with sharpened bamboo stakes and holes to trip the horses. There was danger everywhere to deal with the strong attacks of the enemy.

The long grass and woods surrounding the area were removed to prevent enemies from taking cover amongst them.

The camp itself was set up according to how it's usually done, in the shape of a crescent moon, with the main tents in the middle and the 6 armies split into both sides, forming a half circle with the front protruding out. The camp and the short wall was more than 3 feet apart so unless the wall has been taken over, the camp will be out of reach of the enemy's projectiles.

After busying themselves for 3 days, they've finally made the camp into one strong in defenses with the ditch on the outside, a rampart on the inside and pikes and holes outside the walls.

In order to prevent the enemy from using fire to attack, Xiang Shaolong dug ditches to connect the stream behind them into the camp. By the time everything was done, 5 days has passed.

That day when Xiang Shaolong was instructing his men to set aside rocks collected from the slope, the scouts returned to report that they found a group of horse thieves close to 10,000 in strength rushing through the flat plains.

Everyone understood in their hearts that this must be the enemy that has been waiting for them a long time in the plains without avail, therefore they could not take it any longer and has come to attack them directly.

And this also proved that their guess was correct. No one will believe that there are no Wei soldiers mixed into the group of enemy.

Although they know that to be the truth, they're still not sure why the King of Wei would want to be so ruthless, and the only explanation is that Prince Xinling is indeed a threat to his throne and he's thinking of using this to spoil the relations between Prince Xinling and the Zhaos. As for any other reasons, it something that they will not know. But the King of Wei is well known for being a useless king, so no one will find it strange that he'll actually do something so ridiculous.

The night passed peacefully and the next day, Xiang Shaolong instructed that besides the soldiers on duty, everyone else were to rest so that they can conserve their energy to deal with the enemy's attack.

Luckily they have kept a large amount of weapons, rations and

arrows from Hui Hu and it's enough for them to stay besieged for half a month without having to worry about food and arrows.

Another advantage they have is that the enemy will not expect them to build a barricade so reasonably speaking they would not have brought equipment that can deal with barricades, so it will make their job defending much easier.

At dusk, the horse thieves could be seen appearing on the plains and they even set up camp. Obviously there's going to be a standoff between the 2 armies.

Xiang Shaolong scrutinized his enemy and exclaimed hoarsely, "Look! Isn't that Hu Hui?"

The others strained their eyes and saw a group of horse thieves riding nearer towards them, and the one leading them is indeed Hu Hui.

Cheng Xu exclaimed furiously, "From what is seen, Hu Hui does belong to the King of Wei and those horse thieves are Wei soldiers in disguise. Their job is to disrupt other state's financial and political stability. The Weis are really vicious!"

Zha Yuanyu shook his head and sighed, "I really do not understand why his Majesty would want to marry our prettiest princess to the Weis."

Cheng Xu warned him, "You'd better be careful with your words,

if this goes to his Majesty's ears, you and your tribe will all be in big trouble."

Zha Yuanyu smiled bitterly, "Let's talk about it after we survive tonight!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has seen that the number of horse thieves are almost 10 times more than their troops and was feeling afraid. From that he can deduce that the others will feel the same as well and morale will definitely be affected. He furrowed his brow and came up with a plan. He told Cheng Xu, "Prepare a round of fire arrows for me, I might be using them tonight."

After he spoke, he returned to his tent, ignoring their querying looks. He collected his tools and walked towards the back of the camp.

At the area between the camp and the back of the mountain, the mules and horses were separated into 2 huge wooden enclosures, leisurely drinking the clear water redirected from the stream and nibbling on the green grass.

Luckily this is only the beginning of winter, or those animals would be in big trouble if there's a huge snowstorm.

He lifted his head and studied closely the layout and shape of the cliffs and the nearby mountains and with the metal hooks, easily climbed up. He used a hammer to install the climbing rings that Guo Zhong made for him at the appropriate spots, moving towards the next mountain and attached a rough rope before climbing back

to camp. As long as he can climb over the neighboring mountain, he can easily use this 'secret route' the drop down to the plains dozen of feet below and proceed with his secret mission.

By the time he returned to the commander's tent, Cheng Xu came running towards him anxiously and said, "Come and take a look quickly!"

When he returned to the frontline, he saw that the horse thieves at the bottom were all at work, cutting down trees and putting a pile of sharpened stakes about a foot long on the ground in a row.

Wu Zhuo furrowed his brows and asked, "What are they trying to do?"

Xiang Shaolong has an idea on what it could be and exclaimed, "Those are the tools for attacking our mud city. They just have to line those trunks in a row on the slope, then they need not fear the attack from our arrows and rocks."

Zha Yuanyu exclaimed, "This is a very effective move, they just need to have 3 rows of these together front and back, they need not fear even rolling rocks. Also, this would block our view of them and we won't be able to see what they're planning."

Wu Zhuo laughed icily, "If they want to defeat this thing, they would first have to pay a horrible price." He continued with a sigh, "If only their strength was halved."

What he meant was that, even if they sacrificed a lot of men, the remaining strength would still be enough to overrun and enter their barricades.

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Don’t worry! The enemy made a biggest mistake, and that is to belittle their opponent. Look at their camp, there’s no defenses at all. The rations and horses are just abandoned behind there. If we can give them a good fire, their expressions will be very interesting to watch!”

Wu Zhuo and the rest furrowed their brows, looking at the packed thieves on the small hill below and secretly thought that it’s not them who belittle their opponent, but even a rat will find it difficult to slip out and set a fire to their camp.

Xiang Shaolong just smiled and did not explain any further. He returned to his tent for a rest.

After sleeping for 4 hours, it was dusk by the time he woke up. Lady Ya was waiting there quietly to have dinner with him.

Xiang Shaolong sat up feeling refreshed and after freshening up, he ate 3 big bowls of rice.

Lady Ya looked at him curiously, “It seems that you’re very confident, or else you won’t be so excited and in high spirits? But I cannot think of why you would still be so confident of defeating the enemy this time.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and laughed, “Is Ya’er afraid?”

Lady Ya happily kissed him before saying with a smile, “I really am a little afraid without you around, but after seeing you, I’m suddenly fearless. That’s right! Go over to Zhao Qian’s place! She said there’s something she would like to beg of you.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that Zhao Qian is a bigger headache to him compared to the horse thieves.

After this pretty Third Princess dismissed her maids, she came to his side and said shyly, “Xiang Shaolong, can Zhao Qian borrow something from you?”

Xiang Shaolong was asked curiously, “What do you want to borrow?”

Zhao Qian suddenly opened her fair and tender palm and said quietly, “I want your personal dagger which you carry at all times.”

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed, “Do you have so little confidence in me? I will definitely send you to Daliang.”

Zhao Qian’s pretty eyes reddened and she stared at him with sadness and hatred before saying, “Zhao Qian does not want you to bring her to Daliang. Everywhere else is fine, but not to Daliang.”

No words other than these can so clearly express the love she felt for Xiang Shaolong.

Hot blood rushed up Xiang Shaolong's veins and he blurted, "Fine! I promise you, even if I bring you to Daliang, I'll have a way to bring you back to Zhao whole and unblemished."

Zhao Qian was shocked, "Really!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel her pretty face light up, filled with hope and he gritted his teeth and replied, "This is a promise!"

After saying this sentence, he felt himself lightening up.

In truth, every since he found out the complicated situation in the Wei royal family, and knowing that the King of Zhao is going to steal the 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual', he felt that he cannot be the accomplice that helps to sacrifice Zhao Qian's lifelong happiness. Now that he has expressed his stand, that feeling is so great.

Zhao Qian was ecstatic, "Shaolong! Qian'er is really very grateful to you!"

Xiang Shaolong saw that her confidence in him is so much greater than his confidence in himself and felt happy about it. He took out his dagger and shoved it into her tiny hand, taking the chance to hold her soft hands and said, "Unless it's the last choice available, you must not kill yourself with this dagger."

Zhao Qian blushed to her neck and held this love token tightly against her chest. She lowered her head and said with love, “Qian’er will listen to Shaolong’s instructions.”

Xiang Shaolong was captivated and was thinking of taking the opportunity to go a little further when the sounds of drums were heard coming from the foot of the mountain.

Looking at the situation at the foot of the mountain, the expression on Cheng Xu and the rest were ashen. Only Wu Zhuo maintained a calm composure.

The thieves had successfully lined the ground with rows of wooden stakes about 2 feet wide and surrounded all routes of escape at the foot of the mountain.

There’s only a small gap in between the tied wooden stakes, only wide enough to allow a single person to pass, and he won’t be able to go through if he’s on a horse.

Lanterns were hung on the top of the stakes, illuminating the slope clearly.

Beyond the wooden stakes about 2000 horse thieves gathered, the 200 men at the forefront carrying a huge wooden shield as tall as a man, it’s ends pointed so that it can be driven into the ground too help block the attacks from falling rocks.

Another 200 odd men carried tools like shovels and hoes and it

seems that they are first going to remove the obstructions along the slope and fill up the ditches filled with sharp stakes. Following behind them are 500 archers holding strong bows, and after them came the troops holding long halberds, spears, etc. The formation looked majestic and sends a chill down their spines.

Hui Hu and a few men who looked like leaders were sitting atop their horses, making pointing actions towards them, obviously discussing their plans of attack.

Wu Zhuo pointed to a burly man, who looks like a wolf, next to Hui Hu and said, "That man is called 'Wolfman' Li Ao, a famous horse thief who frequents the border along the State of Han. His fame is on par with Hui Hu, and I did not expect that he also belongs to the King of Wei."

Xiang Shaolong commented, "So it seems that this 10,000 strong troop is made up of different groups of horse thieves, but they're all men sent by the King of Wei. Humph! I think I understand now, the King of Wei is dealing with us so as to give Prince Xinling a hard blow, but also because there's a personal grudge involved. Because I once killed a large group of Hui Hu's men." He suddenly realized, no wonder at that time Dou Liang would secretly leak news to Hui Hu, and ask Hui Hu to come and steal the horses and women. It's because they are all spies sent by the King of Wei to stir up trouble at the Zhao border.

Cheng Xu said, "It seems that they will take turns and attack us relentlessly day and night. This will be a long battle which will see who weakens first."

Zha Yuanyu heaved a cold sigh and said, “Even if reinforcements were to come immediately upon hearing the news, it’ll still take at least 15 days. I’m afraid we can’t even hold them off for 3 days, who would have expect them to be so strong?”

The sounds of drums were heard.

A string of men carrying shields came out from the tiny gaps between the rows of wooden stakes and lined up neatly in front, followed by the soldiers with tools and the archers.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the sky is getting dark and after asking Cheng Xu for the bag of fire arrows that has been wrapped in oiled cloth, instructed them, “All of you will be in charge of defenses here. I’ll go behind enemy lines to burn their rations and chase their horses away, let’s see what great they can still do after that?”

Everyone looked at him in shock, not comprehending how he is going to make his way to the enemy camp.

Book 3 Chapter 6 – Defeating The Enemy's Army

Xiang Shaolong returned to camp and changed into his black outfit, strapped on the belt containing his needles and the equipment used for mountain climbing, carried the bows and arrows on his back and after kissing Lady Ya and bidding his farewell to the maids, he left towards the back of the camp.

He passed by Zhao Qian's tent and he can't help but stand outside the entrance of the tent and called out, "Princess!"

The tempo of the drums became more and more frantic, which means that the enemy is going to launch an attack soon.

"Boom, boom, boom..."

Beat by beat, it sounds like the calls of the grim reaper, the sounds going straight into the deepest corner of the souls of everyone on the battlefield.

Zhao Qian could have been thinking about Xiang Shaolong at that time, and upon hearing his voice, she lifted the flap of her tent in surprise and cried out, "Shaolong! What are you doing here? Hey!" Her pretty eyes noticed his black outfit.

Xiang Shaolong looked that this young girl as pretty as Wu Tingfang, looking at her pure, innocent and refreshing face and the feelings that he has been trying to keep suppressed rushed up

and he said with a smile, “I am now going on a deadly mission to deal with the enemy, isn’t Princess going to give me some encouragement?”

Zhao Qian was startled and her pretty eyes revealed her fear and excitement. She lifted her pretty face gently, pouted her lips and quietly waited for the arrival of her first kiss and happiness without any apprehension at all but her dainty and pert bosom was heaving quickly.

Next to the camp there were suddenly war cries.

The enemy has started to make their way up the slope.

But nothing entered the ears of Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Qian, they were totally lost in that feeling of closeness, drunk in the soul wrenching proximity.

The sounds of battle cries and arrows flying broke the silent night and fell and rose like waves.

Xiang Shaolong released Zhao Qian and said with a smile, “With this kiss! I, Xiang Shaolong, will have the confidence to protect Princess until the end of time.”

While Zhao Qian was still feeling intoxicated, Xiang Shaolong has already disappeared into the darkness of the night.

The northern wind blew.

Xiang Shaolong used all the skills he's learnt and based purely on his memory and feel, climbed up the steep cliff using the rope he had tied earlier. He quietly landed himself behind the enemy and made his way silently towards the enemy camp.

He once received the strictest military training of the 21st century and such night sabotages is but child's play to him.

Without his armor to weigh him down, he was like a bird that found wings. He moved silently and speedily like a civet cat and was soon at the back of the enemy.

The thieves set up their camp according to the 'square formation', with 5 squares from the inside to the outside.

The tents containing the rations were at the furthest back, followed by 2 large enclosures where hundreds of warhorses were kept.

The situation over at the other side was getting more and more intense but the situation at the enemy's camp here is peaceful, quiet and dimly lit. It seems that for the thieves whose turn is not up for their attack is trying to gather as much rest as possible.

Xiang Shaolong laughed secretly to himself, and thought that he can guarantee that they will not have a good night's sleep tonight, but they will have a cruel nightmare which has come to life.

He observed closely and found that the security at the enemy camp was lax, and some of the soldiers on guard duty were even sitting on the ground and nodding off.

When he went to the horse enclosure, he felt it even more hilarious. It turns out that the 12 men on night duty were gambling happily in a circle, as if they're totally unaware of the intense situation over at the battlefield.

As soon as he gets rid of these 12 thieves, he'll be able to set fire to the rations tent.

The problem is, how can he kill these 12 soldiers who are experienced in battle and not let a single one escape?

Xiang Shaolong cracked his head over this.

Right at this time one of the men walked towards him.

Xiang Shaolong was initially shocked, luckily he saw that the man was loosening his pants as he walked and he realized what the other party was going to do so he hurriedly hid behind a tree.

That person just stepped into the woods when there's a flash of dagger, he felt a coldness at his throat and was dead immediately.

Xiang Shaolong kept his Flying Rainbow, removed that person's outer armor and wore it. He swaggered out until he was behind 2 of the men and reached out to grab their heads and banged it hard

against each other. His palms reached out and with lightning speed chopped at another 2 men's neck.

His moves were smooth and swift and only when the 4 fell to the ground did the other 7 thieves realize what has happened.

The dagger flashed. With the Flying Rainbow in his hand, Xiang Shaolong leapt up and landed on the rock that they had been using as a gambling table and slashed the throats of 3 men.

“Bang!”

He kicked his leg and it landed on the side of one of the men's face, who had just drew his sword. The man fainted.

The remaining 3 thieves were terrified and escaped in 2 different directions.

Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed to himself and Flying Rainbow flew from his hand, stabbing and killing one of the man in his back.

The other 2 saw that he has lost his weapon so they drew their sword and came running back.

Xiang Shaolong reached towards his waist and pulled out 2 flying needles and with a flick of his wrist, the needles flew out like lightning, aiming at the spot between the men's brows.

By the time their bodies touch the ground, Xiang Shaolong has already picked up Flying Rainbow and disappeared into the darkness.

The battle cries were even more intense now.

Sounds of rocks and stones landing were heard, obviously the enemy is near the top of the slope and Cheng Xu and the rest had no choice but to release the rocks to attack the enemy making their way up.

By now Xiang Shaolong has successfully destroyed the horse enclosure at the back and he hurriedly removed his bow and made his way past the horses nearer to where the rations are kept.

Looking at the enemy's camp from this angle, he happened to see that at the outermost area furthest back about 3 feet away there were a row of 20 odd tents, with a lamp hung outside each of the tent, shaking in the northerly wind. The camp was deserted with only a few guards on night duty who were dozing off, security was extremely lax.

They can't really be blamed, for this place is behind all their troops and they thought that Xiang Shaolong's men were all heavily surrounded far away, that's why they were careless.

This morning Xiang Shaolong had made use of his high vantage view and saw clearly that the 40 odd tents at the last 2 rows were used to store rations, saving him the trouble of having to scout

around.

The camp's back was facing the south, the northern wind is blowing right now. So if he can successfully set fire to the rations at the southern end and if the fire were to follow the direction of the wind, he may very well cause the rest of the camp to be on fire very quickly, especially when the inside of the camp is full of wild grass. It may become a huge fire that no one can deal with.

After he made up his mind, Xiang Shaolong knelt down with one knee on the ground and lit the arrows first before shooting it towards the ration tent nearest to him. He chose the tent right at the back of the camp, so unless the smoke was very thick, the enemy will not find out about the fire so soon.

After setting fire to the tents at the outer area, he set fire to the horses grains inside the horse enclosure. He found one exceptionally strong warhorse with stirrups and led it around the camp through the dense woods at the side, towards the middle of the camp.

By now the northern side of the camp is thick with smoke and flames could be seen and a few alert guards have started crying out to others to put out the fire and were rushing towards the fire.

What made the thieves even more panicky were the nervous neighs and trampling of the warhorses, and for a moment the whole camp was in chaos.

Xiang Shaolong rode the horse and at the same time continued

shooting fire arrows along the perimeter of the camp. As long as the perimeter of the camp is on fire, those in deep sleep inside the tents can forget about escaping the fire.

While everyone's attention was focused on the intense fire at the northern end, he wore the thief's armor again and walked boldly across the camp towards the perimeter on the other side.

The thieves' camp is in a mess. The troops were trying to get as much rest as possible before they start the next shift of attack but they are now scurrying out of the tents sleepy-eyed and still in a daze about their surroundings.

Some even thought enemies have attacked them and came running out with their weapons and armor in disarray.

Everywhere else there were scurrying and panicky soldiers.

Sound of hooves were heard from the northern end. Obviously the warhorses are in shock and running towards the plains.

Xiang Shaolong rode past but no one suspected him at all. Some even called out to him as he's the only person to have a horse to run after the escaped horses.

Xiang Shaolong called out a reply and turned a circle, still running towards the perimeter on the other side. By now the tents at the side along the back were embroiled in the fire and the fire engulfed the surrounding trees and grass, adding fuel to the

rapidly spreading fire.

He had used up his arrows so he might as well throw away his bow and pulled out his Flying Rainbow instead. He toppled every lantern that he saw and when the oil lamps dropped to the ground, the flames started immediately and it's even more effective than the arrows.

He heard something behind him. Xiang Shaolong immediately lied low on the horse's back and 3 arrows flew past his back.

He laughed and with a tight grip around the horse's belly, is already far away from them. After toppling another 10 odd lanterns, he realized that the soldiers are not coming towards him. Without hesitation, he hurried the horse to run faster towards his own camp.

By now the soldiers who were attacking the camp came running back in a frenzy, thinking that a large group of enemies have attacked them in their panic.

These thieves, besides Hui Hu, Wolfman and another 4 leaders, the rest were all foot soldiers so by the time they retreated, Hui Hu and those on horses were already way ahead.

Xiang Shaolong was brilliant and bold. He kept his Flying Rainbow and pulled out 2 flying needles instead and hid it in his hands.

In the darkness, Hui Hu could only rely on the far away fire and could not see clearly so he thought that the person coming towards them is his own man here to give a report so he shouted from afar, “What happened?”

Xiang Shaolong shouted back, “It’s Prince Xinling’s men!”

The rest of the bandit leaders were shocked and hastened over.

Hui Hu and Wolfman were a little further behind and Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented that it’s a pity. He raised his hands and the flying needles shot out.

The strength of his wrist was formidable and the impact of the long and thin needles astonishing, going past the armor and the 2 bandit leaders right at the front were struck immediately.

Before the 2 thieves fell, Xiang Shaolong had pulled out another 2 needles and threw them at another 2 people behind them.

Hui Hu and Wolfman both realized that something was not right and as they cried out, they pulled their long swords and came towards him from 2 sides.

By now the 2 men in the front row had already fell with a groan from the side of their horses.

Xiang Shaolong had no intention of retrieving the flying needles and with one hand controlling the horse and the other hand

pulling out Flying Rainbow, he faced Wolfman who was coming from his left side.

Wolfman roared and borrowing the force from the running horse, aimed his sword towards his face.

Xiang Shaolong cried out and raised his sword to block and at the same time leaned to a side and raised his leg and kicked Wolfman in his waist.

This kick is modified from Thai kickboxing and extremely powerful. Wolfman screamed and fell off his horse.

By now the 2 men at the back row who were struck by the flying needles dropped to the ground with a dull thud.

The warhorses, having lost their riders, were stamping and jumping in shock. When the hoof of one of the horses stamped down, it happened to land right on the chest of Wolfman who had fallen to the ground. Sounds of bones cracking could be heard immediately and this ferocious man died immediately.

Xiang Shaolong turned a circle around the 2 horses and took the opportunity to take out another flying needle and rushed towards Hui Hu's back.

Hui Hu saw that the situation was not right and turned his horse around, running swiftly towards the rapidly burning camp.

Xiang Shaolong removed his armor to lighten his body weight and gave chase.

His horse is carrying a much lighter load compared to Hui Hu's horse, and it's also especially strong so it was only about 7 or 8 horse lengths behind Hui Hu in the blink of an eye.

Without a word, Xiang Shaolong threw his flying needle.

Who would have expected that Hui Hu saw that there's no way he can run away so he might as well turned his horse around and coincidentally managed to avoid the flying needle.

That place happens to be right between the camp and the retreating soldiers so there was no one around for the moment, and it became a one to one situation.

Hui Hu raised his sword and came rushing back, shouting, "Who is that?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly, "It's your old friend Xiang Shaolong."

Amidst the sound of metal clanking, the 2 of them went past each other on horseback and exchanged 3 sword strokes but no one gained the upper hand.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to have such excellent arm strength and swordsmanship. When he turned his horse around,

he used his thighs to control the horse while his right hand held Flying Rainbow and his left hand drew out a flying needle.

He has been spending most of his time on horseback recently and this made his horsemanship improve greatly so he's no longer the greenhorn he used to be.

Hui Hu took the opportunity to draw his bow and arrow and cocked the arrow with lightning fast speed. With a 'clang' he released a strong arrow, his long sword held across by his teeth.

Xiang Shaolong's training has always been avoiding bullets so he's not afraid of his arrow at all. He leaned to the side and avoided the arrow and his thigh tightened against the horse's belly and it surged forward.

Hui Hu did not expect him to avoid this fatal strike and in shock he threw the bow at him while taking his long sword, which was clasped in his mouth.

Xiang Shaolong raised his feet and kicked the flying bow away. Flying Rainbow swept past, towards Hui Hu's chest.

There was a loud 'clang'.

Although Hui Hu managed to narrowly block the sword, but his defense was raised chaotically while his opponent's attack is planned. On top of that, he used the momentum from the running horse to increase the power of the strike so Hui Hu collapsed onto

his horse's back.

Xiang Shaolong roared and with a backhand let loose the flying needle.

There was a 'clink', and although the flying needle struck Hui Hu, it landed on his hard helmet and ricocheted off.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the situation is dire, if he allows the two horses to run in the wrong direction like this, there'll be no way he can catch up with this fiend within the short distance to the camp so he dismounted his horse with a back flip, turned a somersault in the air and Flying Rainbow flew out of his hand.

By now Hui Hu had just managed to seat himself upright, his thighs clasp his horse's belly when Xiang Shaolong's extremely sharp Flying Rainbow, which was made by the finest craftsman in the State of Yue, pierced him in his back and he died on the spot.

The horse ran wildly and after a distance away, Hui Hu's body fell from the horse.

Xiang Shaolong landed on the ground safely and ran up to retrieve his Flying Rainbow.

Thunderous war cries were heard from his side of the camp, apparently Cheng Xu and the rest saw how chaotic the thieves were and took the opportunity to kill their way out.

Xiang Shaolong felt his valor rising and he cut off Hui Hu's head, ignoring the flowing fresh blood and with the head held aloft, leapt up the horse towards the 2000 horse thieves who were retreating and shouted, "Hui Hu is dead! Hui Hu is dead! Run away quickly! Escape!"

Those thieves who were running back carrying torches were already in a panic because they were being pursued, and now on seeing this person in front of them carrying Hui Hu's head, thought that a strong army has come. No one dared to fight on and with a shout, all of them ran away in all directions.

The defeat of the thieves was like a domino effect, the thieves running at the back has no idea what has happened but the chain reaction made them run for their lives as well.

2000 odd men, defeated without even a fight.

In a short while, Xiang Shaolong met up with Cheng Xu and his troops who were pursuing the thieves and the whole army cheered and killed their way towards the blazing enemy camp.

The thieves have lost their leader, their camp is on fire, their rations and horses lost and none of them is in the mood for battle and were all running away. Xiang Shaolong led his men and killed until the day broke, coming out totally victorious.

They have killed more than a thousand enemies, but on Xiang Shaolong's side only 5 men perished and 150 odd men injured. Fighting against the enemy's 10,000 odd troops with less than a

thousand men and yet they suffered so little losses, it's really an unbelievable miracle. This has also established Xiang Shaolong's position in the battlefield.

But it was really a close shave towards victory.

When the enemy's camp was on fire, Hui Hu's men has already cleared all the obstacles on the slope and filled the ditches and was about to launch an offensive when urgent matters cropped up on their side and they had to retreat.

Those wooden stakes became an obstacle to the thieves' retreat instead and they were killed by the rocks that were rolled down and the arrows shot. Blood flowed like rivers and the scene looked like hell on earth.

Hui Hu and Wolfman's head were soaked in herbs and alcohol and light cavalry were tasked to send these back to the King of Zhao through shortcuts so that he can show these off to their fellow countrymen.

This is a psychological attack against Zhao Mu on Xiang Shaolong's part, to make the King of Zhao feel how important he really is. If not for the fact that there's now another twist in Zhao Qian's affair, there might have been a chance for him to retain his loyalty.

When Xiang Shaolong returned to camp, only Prince Shaoyuan whose hatred for him has now increased, refused to come out, using his illness as an excuse. Even Lady Pingyuan came out to

welcome his heroic return, and of course Zhao Ya, Zhao Qian and the other ladies as well.

Ever since ancient times, beauties have always loved heroes and when all the ladies looked at him, their gaze was filled with intoxication, making him feel as if he's in heaven.

In the 21st century, such a situation is almost impossible because everything depends on teamwork and collaboration, and an individual is only a small fry in the whole organization.

But in this warring states period, it is filled with romanticized individualistic heroism, that's why there are people like Shang Yang who can change the whole situation, and a famous general like Lian Po who rules the battlefield.

Xiang Shaolong is a product that has crossed time, with the training and knowledge of modern military tactics, that's why he can emerge miraculously victorious so many times.

So how can the ladies not fall for him.

Even the evil hearted Lady Pingyuan is now looking at him differently, and is now thinking of other things. Such a talent, if sacrificed will be such a waste.

Xiang Shaolong was injured in a few places and Zhao Ya and Zhao Qian dragged him into the commander's tent to tend to his injuries.

Lady Ya saw that Zhao Qian was not at all concerned that Xiang Shaolong was only wearing his shorts and was feeling perplexed. She was afraid that if there's something going on between the two of them, then there might be big trouble.

Zhao Qian asked with concern, "Is it painful?"

With 2 pretty ladies putting their dainty hands on him, he was so comfortable he almost moaned. Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile and lied down and fell into a deep sleep with the fragrances of the 2 ladies.

Book 3 Chapter 7 – Three States Joined As One

After winning Hu Hui, Xiang Shaolong still remained there for the next 10 days.

During this time the injured were recovering very well and after a discussion, everyone agreed that they should no longer wait for the border guard reinforcements for fear that the Weis will have some tricks up their sleeves again. They will continue the journey on their own and hopefully be able to meet the reinforcements on the way.

With this decision made, Xiang Shaolong went to see Lady Pingyuan.

Her family warriors' attitude towards him has changed greatly, being extremely respectful as if he is a deity.

Xiang Shaolong had found out from Lady Ya long ago that ever since Prince Pingyuan passed away, the 3000 odd family warriors he left behind all did not think highly of Prince Shaoyuan so many of them left and now there's less than 500 of them left.

If not for their connection with Prince Xinling, the King of Zhao would not have tolerated Prince Shaoyuan and allowed him to become such a bully in Handan.

Most of these family warriors are from Zhao and has no feelings

towards the State of Wei. Now that they are slowly realizing that after Lady Pingyuan goes to Wei, she may never return to Zhao again, they are beginning to have second thoughts. And Xiang Shaolong has become the most ideal person for them to throw their lot with, firstly because of his background as the grandson-in-law of the Wu family, and most importantly they saw how righteous he is and his astounding swordsmanship, bravery and tactics.

In this era, a powerful man will naturally have men willing to follow him. And Xiang Shaolong's potential to become powerful is like the rising sun.

Mercenaries and family warriors represent a person's ability.

In the past Prince Xinling was able to snatch Jin Bi's military token to deal with the Qins because he already has a few thousand family warriors under him.

So it's a most natural thing that those in the Pingyuan's family changed their attitude towards him totally.

Outside Lady Pingyuan's tent, he bumped into the almost recovered Prince Shaoyuan but the latter did not even bother to take a look at him and went in on his own.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly commenting to himself, 'what a lad, consider yourself lucky that I did not give you trouble, and yet you have the audacity to show me your unhappiness.'

Ever since he injured Prince Shaoyuan so seriously, his hatred towards him has lessened greatly but now on seeing his antagonistic attitude, the feeling of old hatred came back.

Inside the tent, Lady Pingyuan was leaning on her couch, her wrist resting on the soft cushion, looking especially alluring, which made Xiang Shaolong's heart beat faster.

When she gave birth to Prince Shaoyuan, Zhao De, she was not any older than 15, so although she now has a grown up son, she's only in her 30s. This is the time a woman is most feminine, sultry and in need of the opposite sex.

Having a relationship with such a mature lady is certainly only to pursue the gratification of the body, unlike the illusions surrounding young couples which are quickly broken by reality.

That's why when he saw how inviting Lady Pingyuan look, thoughts of copulation immediately entered his head.

But instead he behaved properly and sat down at the side of her feet.

Lady Pingyuan asked nonchalantly, "Xiang Shaolong, you're not going to wait for reinforcements and planning to set off immediately?"

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, "You guessed!"

Lady Pingyuan rolled her eyes at him coquettishly and said, “Not a guess, but a deduction based on your character. Because you’re not the kind who will let others have the chance to move first.”

Xiang Shaolong was a little thrown off guard and said with a bitter smile, “It seems that Lady has changed your attitude towards me, not only are you not on your guard against me, but you seem to be luring me!”

Lady Pingyuan guffawed and rolled her eyes at him again, “It’s your thinking! But I am not going to lure you, instead I wish to have an honest talk with you, that’s why the change in attitude is a very natural thing.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised, “That means that Lady has not been totally honest with me all this time.”

Lady Pingyuan replied frankly, “You can say that, because at that time I could not see through you. It was only until you defeated Hui Hu’s enormous army that I realized that you are not one who is will willingly let others control you, and you have the intelligence and ability to achieve this.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly, “You’re confusing me, how can I know when you’re telling me the truth and when you’re lying? Or maybe you only changed your tactic of dealing with me?”

Lady Pingyuan did not reply him but instead asked suddenly, “Do you know why An Li wants to destroy this wedding agreement between Zhao and Wei?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head.

Lady Pingyuan's eyes were filled with sadness as she slowly explained, "The story will have to start from 20 years ago, which was 3 years before the battle of Chang Ping started. Zhao Qian was only 3 years old then."

By now Xiang Shaolong is quite familiar with the history of that time and asked, "Is Lady referring to the time the King of Qin sent the 'king of killing' Bai Qi to attack the state of Han?"

Lady Pingyuan chuckled, "King of killing? Humph! This nickname is indeed very suitable for that fiend whose hands are stained with blood."

She sighed and continued, "If the Qins were to invade east, those who will take the brunt first will be our 3 states, Wei, Zhao and Han. Facing the same calamity, feelings run especially strongly so the 3 most powerful officials in the 3 states secretly came to a deal, which is to let the 3 separated states join together and become a strong country while they are still living, which is akin to the Large State in the past. Only this way can they defeat the Qins and become the rulers of the world."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "So they actually had this thought."

Lady Pingyuan changed the topic, "Do you know why I wanted to marry Prince Pingyuan?"

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that of course it's because she thought that Prince Pingyuan could take over the leadership position! However, he said instead, "Is that another political agreement?"

Lady Pingyuan said, "I guess you can put it that way! It is indeed part of an agreement, which is to make use of the marriages between royalty to strengthen the relations between the various Kings." She continued with a smile, "But the most important reason, is because Wuji and me were very interested in the state of Zhao. Before the battle of Changping, the Zhaos had the world's best generals and fighters and were unrivaled. The state of Zhao was the first to abandon fighting battles with carriages and instead changed to using cavalry as their main force."

Wuji is Prince Xinling's name.

During the Spring-Autumn period, carriages were the main forces used in battles. The war carriage represents a person's status and ability. Changing the carriages to horses is in fact a revolution of that time, which also changed how battles were fought.

Because the State of Zhao had been in constant battles with the ferocious [Xiong Nu](#) and with their experienced gain from such battles, the Zhaos learnt that these nomadic army who fight mainly on horseback with archery is a lot more nimble and swift in their attacks. Therefore they abandoned fighting with carriages, a way of battle which looks majestic but is in fact useless.

Lady Pingyuan said sadly, “But after Chang Ping, our dreams were rudely shattered, but it also made us believe even more strongly that the only way to survive is to reunite the 3 states. This is the only way to avoid fighting and wars amongst ourselves.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Those three important officials, naturally it’s Prince Xinling from Wei, Prince Pingyuan from Zhao, but who is the official in Han?”

Lady Pingyuan replied, “I have no wish to say it. In any way they used their influence and decided on a string of marriage agreements between the 3 states. The Empress of Zhao is a Han, and Prince Xinling married a Zhao lady. The marriage of Zhao Qian to the Crown Prince of Wei is the most important one in the agreements.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood and he slapped his thigh as he said, “It must be that King An Li heard about this and was afraid the unification of the 3 states will make him lose his throne, that’s why he’s going all out to destroy this marriage agreement. But he is the King of Wei, if he wants to go back on the marriage agreement, he only has to say so, why waste so much effort?” He looked at her coldly and asked, “Why does Lady want to destroy Zhao Qian’s virginity?”

Lady Pingyuan’s pretty face blushed slightly and she asked, “Can you not try to settle old scores with me!”

She continued with a sad sigh, “But the situation changed, the early death of Prince Pingyuan has caused the shift of power in Zhao into that fiend Zhao Mu’s hands. That’s why Prince Xinling

was forced to return to Wei and start a new round of fight with that useless King An Li, and Zhao Qian's marriage agreement has lost its initial meaning."

She was deep in thought for a moment, her eyes fixed on Xiang Shaolong before she continued, "In actual fact no one is trustworthy nowadays, but on the surface everyone pretends to be honest in the ways they deal with the world. That useless King An Li has gone back on his words on many occasions, both to people in his own state and outside of it, so how can he go back on his word with the Zhaos. Besides he's very wary of Wuji, so he will not dare to oppose the agreement so publicly." She paused and said quietly, "Dealing with Zhao Qian is only a secondary matter, the real person he wants to get rid of is me. Because he knows that when Wuji and I join forces, we'll be a huge threat towards him, because I have what Wuji lacks, which is viciousness."

No one understands more than Xiang Shaolong what her last sentence means. Looking at her bright and lengthy eyes, he said quietly, "Why is it that Lady is suddenly being so honest with me, telling me such a great secret?"

Lady Pingyuan's smooth thighs moved slightly, touching the side of Xiang Shaolong's buttocks, her pretty face blushing and she said gently, "Because I saw a new ray of hope in you. Unless you do not step foot into Zhao forever, or else you will certainly have to engage in a life and death duel with Zhao Mu. If you can eliminate Zhao Mu, or take over his position, then it will again be possible for the 3 states to unite." She lowered her voice and added, "But this is not the most important reason, do you want to go on listening?"

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming on, he does not know if this is another of her ploy to deal with him. Because after eavesdropping on her conversation with her son the other night, her venomous nature has carved a very deep impression on him. Besides, she dotes on her son so much, so how can she really fall for her son's enemy and tell him what's really on her mind?

He thought to himself that if she wants to play games with him, he'll play along with her. He extended his hand and put it on her thigh, gently caressing her sensitive inner thigh, looked in her eyes and explained, "Of course I want to listen!"

Lady Pingyuan's eyes revealed an alluring gaze as she lowered her head to look at his invasive hand, saying gently, "Because I want to surrender to you, and beg for your love and pity."

Xiang Shaolong shifted forward and sealed her fragrant lips, his hands attacking her at the same time. Lady Pingyuan's body was shaking violently, her tongue cold as ice due to her passion and nervousness. Such unhidden natural reaction served to fuel Xiang Shaolong's lust.

A cold snort was heard from outside the tent.

The 2 of them were so shocked they separated and looked towards the entrance of the tent.

Prince Shaoyuan lifted the flap and entered, a flash of hatred and anger went across his eyes.

They both guessed that Prince Shaoyuan had actually entered earlier and saw them in their heated embrace but he stepped out again and snorted to surprise them before pretending that nothing has happened and stepped into the tent again.

Joy at having taken revenge surged in Xiang Shaolong's heart and without waiting for Prince Shaoyuan to speak, he rose and said, "We'll be traveling in the night tonight, so will Lady please make preparations."

Without even looking at Prince Shaoyuan, he left.

Xiang Shaolong finally understood some things that seemed so foggy long ago, for example the reason Tian Dan sent Xiao Weimou to destroy the wedding agreement between Zhao and Wei is because he does not want the 3 states to unite. Not only will that be disadvantageous for Qin, it will also become a threat to the state of Qi and the other states.

Although the 3 states all had different family names, but they had once served the same master so naturally they are a lot closer to one another compared to other states.

In the past Prince Xinling risked himself to steal the military token and wrestle over the military power because he wants to preserve the state of Zhao, with the hope that one day the 3 states can unite into one and become the strongest state.

But Tao Fang once said that the Weis are most untrustworthy. Lady Pingyuan may have some true feelings for him, but for Price

Xinling, he's just a useful pawn.

And the thing that influenced his decision the most, is that he knows that the 3 states will never unify. This has already been written in history books.

Can he change history?

“Commander!”

Xiang Shaolong turned towards the direction of the voice, it turns out to be one of two Zhao Qian's personal maid, Cui Tong.

These 2 maids were extremely pretty and outstanding, about one or two years older than Zhao Qian, which makes them about 17 or 18 years old.

Cui Tong stopped him and with a lowered head, said “Third Princess would like to request the audience of Sir.”

Xiang Shaolong's lust which was stirred up by Lady Pingyuan was not appeased, and on seeing how alluring and shy she looked, he felt a strong desire. But he thought that if he allow himself to do that, it will only serve to make Zhao Qian look down on him so he suppressed his urge and followed her to Zhao Qian's tent.

Cui Tong dared not walk alongside him, and walked half a step behind him instead.

Xiang Shaolong turned his head around and threw a glance at her. When he saw her blushing, he asked quizzically, “Why is Sister Xiaotong so shy?”

Cui Tong was showered and kept her head so low that her forehead was almost touching her chest and dared not look at him.

By now the two of them have passed the guards and entered the compound and there's no one else around the ladies camps. Xiang Shaolong is after all a flirt and he grabbed her hand and asked gently, “Is there anyone in your tent?”

Cui Tong's petite body trembled as she exclaimed in a mixture of shock and joy, “Commander! Please, others will find out.”

The flap of the tent where Xiao Zhao and the rest stayed in flipped open, startling Xiang Shaolong and he hurriedly released his hold on Cui Tong's hand and hurriedly walked into Zhao Qian's tent.

For the past 10 days, Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Qian has been behaving intimately. Other than the last hurdle, they have tried every other physical things possible and also suffering from trying to hold themselves back. That's why for these 2 days, they are restricting themselves instead and dare not overstep the border, afraid that they will do something that they might regret and let others catch him deflowering the beautiful Third Princess.

Zhao Qian saw him arriving and happily gave him a long pouch

which she sewed personally and said, “I made this especially for your wooden sword. Qian’er has never liked swords or weapons, but Xiang Lang’s wooden sword is an exception.” And she stared with irritation at Flying Rainbow, which was hung at his waist.

Xiang Shaolong like to carry Flying Rainbow with him because it’s light and swift and on seeing the beauty’s gift, he hugged her slender waist and kissed her tender cheeks before saying with a laugh, “You don’t even like the famous sword from Yue?”

Zhao Qian glared at him and said, “The Yue sword is well made and pretty, but it’s still a gift from Zhao Mu, and seeing it reminds me of him. Therefore I have no wish to see it.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “So you don’t like Zhao Mu.”

Zhao Qian’s eyes reddened as she replied, “Not only do I hate him, but I hate Imperial Father even more.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and moved to a side and sat down with her. Lying on the soft cushion, his hands roaming about her bosom, he asked, “Did Zhao Mu try to do anything overboard with you?”

Zhao Qian was weak from his fondles and burrowed herself into his chest, saying sadly, “I have a marriage agreement with the Weis, so he dare not be so bold. However Qian’er’s mother died because of him.”

Xiang Shaolong was so shocked that he stopped his hand activity and asked hoarsely, “What?”

Hot tears rushed out as Zhao Qian hugged Xiang Shaolong tightly, “Xiang Lang must decide for Qian’er, and kill that fiend for me.”

Xiang Shaolong wiped away her tears and asked gently, “Tell me first how he caused your mother’s death.”

He has never asked Zhao Qian about matters involving the imperial court, and thought that the Zhao empress now is her birth mother.

Zhao Qian related sadly with tears in her eyes, “At that time Qian’er’s mother was still Imperial Father’s most beloved concubine. One night Zhao Mu and Imperial Father summoned Mother into the bedroom and the next day Mother hanged herself. Qian’er was only 10 years old, but I will never forget that scene. Mother died horribly!” And she cried bitterly again.

Xiang Shaolong did not imagine that such a flawless and pretty princess would have such a horrible childhood and allowed her to cry and vent her anger. Caressing her back, he felt a wave of inextinguishable anger welling up.

Zhao Mu and King Xiao Cheng are really worst than beasts, to actually engage in such sadistic sexual play in the palace. From this he can deduce that there are many more victims in the palace.”

The imperial palace is a place filled with the filthiest and unreasonable people.

The only way to change such immoralities is for himself to unite the world and install new values.

He remembered the words of Yuan Zong, the last great man of Mohism.

When he was discussing the philosophy of this era with Yuan Zong, Xiang Shaolong mentioned Confucius and Yuan Zong said dismissively, “He just refused to face reality, thinking of the past and present all the time and only knows how to protect tradition. He’s is not worthy to have such a high and respected position. He advocates so-called rituals, which only serves to make the various heads of states spends even more excessively and the country’s wealth will be in the selfish hands of a small group. He only theorizes but is not aware of the actual situations, and totally ignorant about hardship of wars. The most irritating thing is that he belittles those who works with their hands, and makes fun of his disciple Fan Chi who is a farmer as ‘a small man’.”

Naturally Xiang Shaolong is not intellectual enough to have a debate with him, but he does know that the 2 schools of thought, Mohism and Confucianism, are like the north and south poles, both opposite extremes.

Not only is Mozi a famed warrior, he’s also a craftsman, something that Confucius look down on. He worked with his hands and feet and regard rituals as a false pretense and a waste of resources. The biggest difference is, the teachings of Confucius is

to the benefit of the traditional monarch while Mozi goes after a new outlook in society.

No monarch will like Mozi's ideals.

This is also the main reason why Confucius was almost regarded as a deity later.

It was also from Yuan Zong that Xiang Shaolong realized that the term '[ru](#)' is not a term used only by the disciples of Confucius during that era.

A 'ru' was initially the scholar who maintains the clan's parents, ancestors, family history etc but after the family clan fell into hard times, they stayed around the commoners and using their knowledge of poetry, books, rituals, helped others with the rites for funerals etc, or teach others what they learnt in order to earn some money for living expenses.

It's only when Confucius expounded on the philosophy of 'Education of a Scholar' (Jun Zi Ru), did the term 'ru' became a term specifically used for Confucianism.

Each school of thought represents their ideals towards governance.

To Xiang Shaolong, Mozi's teachings are more suited to his taste. But of course he won't just accept everything in the teachings.

Zhao Qian's sobbing stopped and on seeing him so quiet, she can't help but call out, "Xiang Lang!"

Xiang Shaolong lifted her face up and kissed her a few times before saying. "Don't be afraid! I'll be there to protect you in future."

Zhao Qian said sadly, "I don't wish to return to Zhao."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and asked, "You want to stay in Wei?"

Zhao Qian exclaimed, "Of course not, but as long as I can stay by your side, I am not afraid of any hardship." She continued with a cry, "If I return to the Zhao palace, and there's no marriage agreement, Zhao Mu will certainly not let me off. Then death will be the only way for Qian'er to repay Xiang Lang."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows and asked, "Can he really be so lawless? Isn't Lady Ni able to escape from his evil clutches and remain unscathed?"

Zhao Qian exclaimed. "Lady Ni is different! Her father-in-law is the famous Zhao general Zhao She and most of the leaders and generals in the army were taught by him. Therefore no matter how much Zhao Mu covets her, he dare not force himself on her. But my status is entirely dependant on my Imperial Father, if he doesn't protect me, there's no one who can save me."

Xiang Shaolong consoled her, “There’s me!” Only now did he realize that Zhao Ni had married Zhao Gua’s brother, no wonder Zhao Ni and Lady Ya are so close to each other.

Zhao Qian sighed, “Zhao Mu knows how to use drugs very well, if he’s really intent on having me, there’s no way Qian’er will be able to stop him. I can only copy my Mother!” She felt a deep sorrow and started crying again.

A fire of hatred burned in Xiang Shaolong’s heart.

For Zhao Qian, for Shu’er’s revenge, when he returns to Zhao, that will be the time he’ll have a life and death duel with Zhao Mu! He will use all methods to attack this fiend, it doesn’t matter even if he has to use the help of Prince Xinling and Lady Pingyuan.

After he left Zhao Qian, he returned to his commander’s tent.

Cheng Xu and Wu Zhuo were waiting for him to discuss the route to take to Fengqiu.

After his conversation with Lady Pingyuan, he was suddenly enlightened and understood what used to baffle him.

If he can return to the 21st century, he’ll certainly become the leading expert in the history of the warring states period.

The 3 states disintegrated and became Han, Zhao and Wei, but the most ironic part is that these 3 states have been constantly hoping to reunite again. The only problem is who will become the king!

The most direct way is to attack and conquer.

The first to start was the very magnificent Wei who even managed to invade Handan and stayed there for 2 years until they were forced to retreat by the state of Qi.

Naturally the state of Qi did not come to the Zhaos rescue because they felt a special liking for them, but because what Qi fears most is the unification of the 3 states. Because under that situation, the first to be in trouble will be the state of Qi due to its close proximity to the 3 states.

Later the Weis suffered heavy losses at the battle of Maling and 100,000 brave troops were eliminated in one day. Even the Chief Commander Prince Shen and the great general Pang Juan lost their lives and they never managed to pick themselves up after that fall.

For the Weis, the battle of Maling is akin to the battle of Chang Ping to the Zhaos, with deep reaching influence.

Because the other states were afraid of the unification of the 3 states, they took the opportunity to keep invading Wei. The continuous attacks by Qi, Qin and Chu made Wei unable to use their military power to unify the 3 states.

But the threat by the Qins are growing bigger day by day.

Therefore the most influential senior officials in the 3 states secretly arranged marriage agreements and such, hoping to unify the 3 states in a more peaceful way. Naturally they are the only ones who know the details.

But the State of Qi has been keeping their eye on them all the time, that's why Tian Dan sent Xiao Weimou this time to destroy this marriage agreement.

Now Xiang Shaolong is very certain that Xiao Weimou will not let them off.

Xiao Weimou is not like Hui Hu, who was a mix of soldier and thief. He is a professional killer, a little like the special task force he used to be in, specializing in infiltrating enemy camps to investigate, search, destroy or assassinate, and will be a difficult person to deal with.

Therefore they have to meet up with their reinforcements earlier, only then will they be really safe.

Book 3 Chapter 8 – Defending Against The Enemy With Fire

The snow this year came especially late, the grass is still green on the plains and the lakes still sparkling.

This place lies between the main Yellow River and it's tributaries and the 2 main river splits into hundreds of smaller rivers. The rivers weaved across each other like silver threads, the grass was lush, thick and fragrant and it was a meeting place between the forest grass and dried grass of the plains.

The entourage traveled slowly through this large piece of flat carpet-like grassland.

This is still a place which has not been developed, and only a handful of nomads stayed there. They each have their own lifestyle, like the pretty Baiyi tribe in Zhao, and goes about their own business, not accepting the control of the government.

This place has lots of cows, horses and deer. Traveling past this area, they will see them galloping in the distance or lazily grazing.

But this prehistoric place is also a place where fierce beasts roam.

The more frightening are the wild wolves pack, who kept following in front of behind the troops, not afraid of humans at all.

Xiang Shaolong sent out 10 teams comprising of 5 men each to scout around the area to avoid being ambushed by enemies who might be hiding in the tall grass or the woods.

3 days later, the terrain started to change, with rising and falling hills and wild grass everywhere, greatly slowing their progress.

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely uneasy.

With Xiao Weimou's evil reputation, if his men are all really good as rumored, he will certainly know that they have battled Hui Hu. At the very least he would have captured some 'escaped thieves' and grilled them to find out their whereabouts.

If his deduction is correct, then Xiao Weimou must be following them and waiting for the best time to strike.

But where will they strike?

By noon, the answer appeared finally. It's a huge mountain diagonally in front of them, and the only way past it is a narrow passage about 3li long.

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows deeply on seeing it and was silent for a moment before summoning Cheng Xu, Wu Zhuo and Zha Yuanyu over and said, "If my guess is correct, Xiao Weimou and his men must be waiting for us at that narrow valley."

Cheng Xu nodded his head, “According to our scout’s report, if there are people lying in ambush on the top of both side of the cliffs, just throwing rocks at us will be enough for all of us to perish.”

Zha Yuanyu said with a miserable look, “This place is dense with grass and trees, if the enemy were to set up a fire upwind, the thick smoke will be enough to suffocate us to death.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Thick smoke can only be used to deal with those who are unprepared. Yuanyu, you will immediately organize all the men to remove all the grass and trees on this side of the mountain and slopes and dig a deep ditch at the bottom of the valley to lure the nearby streams into the ditch to surround the camp. We will join the carriages to face the mountain to protect the camp. At the same time prepare a large amount of clear water in the camp, each camp is to have at least 2 barrels and everyone is to carry with them cloths or handkerchiefs. When there’s thick smoke, soak it in the water and cover the face with it, then they need not fear the choking smoke.”

Zha Yuanyu was about to get to work when Xiang Shaolong called him back again and said, “Tell everyone to remove their armors or it might affect the tasks!”

Zhao Yuanyu left with that order.

After Xiang Shaolong discussed a little further with Cheng Xu and Wu Zhuo, he was about to look for Zhao Ya and Zhao Qian when Prince Shaoyuan appeared hurriedly towards him with a few family warriors and demanded, “Xiang Shaolong! Why are we

stopping at such a dangerous place? How are we going to fend against the enemy if they use fire to attack us?”

Xiang Shaolong replied coldly, “You can cross the narrow valley alone if you like! But I won’t be accompanying.”

Prince Shaoyuan’s eyes were burning and after staying silent for a moment, naturally he dared not take the risk so he changed his tune, “Since we can’t enter, then we should retreat to a safer place.”

Wu Zhuo can’t help but interrupt, “The sun will set in 6 hours, and the mountain terrain is difficult to maneuver, if we retreat to a place where we get stuck, we might as well...”

Prince Shaoyuan shouted angrily, “Shut up! A servant like you has no right to interrupt.”

Wu Zhuo’s expression changed and his hand moved to his sword.

Xiang Shaolong put his hand around Wu Zhuo’s shoulder and said with a smile, “Young Master is mistaken, Wu Zhuo is my battle mate, his words are my words.”

Cheng Xu said with a cold smile, “Whoever sounds more reasonable, we will obey that person.”

Prince Shaoyuan was so furious that the color on his face alternated between pale and red, and he left in a huff.

Wu Zhuo said gratefully, "To be able to fight side by side with Young Grand Master-in-law, is the happiest thing in my life."

Xiang Shaolong patted him warmly before letting go of his hold on his shoulder and looking at the narrow valley, said, "If we can survive tonight, I'm confident that I can deal with Xiao Weimou's soldiers hiding in ambush above the narrow valley."

Chang Xu replied, "According to my calculation, Xiao Weimou's men are certainly not as many as ours, or else they would have attacked us head on long ago when we were traveling."

They talked a little further before Xiang Shaolong went to see Lady Ya.

Xiao Zhao and the rest had just set up camp and on seeing his arrival, hurriedly paid their respects.

Looking at these pretty young girls, Xiang Shaolong's spirits lifted and after flirting with them for a moment, he went in to see Lady Ya.

Lady Ya received him warmly and after letting him have his way with her for a while, they sat on the rug and she said, "Shaolong! There are some words that Ya'er must say, please don't be offended!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "You must be wanting to ask me about

my relationship with Zhao Qian. Don't worry! She's still a virgin."

Lady Ya replied, "But you have aroused her desires, how can she be willing to marry to Wei, and if so why do we still need to go to Daliang?"

Xiang Shaolong replied nonchalantly, "Naturally it's to steal 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual'!"

Lady Ya exclaimed seriously, "Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong stopped smiling and said, "I know you want to say, 'if Prince Xinling knows that we are going there to steal the manual, he definitely won't allow us to succeed', right?"

Lady Ya bit his shoulder in anger, so upset that she could not say a word.

Xiang Shaolong caressed her shoulder and consoled her, "Trust your husband! In this era where everyone is trying to trick everyone else, we can only act according to circumstances. For all you know we can have our cake and eat it too. Hei! It seems like a long time since I was intimate (xin fang = doing intimate things in a room) with you."

Lady Ya replied coquettishly, "It's 'not been intimate in camp', we don't have a 'room' here."

Before Xiang Shaolong has a chance to reply, Xiaozi's voice was

heard calling from the outside, “Vice-Commander Cheng invites Master Xiang to come out immediately!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed and told Lady Ya, “It must be that fellow Prince Shaoyuan who has gotten into trouble again.”

As expected, Prince Shaoyuan has summoned his family warriors and was determined to have his own way and retreat from this mountain on his own.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived, Lady Pingyuan was trying to persuade her beloved son to abolish the idea.

When Prince Shaoyuan saw Xiang Shaolong, he got even more furious and exclaimed irritably, “I am not going to sit and die with others. There are forests all around this place, we’re in the open while the enemy is in hiding, how long can we defend ourselves? Only a fool who knows nothing about military matters will do such a stupid thing which is akin to committing suicide.”

Lady Pingyuan replied angrily, “What right do you have to criticize others? Can you defeat Hui Hu’s huge army? That day when Hui Hu was attacking, besides hiding in your tent, what outstanding things have you done.”

Prince Shaoyuan did not expect his mother to embarrass him in public and he nodded his head and said, “Fine! Now you’re totally siding with an outsider, and turned around to deal with your own son. From today onwards, I don’t have a mother like you.”

“Pak!”

Lady Pingyuan gave him an angry slap and with her body shaking, exclaimed, “Say that again one more time!”

Prince Shaoyuan cupped the side of his cheek that was slapped, his eyes filled with viciousness and alternated between looking at her and Xiang Shaolong before saying frostily, “Now that you have a lover, why do you still need a son like me!” He raised his voice and cried out, “Children! Those who still want to stay alive, come with me.”

Lady Pingyuan was so furious her face paled and she cried out, “No one is allowed to follow him. I am still in charge of this family, since when is it his turn to talk.”

The family warriors all kept quiet, but everyone knows that no one will take the risk with Prince Shaoyuan.

Lady Pingyuan looked at Prince Shaoyuan coldly and said, “If you do not come and kowtow to me and admit your mistake, you can forget about expecting my forgiveness.” She humphed and returned to her camp.

Xiang Shaolong did not even bother to take a look at the stoned Prince Shaoyuan, but just gave the orders, “Those who really want to live, get to work immediately.”

All the family warriors uttered their reply and ignoring Prince

Shaoyuan, went about chopping trees and cutting grass.

The others all dispersed, leaving only Prince Shaoyuan standing all alone there, helpless.

The sun was setting, the earth getting dark, the freezing wind blowing from the northwestern direction.

Xiang Shaolong's army was all on the alert, waiting with their weapons. Only a few lamps were lighted in the camp and the scene was miserable and cold.

Xiang Shaolong, Cheng Xu and Wu Zhuo were sitting on a carriage, which surrounded the camp, looking at the movements around them.

The sound of something hard dropping was heard from the other side of the mountain.

The three of them immediately perked up.

They've finally confirmed the presence of the enemy, confirmed Xiang Shaolong's analysis.

The sound of something falling came because the enemy ran into the horse-tripping ropes they put up.

It must be known that before this moment, whether there really

is an enemy out there is still an unknown, with no facts to support that point. They only deduced that if there is an enemy out there, then they must be hiding in the narrow valley. This place still belongs to the Weis after all, so Xiao Weimou will have to work speedily and attack the camp in the cover of the night.

If they have to attack at night, this kind of place is most advantageous to attack with fire, and to attack with fire they must first position themselves upwind. Therefore their enemy will certainly have to leave the narrow valley and go to another mountain, which faces them at the other side of the camp.

So based on this point, they laid down horse tripping ropes in the wilderness on both sides of the camp. If the enemy were to trip and fall and make some noise, they would be able to know the position of the enemy even in the darkness.

Sounds of things dropping and quiet groans were heard.

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly and shouted, “Xiao Weimou, you’ve been tricked! Release the arrows!”

Lamps were lighted in the camp, hundreds of fire arrows were shot high into the air, aiming towards the side and the entrance of the narrow valley, leaving only a clear spot upwind.

The flames burned all around as the dry woods caught fire rapidly, and the wind blew the flames and smoke towards the narrow valley, surrounding the enemies who came under the cover of the night with flames. It turns out that Xiang Shaolong has

already ordered his men to splash oil on the woods so that it will burn once it catches fire.

Thick smoke rose up, most of them blown towards the narrow valley, with only a little smoke floating towards their camp.

Everyone hurriedly dampened their cloths and covered their noses and mouths with it.

Screams and groans were heard, the enemy is helpless and did not expect Xiang Shaolong to strike first and use fire to attack them instead.

Shadows appeared.

The entrance to the valley has been blocked by the huge fire and the enemies who were in hiding around the camp has no choice but to take the risk and attack the camp.

The Zhao soldiers saw that their commander's eccentric plans have worked again and morale was greatly boosted. In unison, they all rushed over and started shooting arrows at the enemies who were making their way up the slope.

Without any cover for protection and hindered by the dark smoke, the enemies fell one by one and only 10 odd enemies managed to past the flooded ditch that surrounded the camp but all of them perished at the slope.

The outcome of the battle is certain.

Xiang Shaolong saw that even in such dire circumstances, their enemies were still fierce and swift and was secretly thanking his good luck. If it's a head on attack, he may be able to win but he will certainly suffer heavy losses on his side as well. The situation would not be so easy like now. Obviously intellect and bravery must work hand in hand, neither one can be missing.

By now the surrounding forests were all in flames and the fire burned high into the sky, ancient trees falling one by one, swallowed by the fire, increasing the magnificence of the scene.

Thick black smoke traveled into the narrow valley and the fire followed close behind.

The enemy was forced by the fire to launch an attack and some of them have already become inferno men even before then rush out, and they will die even without the arrows shooting them.

What was originally a picturesque wilderness has now become hell on earth.

Screams and cries kept coming out from the scene of the fire, the shouts shattering the sky.

Blood flowed like the river along the slope and ditch.

By dawn, the perimeter up to 10 li away all became charred soil,

the fire was still burning far away but has weakened greatly by now.

Xiang Shaolong with his marvelous plan managed to take care of the enemy without losing a single man, and without even knowing what Xiao Weimou looks like. As the saying goes, 'those who are adept in battles, will have outstanding outcomes.'

Corpses lined the area after the fire and according to their calculation, almost a thousand men were burned or shot.

It's just that they do not know if Xiao Weimou is one of the dead.

Xiang Shaolong led a team personally to the narrow valley to make sure that there's no enemy left before letting the others set off immediately, leaving this horrendous place which now looks like hell.

After passing the narrow valley and traveling northeast for about 4 hours, the group reached the western bank of Pushui.

This part of the river was filled with more rocks than mud, so the water was very clear.

After few li down north, a clear and sparkling huge lake appeared in front of them, with lush plants growing around it and huge eagles, wild ducks and kingfishers flying about. With the blue sky and white clouds as backdrop, it formed a very enchanting scene.

After working hard for one whole night, everyone was in high spirits on reaching this place and immediately set up camp next to the lake and started preparing dinner.

The soldiers were casting nets and catching fishes, and it feels as if they are on a holiday instead.

Lady Ya was suddenly in the mood and ordered someone to put up curtains at a corner of the lake and started bathing and playing in the clear water. In the end even Zhao Qian, Cui Tong and Cui Lü couldn't withstand the temptation and joined them, their eyes filled with endless joy and fun.

Xiang Shaolong sat lazily on a huge rock next to the lake, admiring the view of the lake and mountains, looking at the endless green grass, with the lake's water clear and green with the reflection of the trees, feeling extremely intoxicated.

The soldiers were enjoying themselves too, stripping themselves naked and jumping into the lake and swimming languidly. After going through so much shocking events, no one can blame them for letting loose now.

As Xiang Shaolong was sharing their joy, Lady Pingyuan's voice rang out gently behind him, "Shaolong, why aren't you swimming as well?"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head around and smiled, "If Lady is willing to frolic with me in the water, your subordinate will gladly oblige."

Lady Pingyuan's pretty face blushed slightly and sat down next to him before sighing sadly, "My opinion of you is getting higher and higher. If you were in charge of the battle of Chang Ping, I can guarantee that the 400,000 who died would not be the Zhaos but the Qins, and the whole situation would have been different."

Xiang Shaolong leaned over, touching her shoulder, smelling her fragrance and said humbly, "Lady you flatter me, it's just a small victory, nothing to talk about." He paused and asked, "How is Prince Shaoyuan?"

Lady Pingyuan's face turned icy and she said through clenched teeth, "Don't talk about that useless beast." She sighed helplessly, and was silent.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, "Does he dare not to kowtow to you and apologize?"

Lady Pingyuan turned her head around and looked at him deeply and said, "What's the use of kowtowing and apologizing? I've never been satisfied with my late husband, and now this beast is even worse than him." She lowered her head and said with a blush, "Shaolong! Can you give me a child, as long as he is half like you, I'll be very satisfied."

Xiang Shaolong was initially startled, then he was ecstatic and said, "It's only at this time that I really do not feel any enmity Lady has towards me."

Lady Pingyuan's pretty face blushed more crimson as she replied quietly, "You earned this with your capability. After seeing your almost divine tactics time and again, I no longer wish to be your enemy."

Xiang Shaolong reached out and held her wrist, asking, "Do you want to become my woman?"

A look of helplessness came over Lady Pinyuan as she sighed quietly, "Now I no longer wish to hide anything from you. For my return to Wei this time, it's been arranged that I'll re-marry a general who has control of the military, this is a fact that cannot change. You... will you blame me?"

Xiang Shaolong was relieved instead. In reality he only has lust and not feelings for this woman, and only harbored the feeling of having fun with her. On one hand he will use this to take revenge against Prince Shaoyuan for causing the death of Su Nu, and it's also a way to stay alive, so how can he blame her. Of course he had to pretend to be sad and extremely disappointed on the surface.

The alarm sound went off.

Xiang Shaolong looked over in shock, and saw on the flat lands in the distance, a troop of horses and men were running towards them.

Lady Pingyuan's hands gripped his tightly and said ecstatically, "The reinforcements from the pass are here."

Book 3 Chapter 9 – In A Dangerous Position

The capital of Wei, Daliang, is situated on the southern bank of the Yellow River, where the big rivers like Luoshui, Suishui, Weishui, Danshui and Honggou etc converge. The Weis also dug up 2 man-made canals Dagou and Lianggou to surround and protect Daliang. It became a natural barrier, making this great city easy to defend but difficult to invade, giving them stability. The State of Wei was situated in the middle of the central plains then, with her north backing Zhao, west siding Qin, east siding Qi and south facing Chu. It's at the crossroad of the meeting place of the world. Daliang is situated right in the middle of the state of Wei and is an important city in any battle plans since it's right in the middle of important roads and waterways. If one wants to invade the other 5 sates, the task will be made very difficult if he does not defeat Wei first and in order to defeat Wei, Daliang is a place they must gain control of. Therefore one can see how important this capital of Wei is.

Xiang Shaolong and his party rested at Fengqiu for 3 days and under the protection of 2000 men from the Pass, crossed the Yellow River and after traveling for another 15 days, Daliang is just in the distance. Throughout the journey, Xiang Shaolong was relaxed, as if he has joined a tour group for ancient China and traveling through 'old places'. In his relaxed frame of mind, he imagined that on this huge and open land, there are countless cities scattered over it, each city with its strong and high city walls and the vast open land beyond the city walls. And each city is the center for battles and for expansion of the military. Everything important that happened in this era, happened around places like these, spreading with the invasion and defense of cities as centers. Whether a city could be protected or taken, shows the fortune and success of a country. Such battles which centers on attacking cities

is the simplest and most straightforward and if seen from another angle, it also has an indescribable captivation. To a ruler in the warring states period, it's like a game of chess. Once hooked and you're unable to pull yourself away and the only way is to have a battle of wits, to see who will become the ultimate survivor.

In these enclosed city walls, are military centers of different sizes, and are the most important military command center for the surround area and also the symbol of power. Defeating these cities will mean destroying the other party's governmental control. The troops from the Pass escorted them until they were about 10li north of Dagou before going back to Fengqiu, leaving the task of escorting them to the military situated at the outskirts of Daliang. By this time the welcoming party sent by Prince Xinling has arrived and escorted them through the hanging bridge past Dagou. And Prince Xinling, Wei Wuji, has already set up a formation on the other end, ready to receive this wedding entourage who has went through so much difficulties.

Wei Wuji, one of the 4 Princes of the warring states period, was dressed in casual wear, sitting astride a horse. He has a square face and big ears, tall and good-looking with a stern and respectable air about him. Although he was smiling warmly, his eyes were gleaming which gives one a sense of awe. He may be Lady Pingyuan's younger brother but he looks older than his sister, maybe because of long-term stress that aged him faster. After a round of small talk, all of them headed towards Daliang.

The city of Daliang was full of sights and sounds, the city streets wide and spacious forming an inconsistent rectangular shape, following the curves of the rivers with the southern gate as the main gate. All the city gates have a protruding watch tower which

greatly improved the defenses. They have to travel another 5li north from the city gate, and the sand was blowing in front of them. All of them awaited for the King of Wei's orders and the edict states that besides Xiang Shaolong, Zhao Qian and the other ladies, the rest of the group have to set up camp outside the city. Naturally Lady Pingyuan, her son and their family warriors are not under such restrictions. Xiang Shaolong felt extremely surprised and indignant. And a look of unhappiness appeared on Prince Xinling's face but as it's an imperial order, and unless he has made up his mind to rebel immediately, he can only accept this humiliating arrangement. After Xiang Shaolong gave some instructions to Cheng Xu and Wu Zhuo, he followed Prince Xinling into Daliang.

Compared to Handan, Daliang looks different. It did not have the ancient magnificence of Zhao, but has its own exquisite intricacies. It's decorations were more colorful. The streets in the city were split into 8 large streets from north to south and 4 main streets from east to west crisscrossing one another. These 12 large streets are wide enough to accommodate more than 10 horses moving side by side, so one can imagine how huge it is. With the imperial soldiers opening the path for them, the entourage passed by the decorated streets outside the palace, went around the high walls of the palace and came to a place at the northeastern corner where the nobility and senior officials reside.

Along the way the streets were full of activities and there were twice as many people on the streets as compared to Handan. When they saw Prince Xinling's flag, they all looked respectful and some even knelt down to pay their respects, which goes to show how esteemed Prince Xinling is in the hearts of the Weis. Prince Xinling's residence, Wei'e Chu is situated right at the end of the street. Behind the high walls, tall trees reached into the sky, which

showed off Prince Xinling's extraordinary status. Xiang Shaolong was separated from Zhao Qian and the rest and were assigned different courtyards to reside in. Prince Xinling was very warm in his welcome and sent 4 pretty maids to personally serve him. After cleaning up, he received Xiang Shaolong immediately in the study. After all the maids retreated, Prince Xinling warmly invited Xiang Shaolong to partake the meal and after offering him a toast, Prince Xinling said, "Shaolong you are indeed extraordinary, to be able to defeat more than 10,000 horse thieves with only 800 men. No wonder you can rise to fame so swiftly in Zhao." Xiang Shaolong knows that this is his opening speech, and hurriedly expressed his humble thanks.

Prince Xinling raised his wine cup and was silent for a moment before continuing with a slight smile, "Everyone saw that the battle of Chang Ping greatly weakened the state of Zhao from a strong state, but very few people saw that the Qins also suffered heavy losses in this battle. How else could I have defeated the Qins in Handan 6 years ago if not for that, and subsequent the combined forces of Yue Cheng and Qing He from your state, together with the states Han, Chu and Bi also greatly defeated the Qins." Xiang Shaolong has no idea why he would bring up this matter, so he just bulldozed his way through to try and flatter him, saying "It's all due to your intelligence and decisiveness that gave the Qins their most terrible defeat ever since Shang Yang changed the policies." Prince Xinling smiled proudly, "The King of Qin is narrow minded, he has such a good general in Bai Qi but because of a fit of anger, forced him to his death. Fan Sui also gave up his premier post 4 years ago which greatly weakened Qin further, which gave us the opportunity to conquer Taojun. If my estimation is correct, the Qins can forget about regaining their strength within the next 20 years."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed and thought to himself that this Prince Xinling is indeed a talent of his times. Because from what he knows from the history books, it is indeed 20 odd years later that Qin manage to destroy the other 6 states. Prince Xinling personally poured the wine and after drinking a toast, said solemnly, “Now that Lu Buwei caused the death of King Xiaowen, and allowed Yiren to ascend the throne and the world was in fear because they know how formidable Lu Buwei is. But I see it from another point of view. With the Qins being so suspicious of any outsiders, how can they allow Lu Buwei to control the politics, therefore there must be internal strife which will again weaken their plans to invade east.” Xiang Shaolong complimented him sincerely, “No wonder you are so well respected by the people, you can really analyze and understand the situations well.” Of course he knew that in the end Emperor Qin exterminated Lu Buwei’s entire clan, that’s why he is especially amazed by Prince Xinling’s farsightedness. Among the 4 princes in the warring states period, he and Prince Mengchang emerged tops, and obviously he does live up to his name.

He thought of how frightened the Zhaos were once they heard that Lu Buwei is now in power and the contrast against Prince Xinling shows how bold and farsighted he is. Prince Xinling’s eyes gleamed and he sighed meaningfully, “Shaolong! If the 3 states were to unify, now is the time.” In truth, Xiang Shaolong is very much interested in this idea because who can guarantee that history will not change. At least the Emperor of Qin now is a useless person, totally different from the smart and brave Emperor described in history books. Since he wants to deal with Zhao Mu, naturally he will need the help of Prince Xinling and once he thought of this, his heart started pounding. Prince Xinling is indeed astute, just by studying his looks and behavior, he already knows what he is thinking and nodded his head with satisfaction, “My elder sister is indeed right about you, Shaolong is indeed a

bold and intelligent man.” He continued in a lowered voice, “Does Shaolong know that you are in a dangerous position where you will find it difficult to advance or retreat.” Xiang Shaolong nodded his head to indicate his understanding.

However, Prince Xinling shook his head and smiled, “You don’t really know yet. Tell me! Do you know Hui Hu is which person’s trusted aide?” Xiang Shaolong was stunned and asked, “Doesn’t Hui Hu take orders from your King?” Prince Xinling replied, “That coward would not dare to touch anything that might incite public fury. Anli’s most beloved [Lord Longyang](#)* handled all these secretive evil plans. According to secret reports, Lord Longyang hates you to the core, that’s why he forced Anli to give the orders not to allow your men to enter the city so that you’ll be alone and helpless. If not for my strong support of you, Shaolong would have perished long ago.” Xiang Shaolong felt numb but also found the situation hilarious at the same time.

It was really unexpected that he would actually meet the famous Lord Long Yang, whose name has long become synonymous with gays. Without a question, An Li and Lord Long Yang’s relationship is similar to King Xiaocheng’s relationship with Zhao Mu. Apparently the royalty in this era, due to the 2 extremes in their lifestyle of extravagance and constant fear of losing their lives, have all turned a little abnormal. Prince Xinling said, “Lord Long Yang is one of the 3 most famous swordsmen in the state of Wei. He is intelligent and cunning, and certainly not easy to deal with.” Xiang Shaolong sighed and said, “We can consider this to pose difficulty in me advancing, but why can’t I retreat then?” Prince Xinling stared at him for a moment before saying calmly, “Because if you return to Zhao, Zhao Mu will certainly try to take your life.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that Lady Pingyuan once told him that the King of Zhao has taken a liking to him, and if that's really the case, what Prince Xinling just told him is not just to scare him. He sighed and said, "To tell you the truth, I was ordered to come to Wei this time with another secret mission, which is to steal the 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual'." He obviously knows that Prince Xinling is already aware of this, so he said it out first to gain his trust. As expected Prince Xinling chortled, reached out and patted his shoulder and exclaimed, "Great! It's only now that I believe you really have the intention of allying yourself with us. If you can work for me well, I can guarantee you endless wealth and riches." He continued in a quiet voice, "That fellow An Li, under Lord Long Yang's persuasion, is not busy preparing to eliminate Zhao, so even though Hui Hu is totally unrelated to him, he will never let a talent like you return. As for Zhao Qian, not only will she not be able to become the Crown Princess, her fate will be extremely terrible as well." Xiang Shaolong sighed helplessly and asked, "What should we do now?" Prince Xinling smiled slightly. "The one who strikes first will gain the upper hand, the one who strikes later will be at the mercy of others. Does Shaolong understand these words?"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt himself sweating, finally understanding that Prince Xinling said so much to him because he is still intent on the initial plan he made with lady Pingyuan and Prince Shaoyuan, which is to assassinate King An Li, so he is just a pawn now. He was so furious that he felt like giving himself 2 tight slaps. How stupid and naïve he was, to actually believe that the vicious Lady Pingyuan would really fall in love with him. Lady Pingyuan is indeed formidable, deliberately pretending to be unhappy with Prince Shaoyuan, and flattering him at the same time, saying that she wants a child with him so that he'll be taken in. If not for the fact that he overheard the talk she had with her son that night, he won't even know how he died. That vicious woman actually slowly made her progress, sacrificing her body to

lure him in, kept on flattering him with the only aim of using his bravery, intelligence, martial arts skill and status to help them kill the King of Wei. After that they will push the blame to him and the Zhaos, so that they can retreat safely from this matter. Such a venomous ploy is indeed enough to make one's blood run cold.

In order not to arouse the other party's suspicions, he pretended to be full of vigor as he replied, "If there is anything I can do, please let me know. I am willing to go through fire and water." Prince Xinling exclaimed happily, "With these words from you, why should I worry that the plan will not work." He continued in a straight face, "I already have a plan in mind, but it's not the time to let you know yet. You can enjoy yourselves for these few days, I have a lot of beauties in my residence and you can choose anyone to serve you." Xiang Shaolong had an idea and deliberately tested the waters by saying, "With Lady Ya around, I am already satisfied." A look of anger and jealousy flashed past Prince Xinling's eyes but he immediately changed it into a warm smile, "You really know how to choose, Zhao Ya is extremely captivating, truly a fine specimen in a man's private room. Go ahead and enjoy yourself!" He added, "You'll have a good rest tonight, I'll arrange some activities for you tomorrow and I can guarantee that your trip will not be in vain."

After Xiang Shaolong left the hall, he walked towards where Zhao Ya and the rest were residing at, knowing very well that in order to gain his trust, Prince Xinling will not restrict his activities in the manor nor send anyone to spy on him. Once he stepped into the garden, he immediately thought of Mei Canniang's quiet little mountain valley. If he can spend the rest of his life in that place where there's no fights, then won't all his troubles be gone? Pride and ambition is really the downfall of many. Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt dejection and an extreme weariness about the things

that has been happening around him. Especially when he thought of Lady Pingyuan, he felt that pain of being cheated and hurt. After walking past a row of old, luxuriant swaying trees, the 'Flying Clouds Chambers' which Zhao Ya and the rest are residing in came into view. Lanterns were lighted on the pillars and the eaves of the corridors and under the illumination of the lanterns, it can be seen that the corridors have double eaves, the roof was decorated with tiles and statues of beasts, extremely colorful and majestic. The paint and carvings on the main door was exquisite, the curtains on the windows were thick, with a soft and hazy light going through it.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt lost. That feeling of a strange dream filled him again. Hai! If only it really is a dream. Even when he was facing the worst situation in Zhao, he has never felt so dejected. Just like what Prince Xinling said, even if he can escape from Wei, he'll face death when he goes back as well, unless he can get his hands on 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual'. But by then those troops pursuing him will certainly include Prince Xinling's men as well. This Prince Xinling is even more difficult to handle than the King of Wei, or else the Qins would not have suffered heavy losses under him time and again. If he really manages to unite the 3 states, for all you know he may really be able to take over Emperor Qin and become the world's ruler. Can history really be changed?

Xiang Shaolong lied down on Lady Ya's couch dejectedly. Zhao Ya sat down and reached out to caress his face, asking in alarm, "Shaolong what happened to you, why do you look so bad." Xiang Shaolong carried her up the bed and buried his head in her chest and sighed, "If I have 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual' with me now, I will steal all of you out of Daliang immediately and run far, far away." Zhao Ya's delicate body shook a little as she cried out, "Shaolong! Can you brace yourself? Seeing you like this pains me."

She went to his ear and whispered, “An Li has got nothing to do with the order not to allow Cheng Xu and the rest into the city.” Xiang Shaolong raised his head up in surprise and looked at her, “How did you know?” Lady Ya covered her mouth and smiled, “Don’t ever think that we are totally helpless to defend, us Zhaos have spies all over the place. I even have my own people in Prince Xinling’s residence.” The look in her eyes turned icy as she continued, “This matter must be related to Prince Xinling, to deliberately isolate you and give you the feeling that there’s danger everywhere so that he and his sister can control you.”

Xiang Shaolong perked up immediately and he sat up, his eyes gleaming, “Have you found out where ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual is hidden.” Lady Ya stared at him unbelievably and said, “If you obviously know that someone is coming to steal your things, will you let others find out so easily?” She then stood up and took out a scrolled painting from a cloth sack and unrolled it on the bed. It turns out to be the floor plan of Prince Xinling’s residence. Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, “Where did you get such a good thing from?” Lady Ya smiled at him coquettishly, “Don’t forget what I’m an expert in. If I can’t even get this, how can I steal more important things?” Xiang Shaolong thought of something and asked, “If there really is a ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’, why isn’t Prince Xinling starting to manufacture the equipment according to the diagrams instead, why would he be keeping it in his residence?”

Lady Ya replied, “This involves the fight between Prince Xinling and the King of Wei. As long as Prince Xinling has not gotten his hands on the imperial throne, he will not take the secret manual out, therefore the manual must be kept in a secret location in his residence.” Xiang Shaolong sighed, “I’m afraid that even before I can find the secret manual, that conniving Prince Xinling would

already have killed me.” Lady Ya suddenly extended her fair arms and covered his mouth, the soft and tender feeling shooting like electricity straight into Xiang Shaolong’s heart. She pouted, “Don’t say anything inauspicious, all right?” Xiang Shaolong sniffed in her fragrance and felt a little better. He took a close look at the map on the bed, silently committing to memory the positions of the houses in the residence. He had strict training on such matters before, so naturally he has a way of memorizing things.

Lady Ya saw that he has regained his confidence and calmness so she happily explained to him the layout of the residence. Xiang Shaolong finally recovered from his depression and asked, “Do you have a way to make contact with Wu Zhuo and the rest?” Lady Ya said with pride, “Such a simple matter, just leave it to me!” Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before continuing, “Tell Wu Zhuo to try and dig a tunnel from the camp to another location. If something happens, it may very well save lives?” Lady Ya’s expression changed, “Is the situation that bad? We are after all representatives of the King of Zhao...” Xiang Shaolong interrupted her, “If you know that the King of Wei has the intention of attacking Zhao, you won’t be saying that. We’ve really made a wrong trip this time.” As he spoke, he went off the bed.

Lady Ya pulled him and asked, “Aren’t you accompanying me?” Xiang Shaolong replied, “Prince Xinling will force me to assassinate the King of Wei anytime, time is running short, I must find the hiding place of ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’.” Lady Ya was greatly startled, “There are ferocious dogs guarding Wei Wuji’s residence, he’ll certainly find out if you enter.” Xiang Shaolong laughed, “You’re the expert thief, you’ll definitely have a way to deal with ferocious dogs.”

Lady Ya rolled her eyes at him and took out a small bottle from her bag and gave it to him, saying “Just a little of this powder on your body, the ferocious dogs will avoid you. But not only are there ferocious dogs, there are guards as well! Hai! Since I know that you’ll be risking your life, how can I sleep in peace tonight?” Xiang Shaolong took the bottle, hugged and gave her a kiss and said, “Just strip and wait for me on the bed without a worry! I guarantee that no one will be able to see me.”

Book 3 Chapter 10 - Meeting Long Yang

Xiang Shaolong returned to his room and after dismissing the 4 pretty maids from their duties and ministrations, he changed into his black suit and carried his tools. He was about to slip out from the window when a maid called out, “Lady Pingyuan arrives.”

Footsteps were heard and Lady Pingyuan is already at the door.

There was no time for Xiang Shaolong to remove his outfit so in his haste he just grabbed an outer robe and draped it on. By then Lady Pingyuan has already entered the room.

Lady Pingyuan closed the door, leaned against it and looked at him with a hidden smile.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, as soon as she touches him, she'll find out immediately about the tools he had on him and with her intelligence, of course she'll know what he's trying to do.

But if he does not hug and kiss her, it would be a deviate from his normal reaction and it will arouse her suspicions.

What should he do?

He suddenly had an idea.

Xiang Shaolong sat back on the couch, patting on the bed next to

him and said with an ulterior motive, “Beauty! Come! This time there will be no one who can disturb us.”

Lady Pingyuan blushed and pouted, “Have you forgotten that I’m about to be married?”

Xiang Shaolong’s ploy was working and he replied, “I thought you are the one who forgot, that’s why you came to my room to look for me. Besides, didn’t Lady ask me to give you a child? If you don’t climb up my bed, how am I supposed to impregnate you?”

Lady Pingyuan replied calmly, “Will you be a little patient? My wedding will be held next spring, and we’ll have all the fun we want the month before my wedding so that person will not suspect that I’m not expecting his son at all.”

Xiang Shaolong expected her to say this, because it’s a good excuse for her to reject him and at the same time appease him so that he will not suspect that she’s plotting against him.

If he does not come up with a good plan 2 months later, he will soon be dead.

This woman is so vicious!

He has never hated a woman so much, especially when she’s so mature and seductive and her status so esteemed.

He stood up and walked towards her, until he was so close he’s

almost touching her bosom. He reached out, grabbed her soft shoulders and kissed her lips.

Lady Pingyuan's reaction was sizzling, her delicate body writhing in excitement but she was unable to touch Xiang Shaolong's body and find out about his secret.

After a long moment, the 2 lips parted.

The 2 of them exchanged looks, their hands held together, panting.

Lady Pingyuan could not take the flirtation any further and panted, "Shaolong! Hug me!"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said with a smile, "Unless you are willing to go to Mount Wu with me, or else I will not touch any other part of your body except for your dainty lips."

Lady Pingyuan was baffled, "What is 'go to Mount Wu'?"

It was only then that Xiang Shaolong remembered that this wonderful term is not being used during this era yet, so he made up a story, "Mount Wu is a huge mountain near my hometown. Legend has it that when men goes there, they will have intimate fun with the fairies in the mountain, so the term go to Mount Wu means going to bed and having fun, does Lady understand now?"

Lady Pingyuan's bright eyes revealed her dilemma and Xiang

Shaolong was shocked, afraid that she will change her mind so he hurriedly ask, “Why has Lady come to look for me?”

Lady Pingyuan regained her senses and pouted, “Do I need to have a reason to look for you?”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and took the risk, “Lady better remind Prince Xinling that Lady Ya seems very confident of stealing Lu Gong’s Secret Manual, I think she already knows where the manual is hidden.”

Lady Pingyuan’s pretty face turned icy as she said, “That slut doesn’t even know she’s at death’s door. No matter how capable she is, she can forget about even touching the secret manual.”

Xiang Shaolong queried, “Are you planning to kill her?”

Lady Pingyuan knew that she has made a slip of the tongue and with her expression remained unchanged, she explained, “That was just said in a fit of anger. Shaolong! You can’t possibly have fallen in love with that slutty woman!”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I don’t know if I have fallen for her, but she is truly infatuated with me, so I do not wish to see any untoward befall her.”

Lady Pingyuan tried to struggle out of his grasp angrily, “Let me go!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Lady is jealous!” He still held on to her shoulder tightly and kissed her lips again.

Under his flirtatious and hot kisses, Lady Pingyuan softened.

Their mouths parted. Lady Pingyuan sighed helplessly again.

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is in a dilemma. On one hand she wants to cause harm to him, but on the other hand she can’t help but to look for him to alleviate her loneliness of so many years. Of course he will not uncover her plot so he changed the topic, “What is Lady’s future husband like?”

Lady Pingyuan turned silent before replying, “He is the great general Bai Gui, have you heard of him?”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that this must be another political agreement, why would he be interested to know, so he leaned forward and kissed her neck.

Lady Pingyuan has gone without physical intimacy for so long, so how can she tolerate such excitement so she struggled and cried out, “No!”

Xiang Shaolong left her and looked at her with a smile.

Lady Pingyuan struggled out of his grasp and pushed the door open, saying, “I am leaving!”

Xiang Shaolong sent her out the door and said, “Since you’re not accompanying me, I’ll have to look for Lady Ya.”

Lady Pingyuan saw that the 4 guards waiting outside the door seems to be listening on the conversation so she left after giving him a stare.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be going towards Flying Clouds Chambers but once he turned the corner and saw no one around, he removed his outer clothes and hid them. Using the hook and ropes, he climbed up the roof and followed Lady Pingyuan from afar, walking either on the roof or corridors or using the big trees as camouflage.

For a person as careful as Lady Pingyuan, once she hears what he told her, she will certainly warn Prince Xinling!

There are countless rooms in the vast residence and the nearer they got to the inner courtyards, the tighter the security with high walls and watch towers. If not for the fact that Xiang Shaolong had once undergone strict training, and has seen the floor plan of the residence and has the appropriate equipment, there’s no way he will be able to infiltrate the place.

There are alarm drums atop the watch towers, so one can imagine that in an emergency, once the signal is sounded, action will be swift.

At this time Lady Pingyuan, under the escort of the 4 guards,

walked into a corridor.

The walls on both sides were long and tall which leads to an open area. Luckily there were a few rows of tall trees, or else there'd be no way for him to sneak in undiscovered.

Facing the entrance to the courtyard is a large building, in front of its door there are 2 rows of 18 guards and outside the house there are guards patrolling with guard dogs.

Very carefully, Xiang Shaolong used the hook and ropes and jumped onto the roof from the tall tree nearest to the building.

Lady Pingyuan went into the building alone and after passing a broad well, went to the main hall to meet Prince Xinling.

Wei Wuji was lying on the rug, his right and left arms each holding a beauty and was drinking and enjoying himself. Even when he saw his elder sister, he continued with his flirtations.

The decorations in the hall was exquisite and the colors matching, the glow from the lanterns soothing, giving one a very comfortable feeling.

Lady Pingyuan sat down opposite Prince Xinling.

Prince Xinling suddenly grabbed one of the women by her hair and pulled her head back.

The woman tilted her head back and under the luminance of the lantern, the beauty's alluring face was revealed to Xiang Shaolong who was hanging upside down outside the window. Looking at her fair neck, he can't help but gulp and at the same time felt pity for her.

Prince Xinling then went towards her fair neck and started kissing and biting her violently, causing that beauty's body to shake and squirm and she was moaning as well. Obviously she is in pain and not pleasure.

By the time Prince Xinling's mouth left her, the tender and fair skin on her neck is full of teeth marks, and there was a faint trace of blood as well.

The other lady seems to be unperturbed, still smiling and not revealing any look of surprise at all.

Prince Xinling chortled madly and still pulling that woman's hair, asked Lady Pingyuan, "Do you think this woman is comparable to that slut Zhao Ya."

Lady Pingyuan sighed and said, "Wuji! You're jealous!"

Prince Xinling pushed that beauty away and shouted, "Scram."

The 2 women hurriedly ran to the back hall to hide.

Prince Xinling took a gulp from the wine bottle and wiped his mouth with his sleeve and said furiously, “That bitch Zhao Ya, when I defeated the Qin army, she was all condescending towards me in Handan. But look at how she is treating me now, I will make her sorry.”

Lady Pingyuan furrowed her brows, “Where’s your patience gone? Can’t you even wait for a few days? Have you seen Zhao Ya?”

Prince Xinling waved his hands, “Don’t talk about her. Only now do I believe your words, Zhao Ya sacrificed her body because of her adoration for Zhao Mu. When I destroy Zhao in future, I will certainly make Zhao Mu have a taste of all the forms of torture in the world.”

Lady Pingyuan said through gritted teeth, “I can’t wait to eat his flesh and drink his blood as well. If not for him, how could Prince Pingyuan, Zhao Sheng die so early for naught?” She then told him what she heard from Xiang Shaolong about Lady Ya’s confidence in stealing the secret manual.

Prince Xinling seems unbothered and said, “Even if that slut knows that the secret manual is in the secret underground room here, security here is so tight she can forget about sneaking in. Don’t worry!”

Xiang Shaolong who was outside the window was ecstatic. Firstly he has confirmed that there indeed is a secret manual and it’s in one of the secret rooms in this building. With a special task force agent like him, it is a big possibility that he can steal the secret

manual.

Lady Pingyuan commented, “It’s still better to be careful!”

Prince Xinling replied, “I have already increased security. Even if she can get the manual, she can forget about taking it out of the residence.”

Lady Pingyuan was silent for a moment before asking, “How are relations between you and An Li now?”

A flash of anger went past Prince Xinling’s eyes as he said coldly, “That old idiot is belittling me more and more. He only knows how to place his trust on petty people like Lord Longyang, Lou Wu, Su Song, Guan Pi etc. If I allow him to have his unruly way, our Great Wei will be destroyed sooner or later.”

Lady Pingyuan asked, “When are you going to arrange for Xiang Shaolong to see An Li?”

Prince Xinling replied, “Now we’re using the excuse that Zhao Qian is not used to the conditions here so she can’t enter the palace to meet An Li yet so that we can have more time to prepare. But this matter cannot be delayed. I’ve decided that on the 1st of the next month, which is 3 days later, we’ll let Xiang Shaolong officially send Zhao Qian into the palace. An Li will certainly set a feast to welcome time and that will be the time to take action.” He paused and continued, “You better tie Xiang Shaolong tightly with love so that he will risk his life for us without a doubt.”

Lady Pingyuan sighed sadly, “You’d better find another way to retain him, I’m a little afraid to see him.”

Prince Xinling was startled, “You can’t possibly have fallen for him?”

Lady Pingyuan stood up and sighed again, shaking her head, “The grander picture is of more importance, what is a personal loss? It’s just that I’m afraid that once I have a sexual relation with him and have his child, that’ll be even worse.” She turned around to leave as she finished her words.

Xiang Shaolong was at a loss. He was stunned for a moment, and waited until after Prince Xinling went into the inner hall before he sneaked into the main hall and did a quick check. He only left secretly when he has made sure that the secret underground room is not beneath this hall.

Xiang Shaolong burrowed beneath the blanket, holding Lady Ya’s burning body, so comfortable that he was moaning.

Ever since he came to Daliang, he has this horrible feeling that he’s lost in an angry sea. It’s only when he’s hugging this beauty can he feel a short moment of relaxation and safety. It doesn’t matter if this feeling is so feeble or fake, it’s still enough to make one intoxicated enough to treasure it.

It’s the first time he felt no barriers or distance between him and Zhao Ya.

The two of them used all their might to hug each other, enjoying the brief pleasure during this difficult time.

Lady Ya kissed his ears as she asked, “Why don’t you go and take a look at Third Princess?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to hold myself back with her and when I return to Zhao later, Zhao Mu will surely use this to trap me.”

Lady Ya kissed him approvingly and said, “It’s rare that you’re so alert, Xiang Lang! Zhao Ya loves you.”

Xiang Shaolong replied sincerely, “I love you too!” He then told her in detail what he has overheard.

Zhao Ya said, “The underground room must be beneath Prince Xinling’s bedroom. Xiang Lang is so capable to be able to infiltrate into such a highly guarded place. This must be out of that conniving thief’s expectations.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “It may not be difficult to steal the secret manual, but the difficult part is getting you 12 weak and dainty beauties out of Daliang.”

Zhao Ya replied, “All residences belonging to royalty and officials will certainly have a secret passageway for escape. If we can find this passageway, there’s the possibility of escaping from the mansion. But even if we can get out, we won’t be able to slip out of

the city.”

Xiang Shaolong was inspired by her words and sat up. He thought that if there is a passageway, it will certainly be behind Prince Xinling’s residence, because he has checked the floor in the main hall and did not find anything.

Lady Ya sat up with him and laid in his arms, asking, “Shaolong! What have you thought of?”

Xiang Shaolong explained, “If there is a secret passageway, it must be connected with the secret room which holds Lu Gong’s Secret Manual. That is only reasonable. Also, there will be more than one entrance to this passageway, so as long as we can find just one of the entrances, we will be able to move freely in here.”

Lady Ya smiled coquettishly, “Leave this to me, I guarantee that I will not disappoint.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged her tightly and laughed, “Zhao Ya is so obedient, how shall I thank you?”

Zhao Ya was about to reply when someone knocked on the door, followed by Zhao Qian’s sad voice calling out, “Can Qian’er come in?”

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, the bed was filled with a fragrant smell.

Zhao Ya and Zhao Qian were on either side of him, hugging him tightly.

With Zhao Qian around last night, he did not have fun with Lady Ya and naturally he dared not touch Zhao Qian as well. But that kind of intoxicating feeling is alluring enough as well.

After having a good sleep, all the dejection he felt yesterday was swept away.

He has let go of everything else and did not step out of Flying Clouds Chamber the whole morning, spending the time chatting happily with the 2 ladies and the maids.

At noon, Prince Xinling sent someone to ask for him.

At the outer hall, Prince Xinling was sitting with 3 other people, having tea. On seeing his arrival, he immediately introduced them and they turned out to be famous mercenaries in his residence.

One of them who was large built and ugly was Zhu Hai. When Prince Xinling stole the military token to defeat Qin years ago, it was all thanks to him who hid a 40jin hammer and used it to kill the General Jin Bi who was leading the military. He is one of the famed fiercest general in the world.

The other two are Tan Bang and Yue Xing. The former was heavily bearded and looked like a Confucian scholar while the latter was short and stout, with a glance one can tell that he's a

highly skilled pugilist.

Prince Xinling smiled, “It’s the first time Shaolong has been here, let me bring you around and after lunch we can meet the most talented and beautiful lady in Daliang and let’s see if you can manage to impress her.”

Xiang Shaolong immediately thought of the ‘Shi Shaonu’ whom Lady Ya once mentioned and he was immediately invigorated and followed them out of the house.

The 5 of them went separately in 2 horse carriages and under the protection of 20 odd guards, toured Daliang.

The carriage went past the route they took when they arrived, which passed the imperial palace.

The buildings were grouped magnificently together with carvings of phoenixes and dragons, with lush woods surrounding them. But when Xiang Shaolong thought of when these pretty buildings will soon become unrecognizable ruins, he felt a great pity.

Along the walls of the palace, there were river ways intercrossed with roads and bridge, looking extremely picturesque.

After leaving the palace area, they turned into a bustling street linking the north and south.

Strangely, there's a path right in the middle of the large street, which is extremely flat with locust trees planted thickly on both sides, and next to them were wide drains. The pedestrian walkway is on the outer area of the drains.

Prince Xinling explained, "This is an official pathway reserved only for the use of his Majesty and officials with the ranks of dukes and above, commoners are not allowed to step on it."

As he spoke, the carriage had already turned into the official pathway.

At the southern end of the official path was tightly knitted residential and commercial areas, the layout was organized although chaotic in a way as well. Ladies, gentlemen and merchants were moving around the crowd with people talking and bumping into one another, making the place look extremely exciting and prosperous.

They had lunch at the largest restaurant in this area, Dan Yang Lou. This restaurant has its front facing the main street and its back against a small river and was very exquisite.

They took up a large private room near the river on the 2nd level and when they've had some drinks, that Tan Bang became very chatty, revealing his scholarly nature. No wonder Prince Xinling would invite him along to accompany them.

Although Zhu Hai and Yue Xing were more into martial arts, they too listened intently.

It's the first time Xiang Shaolong has heard such an in-depth and witty analysis of current affairs and was very much intrigued.

Right then Prince Xinling asked, "Amongst the many schools of thought, which school and which person is the best?"

Tan Bang smiled and took his time to reply, "Although it's said that rivers all flow in different ways, but in today's time they have all merged. From what I see, amongst the modern people now, Zou Yan and [Xun Qing](#)* from Qi and [Master Fei](#)** from Han have all the accomplishments of learned men before our time, and can also do more than what has been done by our forefathers. Their teachings will certainly be the way to go for future ideals on managing a state."

Naturally Xiang Shaolong knows who Xun Zi and Han Fei is, but he does not know the background of Zou Yan at all and asked, "Who is Zou Yan?"

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

Prince Xinling commented, "I did not know that Shaolong don't even know who this famous and rare person is." He continued with a mysterious smile, "Let me introduce you later."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, could it be that this Zou Yan is living in that Shi Cainu's house, or else how could he see him so easily?

Tan Bang lowered his voice, “Mister Zou may be one of the rare talents in the world now, but he is famous now because the situation made him so.”

Everyone hurriedly asked him for the reason.

Tan Bang sighed and revealed a sad expression, “Ever since the weakening of the Zhous, the world has been without a leader and the various states fighting amongst themselves. All the suffering commoners were praying for the appearance of the true ruler so that all these wars can be stopped. Mister Zou’s teachings of the 5 morals said, listen to the words and obey the orders. Everyone hopes that he can give some hint so that they will know who will be the master of the new era.”

A gleam flashed in Prince Xinling’s eyes, because he has long regarded himself as the savior in these difficult times, and he is working hard towards this goal.

Xiang Shaolong used to be so sure that the ruler of the new era would be Emperor Qin, but after knowing the true situation here, he was confused again.

Tan Bang lowered his voice, “From what I see, the new ruler will certainly be Prince.”

Prince Xinling coughed dryly to cover the excitement he felt and said, “That Zou Yan whom Mister Tan was referring to may be famous, but he came from [Jixia](#)* that comes out with wild

theories. From what I see he's just someone who speaks empty."

Tan Bang replied with a straight face, "No, this person is very different from those madmen at Jixia. He is a defender of Confucius's teachings and does not look highly upon the words of Mohism. If Prince has some free time, you should read his works in detail."

Prince Xinling pretended to appear very magnanimous and replied, "Thank you for your pointers."

Tan Bang was about to talk about Han Fei when footsteps could be heard outside the door and the soldier who was guarding outside the door came in and reported, "Lord Longyang requests for an audience!"

Prince Xinling and Xiang Shaolong were extremely surprised, they did not expect Lord Longyang would be so bold to actually come looking for them.

Those who come are without good intentions.

Prince Xinling sat proudly, having no intention of rising to greet him at all and said loudly, "If Lord Longyang has no intention to drink, than it's best that you do not come in." He is obviously not giving Lord Longyang any face with these words, obviously their relation is so strained that they are openly at war.

Zhu Hai's gaze turned icy as he asked, "Does Prince wants me to

guard the door for you.”

Prince Xinling shook his head with a smile.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed. Prince Xinling's expression can remain totally unchanged even if Mount Tai was collapsing in front of him, and this is precisely the secret to his success. At the same time he felt a little anticipation as well, wanting to find out exactly how 'charming' is this Lord Longyang whose fame amongst men has extended through history.

A gentle and melodious voice that could have belonged to either a man or a woman answered from outside the door, “Why is Prince Xinling so upset, have I offended you in any way? Then all the more Longyang has to come in and offer my apologies.”

Xiang Shaolong felt his hair stand on hearing the voice. He did not expect that just Lord Longyang's voice is already so intolerable.

Prince Xinling chortled, “No need for apologies!” He added with a shout, “Aren't you letting our esteemed guest in!”

The door opened.

5 men came in.

Xiang Shaolong stared at Lord Longyang who was at the head of the line, stunned for a moment.

His pretty looks is unparalleled, his skin fairer and softer than a woman, his long eyes full of life and he walked daintily, like a little grass bending from the gentle breeze. If he were to dress up as a woman, he will definitely be an unrivaled beauty.

He was at least half a head shorter than Xiang Shaolong, but his build was proportionate, his arms and limbs slender.

The warrior outfit he wore was exquisite, with a dark green as the base embroidered with pretty silk flowers, very eye catching.

The hat he wore was even better, made in the shape of a romantic and exaggerated tiger's face, and behind the hat there's even a tiger's tail.

Although Xiang Shaolong has no interest in men, he has to admit that Lord Longyang is indeed very 'pretty'.

If not for the long sword he hung on his waist, Xiang Shaolong will never remember that Prince Xinling once told him that he is one of Wei's 3 greatest swordsmen.

You will never be on your guard against such a dainty and weak looking man.

If one were to only compare beauty, Lian Jin would not be able to catch up with him even if he's on a horse.

As for the other four, with one look it's obvious that they are top swordsmen, especially the short and stout man behind Lord Longyang on the right. His eyes were gleaming and he has an aura of death. He looks like one who loves a fight, and others will not dare to belittle him.

Lord Longyang walked daintily to the table and sat down gently. He threw a flirtatious look at Prince Xinling first before his glittering eyes traveled past the others seated around the table, landing at last on Xiang Shaolong's face. He stared at him for a moment before 'giggling', "Commander Xiang, I've missed you so badly!"

Xiang Shaolong felt himself go numb from his stare and thought to himself that this person is so coquettish that he must have long disregarded himself as a man. The thought grossed him out so much that for a moment he does not know how to handle him and can only smile stiffly, "I do not have any capabilities at all, so how could I have caused Lord Longyang to miss me so much?"

Prince Xinling personally filled Lord Longyang's winecup and said with a smile, "I'd like to hear about it as well."

Lord Longyang 'smiled daintily' and replied, "Commander Xiang was able to kill Lian Jin, a good fighter from Wei, and execute the horrible horse thief Hui Hu, obviously you really have the talent, so how can I not like you?"

Zhu Hai and the rest were furrowing their brows as they heard the conversation but there's nothing they can do to him.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled, this person was 'smiling coquettishly', and the eyes looking at him were 'full of feelings', not a trace of hatred towards him was revealed. This 'smiling with a dagger hidden' is enough to make one's heart run cold.

Prince Xinling chortled, "Come! Let us drink a toast to Lord Longyang's affection." He swept his eyes across and his stern look landed on the 4 swordsmen standing behind Lord Longyang and cried out, "Offer the wine!"

Naturally there will be someone who will offer wine to those 4.

Everyone there had their own secret intentions, but all drank the toast.

Except for Lord Longyang who did not move. He waited until everyone has drunk the wine before pouring it on the ground next to him, saying shyly, "Let's offer this wine to the Earth Deity, to celebrate the number one swordsman from Zhao stepping on our Great Wei's soil."

Even with Prince Xinling's control, his composure changed slightly as he uttered coldly, "I've specially arranged a lot of programs for Shaolong today, if Lord Longyang has no other matters, please forgive us as we will be leaving immediately."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cheering. In truth he was starting to get irritated with Lord Longyang effeminate way of talking.

At the same time he was thinking to himself, if this Lord's swordplay is as effeminate and willowy as him, it will be quite difficult to deal with. If during the duel he's as irritated as he's feeling now which makes him rash and anxious, he might lose because of it.

Lord Longyang laughed, his 'pretty eyes' looking at Xiang Shaolong joyously as he said effeminately, "I came here today is to see how heroic and brave Commander Xiang is. It's such a small request, I'm sure Master Wuji will not reject me!"

Prince Xinling and Xiang Shaolong exchanged looks, extremely annoyed but they really found it difficult to reject.

A gleam came over Xiang Shaolong's eyes, and looking at this man famed for his beauty, he laughed and asked, "I wonder if Lord Longyang is going to test me personally or will you let your men do it?"

Prince Xinling interrupted, "Weapons do not have eyes. If Lord Longyang is fighting personally, then forgive me for not agreeing to this."

Lord Longyang 'giggled', "Since Master is so protective of me, I will let Sha Xuan take on Commander Xiang!"

Prince Xinling and the rest revealed a look of alarm and they looked towards the short and stout man whom Xiang Shaolong was scrutinizing earlier. This made Xiang Shaolong affirm his guess

that this person must be a ferocious fighter who has won many duels.

That Sha Xuan took a step forward and said loudly, “Sha Xuan is willing to take some pointers from Commander Xiang’s excellent swordplay!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that this duel is unavoidable, besides this also involves the reputation of Zhao. So he respectfully sought Prince Xinling’s permission, asking, “Will Prince allow Shaolong to accept the duel!”

Prince Xinling was very confident about him, and at the same time he wanted to see for himself his swordplay as well, so he replied with a smile, “Sha Xuan is our Majesty’s skilled fighter, Shaolong must be careful.” He continued loudly, “This is purely an exchange of pointers, so I hope both of you will control your attacks.” He then shouted, “Men! Clear a space for a duel in the hall here!”

He had just spoken his words when the sounds of tables and chairs being moved could be heard outside the room.

Lord Longyang smiled and stood up gently.

Xiang Shaolong was stunned as well, no wonder the King of Wei is so besotted with this person. All his movements are fluid, beautiful, his expressions alluring. Once you are with him for some time, it’s difficult not to treat him as a woman.

Lord Longyang bowed slightly towards Xiang Shaolong and laughed daintily, “I will wait outside for Commander Xiang.”

And he walked out of the room with his men, his hips swaying.

Prince Xinling looked at his disappearing back view, his eyes shone and he lowered his voice and said icily, “Kill Sha Xuan for me!”

Book 3 Chapter 11 – Little House By The Lake

After the tables and things were moved to the corners, there was a large empty space.

All the guests were asked to leave the upper level, leaving only men from both sides.

Sha Xuan and Xiang Shaolong stood facing each other in the middle of the hall. The sunlight streamed in from a large window at the side, illuminating the ground near the window in a golden glow.

Lord Longyang was very confident in his man, and was looking at Xiang Shaolong with a coquettish smile. However his subordinates were looking at Xiang Shaolong as if they did not think highly of him.

Sha Xuan's swordplay is very famous in Daliang, and he is the leader of the 8 senior imperial guards belonging to King An Li, one of the most feared characters in Daliang.

Prince Xinling may look calm and composed on the surface, but he is secretly feeling nervous. If Xiang Shaolong were to unfortunately perish in the duel, then his plan to assassinate King An Li would have gone down the drain. But if he can kill the other party, there will be one less obstacle when assassinating the King of Wei.

“Clang!”

Sha Xuan removed his sword from the scabbard, and for a moment a cold ray was emitted. He seemed to have changed into another person, holding on to his sword heroically and retreated 3 steps. His retreat reverberated through the wooden floor, the sound of his steps loud.

Although he retreated, his impressive aura was increasing instead of decreasing and the spectators at the side all felt stifled and was shocked.

Xiang Shaolong could feel his opponent's fierce and vicious aura, so he recollected his thoughts and entered into Mozi Swordplay's world of quiet defense, and did not look into his opponent's sharp and piercing eyes.

Men on both sides saw that Xiang Shaolong was unmoving despite being oppressed by his opponent's fierce aura. He stood straight, his composure calm, and they were all surprised. They did not know that it is the essence of Mozi swordplay to counter movement with calmness.

Sha Xuan felt displeased, because in the past when he defeated his enemies, he relied on his special fierce aura to make his opponent frightened before attacking swiftly and strongly so that his opponent will shed blood within 5 steps. However, he did not expect that this person in front of him is not at all affected by his aura and this made him lose his bearings instead. But by now there's no room for retreat, so he roared and attacked with his sword.

Lord Longyang and the men immediately cheered to boost his morale.

This sword attack was as swift as lightning, aiming straight towards Xiang Shaolong's forehead, filled with a strong force that cannot be retracted.

Xiang Shaolong's Flying Rainbow is still in his scabbard, as if he has no intention of retaliating at all. It was only until the sword was almost upon his head and Prince Xinling and the rest were beginning to worry for him that his body moved suddenly and diagonally across and came in front of the large window which sunlight streamed in. He was still looking at his opponent coolly, his eyes filled with unparalleled and strong determination.

He came from a background of strict and elite military training, and is adept at using the environment to bring out the best in his fighting ability. Since he accepted the challenge, he is determined to get rid of his opponent in the shortest time possible, firstly to curb some of Lord Longyang's air, and secondly to make Prince Xinling think even more highly of himself.

He is extremely experience in combat and very good at eyeing others out. With a look at Sha Xuan's stance, he knows that this person has very strong arms and specializes in vicious and dangerous attacks. That's why he avoided his sword attack to throw the opponent off guard.

Sha Xuan roared angrily, and followed his sword again to make another attack.

Xiang Shaolong laughed long and loud, Flying Rainbow came out of the scabbard like lightning and he held the treasured sword diagonally away from his body at a 45-degree angle on the side. It immediately captured the afternoon sunlight that was glaring in from the window and reflected the ray of sunlight into Sha Xuan's round and fearsome eyes.

Never in his dreams did Sha Xuan imagine that there would be a kind of swordplay against an opponent, which makes use of sunlight in a room. He felt a strong glare in front of him and for a moment he could not see anything at all.

How can Xiang Shaolong let such a rare opportunity go so he avoided his opponent's sword and his sword slashed diagonally, like the wind. For a moment, blood poured and a scream was heard. The fresh blood pouring from the side of Sha Xuan's neck gradually ebbed as he fell to the ground.

His sword had sliced his opponent's throat, and everyone knows that there's no way Sha Xuan will survive.

Men on both sides could feel cold sweat coming out from their pores as they witnessed the scene. Who would have imagined that with Sha Xuan's swordplay, he could not even fend against his opponent's one stroke.

Xiang Shaolong returned his sword into the scabbard and smiled calmly at Lord Longyang, "Brother Sha's swordplay is too good, I would have liked to hold my attacks back but was unable to, please

forgive me.”

Inside the horse carriage, Prince Xinling said happily, “Xiang Shaolong has helped me vent my frustration, it feels so good!”

Xiang Shaolong remembered Lord Longyang’s pretense of calm as he was leaving and asked with a smile, “I wonder if King An Li will be displeased that I killed his guard.”

Prince Xinling gave a cold snort, “That Sha Xuan, on the pretext of exchanging pointers, killed 5 of my very good swordsmen. Now that you’ve killed him today, what else can An Li say about that.”

By then the carriage has turned into a small road with trees growing densely around it and in front there’s a tranquil and exquisite looking house and courtyard.

Prince Xinling is in extremely high spirits, maybe because there’s now a chance of assassinating the King of Wei. He told him warmly, “We’re now going to this place that all men in Daliang wishes to go, ‘Little House by the Lake’. The scenery here is breathtaking but the main reason is it’s mistress Miss Ji Yanran not only has the beauty to make a country fall, but her talents astound the world as well. Together with Widow Qing from the state of Qin, they are known as the era’s finest pair.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing bitterly. If it was the past, he will certainly be ecstatic to have the chance to meet such a famous beauty, but now his own life is in danger, how can he find the mood to flirt. Even if the other party was willing, he’ll have to

think of a way to make her give up so that she will not have to worry about his future.

Once he thought about that, he really felt like a tiger who has fallen on bad times.

Prince Xinling has no idea that he is already aware of his evil plot and thought that Xiang Shaolong was just too excited to talk, so he embellished the story, “Miss Yanran loves to chat about scholarly and martial pursuits with the various learned men who came from afar...”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Martial pursuits?”

Prince Xinling was shocked, “I didn’t expect you not to know this. Miss Yanran is ranked above Lord Longyang amongst Wei’s greatest swordsmen, at number 2. Hai! Such a beauty, how can any average man be compatible with her? That’s why she is still unmarried now. Whoever wins her heart, will certainly gain fame in the world immediately and become the envy of all men around.”

He sighed again, “Talking about looks and skills, Shaolong has the qualities to be selected, but you might not be able to pass the scholarly test.”

As they spoke, the carriage has entered the courtyard.

Under the shade of the trees, a small lake appeared in front of them. In the middle of the lake was a small island with a few

exquisite rooms built on it, a long bridge linking the island to the land. It looks like a place fit for a deity to live in.

No matter how dejected Xiang Shaolong was, he was invigorated on seeing it. To think that there would be such a scenic place in Daliang. Looking at the abode one can know the person who resides in it, so by this deduction, this pretty mistress must certainly be out of the ordinary.

The little island on the pretty lake was shaped like a crescent moon, with a fake waterfall, looking like a painted scroll. Between the rooms there were strange flowers and grass, gentle waves lapping and long corridors meandering and linking them, exquisite with an ancient beauty. One can imagine that if one can take a stroll there, it will certainly be a very exhilarated feeling and one will be reluctant to leave.

The carriages went up the long bridge, as if they're now traveling into a beautiful painting, the breeze blowing past the water, the trees fighting for beauty. The colors of the pavilions and rooms stood in contrast with the lake and the mountains, the little bridges and streams partially hidden by the green leaves and trees.

After passing through a bamboo pathway and 2 small pavilions, the carriages stopped in at an open space in front of a building. There were already 3 horse carriages parked there, obviously they are not the only visitors.

Xiang Shaolong followed the rest down the carriage and a pretty maid came out from the building and paid her respect to Prince Xinling, saying "Miss is having an afternoon nap now, would

Prince Xinling and the rest of the guests please wait a moment in the hall.”

Prince Xinling doesn't seem in the least offended and happily led Xiang Shaolong into the hall beneath the building.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing bitterly to himself secretly again. Looking at what the maid is like, he can imagine what the mistress will be like. To think that there is such a great beauty with character, but he does not have the mood or bravery to hunt. Fate does make fun of men.

End of Book 3

Book 4 Chapter 1 – Fierce Beauty

Ji Yanran's abode is made from white stone, hidden amongst the flowers and trees and its style was ancient and exquisite, like a building in heaven and those staying inside were beautiful fairies.

Walking up the stone steps to the building, inside the door there was an exquisite stand for the guests to put their cloaks and weapons. 2 pretty maids were already waiting there to serve them.

Tan Bang went close to Xiang Shaolong's ears and whispered, "Learned lady Ji does not like people to bring swords into her abode."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head to show his understanding and thought to himself that this Learned lady Ji is really putting on airs. She obviously knows that an esteemed guest like Prince Xinling has arrived but she was still napping and her maids dared not wake her up as well. Furthermore, she refused to let anyone enter with weapons. But he thought about it again and felt that her haughty attitude is well done as well, because truthfully, he has to admit that men are cheap. The more difficult it is to get the woman, the more precious she will be. Even now he is thirsting to find out how truly beautiful she is.

The 2 pretty maids seems especially taken with Xiang Shaolong as they served him meticulously, carefully dusting off the dirt and dust on his clothes before presenting him.

After all the various work was done, the 4 entered the hall.

They had just walked past the door when a loud and crisp voice shouted next to Xiang Shaolong, “Esteemed guests have arrived! Esteemed guests have arrived!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken unawares and totally startled. He looked towards the voice and can’t help but laugh, because it’s a talking parrot perched on a stand.

The 2 pretty maids obviously doted on it and they smiled daintily as they fed this interesting animal.

Xiang Shaolong glanced around.

The large hall was elegantly decorated but the most unique part is that there are no rugs, just a few square tables and mats. The hall was filled with strange bonsai, as if they have moved part of the garden outside into here.

On one of the huge walls hung a large painting of a beautiful woman, wearing light and thin clothes, looking quietly elegant, just like the talent and elegance exuded by the mistress here.

Of the group of 4 tables in the hall, 3 groups were filled and there were 2 to 6 people in each group. All of them talked softly, as if afraid to awaken the mistress from her nap.

Prince Xinling led them and walked into the hall and immediately more than half the people stood up and pay their

respects to this second in command in Wei. Obviously it was the first time the rest of the people had seen him, and only when they realized who he is, they hurriedly stood up and paid their respects as well.

With one look Xiang Shaolong took notice of a few of the people.

Especially the group of 4 near the window on the left side. 3 of them were dressed in warrior's clothes and have an outstanding aura, but what stirred his notice was the ferocity they exuded. Especially one of the large sized men who is built like a mountain and a little taller than Xiang Shaolong. His limbs were extremely thick, his long hair touching his shoulder, wearing a silver decorative piece on his forehead. His face was wide, his back broad, his eyes large like copper bells with a look of viciousness and slyness. He looks majestic and his whole body exuded an evil and shocking charisma.

The 2 warriors beside him were both fierce and vicious looking but next to him, they immediately paled in comparison. The strangest thing is the hands of the 3 of them all bore scars of being burnt by fire.

Another who took his notice was the group of 6 men on the right dressed as scholars. One of them was tall with a refined look, the deep eyes shimmering with intellect, looking like an immortal.

There was only 2 people in the last group, the shorter one with an average look and from his clothes, one can tell that he is not a Wei. One wonders which country he could have come from, but for someone who can come here and see Ji Yanran, he is naturally a

person of a certain status.

Prince Xinling first greeted the group of 6 on the right, and spoke to the refined looking man, “We were just talking about Mister Zou, and did not expect to see you so soon.” He waved at Xiang Shaolong and said, “Shaolong, come over and meet this extremely gifted man with foresight Mister Zou Yan.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, so this is the philosopher who is famed because of his ‘Sayings of the 5 merits’. He was about to come forward and offer his respects when a loud and thick voice from the left rang out, “Master Wuji, may I ask if this is the Imperial Protector from the state of Zhao, Brother Xiang Shaolong?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled and looked towards the voice. The person who spoke was the warrior who looked like the devil reincarnated.

Obviously Prince Xinling does not recognize this person and asked in surprise, “This gentleman is...”

The Wei who looks like the person who introduced these 3 warriors here to meet Ji Yanran stepped forward and said respectfully, “Feng Zhisen is a guest under Lord Longyang, pays his respect to Sir. This person whose intellect and bravery is known throughout the state of Qi is Mister Xiao Weimou, the warrior on the right is called Ning Chong, the one on the left is Zheng Lei. They are all famous warriors in Qi and Mister Wei’s personal fighters.”

Prince Xinling and Xiang Shaolong were both equally shocked, they did not expect this ferocious man would chase him so closely. Since he is now openly going after him in Daliang, he must be up to something nefarious. Obviously he is under the protection of Lord Longyang and has the backing of the King of Wei, no wonder he dares to be so rude here.

Just as Xiang Shaolong feels a huge headache coming on, Xiao Weimou took a huge step forward and after paying his respects to Prince Xinling, turned towards Xiang Shaolong, extended his hand and said, "I've long heard that Brother Xiang's swordsmanship is outstanding, if there's a chance I must exchange pointers with you."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he wants to compete with him on strength and has no choice but to extend his own hand as well.

The corners of Xiao Weimou's mouth curved up into a cold smile as he used his strength to shake his hand. For a moment Xiang Shaolong felt as if his hands has been clasped with an iron manacle that is still being tightened.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled. Although he can still manage to fend him off, he still felt the pain in his hands as if the bones are cracking and he knows that his opponent's arm strength is definitely better than his.

Luckily he has a higher tolerance than ordinary men and did not embarrass himself in public. He even managed a smile and said,

“Has Mister Wei just had an accident with fire, why do your hands look as if they have been burnt?”

A mad fury flashed past Xiao Weimou’s eyes and he increased the pressure in his arms and said icily, “It’s just some silly act by some low down person. It’s nothing much, besides, such childish pranks can only last for a moment. Sooner or later I will crush him to pieces.”

Such an explosive atmosphere, even Zou Yan and the rest can clearly feel that something unpleasant had happened between the 2 of them.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly withstood his startling arm strength.

Xiao Weimou had wanted to crush his fingers to pieces immediately so that he will no longer be able to use the sword. But after testing Xiang Shaolong’s strength, he knows that he would not be able to achieve his ideal effect, so with a cold laugh, he released his hand and went back.

His 2 subordinates stared at Xiang Shaolong with deep hatred. Obviously that fire had burned them quite badly.

Prince Xinling signaled to Xiang Shaolong with a look and introduced the Weis next to Zou Yan, who are all famous men or senior officials. Obviously Zou Yan is very popular with the Weis.

After the round of introductions, Prince Xinling’s gaze rested on

the last group of Weis and said with a smile, “This is the first time I’ve seen Mister Zhang Fengchang here.” He looked at the person who is of average built next to him, and besides his intelligent eyes, the rest of him looks average and asked, “This gentleman is...”

Zhang Fengchang laughed, “This is Master Han Fei from the state of Han. I’m here all thanks to him today, because Miss Ji was complimenting Master Han’s book ‘Speaking of Difficulties’ after reading it and sent word to say she would like to meet him. Therefore I have to accompany and bring Master Han here to meet Miss.”

Prince Xinling and the rest were all excited as they did not expect to see such a famed intellectual here. But at the same time they feel a little cheated, as they did not expect this person to look so ordinary.

This famous Han Fei whose name had gone down centuries is not one good at socializing. He just smiled clumsily, bowed slightly and to him it means offering a greeting.

The 2 pretty maids hurriedly invited Prince Xinling and his men to be seated at a low table opposite Han Fei and his friend.

By then only the table beneath the large painting of the beauty was empty, and this must be where Learned lady Ji will be seated.

Like the others, Xiang Shaolong sat around the table, eating the snacks the maids brought out but his heart is in a turmoil.

With the arrival of Xiao Weimou, the situation has become even more complicated.

Besides, this person has amazing arm strength and his body is as solid as steel. Xiang Shaolong may be talented, but he may not be his match as well. If he were to join hands with Lord Longyang, and with Prince Xinling harboring hidden agendas about him, his trip here will really be filled with danger.

As he was thinking, he heard Prince Xinling asking Han Feizi, “Does Master Han have something to attend to during your trip to our state this time? Please let us know so that I can see if there’s any way I can help?”

Hai Fei replied, “This time... Hai! This time I came under the orders of my King, to come... come here and borrow rations.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled, he did not expect Han Fei to have a stutter, and his words are not adequate to express his meaning. He doesn’t even know how to take the opportunity to speak up for his cause and point out why Wei should lend rations to Han.

Indeed Prince Xinling furrowed his brows and replied, “So that’s the case, how much does your country need to borrow?”

Han Fei replied, “10,000 stones!” And he stopped short at that, not elaborating further.

Naturally Prince Xinling was unperturbed but just smiled and did not converse further.

Zou Yan said loudly, “Downfall comes after the peak, and after downfall comes the peak, the exchange of the 5 merits. Actually there were signs long ago that the state of Han will suffer from drought. 5 years ago I saw a meteor fall into the boundaries of Han, and I said there will certainly be calamity, and now the prediction has come true.”

Han Feizi furrowed his brows, obviously unhappy and he did not believe Zou Yan’s words at all. But the others around Zou Yan all agreed with him.

Xiao Weimou who is from Qi like Zou Yan, laughed “Mister Zou is indeed far sighted. Now the world is ruled by 7 states, would Mister be able to explain where the future will lie and enlighten us?”

Zou Yan smiled slightly and was about to reply when they heard the sounds of adornments clinking and a beauty, with the accompaniment of 4 maids, walked into the hall from the inside.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly looked over and he felt his brains go numb from shock.

A beauty who looks like a fairy with supple skin and luminance being escorted out by pretty maids, like the moon being supported by many stars, walking daintily forward. This scene captivated everyone, their souls seemed to have gone to heaven.

Her hair was combed into a high bun at the side, which matches her slim body and tiny waist. Her slim neck and fair skin was alluring, their brightness captivating.

Her eyes were deep and dark with reflections like the water. No wonder her beauty is known far and wide, she is absolutely enthralling.

She was wearing a long white robe with flowers, which flitted prettily as she moved, the wide sleeves fluttering, enhancing her beauty and posture.

Her alluring outer beauty as well as her captivating inner beauty came together to form a painting of a beauty. Xiang Shaolong felt as if he's in heaven, and totally forgot about the things happening on earth.

Even with Wu Tingfang's beauty, she pales a little even when compared to her, so apparently she is extremely enchanting.

Ji Yanran walked over prettily and leaned languidly on the tall cushion behind the long table in the middle, looking even more charismatic than ever.

The way she half sat and half leaned back is already alluring, but when she kept her legs up the rug, her skirt moved up to reveal her fair, flawless and supple dainty feet which makes Xiang Shaolong feel like crawling up the rug and pin her underneath so that he can explore her body and inhale her fragrance.

After Ji Yanran seated herself properly, she tilted her pretty head and said with a smile, “Yanran was too fond of sleeping and have made everyone wait so long!”

Xiang Shaolong regained his senses and took a look at the rest. He saw that Prince Xinling, Zou Yan, Han Fei, Xiao Weimou and everyone else looked enchanted; they have even less self-control than him.

Just as everyone hurriedly assured her that it's all right, Ji Yanran's shiny, lively and dark eyes flitted towards Xiang Shaolong and looked at him before flitting over to Xiao Weimou's table, scrutinizing the rest of the people and lastly looked at Han Fei. A look of joy passed over as she exclaimed happily, “Would this be Master Han Fei?”

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Weimou were both greatly disappointed, obviously Ji Yanran is more interested in Han Fei than in them.

Han Fei's face blushed red and replied nervously, “I am indeed Han Fei.”

Ji Yanran's pretty eyes lighted up as she gushed happily, “After reading Master's grand works, it indeed has views that no one else has thought of before, I am extremely awed.”

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely disappointed, this Han Fei's appearance has no attraction at all yet Ji Yanran is looking at him

differently. Obviously this woman is more concerned about a person's intellect. When it comes to compositions or debates, if he compares himself to Han Fei, it would be like the comparison between a kindergarten student and a Nobel Prize winner. But he feels a little relieved as well, because he has problems preserving his own life now, so no matter how alluring Ji Yanran is, he will have to curb his desire to court her or he may not be able to handle it all.

With a beauty praising him, Han Fei is at a loss as to what to do, and doesn't even know where to put his hands.

Ji Yanran seems to have eyes only for Han Fei, and she said gently, "Mister's philosophy about governing a country with 'law', 'techniques' and 'power', suggesting that people acts with one thing in mind which is to achieve gains while avoiding punishment, so the law must come into play if anyone commits any unwanted actions. It indeed looks right into the problem and is food for thought."

Han Fei was at a greater loss for words and can only keep nodded his head, which makes others feel bad for him.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that if he can transplant his knowledge into his own brain, he might be able to enjoy the company of a beauty tonight.

Zou Yan laughed loudly, and after Ji Yaran and everyone else's attention was diverted to him, said confidently, "With Master Han's knowledge, your King will certainly appreciate it greatly, but why is it that there seems to be no improvement in your

country's cause to take over the world?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed, Zou Yan was too much to rub salt on Han Fei's wounds like that.

A look of anger and embarrassment flashed through Han Fei's face but he was unable to speak further.

Obviously Ji Yanran admires Han Fei for his talent so she helped him out by saying, "An intelligent man needs a good master as well. Shang Yang, who is a Wei, did not accomplish anything in Wei as well. But when he went to Qin, his reforms improved the state greatly, does Mister Zou think that I have spoken rightly?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly complimented her retort, this lady is indeed remarkable. Just as he thought [Zou Yan](#) would be speechless, Zou Yan smiled slightly and said, "Of course Miss's words are very reasonable, but the point is not about the intellect of an individual. Besides an individual, there is still fate at work. Shang Yang was successful because of the situation, and he could not escape from the control of the 5 virtues. Only one who truly understands the 5 elements: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth and how they interact with each other will be able to grasp the changes of luck determined by Heaven."

Han Fei gave a cold snort, and his words came out a little smoother as he said, "What Mister Zou said... said... is unconvincing, then.... then are we supposed to... sit and wait for fate, and don't have to do anything else?"

His words sound reasonable as well, but the way he stuttered them out, it just doesn't sound as convincing.

Zou Yan is a good debater and he chortled, "Of course that's not the case. Once we can grasp Heaven's plans, we will be able to foretell the future and know the aim and direction where we should work on. Let's say digging a well for example, only when we know where the source of water is will we not waste our efforts in vain."

Han Fei was so furious his face turned red but he could not find a retort, or maybe he doesn't know how to express it. Xiang Shaolong felt great pity for him and wished that he can find some paper and brush so that he can write down his opinions.

Applause was heard, it turned out to be Xiao Weimou clapping in agreement.

Ji Yanran looked towards Xiao Weimou and raised her brow, asking, "This gentleman is..."

Xiao Weimou puffed out his chest, like an animal looking for a mate and said loudly, "I am Xiao Weimou from the state of Qi, I wonder if Miss have heard of me?"

Ji Yanran was enlightened, "So it's Mister Wei who advocates learning from beasts. May I ask, if men and beasts are the same, won't the world be thrown immediately into chaos?"

Now that Xiao Weimou has a chance to show off his knowledge in front of this beauty, how can he give up this chance so easily, so he smiled and said “Miss has lived mostly in the city, naturally you would not understand the world of animals. The wilderness has been my teacher for many years and I have observed the lives of beasts and birds and have concluded that only if we go with nature’s flow will we not betray Heaven’s decree. We can enjoy the life given to us under the greater law of nature. If we were to try and suppress our nature, it will only cause more harm than good and will make one become a hypocrite whose thoughts are not in conjunction with one’s actions.”

Ji Yanran looked at him with concentration, her expression showing that she’s thinking about his words. Xiang Shaolong secretly thought oh no, this beauty is obviously very curious about things and very easily attracted by new and unique theories. If Xiao Weimou was to possess her, he would feel the pain and unfairness of it, so he can’t help but blurt out, “How can man and beasts be the same? Even different animals have different ways of living.”

Xiao Weimou laughed coldly, “They can live differently, but their nature remains the same.”

Naturally Xiang Shaolong will not show any courtesy towards him so he stared at him and said smilingly, “The difference between man and animals, is that we are not restricted by our innate abilities and desires; we can even sacrifice our own precious lives for the greater good. Animals walk on all fours, but we can stand up and because we need not use our hands to walk, they’ve become nimble and can make things like this house and all other necessities. Do animals have that ability?”

Obviously Xiao Weimou has done some research on this question so he mocked in reply, “You’re talking about abilities, not innate nature. Birds can fly but can humans fly? Fishes can live underwater but can humans live underwater?”

Xiang Shaolong is definitely not a philosopher, but now that he’s spoken, he cannot back down and have to forge his way through, “I am talking about innate ability. Because human brains are different from animals, we can think and reflect. Besides food, clothing and lodging, we also need mental stimulation; but for animals everything is about survival, they sleep after eating and mate when the time is right. Animals in nature are at a loss and can only react but man can fight against nature and defeat nature. That’s because man has a different innate nature, we know how to improve and expand, that’s how we are now above animals.”

Xiang Shaolong’s not very excellent argument is widely known in the 21st century, but for the people in this era, it’s a new idea and this made Ji Yanran immediately change her opinion of him.

Obviously Xiao Weimou has never thought of this question and he replied angrily, “What’s the difference, I’ve seen both animal and human brains, they’re all just made of tissues and flesh!”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “You have just spoken about the greatest difference between humans and animals. Would animals analyze the difference between their brains and human brains?”

For a moment Xiao Weimou was dumbstruck, fury flared in his

eyes and he wished he could tear Xiang Shaolong alive.

Although Zou Yan does not agree with Xiao Weimou's wild theory that humans should emulate animals, but they're both from the State of Qi and he does want to put Xiang Shaolong down in front of Ji Yanran. Therefore, he tried to pick a bone from an egg and retorted, "Brother Xiang earlier said that the difference between humans and animals is that we can stand up, then gorillas and monkeys all can stand and walk, how do you explain that?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, and thought to himself that he can't possibly explain to them about evolution. Luckily his mind worked quickly and he had an idea, "The difference is in the construction of the brain." He touched his forehead and said, "Primates do not have forehead like us, so they can only concentrate on immediate matters and won't think about tomorrow. But we can arrange and plan for tomorrow's matters, or even plan for matters a year or ten years from now."

In truth Xiang Shaolong's thoughts and arguments are already in a mess, but everyone knows that gorillas really do not have foreheads, so they all thought his reasoning logical.

Ji Yanran clapped and chuckled daintily, "How exciting, I've not heard such an interesting debate like this for a long time."

Her pretty eyes flitted towards Xiang Shaolong and she asked with a sweet smile, "This gentleman here, please forgive Yanran for not knowing who you are yet!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and secretly lamented. He could not tolerate it further earlier and thus came up with a nonsensical debate, and he hopes that she has not really taken a liking for him.

Book 4 Chapter 2 – Chu Mohism's Fu Du

Ji Yanran asked about Xiang Shaolong's background and Prince Xinling hurriedly replied, "This is the No. 1 swordsman from the state of Zhao, Xiang Shaolong, remember that, Yanran."

Ji Yanran looked at Xiang Shaolong with a smile before turning her attention back to Han Fei. Although Xiang Shaolong breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that she has not 'taken a liking' to him, he can't help but also feel dejected, as if hurt. What a dilemma.

Tan Bang went closer to Xiang Shaolong and whispered, "This is Ji Yanran's rule, only she can ask a person's name and status. I've been here more than 20 times but she has never asked who I am. Shaolong, you've already left an impression on her."

Xiang Shaolong felt a man's pride surging up. He thought to himself that since he is not wooing her, why does he have to react to her moods but on seeing her only talking and laughing with Han Fei while the rest can only look on, he felt a sudden fury. Of course he felt a little left out and jealous as well so he stood up.

Prince Xinling was stunned, "Shaolong! What are you doing?"

Ji Yanran turned around and looked at him, a flash of light seems to pass her pretty eyes, obviously she only realized his perfect physique and outstanding aura now.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be candid and said with a laugh, "Miss Ji is indeed a born beauty, it is my fortune to meet you,

farewell!”

Ji Yanran was a little startled, then she seemed to understand his thinking and said with a slight smile, “How many days will Mister Xiang be staying in Daliang?”

Xiang Shaolong saw that she has no intention of making him stay at all and was secretly furious and felt a great loss of face but he pretended to be nonchalant and said simply, “Maybe a few more days!”

Prince Xinling and the rest had no choice but to stand up and leave with him.

On the way back to Xinling’s residence, Prince Xinling ranted in the carriage, “Shaolong do you know what a good opportunity you’ve missed? It’s rare that Ji Yanran is all smiles, for all you know she may play the zither and sing for the guests! Hai!” His words carry a great regret, obviously Ji Yanran’s singing and zither skills is extraordinary.

But what Xiang Shaolong is thinking of is the vicious look Xiao Weimou gave him when he left. This person is not one who has only brawns but no brains, and he has many capable men under him. He is indeed in a very dangerous position now.

After returning to Prince Xinling’s residence, he went to Lady Ya and she immediately pulled him into the room and said, “I’ve made contact with Wu Zhuo and Cheng Xu and told them your instructions. Wu Zhuo wants me to tell you: He doesn’t know if

their spies in Daliang has been embroiled in Prince Xinling and Lord Longyang's fights because of this matter, so they have been in hiding and refused to make contact with him. Now we can only rely on ourselves. He also said he'll try to find a way to sneak into the city."

On hearing this Xiang Shaolong's mood turned for the worse and he collapsed on Lady Ya's rugs.

Lady Ya came up and helped remove his shoes, saying gently, "Ya'er has found the entrance to the underground tunnel, how are you going to reward me?"

Xiang Shaolong sat up in joy and pulled her into her arms. After giving her a good kiss on the lips, he said, "Lady is really capable!"

Lady Ya happily nibbled on his ears before telling him in detail the entrance to the tunnel. She sighed and continued, "Stealing 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual' may not be difficult, but the difficult part is leaving the state of Wei and avoiding the pursuing soldiers. 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual' is such an important item, Prince Xinling will surely check on it daily and once he find it gone, he'll naturally think that we're the ones who took it."

Xiang Shaolong also felt this to be a headache.

Right at this time Prince Xinling sent someone to summon him over immediately.

The guard led him to the inner hall which he had overheard Prince Xinling and his sister's conversation the other night, and after they were all seated, Prince Xinling said seriously, "An Li has given his imperial edict, he wants you to send Zhao Qian into the Palace the day after. That night he will throw a feast to welcome you as the ambassador."

Xiang Shaolong felt a lurk in his heart, he knows the crucial time is about to come.

Prince Xinling lowered his voice, "Lord Longyang will use the excuse to exchange pointers about swordplay to kill you. The person who will fight will certainly be that Xiao Weimou, in that way An Li and Lord Longyang need not be responsible because Xiao Weimou is a guest from the state of Qi."

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented, if it's a proper duel with Xiao Weimou, chances of him winning are really slim. Just based on arm strength alone, he's already on the losing end.

Prince Xinling said quietly, "Lord Longyang hates you to the core right now, he's definitely not going to let you leave Daliang alive and because he has the backing of the King, I'm afraid even I cannot protect you. Shaolong do you have any plans?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing Prince Xinling but he sighed and said, "What can I do? I can only take one step at a time."

Prince Xinling sized him up for a moment before taking a deep

breath and said, “If Shaolong wants to avoid the calamity and at the same time enjoy endless riches, there is only one way. Do you want to know?”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, “It’s coming!” But he pretended to be attracted and said, “Please advice!”

Prince Xinling said, “It is to kill An Li that useless King and Lord Longyang.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be shocked and exclaimed, “What?”

Prince Xinling said coldly, “A man must be vicious at times, since he’s merciless, I need not show any kindness. I have men around An Li as well and we can hide the weapons in the Palace. As soon as you kill An Li, my men can immediately take out the weapons and kill Lord Longyang and the rest. When I ascend the throne, and with your great help, we’ll take the opportunity when Qin is powerless to invade east to unify the 3 states. By then won’t the world be ours? You can kill Zhao Mu for revenge as well, or else it’ll be a dead end for you when you return to Zhao anyway.”

The future he painted is indeed very attractive but Xiang Shaolong knows they’re all lies. He nodded his head, “This truly is the only way, but King An Li will certainly have personal bodyguards and I cannot carry my weapon openly, how can I kill him?”

Prince Xinling saw that he did not object at all, his eyes gleamed with excitement as he said, “I had planned to hide a dagger under

your table, but it's not that appropriate. Now that I guessed that Xiao Weimou will challenge you during the feast, then after you defeat Xiao Weimou, while accepting An Li's congratulations, you can surprise and kill him. You can also create some chaos with your swordplay and we'll have the chance to strike. At the same time my men will attack the Palace and we need not worry the plan will fail."

Xiang Shaolong thought what if I'm killed by Xiao Weimou instead? He had an idea, if he doesn't take this chance to gain more advantages, he'd be a fool. So he said with a straight face, "As long as I have nothing to worry, Shaolong will give his life to you and try my best."

Prince Xinling furrowed his brow, "What do you mean by nothing to worry?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "It's Lady Ya and Zhao Qian, if they can leave Daliang, I will not have to worry and can do what needs to be done."

This is called blackmail. Of course he knows Prince Xinling cannot let Zhao Qian go but he's not afraid of letting Lady Ya leave because the day after, whether the assassination is successful or not, he can still instruct his men to get Lady Ya back.

As expected Prince Xinling said, "Zhao Qian can never leave, because you have to send her to the Palace. As for Lady Ya? Since Shaolong has this request, I will certainly do my best."

Xiang Shaolong was relieved of half his load and said, “The King is not going to let Zhao Qian become the Crown Princess at all, then why is he still inviting her into the Palace?”

Prince Xinling sighed, “Shaolong you’re too naïve. An Li can easily let Zhao Qian die mysteriously, then announce to the world that she died of illness and send her body back to Zhao. The King of Zhao will not be able to do anything to him. This may be too extreme, but it’s the best plan An Li can come up with as a last resort.”

Xiang Shaolong felt his whole body run cold on hearing this, which increased his determination to save the beauty.

Prince Xinling said, “As soon as you kill An Li, won’t all problems be solved?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, “That’s just the way I am, I do not wish implicate others in whatever I do. If Zhao Ya and Zhao Qian are not around, I will take responsibility for everything that I do, even if I fail and get captured I will not betray you. But once I think that I may implicate them, I’m afraid I will not find the courage to strike, then that’ll be terrible.”

There’s nothing Prince Xinling can do to him and he suppressed his anger and nodded his head, “Let me think about this, there surely will be a solution.”

When Xiang Shaolong heard him say this, he was secretly overjoyed. He remembered that Wu Zhuo mentioned he will be

trying to sneak into the city, so he said, “In order not to let An Li become suspicious, I’d better not coop myself up in your residence these few days. I should walk around outside, then all the more An Li will not be on guard against me.”

Prince Xinling furrowed his brows, “How can you do that, Lord Longyang will find someone to deal with you.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “He’s not that stupid. After seeing how easily I killed Sha Xuan, and now that Xiao Weimou is helping him, can’t he wait another 2 days? I’m also doing this for you, hoping that the plan can succeed more easily.”

Because Prince Xinling needs his help, he does not want to go against his request too much so he sighed and said, “What other requests do you have? I’ve just received a few dancers from Chu who are excellent dancers and singers. Let me send 2 of them for your enjoyment!”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that it’s still an unknown whether he can stay alive, where can he find the mood to have fun with beauties? He said seriously, “I should not be going near women these 2 days so that I can maintain my best stamina. Hei! If I can kill An Li, even if you do not offer me beauties, I’ll ask you for them anyway!”

A teasing look flashed past Prince Xinling’s eyes as he chortled, “If the plan succeeds, there’s no problem even if you want the Empress or Princesses of Wei to accompany you.”

The 2 of them exchanged looks, and both laughed, each harboring their own motives.

Xiang Shaolong left Prince Xinling's inner residence and walked towards Lady Ya's Flying Clouds Chamber and as he was passing by the woods, a maid hurriedly brushed past him and stuffed something into his hands. Xiang Shaolong was still in a state of surprise as he took the thing when the maid increased her speed and darted into the woods. Because she kept her head lowered, he didn't even manage to catch a good look at her.

Xiang Shaolong opened his hand, it turns out to be a nicely folded little handkerchief and when he opened it, a delicate map was drawn on it with a few tiny words at the side which read, "Waiting for gentleman at the Windy Bridge, meeting from Shen Mou* hour. Ji Yanran."

*Shen Mou – time between 3pm to 7pm

Xiang Shaolong was feeling perplexed and taking a closer look at the map, it shows the direction to that Windy Bridge from Prince Xinling's residence.

Ha! This woman really spared a lot of thought into this, to actually use such a method to date him, obviously because she does not want others to know. He didn't expect her to put up such a haughty and proud front, but in fact she is also thirsting for men.

His heart immediately started burning, but he remembered his dangerous situation now and sighed. He sat down in a small

pavilion in the garden, contemplating whether to go for the appointment.

Footsteps were heard and a guard rushed over and said, “Master invites Sir over!”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and followed the guard back into the inner hall to see Prince Xinling.

Prince Xinling exclaimed happily, “Shaolong is really capable, Yanran just sent someone over with a verbal message and invited you and me to her abode tonight at the Mou* hour to continue with the debate we had today. Obviously she has a very good impression of you, later I will tell someone to send you there!”

*Mou – time between 5pm to 7pm

Xiang Shaolong was startled and secretly thought what a close shave.

So that handkerchief earlier was a trap, this is the real thing. He was really careless to have almost been duped, mainly because he was too confident about his charm and he can't help but feel shame and guilt.

Prince Xinling saw that he has a strange expression and asked surprisingly, “Is Shaolong unhappy? Everyone in Daliang finds it an honor if they can attend Yanran's banquet.”

Xiang Shaolong was just pondering who could be the one who wants to harm him and he answered with a bitter smile, “I’d better not go, in case I get distracted.”

Prince Xinling laughed, “Don’t be so nervous, and don’t think that Yanran will fall for you so easily. Your theory was interesting today, that’s why her interest was a little piqued! If you don’t go it will arouse the suspicions of others instead.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “You mentioned earlier that you’ll tell someone to send me there, are you not going as well?”

Prince Xinling sighed, “She invited me only because it’s basic courtesy to do so, but her target is you. Go! If you miss Yanran’s banquet, even I will think it’s a great loss to you!”

Actually Xiang Shaolong really wants to meet this unique beauty again and his departure today was due to a man’s ego. Since now Prince Xinling is encouraging him, he made up his mind and said, “I can go on my own, and at the same time I can take a walk around as well.”

Prince Xinling agreed with a smile.

When Xiang Shaolong returned to Flying Clouds Chamber, Zhao Qian and Zhao Ya were chatting and when they saw him return, naturally they were full of smiles and overjoyed.

He saw that Zhao Qian was around and dared not reveal the

conversation he had with Prince Xinling earlier, afraid that he would scare this weak princess.

Lady Ya seems to understand and said with a smile, “Come! Princess! Let us serve Xiang Lang while he bathe!”

Although Zhao Qian doesn’t mind being cozy with Xiang Shaolong, or even let him paw her, but she has never tried being naked with him. She blushed immediately and ran away.

Lady Ya then pulled him towards the bath.

While Xiang Shaolong was frolicking with the beauty in the water, he told her about Prince Xinling’s plan for him to assassinate the King of Wei.

Lady Ya felt her body turn cold, even though Xiaozhao and the rest of the maids kept pouring in hot water, it did not help. She exclaimed in alarm, “The day after is so soon! What shall we do?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “We definitely cannot proceed with the plan to assassinate the King of Wei. No matter if it succeeds or not, I will not be able to live, so the only way out now is to find out how to steal ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’ and then run away from this place safely with the whole group.”

Lady Ya looked dejected, “That’s easy for you to say, this place is where the Weis are at their strongest. Both the King of Wei and Prince Xinling has the city heavily guarded so how can we escape

when each step of the way is fraught with difficulties?”

Xiang Shaolong held her tightly and sniffed her face before replying, “Don’t worry! Prince Xinling made a show of pretense and said he will let you and Cheng Xu leave, because if not I will refuse to execute his assassination plot. The question is how can you avoid his pursuit, and we must also consider that he might hide things from me and secretly escort all of you to somewhere else.”

Lady Ya burrowed her head into his arms and said, “He’ll definitely do that. Besides how can I bear to leave you? We’ll die together if need be.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “This time it’s my turn to disallow you to utter the word ‘die’, trust me!” He paused and continued, “Ya’er is an expert at stealing information and this time you’re here especially to steal ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual. I’m sure you had something planned out!”

Lady Ya replied, “Of course I made plans! I just didn’t expect this to be a trap! I followed the scroll that Guo Zhong obtained which shows the drawings of how the cloud ladder is made and with that, made a silk scroll. As long as we can steal the real ‘Secret Manual’, Xiaozhao, the maids and I, the 8 of us working together, I’m confident we’ll be able to copy a large portion of the scroll and make it look authentic. If Prince Xinling were to flip only a section of the scroll when he’s checking it, he’ll definitely not find out that we’ve done something to it. But we need at least 10 days.”

Xiang Shaolong had a bright idea, “Since that is the case, why

don't you use just one night, make a rough copy of one section of the scroll and cut the rest of it out and replace it with blank copies, then it'll be even better to trick Prince Xinling with."

Lady Ya hugged him happily and kissed him. She complimented him with a sigh, "Ya'er is so silly, I didn't even think of such a good idea." But her mood immediately turned sullen, "But how can we leave Wei? If Prince Xinling keeps you and Qian'er behind, there's no use even if we manage to escape successfully."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Heaven will always leave a way out for man, we will certainly find a good plan to achieve both ends."

Lady Ya's pretty eyes shone, "Heaven will always leave a way out for man, achieve both ends, Xiang Lang's words are always so interesting and sounds good as well, Ya'er really loves you!"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Now let me see if I can bump into Wu Zhuo. This person is smart and brave and familiar with the situation in Wei as well, he'll certainly think of an appropriate plan. I will be attending Ji Yanran's feast tonight, but I will slip back secretly. Now tell me quickly the entrance to the secret tunnel."

After the 2 of them discussed the finer details, Xiang Shaolong prepared himself and left.

He had just stepped out of Prince Xinling's residence into the street when a person rushed over and asked, "Does Commander remember me?"

Xiang Shaolong looked over in surprise and felt that this person looks familiar. He took a while to remember he is Pu Bu, one of the famed family warriors under Prince Shaoyuan, who is on the same status as Xu Hai, the one he killed. He cried out happily, “So it’s Brother Pu Bu.”

Pu Bu pulled him into a restaurant and after sitting down, said quietly, “Most of us have given up on Prince Shaoyuan, and we do not wish to live amongst the conniving and unreliable Weis. We hope to follow Commander and do great things.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “But I’m having problems preserving my own life now. Both Zhao and Wei are not the place for me, if you follow me, I’m afraid you might even lose your lives.”

Pu Bu replied, “There’s 48 of us, we’re all brave men who are not afraid of death. We have thought over the various problems before making up our minds to follow Commander. Just looking at how Commander cares so much for our well-being, we’ll be willing to work hard for Commander. With your capability, you will achieve something great sooner or later, please accept us!”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea, “Aren’t you living in Prince Xinling’s residence?”

Pu Bu replied, “A group of us is staying in the residence with Prince Shaoyuan, while the rest is staying in a mercenary house nearby for the time being. We’re just waiting for Commander’s

instructions now.”

Xiang Shaolong has learnt his lesson and thought to himself that he cannot be so trusting of this person for now. After they agreed on how they could contact each other, he asked, “Are all of you from Zhao?”

Pu Bu shook his head, “We have people from everywhere, please don’t worry! We truly respect your character and military abilities and have no other intentions.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “All right! Go back to the mercenary house first and wait for my commands.”

Pu Bu left happily.

He had just stepped out when Wu Zhuo took over his seat.

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and hurriedly discussed with Wu Zhuo the plans secretly.

After he parted with Wu Zhuo, the sun was still up. He saw that it’s still early so he might as well follow the map’s instructions and go to that Windy Bridge. The bridge is indeed as the name suggests, with cold wind blowing past it. Not a lot of people crossed the bridge and those who did were all in a hurry.

There are forests at the 2 ends of the bridge, with very few houses around. It’s very quiet and secluded, an ideal place to kill someone.

Reasonably Lord Longyang and Xiao Weimou won't go an extra step to lay a trap to kill him. His other enemy Prince Shaoyuan won't be so dumb as to spoil his uncle's grand plan, so who could be the one who tried to lure him here?

Once he thought about this, he was very curious and since the enemy is not here yet, he hid under the bridge first. Using the steel hooks, he tied himself securely beneath the bridge so that even if someone were to check under the bridge, they won't notice his presence so easily.

Xiang Shaolong waited patiently and when the time for the appointment arrived, light footsteps could be heard on the bridge, as if his enemy is not wearing any shoes.

Xiang Shaolong thought that it's really a close shave, if he really thought that the beauty had asked him out, he will definitely be in trouble now.

Someone above called out, "Juzi! I'm afraid Xiang Shaolong won't be coming, we didn't even see any trace of him while on the way here."

Xiang Shaolong who was beneath the bridge was startled, could it be that the leader of Zhao Mohism, Yan Ping is here?

A rough voice replied, "How could that lad have seen through our trap? That's really strange!"

Xiang Shaolong could tell that it's not Yan Ping's voice and felt even more troubled, the group above would either be from 'Qi Mohism' or 'Chu Mohism'. He did not expect their news to be so accurate and guessed that the Juzi Token is with him. Trouble really comes one after another.

The person earlier asked, "Juzi! What should we do now?"

That Juzi laughed coldly, "Does he think that we can't find him as long as he hides in Prince Xinling's residence? Others may be afraid of Prince Xinling but would I, Fu Du be afraid of him?"

His subordinate asked quietly, "I heard that he will be attending the King of Wei's feast the day after. Lord Longyang and Xiao Weimou will definitely not let him off so if we want to strike, there's only tonight and tomorrow night."

Fu Du was silent for a moment before replying slowly, "We still need to prepare, so let's strike tomorrow night! If possible, we might as well kill Prince Xinling as well so that when our Great Chu deals with the Weis in future, it'll be easier."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly glad he came and overheard this big plot, and at the same time found out that the other party is from Chu Mohism. He can't help but sincerely thank Heavens.

The other party must have a spy, so they would know the situation in Prince Xinling's residence and the defense strength. Even so they actually have the audacity to enter the residence to

kill and plunder, so obviously they are quite strong. But since he is aware of the other party's plot now, this would turn out entirely differently.

Book 4 Chapter 3 – Debating Heroes

When Xiang Shaolong arrived at Ji Yanran's little house by the lake, there were already 10 odd elaborate horse carriages outside the door, the attendance a lot larger than this afternoon's.

After he gave his name to the guard, he saw one of the maids he met this morning coming out to welcome him and led him past the building which he met Ji Yanran this afternoon. She was carrying a lantern as she led the way and went through a small path in the woods. His eyes suddenly brightened, in large building with a lot of colorful lanterns hanging on it appeared in front, and he seems to hear people talking in it.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but ask the pretty maid, "Which other guests are here tonight?"

The pretty maid replied nonchalantly, "The guests tonight are all specially invited by Miss, besides Master Han Fei, Zou Yan and Xiao Weimou whom Mister Xiang has seen today, there's also Lord Longyang, Philosopher Xu Jie and General Bai Gui."

Xiang Shaolong sucked in his breath, this Ji Yanran is really something. Bai Gui is the person that Lady Pingyuan is remarrying, so naturally he's someone great while Lord Longyang is a favorite of the King of Wei and yet they all came for the event. Obviously her position in Wei is extremely elevated as well. Although he doesn't know who that Xu Jie is, he must be someone famous as well.

He was perplexed as well, Lord Longyang should not be interested in women, so if he's not here because of Ji Yanran's beauty, what else can he be here for? Could it be to humiliate him to appease his anger?

When it comes to learning, he won't be able to catch up with these scholars even if he's chasing them on a horse, so to ask him to speak is akin to embarrassing him on the spot. Therefore, he can't help but feel uneasy.

When he stepped into the hall, he saw the table laid out and all the others the maid talked about were already here, all sitting back on the soft rugs and sitting comfortably around the table.

Another 2 pretty maids came forward and helped him remove his outer cloak and shoes. Luckily it is winter now and he's wearing a thick cotton outfit so unless one reaches out to touch him, they won't realize his equipment hidden in his clothes.

Stoves were lit in the room, making it as warm as spring.

Lord Longyang is still behaving 'languidly' and even proactively introduced him to the others.

That Bai Gui is the oldest, at least 50 years old but very robust with gleaming eyes, giving others an impression that he is very smart. And he behaved haughtily towards Xiang Shaolong, only giving him a cold acknowledgement before turning towards Philosopher Xu Jie who looks like a typical scholar and spoke quietly to each other privately.

Xiang Shaolong was seated between Hai Fei and Zou Yan, the seat beside Han Fei is still empty, obviously it's Ji Yanran's main seat, followed by Lord Longyang, Bai Gui, Xu Jie and Xiao Weimou.

Xiang Shaolong saw that he need not sit opposite Xiao Weimou and face him so he felt a little more comfortable.

Zou Yan behaved quite coldly towards Xiang Shaolong and only gave a brief greeting before talking to Xiao Weimou, who is from Qi like him, totally ignoring Xiang Shaolong.

Instead it was Han Fei who took a liking to Xiang Shaolong because of his help this afternoon and although he is not a very good talker, it still gave Xiang Shaolong a little warmth in this 'icy atmosphere'.

Ji Yanran only appeared now, wearing a white brocade robe and absolutely glowing, immediately capturing the attention of everyone. Even that Lord Longyang was no exception, he looked dumbfounded and Xiao Weimou was almost drooling while Han Fei blushed. Although their reactions were all different, they were all attracted by her.

Ji Yanran looked at everyone with a smile, her clear and languid eyes flitted around and even Xiang Shaolong felt as if his soul had been enchanted. Her body emitted a fragrance after her bath, giving rise to other thoughts.

She had just sat down when she said with a smile, "Mister Xiang

will have to be punished with a drink first, how can you leave before the end of the meeting this afternoon?”

Everyone immediately followed her wishes and agreed.

Naturally at this point in time there'll be pretty maids pouring wine and serving delicious food.

After Xiang Shaolong gladly exchanged a toast with her, Ji Yanran's enchanting eyes flitted around the dining table and chatted cleverly, making everyone at the feast feel at home. However, she seems to be more interested in Han Fei, Zou Yan and Philosopher Xu Jie, talking and smiling to them more, and not paying much attention to the rivals Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Weimou.

The truth is Xiang Shaolong has absolutely no clue about their conversation regarding poetries and song, and there's no way he can interrupt to show off even if he wanted to.

After they've eaten and drank, and with the urging of everyone, Ji Yanran ordered her flute to be brought out and played a tune for all.

Xiang Shaolong doesn't know the tune she played but he does know that her skills with the flute is flawless and at the peak and can't help but be drawn into the music like the rest of them, totally intoxicated by the melody.

After Ji Yanran finished her tune and everyone sincerely complimented her, she smiled and asked Xiao Weimou, “Mister Xiao please forgive Yanran for being rude, but I would like to boldly ask you a question.”

Maybe Xiao Weimou has been affected by the atmosphere, or maybe he’s trying to get into Ji Yanran’s good books and gain her affection so his speech is a lot more refined and said gently, “As long as it’s Miss who asks it, I will be most glad to answer any question of yours.”

Ji Yanran smiled enchantingly and said, “The difference between humans and beasts is whether they have a sense of shame, what does Mister think?”

Everyone knows that the show is about to begin and stopped eating and drinking, quietly listening to their conversation.

Before Xiang Shaolong came he thought that Ji Yanran had changed her mind about him but now that he saw she is treating him so coldly, he was about to find an excuse to slip back and steal the ‘Secret Manual’ so that Lady Ya and the 8 maids can make a copy. Therefore he was not really concentrating on their conversation.

Obviously Xiao Weimou came well prepared and said with a smile, “I’m afraid Miss has misunderstood my meaning. I do not mean there’s no difference between man and beasts at all, it’s just that some innate nature, like the desire to live and procreate, is the same! That’s why there are many things worth learning from animals, for example animals will not lie, they’re more honest

than us. Man should be true to their own nature before they can really enjoy life.” He continued with a cold snort towards Xiang Shaolong, “What insight does Brother Xiang has about my theory?”

Xiang Shaolong was thinking about Chu Mohism’s Fu Du at that time so when he heard the words he was startled and said, “What? Oh! I don’t have any views on that.”

Everyone, including Ji Yanran, were immediately stunned and revealed looks of contempt.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing bitterly to himself that he’s not a debater so even if he has heard what he said, he won’t be able to argue well. Luckily he has decided not to woo Ji Yanran, so it’s no big deal if he loses favor with her or not.

Philosopher Xu Jie looked at Xiang Shaolong scornfully before saying, “There’s a big problem with Mister Xiao’s words. The difference between man and beasts lies exactly in their innate nature. Man are kind by nature that’s why they show kindness to others; beasts, in order to fill their stomachs, have no such compassion and will willfully kill and eat other animals, sometimes even their own kinds are not let off. If man were to be so bad as to learn from beasts, won’t the world be thrown into chaos?”

Xiao Weimou is an unrefined man and now that this scholar in Confucianism is butting into his theory, he felt a loss of face and asked coldly, “Will man not kill other animals? What is Philosopher Xu eating now then?”

Xu Jie laughed, “This is exactly the difference between those bloodthirsty beasts and us. We only eat domesticated animals, will beasts know how to do this?”

Xiao Weimou is obviously not his match and for a moment was dumbfounded.

Xu Jie won in his first attack and was filled with pride in front of Ji Yanran, so he turned his attack towards Han Fei, “I have read Master Han’s great works as well and the theories are interesting. A pity that you committed the same mistake as your Teacher [Xun Kuang](#), which is to think that men are evil by nature, that’s why they do not know the great meaning of changing the people with benevolent policies. They use punishments to rule the country and bully the people. With Master’s abilities, to think that you were actually misled into following the wrong path, it’s really a pity.”

Hai Fei was stunned for a moment as he did not expect Xu Jie to be so rude as to criticize him so disrespectfully. He is furious and could think of the retorts to make but the more angry he is, the worse is his stutter and he was unable to speak at all.

Lord Longyang, Bai Gui and Zou Yan all have an icy smile on their faces, ‘happily’ watching him being humiliated.

Ji Yanran raised her delicate brows and although she felt bad for Han Fei, she was impatient about his inability to speak as well.

Xiang Shaolong, as an outsider, suddenly understood the

meaning behind Ji Yanran's hosting of this dinner tonight; which is to find a good way to govern a country. That's why she looked at Han Fei in a different light and also invited the important people in Wei so that they can accept new theories and ideals.

Xu Jie saw that Han Fei was unable to defend himself at all and became even more proud and insolent, saying "As for you who denied the methods of the previous Kings, it shows that you are forgetting your roots. It's just like building a house, we must first have a good foundation. Without a foundation, the house will not be able to withstand the weather, and this foundation is the models left behind by our learned ancestors."

These words are targeting at Han Fei's theory that there is no such thing as unchanging policies in governing a country. Han Fei feels that protecting the old ways is not proactive at all, so one should not follow old ways blindly but act appropriately according to different situations at different times. Such thinking is of course more advanced than those Confucians who advocates protecting the old ways, but a pity Han Fei is not eloquent enough to say it out.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Han Fei was so furious his vein was almost bursting. He couldn't bear the sight and blurted out, "Nonsense!"

He'd just spoken out when he realized he's in trouble. Indeed everyone's attention turned towards him, and Xu Jie looked at him impertinently and said with a cold laugh, "It turns out that besides leading soldiers to war, Commander Xiang has some insight about governing a country as well. I am willing to listen to your lofty

ideals.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel Ji Yanran’s pretty eyes staring at him, and thought to himself how can he possibly lose face in front of this beauty, so he forged ahead, “Time moves forward, for example in the past wars were fought mainly with war carriages but now it’s fought with a mixture of steeds, foot soldiers and carriages. So obviously blindly relying on old ways will not work out.”

Ji Yanran sighed disappointedly, “Mister Xiang seems to be a little unclear about Philosopher Xu’s point. What he is referring to is principles, not methods. It’s just like a war is a still war, just different ways of fighting it.”

Lord Longyang smiled coquettishly, “Brother Xiang, your swordplay may be excellent but it seems that you have not studied a lot. Now we’re debating with Master Han the difference between governing by ‘virtue’ and by ‘legalism’!”

Xu Jie said loudly, “Governing by virtue, you will be like the North Star, staying in its place while other stars move around you.” He paused and recited again, “People who are governed legalistically and controlled by punishment will avoid crime but have no sense of shame. People who are governed through virtue and controlled through propriety will have a sense of shame and correct themselves.”

These are famous Confucianism sayings, meaning that the way to govern a country is to use virtue as a foundation so that the people can be educated and the country peaceful. It has a totally different basis from legalism.

Xiang Shaolong was not interested and felt that it's better he find an opportunity to slip away soon. All this talk about governing with virtues, he's not even clear about the theories behind it. It's better that he leave early to avoid embarrassment to himself so he stood up and offered his farewells.

Everyone was shocked. They did not expect that the debate has not even properly started and this person is already running away.

Ji Yanran looked at him unhappily, "If Mister Xiang is going to slip away after just saying a few words like you did this afternoon, Yanran will be very unhappy."

Lord Longyang has not made enough 'fun' of him yet, so how can he bear to let him leave. He also spoke up to make him stay.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that he can't be bothered if Ji Yanran is happy or not because to her, he's just an unimportant guest whose presence will not be missed. He was about to leave when he realized that Han Fei was tugging at his sleeve seriously so his heart softened and he sat down.

Ji Yanran exclaimed happily, "Now that is how a man should be. Mister Xiang seems to be deliberately holding back your opinions, Yanran really wants to hear your theories!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly to himself, thinking that Miss Ji really thought too highly of him. Compared to the rest, he's just a bumpkin, where can he find theories to expound.

Xu Jie has been on the upper hand the whole night and secretly thought that he may be able to gain the liking of the beauty, so he will not let go of the chance to show off. He forced an attack and said, "In Mister Xiang's opinion, which is better, governing by virtues or legalism?"

Xiang Shaolong saw the look of contempt in his eyes and was furious. He decided to forge ahead and said, "It's not a question of better or worse, but a question of whether it works or not. Governing by virtue is purely idealism, if everyone in the world is a saint and there are no evil men, then everyone will obey the law without the use of any methods. But the truth is, the situation is obviously not like that, and it will never become a fact, that's why we need a set of laws and guidelines that everyone is aware of to restrict everyone and make them obey. Only after this is achieved can we talk about virtues and respect. That's all I have to say."

Everyone was shocked. To someone from the 21st century, this is a logic that everyone understands, but for people in that era, this is even more in-depth and refreshing than Han Fei's theory of legalism.

Ji Yanran's pretty eyes lighted up and she scrutinized Xiang Shaolong afresh, chewing on his words.

Han Fei looked deep in thought, unconsciously nodding his head.

Zou Yan was silent, as if he's thinking of some questions.

Naturally Xu Jie would not admit defeat so easily but he no longer belittles his opponent and he said with a straight face, “If a country is governed only by law, won’t the person in power be able to suppress and bully the weaker ones with punishment?”

Bai Gui commented, “If the government loves propriety, the people will not dare to be disrespectful; if the government loves righteousness, the people will not dare not to follow them; if the government loves trust, the people will respond with their emotions. This is the way a ruler should govern. If one were to prefer punishment, what would the people become? Mister Xiang please enlighten us.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled and after taking a long look at Ji Yanran, turned towards Bai Gui and Xu Jie and said, “That’s just because legalism is not thorough enough, to put the power solely in the hands of the ruler! If everyone is equal in front of the law, the son of heaven... heh.... The ruler who commits a mistake will face the same punishment as commoners. For example if anyone who kills someone without a reason will be punished, who would dare to kill randomly? I did not say we should discard propriety and righteousness, these should be the basic principle behind any law. The true way to govern a country is to combine governing by virtue and legalism. Absolute power will only result in absolute disintegration.”

When he talked about ‘the ruler will face the same punishment as commoners’, Ji Yanran went ‘Ah’ while Han Fei’s eyes immediately brightened. The others, including Xiao Weimou, all revealed looks of shock and alarm. Especially the last few words, is like a morning bell sounding, resonating deeply in everyone’s heart.

For the people living in this era where the rulers are supreme, this is indeed a mind shattering theory.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that that's all the argument he can muster out, if he says some more there's bound to be mistakes so he stood up and said, "I have already revealed all my worthless thoughts. Hei! I still have something important to do, farewell!"

Ji Yanran furrowed her brows and said angrily, "Mister has just told us the most interesting part and you are leaving? Do you dislike Ji Yanran?"

Zou Yan forcefully dragged him back to his seat and laughed, "Commander Xiang has piqued my interest in talking! I would like to ask how such legalism which includes the ruler as well should work?"

Lord Longyang said, "Brother Xiang's theory on governing a country is even more ideal than the governing by virtues which we talked about!"

Xiao Weimou laughed icily, "And more impractical as well!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly, "Yes! It will not work now but if we work towards this direction, one day there will be a situation where power is divided into 3, the legal system, law enforcers and government. The ruler will be chosen by the people and only then will there be... hei... French... ai! No, real live, equality and

freedom.”

He almost wanted to blurt out about the French Revolution but luckily he caught himself in time and swallowed his words.

These words were even more earth shattering and everyone could not digest the information at once. For people who have been living such a long time under the absolute rule of the kings, this is such an unacceptable thought yet at the same time extremely exciting and refreshing.

Xiang Shaolong saw that everyone was furrowing their brows and thought what a better time to leave than this. He stood up and immediately walked far away from the table before bowing and saying, “I was speaking nonsense, please don’t take it to heart.” He turned around and left, ignoring Ji Yanran’s calls.

Book 4 Chapter 4 – Stealing The Sky And Exchanging The Sun

When Xiang Shaolong returned to Prince Xinling's residence, Ji Yanran's calls seems to be still ringing in his ears.

When every guest of hers is trying all means hoping to stay, he is the complete opposite, running away as if afraid that she will entwine him.

But this woman is indeed unique, when he first heard of her talent and beauty, he thought that she would be the melancholy type like [Lin Daiyu](#), or those haughty beauties who keeps an arm's length away from everyone else. Only after he's seen her did he realize she's filled with a passion for life, always seeking facts, thirsting for a learned person to find out a good way to govern a country, or maybe to seek the perfect husband in her heart.

But that person will certainly not be Xiang Shaolong.

For him now, he has no time and neither is it appropriate for him to start any relationship with any woman. He has to conserve all his energy to protect and save Lady Ya, Zhao Qian, the maids and the others, that is his responsibility. If he becomes distracted because of another beauty and made a mistake, he'll certainly regret it for the rest of his life.

He may be a flirt by nature but he has a strong sense of responsibility as well. Besides, he's deeply in love with them.

Making use of the light that was streaming out from the building, he made a big round and using his equipment, climbed up the dangerously sloping back mountain which was behind Prince Xinling's residence. He then easily slipped into the residence and from the description he got, came to the top of a tree next to a building.

This courtyard belongs to Prince Xinling's inner quarters so security is very tight. Occasionally fierce looking guard dogs can be seen patrolling with groups of men. Luckily he has sprinkled on him the powder that Lady Ya brought with her or else he would not be able to escape from these animals' sensitive noses.

Now it's almost 11pm at night, lights can still be seen in the building and he wondered who is not yet asleep.

According to Lady Ya this should be where Prince Xinling's family reside in so if there's someone down there, it'll be difficult for him to sneak into the secret tunnel quietly.

After waiting impatiently for more than half an hour, he could not take it anymore and decided to take the risk, because he does not have the time to continue waiting any longer.

He lifted up the treasure in his hand and activated the switch, the hook flew out 3 feet across and landed lightly on the roof, hooking it tightly.

He then slid over like a flying bird and landed quietly on the roof.

He found a sure footing and flipped over the roof down to the balcony on the 2nd level, which was covered by bamboo, moved to the window and looked into the room.

It was an elaborately decorated room. Besides the curtains hanging lowly on the low bed, there was a dressing table and copper mirror and things usually found in a ladies room. The lamp was brightly lit and from the bed the moans and pants of a man and woman coupling could be heard.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that since this is the entrance to the secret tunnel, the person staying here must be someone Prince Xinling trusts, maybe his beloved wife or concubines. If Prince Xinling wants accompaniment during the night, he can always summon the woman here and there's no need for him to 'travel' here. Could it be that his wife or concubine is having an affair?

But there is no need to think further. Just as he was about to flip one level down, he heard voices from down below. A group of patrol guards were downstairs and they actually stopped and were quietly talking.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting and after waiting for a while, those people downstairs still have no intention of leaving. He gritted his teeth, drew out a flying needle and poked it through the gap in the window, lightly flipping up the latch on the window. He pushed open the window and flipped into the room.

A gust of wind followed him into the room.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and before he had a chance to close the window, a man's voice was heard from inside the curtained bed, "Zhichun you must have forgotten to close the window properly, look! That window is opened!"

The voice sounds familiar, it's actually Prince Shaoyuan.

The woman called Zhichun replied in surprise, "That's impossible, let me go and close it, the weather is really cold!"

Xiang Shaolong was startled. This room may be big but there's no place to hide. The low bed is not higher than a foot and he can't squeeze under it even if he wanted to. In his anxiety he had an idea, he rolled towards the candle, reached out his hand and extinguished the flame by pressing on the wick.

That Zhichun had just sat up and exclaimed with an 'Ah!', saying, "The wind has extinguished the candle!"

Xiang Shaolong dared not hesitate and rushed towards the door and tested it with a push. It opened immediately and he was overjoyed. Using the sounds of Zhichun moving around as a cover, he dashed out and closed the door.

It's an empty hall outside with a flight of stairs down, and there are 2 other rooms.

The sound of the door opening was heard behind him and Xiang

Shaolong was startled. He rushed forward and managed to hide behind a screen in time.

At this time a totally naked beauty came out from the room. She looks younger than 20 and looked delicate with fair skin and a voluptuous body, extremely captivating. When she walked her bosom bounced which made her even more alluring.

Zhichun walked towards the screen coyly.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed and only now did he realize that at his feet there were chamber pots and such, used for relieving oneself and he hurriedly dashed out from the other side of the screen and lied flat on the ground so that the candle will not reflect his shadow. Right at this time Zhichun stepped behind the screen but he exited just as she entered so she did not manage to see him.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought what a close shave and crawled towards the stairs. When he heard twinkling sounds behind the screen, he went down.

Just as he reached the corner of the stairs, voices were heard from below, there were at least 4 men talking.

Xiang Shaolong stood at the corner stunned and lamented his luck. If he can't manage to steal the 'Secret Manual' tonight, it'll be even worse.

He turned around the corner and stuck his head out to look down

towards the hall and saw 4 warriors sitting around a table chatting. If he were to walk down, no matter how careful he is, there's no way he can avoid them. He was so nervous his heart almost stopped.

In his anxiety, he heard Zhichun's crisp voice call out, "Is there anyone still around?"

Someone replied and walked towards the stairs.

Xiang Shaolong secretly groaned. He's really stuck in the middle now with no way to advance or retreat, so he hardened his heart and pulled out a flying needle, his concentration wholly on the warrior who is walking towards the stairs and at the same time squeezed himself into the corner of the wall so that the other party won't be able to see him from afar.

The person replied as he walked, "What instructions does Lady has?"

Xiang Shaolong realized that Zhichun is actually one of the 2 concubines he brought with him from Zhao.

That warrior came to the stairs and came face to face with Xiang Shaolong and he cried out, "Ah!" It turned out to be the other expert family warrior who is of the same status as Pu Bu, Liu Chao.

Xiang Shaolong was about to throw out his flying needle but hurriedly stopped when he saw it was him.

Zhichun's voice called out, "Liu Chao! What's the matter."

Liu Chao collected his thoughts and after exchanging a look with Xiang Shaolong, replied, "Nothing! I just happen to see a rat scurry past and was surprised."

Women are most afraid of small animals like these and Zhichun is no exception so she called out, "Prince is hungry and Xiaoying and the rest are already asleep. Can I trouble you to go to the kitchen and get them to prepare some food." After saying this she ran back into the room as if she's running for her life.

Liu Chao came up and whispered, "We were just talking about Commander. Why is Commander here, is there anyway we can help."

Xiang Shaolong made up his mind and told him about stealing the 'Secret Manual'.

Liu Chao saw that Xiang Shaolong puts so much trust in him and replied happily, "Commander please wait for a moment!"

He went back and after informing the other 3 warriors, he asked Xiang Shaolong to come out.

Xiang Shaolong instructed one of them to go to the kitchen and order some food, then he searched the hall carefully first, followed by the rooms. He found the secret entrance to the tunnel under a

rug.

Liu Chao said, “Commander, put your mind at ease and go down! We’ll keep a look out for you!”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea, “It’s best that you go down with me, if there’s a need you can put it back in its original position.”

Liu Chao gladly agreed and together they grabbed the copper rings and lifted up the stone slab and after walking down 10 odd flights of stone steps, came to the secret tunnel. One side of the tunnel leads towards Prince Xinling’s inner hall while the other end leads to the back of the mountain. Obviously it’s a secret tunnel that can give safe passage to escape from Prince Xinling’s residence because no one will expect that there will be an escape route at that dangerous mountain.

Liu Chao took a lantern and after illuminating the tunnel, the two of them walked towards the direction of Prince Xinling’s bedroom.

When they came to another set of stone stairs which led up, Xiang Shaolong stopped and carefully scrutinized and knocked on the walls of the tunnel and realized that there’s something different about one of the walls.

The two of them tried pushing but the wall did not move at all.

Xiang Shaolong had an idea, and started inspecting each brick

and realized that one of them is slightly protruding. He tried pulling it with his strength and the brick came out immediately, revealing the keyhole inside.

The 2 of them were overjoyed and Xiang Shaolong took out his tools for picking locks and following Lady Ya's instructions, opened the lock in no time at all.

When they pushed open the door and under the illumination from the lantern, the both of them were stunned. It turned out to be a treasure trove.

In the large underground stone room there were more than 10 chests of jewelry and money. They opened 2 of the chests and under the reflection of the lamp, the jade pieces, gold and silver all glittered and blinded.

Xiang Shaolong said quietly, "Don't let the other 3 know about this until we have a plan to leave Daliang, then we'll take a few pieces for our traveling expenses. Remember you must not have thoughts of greed. Men have died for wealth and we could even lose our lives."

Liu Chao is indeed a heroic man and after this reminder, he replied sincerely, "Well spoken, Commander! I understand." At the same time he felt growing respect for Xiang Shaolong as a person who is not easily moved by money.

Xiang Shaolong searched quickly and after some time he managed to find an even more secluded secret compartment at the

corner of the wall and took out a rectangular metal box. He opened it, and indeed it is the 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual' which was tightly wrapped in cloth that will prevent it from rot or moisture.

He unrolled the scroll for a look and was relieved, because the silk on the drawings were so old it's turned yellow and it's more than 30 meters long. It's so thick and heavy that even if he's Prince Xinling, he won't be bothered to check the scroll from start to end every time. Therefore his plan is sure to work.

He took a closer look and saw that was full of drawings of various tools for attack and defense, with detailed instructions on materials used, the quantity needed and the process of making it. It's indeed breathtaking.

There's not much time left so the 2 of them left hurriedly.

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, Lady Ya and the 8 maids were still hard at work. The sun is not yet up.

Lady Ya has already bounded the fake scroll with a section of the real scroll, and used some minerals and colorings to stain the sides of the scroll yellow. It looked so authentic, no wonder she's an expert in duplication.

Xiang Shaolong only had to work under the cover of night and take the 'Secret Manual' which only has the authentic front section, and easily slip it back into the secret room. This should be a very difficult task but because of Liu Chao's help, it became an easy job.

When he returned to Lady Ya's place, the sky is slowly brightening. Lady Ya and the rest were exhausted and were resting on the bed.

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and slept for a while until Prince Xinling sent someone to look for him. He hurriedly washed up and left.

Prince Xinling seems like he had not slept the whole night. Maybe he's trying to pretend to be on close terms because he received him in the side hall of the inner chambers. After they were seated he laughed and said, "Because of your matter, I did not sleep the whole of last night and I finally found an appropriate arrangement."

Right at this time a pretty maid came in to serve tea and Prince Xinling ordered, "I have things to discuss with Commander, no one is allowed to step in here!"

The pretty maid acknowledged the order and left.

Prince Xinling asked in passing, "Did you manage to stir the interest of Yanran last night, I heard Lord Longyang and Xiao Weimou went to the feast as well."

Xiang Shaolong sighed, "Don't talk about it! There's no way I can butt in a word at such a gathering!"

Prince Xinling disagreed, “That’s not true, your ideas is very creative, even Tan Bang admires you!”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, what’s the use of admiring me when you’re still sacrificing me as a stepping-stone towards your success.

Prince Xinling saw that he was quiet and asked, “Has Shaolong taken breakfast?”

Xiang Shaolong rubbed his stomach and shook his head.

Prince Xinling cried out, “Attendants!” Then he slapped his own forehead and sighed, “I’m really muddleheaded, I just chased everyone away. You sit here for a while, I’ll go and instruct someone to bring breakfast.” He stood up and left.

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and jumped up, firstly aiming towards that inner room, the one that looks like an office that was filled with scrolls and such. At the side there is a side door and outside there is a huge open-aired well and behind the well there is a place, which looks like a pool for bathing.

There’s not much time so he pushed open the side door and indeed it is Prince Xinling’s bedroom. He took a hurried look so naturally he cannot find the entrance to the underground tunnel.

He walked forward hurriedly and lifted up the rug on the bed for a look. The entrance to the secret tunnel appeared before him. The

strange thing is that there is a copper pipe poking out from the ground towards the bed, and the other end is a dragon's head made of copper, looking like as exquisite design on the head of the bed.

Xiang Shaolong immediately felt cold sweat and hurriedly returned to the hall. Prince Xinling came back right at this time and was smiling, "Breakfast will be served shortly, come! Let me tell you my plan!"

But what Xiang Shaolong was thinking about was that copper pipe, it's obviously a listening device for the tunnel and the secret chamber. Noises from in there will travel through the pipe to Prince Xinling's bed and the design was intricate. Luckily he did not sleep last night, that's why he did not hear him moving around.

Prince Xinling said, "I will order someone to fake a document and will send it to his Majesty today to let Zhao Ya and the rest of the entourage return to Zhao, leaving only you and Zhao Qian. Zhao Ya is my invited guest, so Lord Longyang has no right to object."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, you can say all you want now, with your power, letting them go is an easy task. At the same time he knows that the fact is he will not let a single person leave, but he's just putting on a show. He pretended to be ecstatic, "That's really great, but can we let them leave earlier?"

Prince Xinling first revealed a look of difficulty before saying, "If I can't even do such a small thing, Shaolong will surely belittle me. All right! I will arrange for Lady Ya and the rest to leave the city this afternoon and meet up with your troops before departing

immediately. Shaolong need not worry.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing to himself as he asked, “How do we solve Zhao Qian’s problem then?”

Prince Xinling replied, “I will send someone to impersonate as her so that you can send her to the palace, then I’ll find a secret place to hide her. I, Prince Xinling, vow to Heaven that regardless if the plan fails or succeeds, I will send her safely back to Zhao unharmed.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought him formidable, as this would mean he has a hostage in his hands and need not fear Xiang Shaolong not following his instructions. Even if he fails and is captured, he would not dare to reveal the mastermind. He has indeed thought of everything.

Breakfast arrived.

As Prince Xinling watched him eat, he asked with a smile, “Is Shaolong pleased with these arrangements?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be extremely grateful, “Very pleased, I will certainly not let you down!”

Prince Xinling looked as if he’s already succeeded and laughed heartily. He saw that Xiang Shaolong has no objections to him holding Zhao Qian and thought that he trusts him implicitly, so his suspicions towards Xiang Shaolong totally disseminated.

Just as the both of them are thinking their own thoughts, a servant came to report that Ji Yanran has come to look for Xiang Shaolong.

The 2 of them were equally stunned. That Ji Yanran would come personally to a man's place to look for him, this is indeed the strangest thing that can happen in the world.

A strong look of jealousy radiated from Prince Xinling's eyes and he tried to cover it up with a dry cough and said, "Shaolong you better go and see her! For all you know she's taken a liking to you!"

However Xiang Shaolong was furrowing his brows instead. He has a lot of things to be done today and they are all important matters regarding life and death. No matter how attractive Ji Yanran is, he cannot waste time on her.

As he was thinking, he followed the servant to the hall in the outer chambers.

Ji Yanran was wearing a white fur cape, standing quietly and delicately in front of a large window looking at the beautiful scenery of the woods outside. She did not even have a maid with her.

There was no one else in the hall but all the back doors and side doors were filled with guards and maids who were squeezing there to steal a look at her. Obviously her attraction is akin to a superstar in the entertainment industry in the 21st century. Luckily there's

no such thing as autographs in this era, or else her pretty hands will have to be kept busy.

Xiang Shaolong came up behind her and said quietly, “Miss Ji!”

Ji Yanran turned around prettily and smiled sweetly at him, “Can you spare some time?”

Looking at her smiling face, Xiang Shaolong does not have the heart to reject her, so he nodded, “If it’s just a while, there’s no problem.”

When Ji Yanran heard that it’s only a while, she stared at him with sadness and anger before saying quietly, “Then follow me!” And walked towards the main door.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling perplexed, where is this beauty going to take him?

The horse carriage left Prince Xinling’s residence by the main door and rode towards the east. Xiang Shaolong stole a look at her pretty side view, devoid of all cosmetics, radiating with the glow of youth. Her dainty body was fragrant, extremely captivating.

Ji Yanran suddenly said, “Absolute power will only result in absolute disintegration. This is the first time Yanran has heard such intelligent words that goes straight to the point. Mister is really brave. After you left last night, everyone, including Yanran, lost the mood to talk. Yanran has not slept the whole night, and

kept on thinking about every word that Mister has said, and thinking of how confident you look when you said these words.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented that he didn't mean for things to turn out like this. There is no time to talk to her about love and relationships.

Ji Yanran's face turned cold and she asked, “Why did Mister Xiang come with Prince Xinling to see Yanran?”

Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to say this is Prince Xinling's arrangement and he's got nothing to do with it. But how can he bear to hurt this great beauty so he sighed, “Does Miss Ji ask this question to all your guests who come due to your fame?”

Ji Yanran sighed quietly and said gently, “Mister Xiang is the first person that Yanran wants to ask this question to. Tell me truthfully, do I make you irritated, that's why you're always in such a hurry to leave and now you're thinking of how to leave this carriage?”

She rolled her eyes at him and continued, “I've never seen someone as unfathomable as you, keeping all your words inside you and only revealing some knowledge only when forced to the wall. How Yanran wish we can talk into the night, letting our words flow freely!”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved to see that she has not fallen in love with him, but just curious and would like to find out more about his ideas. Of course, if he were to launch an attack now and recite a

few theories from the 21st century to make her happy, he may very well be able to get her heart. He can only lament that he has the intention but not the ability to carry this out, for he has to quickly make contact with Wu Zhuo and Pu Bu to arrange the urgent task of escaping from Daliang.

The carriage stopped.

Xiang Shaolong looked out the window in surprise. They have come to an empty space in the woods and there was no one around at all.

Ji Yanran extended her fair hands and lightly pushed his shoulder, a look of excitement in her eyes as she said, "If you don't find Yanran too irritating, then please get off the carriage!"

Xiang Shaolong was all the more perplexed, what has finding her an irritant got to do with leaving the carriage?

Due to her urging, he went down the carriage in a daze.

Ji Yanran told the burly man who drives the carriage, "Go somewhere far away, you can only come back an hour later."

After the man obeyed his orders, Ji Yanran removed her white fur coat, revealing the warrior's outfit underneath. For a moment Xiang Shaolong's eyes shone, looking dumbfounded at the outline of her body and her imposing air.

Ji Yanran drew the sword at her waist and said with a coy smile, “Xiang Shaolong! I am here on his Majesty’s order to kill you, get ready!”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, “Miss must be joking!”

Ji Yanran’s face was icy, her eyes sharp and she humphed daintily, “Who is joking with you? Look out!”

Xiang Shaolong saw a flash of sword in front of him and dared not hesitate so he pulled his sword out as well. With a ‘dang!’ he blocked this beauty’s forceful attack. He can feel that his opponent’s attack is strong and she does not lose out to men in arm strength at all but what shocked him further is that his opponent’s sword seems to have stuck to his which made it difficult for him to execute his sword moves.

Ji Yanran seems to have transformed into a female leopard, or like a ghost has possessed her as she quickly retreated, her waist seems to be made of spring as she moved about, making full use of the strength in her waist and wrist. Her sword attacks were like the River Jiang, attacking every gap available.

Xiang Shaolong was furious and executed the Mozi swordplay, defending himself. After blocking more than 10 attacks, he finally found a chance to counterattack and his sword sliced towards the tip of his opponent’s sword.

Naturally Ji Yanran’s arm strength is not as good as Xiang Shaolong, and she was only relying on her excellent swordplay so

that Xiang Shaolong cannot execute his moves even if he has the strength to. Now that her opponent has struck her head on, she hurriedly retreated.

Ji Yanran smiled coyly, “Finally willing to reveal your real capabilities?”

Xiang Shaolong has wasted his strength trying to fend off her initial flurry of attacks and although he can say he lost because he was caught unawares, but the main reason is that his opponent’s swordplay is indeed excellent, even better than Lian Jin. At this point in time he dared not give way to her as he blocked his chest with his sword, the angle, strength used and timing made it difficult for her to attack.

Ji Yanran’s eyes shone and in an instant she moved her body diagonally and her long sword pierced up from the bottom, coming in contact with Flying Rainbow.

Xiang Shaolong almost lost his grasp on his precious sword and in his shock he moved diagonally away.

Ji Yanran easily moved back into the offensive and launched another flurry of lightning fast attacks so that her opponent does not even have time to catch a breath.

Only now does Xiang Shaolong truly experience why she can be No. 2 in swordplay in Wei. She is indeed better than him but this is only in terms of swordplay. His advantage is that every part of his body is a formidable weapon so if he wants to stay alive this time,

he will have no choice but to use unorthodox moves. As he blocked off the attacks using Mozi swordplay's defensive ability, he was secretly scrutinizing his surroundings as well, looking to see if there's any way he can change defeat into victory.

The more Ji Yanran fought the stronger she became, every move full of energy, frightening yet so alluring and a delight to see.

At this time Xiang Shaolong kept retreating, he felt his back knock against a large tree.

Ji Yanran laughed as her long sword struck towards him.

Xiang Shaolong moved his sword up diagonally to block it.

'Dang!' and Xiang Shaolong's Flying Rainbow flew out of his hand.

Ji Yanran was momentarily stunned because it was obvious Xiang Shaolong loosened his grip deliberately and allowed her to strike the sword aside. Because she was using all her strength, her body fell forward from the momentum.

'Bang!' Ji Yanran's shoulder was struck by Xiang Shaolong's flying kick and she fell forward due to the intense pain, collapsing onto the soft grass.

Ji Yanran was about to turn over and use the strength in her waist to rebound when Xiang Shaolong leapt over and pressed

down on her alluring body, his 2 hands grabbing her wrists like metal manacles and she was immediately immobilized.

Xiang Shaolong grinned as he lowered his head, looking into her eyes with only a 3 inch distance between them, “You do not concede?”

Ji Yanran’s body totally relaxed and she loosened her grip on her sword, her pretty face blushing and pouted prettily as she replied gently, “Why would Yanran not concede?”

Xiang Shaolong’s face turned serious, “Then how are you going to account to your King?”

Their limbs intertwined, the intoxicating feeling coming so strong towards them but instead they have their opposing situation. Xiang Shaolong found it really difficult to describe such feelings.

Ji Yanran totally gave up trying to fight back as she laid on the ground limply. She blinked her huge and pretty eyes, “What account, Yanran does not understand what Mister Xiang is talking about?”

Xiang Shaolong saw the look of sincere joy in her face and slowly understood. He stood up angrily, “So you were lying to me.”

Ji Yanran pouted, “Aren’t you going to help me up?”

Xiang Shaolong was so furious he almost wanted to ignore her. But finally he could not find the heart to be so cruel towards this beauty so he extended his hand and pulled her up.

Ji Yanran bowed and said, “Please don’t blame Yanran? If I don’t do this, how can I test your wondrous... heh, wondrous leg skill. That area is still in pain!”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head as he smiled bitterly and he walked over to pick up his flying rainbow and after returning it to its sheath, turned and walked away.

On the way back in the horse carriage, Ji Yanran looked totally ecstatic and self satisfied and kept on stealing peeks at the simmering Xiang Shaolong and said gently, “Xiang Shaolong you look so good when you’re angry!”

Xiang Shaolong was fuming and he stared at her angrily, “I did not expect that talented Learned lady Ji would lie as well, and be so good at it too.”

Ji Yanran rolled her pretty eyes at him and said, “Aren’t you wondering why I would want to test your swordplay?”

Xiang Shaolong leaned back on the chair, crossed his leg and made a show of nonchalance as he said with a chortle, “You’re trying to see if I’m suited enough to be your future husband, right?”

Ji Yanran covered her mouth in surprise, “You’re only half right, because things have not reached that stage yet. Besides you only barely passed!” She guffawed and continued with a laugh, “Until today, you’re the first who passed the first round. If you’re really serious in wooing me, I can try my best to give you chances.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this woman is indeed funny and he furrowed his brow, “Love is a strange and wondrous feeling between a man and a woman and comes naturally, it’s not a series of tests like what you’re doing.”

Ji Yanran’s eyes shone with an indescribable brightness as she said with a smile, “Very well said, better than anyone else, that’s why Yanran knows that you have a reason for pretending not to like me. However the way you looked at me revealed the secret in your heart. Especially when you were pressing down on me on the grass earlier, I am even more certain of your feelings towards me.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt guilty and was dumbfounded. He can only stare at her dumbly.

Ji Yanran asked happily, “So do you want to go back to Prince Xinling’s residence, or to Yanran’s little house by the lake?”

Xiang Shaolong seems to be startled awake and was secretly cursing himself for being bewitched by her and cried out, “Turn left quickly!”

Ji Yanran gave the orders and before they reached the main door of Prince Xinling’s residence, they turned into another street.

Xiang Shaolong said, “Please stop at the junction in front, I am getting down.”

After Ji Yanran gave the orders, she asked sadly, “Mister Xiang, do you really not feel any longing for Yanran at all?”

Xiang Shaolong felt a wave of sadness and after a sigh, he went close to her ears and whispered, “Miss is the most alluring beauty I have ever met in my life. However the timing is too inappropriate and very soon Miss will understand my difficulties. Forget me! All right?” He hardened his heart and left the carriage.

He was standing on the street when Ji Yanran lifted the curtain and called out, “Mister Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed and moved towards the window.

Ji Yanran looked at him deeply, intelligence reflected in her pretty eyes and she said serenely and gently, “Yanran understands now. If there’s any problem, remember that Yanran will help you at all costs.”

Book 4 Chapter 5 – Bloody Battle On The Long Street

Xiang Shaolong met up with Wu Zhuo at an abandoned old house. This extremely reliable battle friend who went through life and death with him said, “We’ve already followed your instructions and dug a tunnel from beneath our camp to lead to a forest behind the camp. We’ve also sent men to use that tunnel and make more than 10 wooden rafts in the forest and kept them hidden next to a small river that leads to the main canal. If we follow the flow of the water, we will be able to reach the southern border of the state of Qi in 2 days.”

Xiang Shaolong replied happily, “Lady Ya and the rest will return to camp this evening. Tell Cheng Xu to put on an act and insist on traveling only tomorrow. In that way Prince Xinling won’t be on his guard against us.”

Wu Zhuo furrowed his brows, “Then how are you going to get out of the city? Prince Xinling will certainly send men to keep an eye on you.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “I definitely cannot leave, or else no one will be able to escape. To use that tunnel to let everyone leave, we’ll need at least 2 hours. You will start immediately after the sun sets and make some fake men as cover ups. All armors, horses and heavy items will have to be left behind. Try to purchase some horses from the traders after we reach Qi and if you travel by night, you’ll definitely be able to return to Zhao safely. In summary success will depend on being secretive, just pretend that you’re horse thieves.”

Wu Zhuo's expression changed, "What about Grand Young Master-in-law, if I abandon you, Master will certainly take my life! At least I want to stay behind and accompany you."

Xiang Shaolong replied sternly, "This is an order, you must follow my instructions. Without you, Cheng Xu will definitely not be able to accomplish anything." He continued gently and consoled him. "I will definitely treasure my own life and I have a detailed plan as well. I'll be able to save myself and take Zhao Qian away as well."

Wu Zhuo still shook his head.

Xiang Shaolong sighed and revealed to him the whole plan.

Wu Zhuo was silent after listening to it before saying, "If Grand Young Master-in-law does not return to Zhao within 3 months, I will kill myself to replay your kindness."

Xiang Shaolong was both touched and helpless and after discussing further some details, they parted. He managed to find Fu Bu through a series of intricate communication methods and after some secret discussion, he went back to Prince Xinling's residence.

Prince Xinling dragged him to lunch and after the meal Xiang Shaolong returned to Flying Clouds Chamber to see Lady Ya.

Lady Ya has already received notification from Prince Xinling and has already packed. When she saw him return, she ran into his arms and cried bitterly, “Without you, Ya’er will not leave!”

Xiang Shaolong thought this to be a headache and after trying to cajole and scare her, he was finally forced to reveal his whole plan to her. Lady Ya knows that this is the only way they can survive so she had no choice but to tearfully agree.

It’s time to depart.

On Zhao Qian’s side, she and her 3 maids were hugging each other and crying bitterly, as if they are about to be parted by death, making all who witness it feel sad as well.

It was only under Xiang Shaolong’s constant urging that the 2 maids Cui Tong and Cui Lü went on their way tearfully.

Prince Xinling escorted them out of the city personally and when they reached the camp, Cheng Xu followed Xiang Shaolong’s instructions and insisted on traveling only the next day.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be helpless and exchanged a look with Prince Xinling, finally accepting Cheng Xu’s suggestion.

Prince Xinling smiled, “Don’t worry! I’ve specially transferred a team of light cavalry to escort them on their way tomorrow morning.”

Xiang Shaolong had long noticed the Wei army camp nearby and looking at the scale knows that there is at least 2000 men there. He was laughing secretly to himself as he returned to the city with Prince Xinling.

They were riding next to each other as Prince Xinling commented, "From now on, it's best that Shaolong stays in the residence, firstly to conserve your energy and also to prevent any other accidents from happening that can spoil the grand plan. I've already sent men to send Zhao Qian to hide at a secret location so that Shaolong need not have any worries when you attend the feast tomorrow."

On hearing that Xiang Shaolong felt as if his heart has dropped into a bottomless pit. If Zhao Qian has really been kept by him, won't he be totally under the control of this fiend? But he still pretended to be grateful on the surface.

Heavens! What should he do next?

Prince Xinling asked nonchalantly, "Why did Yanran look for you this morning?"

Xiang Shaolong was thinking at this point that if Prince Xinling finds out tomorrow morning that Lady Ya and the rest have all slipped away, he will certainly suspect his sincerity, then how would he deal with him and Zhao Qian? He forced out a smile and said, "I don't know why she's looking for me too, she was talking to me about everything and left after a while."

Prince Xinling thought to himself that as long as she has not taken a liking to him, it's all right, and he stopped talking further.

Xiang Shaolong was in an extremely bad mood and returned listlessly to Prince Xinling's residence. When he returned to his room, he got rid of the 4 pretty maids. Just as he was feeling edgy and nervous, there was a 'plonk', and a piece of cloth wrapped around a stone was thrown in.

Xiang Shaolong removed the cloth and it turned out to be a message from Liu Chao, generally informing him that Prince Xinling has increased the number of men to keep an eye on Xiang Shaolong, so he dared not come and meet with him. Zhao Qian has been brought to Lady Pingyuan's residence and was being held there and they will keep a close eye on her. At the bottom of the cloth he drew a simple map, pointing out the buildings where Lady Pingyuan resides in.

Xiang Shaolong immediately heaved a sigh of relief. As long as he knows that Zhao Qian is still within the residence, there is still hope.

At the same time he guessed that Prince Xinling is up to no good and will still get Lady Pingyuan to send Zhao Qian into the Palace instead of him, thus treating him as an idiot.

By now the sky is slowly getting dark.

Xiang Shaolong decided to relax himself and allowed the 4 pretty maids to return and help him bath and change. He went out and

joined Prince Xinling for dinner, keeping up pretenses all this while.

During dinner Xiang Shaolong said, "I'd like to practice my swordplay alone tonight, it's best that no one is sent over to serve me. Hei! Without Lady Ya, and with such alluring maids, it'll be terrible if I cannot refrain myself!"

Prince Xinling did not suspect anything at all and agreed with a laugh. He was secretly thinking to himself, as long as I send more people to keep an eye on you, and with Zhao Qian in my hands, need I worry that you'll fly away?

Xiang Shaolong returned to his building and immediately made a small hole in the roof and ejected his rope out, grabbing on to a large tree nearby before going into his room. He was about to carry his wooden sword when a knocking was heard on his door.

Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to hurriedly remove his equipment and walk out of the room to open the door. He saw Lady Pingyuan standing alone outside the door with a glow, looking at him deeply with very confused eyes.

He thought that something must be wrong and had no choice but to welcome her in.

Lady Pingyuan walked daintily and lightly towards his bedroom.

Xiang Shaolong was immediately scared mindless. Right now his

bed is full of stuff that should not be seen so how can he allow her to go in. His mind worked quickly and he dashed forward, hugging her waist from the back.

Lady Pingyuan moaned daintily and collapsed softly into his arms, tears flowing down her cheeks.

In his entire life, Xiang Shaolong has never experienced so many women crying over him before and he felt a headache coming on seeing this. He turned her around, tilted up her pretty tear stained face and pretended to be helpless as he asked, "What's the matter!"

Lady Pingyuan closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, trying to control her sobs as she shook her head, looking utterly dejected.

No one other than Xiang Shaolong can understand her dilemma right now, wanting to harm him and send him to his death but yet can't help but come and see him. This is the reason for her torture!

Lady Pingyuan collapsed into Xiang Shaolong's arms, using all her strength to hug him, her pretty face buried in his wide chest as she continued sobbing.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting that with her around like this, how is he going to save Zhao Qian and if those assassins from Chu Mohism were to arrive, he might not be able to preserve his own life as well.

Lady Pingyuan calmed down a little and said quietly as she

nibbled his ear lobe, “Shaolong! Carry me into the room!”

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to cry for help, how can his room be ‘seen’? He hurriedly said, “Lady! Wasn’t it supposed to be later before we can do it?”

Lady Pingyuan stamped her feet and pouted, “I want it now! Aren’t you going to carry me in?”

Xiang Shaolong carried her up by her waist.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door again.

Both of them were equally startled.

A servant’s voice was heard from outside, “Lady, the Prince has something urgent and wants you to see him immediately.”

Xiang Shaolong put Lady Pingyuan down and pretended to be helpless and sighed. However he knows that once Prince Xinling received news that Lady Pingyuan has come to look for him, he’s worried that his sister will let her emotions overrule her and spoil the plan, that’s why he sent someone here to lead her away.

Lady Pingyuan first looked furious, then her expression darkened as she replied, “Coming!”

She rushed forward and hugged Xiang Shaolong tightly, giving

him a hot kiss filled with complicated feelings of joy, pain and farewell. After that she lowered her head and left, not turning back for another look.

At this point in time Xiang Shaolong doesn't know whether to hate her or love her, because that kiss earlier is really eternally unforgettable, getting right into his bones, with an inseparable mixture of love and hate.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived at the huge courtyard that Lady Pingyuan resides in, Zhao Qian's lonely heart was pining away for Xiang Shaolong. He has become this beautiful princess's only hope.

On one hand she has almost blind confidence towards Xiang Shaolong, but she's terrified that he will not know that she's being held captive here. When the 2 extremely conflicting thoughts were torturing her mind, the 2 ladies who were assigned to guard after her every move suddenly shuddered and fainted onto the ground consecutively. And the awe inspiring and handsome Xiang Shaolong appeared proudly in her room.

Zhao Qian was ecstatic and ran into Xiang Shaolong's warm and safe embrace, her dainty body trembling violently.

Xiang Shaolong carried her to a corner that is not easily visible from the door or windows, reached out and loosened her robes.

Although Zhao Qian has always been very obliging towards Xiang Shaolong, she was still shocked and secretly furious that this person still has the mood for such things during such a dangerous

time.

Just as she was about to object, Xiang Shaolong kissed her lips lovingly while continuing the removal of her robes.

Zhao Qian was feeling all soft and ticklish from his nimble fingers working on her overly sensitive skin and just as she was losing her senses, she realized Xiang Shaolong has removed the small bag on his back and is already attiring her alluring body which now only has a slip covering it, with a thick robe that can withstand the cold, covered with a black armored vest.

Xiang Shaolong squatted down and helped her change into shoes suited for long distance travel.

Zhao Qian was so moved that hot tears ran down her cheeks, her heart filled with happiness and gratitude. Even if she has to die for Xiang Shaolong now, she'll do it willingly.

Everything was done and Xiang Shaolong stood up, holding her tightly as if he's carrying the most precious treasure in the world and asked quietly, "Will my little treasure be obedient?"

Zhao Qian nodded her head vigorously.

Xiang Shaolong took out a cloth binding and tied the beautiful princess to his back, crossed her slender legs around his waist and tightened it with the cloth. The two of them merged as one, with no space between them.

Lady Ya made these cloth bindings in a hurry upon his request. Xiang Shaolong had undergone training before and is well aware of the importance of being well equipped, so he was extremely well prepared before the mission.

Zhao Qian leaned on his strong back, her previous worries all swept away and she almost moaned in satisfaction and comfort.

Xiang Shaolong went to the window and looked out. He pushed open the window lightly and listened.

A patrol troop just walked past outside the building.

When they were far away, Xiang Shaolong went out the window with Zhao Qian on his back and landed lightly on the grass outside.

When he was training in the military, he often had to carry 10kg of things and climbed hills and valleys to train his stamina so a light beauty like her will definitely not hinder his movement.

In the woods, he'll suddenly stop moving, or he'll suddenly run madly like the wind, moving swiftly and nimbly forward, his destination is of course that 2 level building which Prince Shaoyuan was staying in.

At the southeast corner gongs and drums were sounded, followed by the voices of people mixed with the barking of ferocious dogs.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and looked towards the direction of the noises only to see fire blazing into the sky at that side. In this starless night the scene looked especially frightening.

He secretly commented that Fu Du really came at the right time and while everyone's attention were on the fire, he rapidly went towards Prince Shaoyuan's residence.

Shouts of fighting and weapons clanging were heard from the direction of the house Xiang Shaolong stayed in.

By now Xiang Shaolong has reached the flowerbeds behind Prince Shaoyuan's residence and saw that Prince Shaoyuan, together with Liu Chao and his men were running out of the house with weapons towards the sound of the fight.

He was secretly laughing to himself, because Liu Chao had already opened the window and he climbed into the house and went into the tunnel with familiarity. After he closed the entrance, he ran down the tunnel towards the back of the mountain.

His shoes were covered with soft cloth so even if he was running rapidly, no sound was emitted so he need not fear Prince Xinling will hear him. Besides, by now there's no way Prince Xinling will remain on his bed.

After running a distance, the tunnel made a 90 degrees turn towards the south and in a short while, he was at the exit on the other end of the tunnel.

He took out his lock picking tools and unlocked the metal door. After closing it properly again, he followed the stone steps outside the door and reached the last door that leads to the ground level outside.

Outside is a dense forest, situated outside the southern wall of Prince Xinling's residence.

After Xiang Shaolong sealed the tunnel properly, he checked out the directions and ran towards the nearest city wall of Daliang. As long as he can leave this city, chances of them escaping will be very much greater.

No one was on the dark streets, it's like a ghost city but hatefully, every household has a lantern hung outside their doors. Although the light was dim and the wind was blowing on the lanterns making them rock, but it makes hiding for him all the more difficult.

Xiang Shaolong tried his best to avoid the larger streets, sticking to the darker alleys.

Sounds of hooves were heard and Xiang Shaolong had just passed a main street but before he can dodge into an alley, the enemy noticed him and rode over shouting.

Xiang Shaolong was extremely perplexed, he cannot figure out how did Prince Xinling manage to find men so quickly to come after him?

But there's no use thinking about it now, he can only run for his life.

Zhao Qian who was lying down on his back was lightly trembling, obviously she's very nervous which made him love and pity her more. Such an elegant beauty, to think she has to go through such difficulties!

After he ran out of the alley and had just turned into a main street, he heard hoof beats coming rapidly from the left, 10 odd riders were coming after them like the wind.

Xiang Shaolong knows that there's no way he can avoid them so he made up his mind and moved to a side, with his back against the houses and his front facing the enemies.

The riders all dismounted and one of them chortled, "Xiang Shaolong, let's see where you can escape to today?"

It turns out to be the one who treats animals as his teacher, Xiao Weimou and of course his left and right hand men Ning Chong and Zheng Lei were with him.

Xiang Shaolong quietly counted, there's altogether 19 of them and all of them looked strong and stout. Luckily the other party obviously came out in a hurry and did not have with them long distance weapons like bows and arrows, or else they could have killed them easily.

The 19 of them spread out and surrounded him in a crescent moon formation so that there's no way he can escape.

Xiao Weimou laughed icily, "I've expected you to try to escape at the last moment, so I've been keeping an eye on you day and night. Ha! That should be the beautiful princess you have on your back! Tonight I can guarantee that she will die in ecstasy."

His men on hearing his words started laughing lewdly.

Xiao Weimou added another sentence, "After I've had my fun, all of you will have a share!"

These ferocious men whooped, obviously they have already regarded Zhao Qian as a sure catch.

Xiang Shaolong followed the things he learnt in the past during military training and breathed deep and long to maintain his calm and at the same time loosened the cloth that bind Zhao Qian to him. He instructed, "Qian'er! This is a life and death situation, you must be brave and no matter what you have to hide behind me."

Zhao Qian was so frightened that she was losing her senses but after hearing Xiang Shaolong's calm and confident voice, her courage increased and she stood firmly on the ground. However, the blood was not flowing properly to her limbs yet and she felt them go soft so she hurriedly pressed onto his shoulders and leaned on his back.

Xiao Weimou saw that this is a chance not to be missed so he waved his heavy sword and shouted, "Attack!"

Xiang Shaolong withdrew his wooden sword and stood his stance without a word, his eagle sharp eyes keeping track on the enemies who are coming towards him from the left, right and front.

Xiao Weimou led the rest and followed behind, tightening the encirclement towards Xiang Shaolong.

The people in the houses on both sides who were rudely awaken stuck their heads out the windows for a proper look but with swears coming from Xiao Weimou's men, they were so frightened they retracted, afraid to see what's happening.

Right at this time 3 long swords attacked towards Xiang Shaolong simultaneously.

Once Xiang Shaolong saw his opponent's swordplay, he knows that he's facing formidable opponents. Since his men are already so good, naturally Xiao Weimou would be even better.

But now there's no time to think further, the hand which has a flying needle hidden flew out and struck right at the face of the enemy to his left. The wooden sword in his right hand blocked off the long sword attacking him from the middle and he used the opportunity where his opponent's sword was reflected up to execute a side kick and kicked hard on his opponent's groin, after which he fended off the attacker on the right with a sweep of his sword.

The one who got struck by the needle fell facing up, and died on the spot.

The one who got struck by the leg fell backwards, unable to get up.

Xiao Weimou did not expect him to be so formidable and was immediately furious as he shouted, “Attack!” He raised his sword and attacked first, not giving him a chance to take out another flying needle.

Xiang Shaolong’s left hand drew out Flying Rainbow from his waist. For a warrior like him who has undergone rigorous training, both his left and right hands are equally nimble and strong, not like the average person who favors only the use of one hand.

Xiang Shaolong cried out, “Qian’er follow me!” and he moved diagonally to avoid Xiao Weimou.

Zhao Qian followed behind him.

The murderous air from the flash of the swords came from 3 directions.

Xiang Shaolong knows that this is a matter of life and death and he cannot retreat. He felt valor rising up in him and vowed to protect the beauty behind him with his life. His right hand holding the wooden sword and left hand holding Flying Rainbow, he

attacked fiercely, his magnificent and forceful aura is even stronger than the enemy's.

The sound of metal and wood clanging against each other was heard and blood was seen at the same time on Xiang Shaolong and his opponent. His chest was struck by the enemy's sword but luckily he has his armor and although his enemy's sword was sharp, it could only pierce through the armor a little and cause an injury about half an inch deep.

The other sword slashed towards his waist but it struck the belt that held his steel needles so he was not injured.

Such close combat is extremely dangerous, a case of either you perish or I die. Especially when Xiang Shaolong has to protect Zhao Qian behind him, he cannot try to avoid his enemy's sword so he was injured once they fought. It only leaves to be seen who will be the last to fall before a victor can be ascertained.

Amongst the 5 who attacked, one has his throat cut by Flying Rainbow and died on the spot. His wooden sword struck another's arm and the long sword immediately fell to the ground as he hurriedly retreated while the other 3 were forced back by his attack.

The sound of weapons slicing through the air could be heard from his left and right and Xiang Shaolong swept his sword towards the right only to see Xiao Weimou dashing towards him from the right, waving his sword towards his head.

At the same time Zhao Qian screamed, another enemy was coming from the left near the wall, his target is obviously Zhao Qian.

Zheng Lei and Ning Chong whose swordsmanship were only below Xiao Weimou came attacking from the front one behind another with the aim to kill Xiang Shaolong with one blow.

These people are very experienced in fighting and once they strike they will not allow Xiang Shaolong any chance of escape.

The sword attack from Xiao Weimou who is aiming directly at him may look simple but it encompasses changes and at any time he can change it into a slash. Just that attack alone is enough to keep Xiang Shaolong busy, to the point that he dare not become distracted.

As for the other attacks he can only rely on his hearing to decide on the course of action.

Xiang Shaolong's used all his strength in his left hand which was holding on to Flying Rainbow to heavily block against Zheng Lei's oncoming sword attack and the impact forced his opponent to retreat 3 steps back. He swept his left hand and Flying Rainbow flew out of his hand, transformed into a flash of light as it flew straight towards the chest of the man who was going towards Zhao Qian.

At the same time the wooden sword went up diagonally, blocking Xiao Weimou's deadly blow before going into Mozi swordplay's

mysterious defensive mode but the wooden sword looks as if it's on the offensive rather than defensive such that even with Xiao Weimou's ferocity, he was stunned as well and retreated for the moment.

Right at this moment Ning Chong's sword came straight at his throat from the front.

There is not enough time for Xiang Shaolong to block with his wooden sword and in that instance he suddenly had an idea and jumped up.

'Clang!', the sword which was aimed at his neck now hit the belt around his waist which was filled with the steel needles.

Just as Ning Chong was feeling surprised, Xiang Shaolong's wooden sword slashed vertically and hit him right on his head.

Sounds of bone cracking were immediately heard and Ning Chong fell to the side, knocking into 2 men who were advancing and all 3 of them fell to the ground.

Right at this time another enemy took the opportunity to stab towards his chest just as he was landing. A sharp pain resonated through his body and as Zhao Qian screamed, Xiang Shaolong gave a flying kick towards the front of his opponent. That person is still midway through his attack and with the kick he was sent tumbling backwards and knocked into another enemy who was coming up for an attack.

The sword was pulled sharply out from Xiang Shaolong's left armpit and fresh blood spurted out.

Since the beginning of the fight, although Xiang Shaolong suffered one light and one serious injury, he managed to kill 4 of his enemies and severely injure 3, with the expert fighter Ning Chong amongst the dead.

Everyone was in a blood fury and the remaining 12 attacked madly.

Xiao Weimou is all the more mad and came from the right again, with his sword slashing down.

Xiang Shaolong knows that after his injury, he's definitely not Xiao Weimou's match and cried out, "Qian'er follow me!" and shifted to his left while staying close to the wall and blocking off the enemy's ferocious attacks with the wooden sword in his hand.

Xiao Weimou was blocked by his own men from attacking and in his anger, he pulled his own men away and dashed in to attack.

Zhao Qian who was hiding behind Xiang Shaolong saw reflections from the swords and sabres surrounding them and fresh blood kept flowing from her beloved's body, only managed to follow him for 10 odd steps before her legs turned soft and she fell to the ground in a sitting position.

By now Xiang Shaolong has been injured numerous times by the

swords and when he felt Zhao Qian falling down behind him, he thought to himself that it's the end. He geared up all his ferocity and without a care to himself, gathered his strength and made a sweeping strike, knocking the advancing enemies and also blocking one of Xiao Weimou's heavy slash.

Xiao Weimou did not use all his strength in this attack but because his arm strength has always been better than Xiang Shaolong, and also the latter is now tired out from the fierce fight, he immediately lost his hold on the wooden sword and it fell to the ground.

The 10 over wounds all over Xiang Shaolong's body was pouring blood and in that dangerous moment he gave a flying kick which landed right on Xiao Weimou's belly, making this ferocious man retreat quickly but it was obviously not enough to injure him.

2 swords came attacking.

Xiang Shaolong quickly pulled out 2 flying needles and with a flick of his hands, the needle on his right hand struck an enemy's chest while the needle on his left hand, because of the serious injury sustained to his arm, missed his target and only struck the enemy's shoulder and that person ignored the needle injury and continued his advance.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this must surely be the end and he pulled his dagger out and was about to kill Zhao Qian first to spare her the torture of being raped when the sound of a bow was heard and an arrow flew over like lightning, piercing that person's neck, flinging him away with the impact as he died on the

spot.

Both him and his enemies turned to look at the direction where the arrow came from and saw a strange person wearing an eerie mask, dressed in a long black robe and riding over speedily on a horse. That person threw away the bow and pulled out a long spear, dashing right into the battle.

The enemy quickly returned to the fight in shock.

That person's skills with the spear is extraordinary and also he's has just freshly joined the fight, all who opposed him were injured or killed, causing chaos to the enemy. In an instant he came next to Xiang Shaolong and extended the circle of the spear attack, forcing Xiao Weimou and the rest back. He called out quietly, "Aren't you getting up the horse!"

Xiang Shaolong could recognize it was Ji Yanran's voice and happily helped Zhao Qian up the horse, picked up his wooden sword before using the last of his strength to jump up behind Zhao Qian.

Ji Yanran immediately controlled the horse with her legs, the spear in her hands danced around as it once again forced Xiao Weimou back and fought her way out of the encirclement, escaping with the 2 of them.

Book 4 Chapter 6 – Tending To Injuries At The Observatory

Xiang Shaolong had countless nightmares.

He dreamt that the time machine sent him back to the 21st century where he was charged with the major crime of messing up history. Suddenly Shu'er and Su'er came to look for him with blood flowing from the orifices on their faces, blaming him for not avenging their deaths. And then countless different faces appeared before him.

These include his parents, relatives, friends, Mei Canniang, Wu Tingfang, the King of Zhao, Zhao Mu etc, and cries kept ringing in his ears together with the wails of souls and ghosts!

In his haze he seems to know that he is pacing at death's door.

No! I must continue living.

For others and for myself!

I cannot give up.

His body alternated between hot and cold, his soul seems to have left his body, as if there's unbearable pain, but it feels totally numb as well.

He does not know how long he struggled at death's door before he finally regained consciousness.

For a moment, he seems to have returned to the safe military hostel in the 21st century.

Cheers erupted next to his bed, Zhao Qian fell on the side of the bed, tears streaming down her face as she laughed and cried.

Before Xiang Shaolong can take a close look at Zhao Qian, he felt darkness surrounding him again and he fainted.

When he regained consciousness again, his mind and body seems to be much better.

Zhao Qian is so happy that she can only cry bitterly.

Xiang Shaolong wiped her tears with his hand weakly and asked feebly, "What is this place, how long was I unconscious."

A familiar voice rang out from the door, "This is the highest level of my Heaven Viewing Pagoda, on the 5th level. Shaolong you were unconscious for 9 days, if it was someone else who was that seriously injured and lost that much blood, that person would have died long ago. But you're not the average person, so you definitely won't die. Obviously everything is planned by Heavens!"

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned and saw a person walking towards the bed, and it turned out to be Zou Yan.

He never really liked this person and he cannot imagine why he would risk his own life to save him and asked in astonishment, “Why did Mister save me?”

Zhao Qian who was sitting by his bed replied, “You are really indebted to Mister Zou for saving your life. If not for his excellent healing skills and meticulous care...”

Zou Yan chortled and interrupted Zhao Qian’s words and said as he lowered his head to take a closer look at Xiang Shaolong, “The person who really saved you is Ji Yanran. I just happened to be around! This Heaven Viewing Pagoda is a place I use to study astrology, and also the tallest building in Daliang, I guarantee that no one will search their way here. Besides I am in no way related to you, so no one will suspect me.”

Xiang Shaolong’s mood turned for the better and he slowly regained the strength to speak. He puzzled, “Mister still have not replied my earlier question.”

Zou Yan smiled a little, “I’ll have to start from the beginning. 3 years ago, I found a new star in the state of Qi, moving towards Tian Chang, the area where the Zhao and Wei borders meet and I know that the new leader of this era has finally appeared. Therefore I came to Daliang to look for a new master.”

Xiang Shaolong was totally befuddled, “What is Tian Chang? Is there a state of Zhao and state of Wei there as well?”

Zou Yan said proudly, “Heavens and humans are related, everything that happens on earth happens because of Heaven’s decree. My study of the 5 elements is based on the 5 stars in Heaven, wood, fire, earth, metal and water, and I deduce what will happen on earth based on Heaven’s decree. Tian Chang is how I separate the Heavens into different areas according to the layout of the states on earth. For example if a guest star happens to take over the main star of a certain area, then the ruler of that area will be in trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong is in no mood now to listen to such superstitious and outrageous theory so he asked, “So what has that got to do with me?”

Zou Yan looked at Zhao Qian, who was looking at him with her large pretty eyes, filled with idolization and he is all the more thrilled and started theorizing, “How can it not have anything to do with you? At the same time you arrived at Daliang, that new star happens to fly into the position of Daliang in Tian Chang, therefore I knew that the new saint has arrived. The first time I saw you, although I felt you have the aura of a dragon, I did not yet think of it until that night when you talked about the earth shattering theory about governing a country did I guess that you are the new saint. That night when you were attacked, I was convinced that I was right about you.”

After he spoke, he knelt down and kow-towed 3 times respectfully.

Xiang Shaolong was amused and quickly asked him to stand, saying “I can understand the front part, but why is it that you are

even more convinced of your faith when I was attacked and injured?”

Zou Yan explained, “On that afternoon that you were attacked, Miss Ji returned moodily to the little house by the lake and after my prolonged questions did she reveal that you refused to woo her. Therefore I told her: the new star in heaven is being forced aside by another star, and I’m afraid you will meet with danger that night. That’s why Miss Ji was able to save you in time and send you here. Tell me, Shaolong, if you’re not the new saint, how can things be such a coincidence?”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded.

A wave of fatigue swept over him and after he forced the medicine down, he fell into a deep sleep again.

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, he felt a lot better than the last time and was able to sit up and eat. Scars have begun to form over his 10 odd wounds, leaving only the wound under his armpit still in very much pain, but the other wounds were not affecting him.

Zou Yan has gone out, and there was only Zhao Qian in the highest level of this ancient observatory.

This pretty princess happily fed him the porridge cooked with precious and expensive herbs.

Xiang Shaolong looked at her sympathetically, “Qian’er! You’ve

lost weight.”

Zhao Qian replied gently, “Compared to the sacrifice you made for me, this is nothing. That night I saw how you were afraid that I would be injured and thus used your own body to block the sword blows from the thieves, my heart was utterly broken.” She continued worriedly, “Sister Yanran has not been here for 3 days, this is really worrying.”

Xiang Shaolong felt an injection of energy, “Does she visit me often?”

Zhao Qian nodded her head, “She was so concerned about you, and comes every time to help me clean and dress your wounds.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Doesn’t that mean that the both of you have seen every part of my body?”

Zhao Qian blushed and nodded her head, but her pretty eyes revealed her joy and her expression looked absolutely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong felt lust arising and said gently as he grabbed her hand, “I must have revenge and see our Princess’s whole body.”

Zhao Qian gently pulled her dainty hands away and continued feeding him the porridge, saying with a blush, “See if you want to!”

A rush of love and sweetness welled up in Xiang Shaolong. To think that the beauty will allow this, how can he not feel grateful.

He said with a smile, “Not only will I see, but I want to investigate with my hands as well, will Princess object?”

Zhao Qian blushed to her ears and stared at him, not daring to answer him but her expression shows her utter willingness.

Xiang Shaolong sighed happily.

Footsteps were heard from the stairs.

Both of them started getting nervous.

Ji Yanran's sweet voice rung out, “No need to be afraid! It's Yanran.”

Zhao Qian was overjoyed and went to welcome her.

In a short while the 2 ladies appeared shoulder to shoulder in front of Xiang Shaolong.

Ji Yanran lost weight as well but when she saw him her bright eyes shone immediately and her gaze intertwined with his.

Xiang Shaolong said, “Xiang Shaolong will never forget how Miss saved me.”

Ji Yanran sat on his bed without any embarrassment and first

looked at his wounds before saying with a relieved sigh, “No need for such polite words. The rate of your recovery is astonishing. You don’t know how frightening you looked the other night with fresh blood all over your body, and you almost made me cry because of you.” She continued with a blush on her pretty face, “And it’s the first time Yanran cried over a man!”

Zhao Qian laughed, “You don’t know how good Sister Yanran was towards you!”

Xiang Shaolong felt a boldness overcome him and daringly grabbed Ji Yanran’s delicate hands and said gently, “It seems that not only have I passed, but I have taken a step further into your heart, right?”

Ji Yanran stared at him and said nonchalantly, “Sorry. You’re still at the passing stage.” Although she said that, she did not try to retract her hands at all.

Xiang Shaolong was filled with love as he replied with a smile, “I have a chance as long as I’ve passed, didn’t Miss Ji said that you will try your best to make it easier for me?”

Zhao Qian listened to their interesting exchange and can’t help but steal a laugh at the side.

After Ji Yanran stared at Zhao Qian, she told Xiang Shaolong, “I came all the way here with so much difficult and am even sitting next to you, isn’t it making it easier for you already?”

Xiang Shaolong was awakened by her words and returned to the cold and cruel reality, asking, “How is the situation outside?”

Ji Yanran said calmly, “Prince Xinling, Lord Longyang and Xiao Weimou are all trying their best to look for you and the defenses in the city has been increased numerous times. Even the areas outside the city and the river routes are filled with guards. I’m afraid you’ll have to turn into a bird before you can fly out.”

Xiang Shaolong asked with fear and concern, “What about the others?”

Zhao Qian sat closely next to Ji Yanran and said, “Don’t worry! Qian’er asked Sister Yanran long ago, they’ve all escaped safely, not a single person was captured.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved but once he thought about Prince Xinling, he can’t laugh. He’s lost the ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’, so how can he possibly let him off?

Ji Yanran’s expression turned serious as she said, “These few days the Weis have been going door to door searching your whereabouts, and they will ultimately find their way here. For the moment they’re only keeping an eye on me and have not suspected Mister Zou yet. But as long as you remain in Daliang, you’re still in extreme danger.”

Zhao Qian said quietly, “Sister you’re so capable, you’ll surely have a way.”

Ji Yanran replied, "I've been constantly thinking of a plan, but security is so tight." She remembered something and told Xiang Shaolong, "Those equipment you have on your waist were all very strange, even a knowledgeable man like Mister Zou has never seen it before, where did you get it from?"

Xiang Shaolong knows she's referring to the hooks and clasps used for climbing and replied, "It's my own design, made by the craftsmen of Zhao. As long as we can reach the city walls, I will have a way to climb over the walls with Qian'er."

Ji Yanran was very surprised and after scrutinizing him for a moment, sighed lightly, "The more I am in contact with you, the more I realize how unfathomable you are. But with the current situation, it's impossible for you to reach the city walls without being detected by those at the watchtowers. Even if you can leave the city, you cannot avoid the thousands of soldiers outside the city, so we still need to think of another way."

Zhao Qian went close to her ear and whispered, "Is Sister starting to like him more and more?"

Ji Yanran's pretty face blushed. Sounds of bells ringing was suddenly heard in the room.

Before Xiang Shaolong can figure out what is happening, the expressions on the 2 ladies changed, "Enemies are approaching!"

Ji Yanran helped Xiang Shaolong up while Zhao Qian hurriedly gathered all the blankets that has traces of blood and everything

else that is associated with Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong asked in shock, “Where can we hide?”

Ji Yanran helped him to a huge wardrobe and opened the door, only to see it filled with clothes inside with no space to hide a person at all. She then extended her hand and pushed, the clothes rose up miraculously and revealed a secret compartment inside.

By now Zhao Qian has packed everything and even let the bed curtains loose before hurrying over to help Xiang Shaolong hide in the secret compartment. Ji Yanran pulled down the outer compartment holding the clothes and the wardrobe door closed automatically, how intricately done.

That space that was meant for hiding 1 person now has 3 people squeezed inside, so one can imagine how cramped it is. The 3 of them stuck to each other front to back, with Zhao Qian’s alluring body pressing tightly against his back while Ji Yanran was squeezed face to face with him.

He can clearly feel the marvelous curves of Ji Yanran’s body, especially when he’s only wearing a pair of shorts, and the exciting fragrance almost made him forget about the danger they’re now in.

Ji Yanran is a little taller than Zhao Qian, her pretty face happened to lean on his shoulder and she quietly whispered in his ear, “This is a place Mister Zou designed to save his own life, I did not expect we’d get to use it instead.”

Although the place is cramped, it's not stuffy at all. Obviously it has marvelously designed ventilation.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly had a thought; no matter how respected people in this era is, but they all have a fear of not living past another day. That's why Zou Yan has this secret compartment for hiding while Prince Xinling has his secret tunnel for escape.

Suddenly there were strange noises in the secret compartment.

Xiang Shaolong concentrated and realized it's the rapid breathing of the 2 ladies. With the heaving of their bosoms, he can feel even more strongly the rubbing of their bodies against him. Luckily Xiang Shaolong's body is still feeling weak so he did not have any natural male reaction, or else the situation would be even more embarrassing.

The 2 ladies' bodies were becoming softer and weaker and Xiang Shaolong felt his lust arising and can't help but reach one arm forward and the other backward and hug them tightly.

Ji Yanran is a little better but Zhao Qian moaned and her slender arms encircled him from the back and hugged his waist tightly, her whole body heated up.

Footsteps were heard, obviously someone was searching the place level by level until at least they reached this highest level.

Prince Xinling's voice can be heard outside, "This is the first time I've seen Mister Zou's observatory. Hey! What gadget is this?"

Zou Yan replied calmly, "This is an equipment used to measure the position of the stars in the sky, I am about to start making an exquisite and accurate map of the stars."

Prince Xinling is obviously not interested in the tour and he commented as he pushed the door open, "Hai! I thought there'll be something interesting in this room, it turns out only to be your bedroom."

Zou Yan laughed, "My work can only be done at night, how can I not have a place to sleep."

Prince Xinling said, "Why don't I go to your star observatory first to explore!"

Footsteps traveled up towards the balcony at the top.

The 3 of them just heaved a sigh of relief.

There were footsteps coming in again and that person searched thoroughly, even pulling the wardrobe door open, not leaving anything unchecked at all.

Their hearts were almost at their throats and were secretly cursing Prince Xinling for being cunning to lure Zou Yan away so that his men can do a thorough search.

After some disturbances, Prince Xinling and Zouyan came down.

The 3 of them were a little relieved and once again felt the excitement of their bodies and limbs intertwined together.

Zhao Qian and Ji Yanran are both unmarried ladies and although they are very much interested in Xiang Shaolong, they still felt utterly embarrassed.

Zhao Qian is a little better as she's used to being intimate with Xiang Shaolong; Ji Yanran has never had the experience of being squeezed in a man's arm and her heart kept beating madly. In this quiet place how can this sound escape Xiang Shaolong's ears and just based on this point is enough to thorough make her feel ashamed.

Whether deliberately or not, the 3 of them almost felt as if they have no wish to leave this safe space.

Xiang Shaolong's lips leaned towards Ji Yanran's ears as he said quietly, "Hey!"

Ji Yanran raised her pretty face in a daze and in the darkness she can feel Xiang Shaolong's breath on her face. She felt utterly lost and forgot to speak.

Xiang Shaolong had wanted to ask her if they can go out now, but he suddenly felt her lips so close to his and thought to himself that

what a better time to take advantage of her than this. So he kissed heavily on her soft and wet lips.

Ji Yanran's dainty body trembled and she finally followed Zhao Qian's example and extended her arms to hug him tightly while tilting her pretty face up, allowing this man to continue with his ungentlemanly bullying.

Footsteps were heard again.

Although she obviously knows that those on the outside cannot see what is inside, Ji Yanran still removed her lips away from Xiang Shaolong's enticing mouth in fear.

Zou Yan's low voice was heard from outside the wardrobe, "You can come out?"

Xiang Shaolong felt that something was not right. With Prince Xinling's status, there's no reason that Zou Yan will not send him off personally and if that is the case, he will not be back so soon.

Besides if everyone else is gone, with Zou Yan's candid character, there's no reason for him to lower his voice so much that he sounded a little hoarse.

Zhao Qian at this time is totally intoxicated under Xiang Shaolong's strong manly embrace and will not be bothered with what is happening outside at all.

Although Ji Yanran's senses is a little lost, but in her cloudy mind she seems to believe that it is Zou Yan who is calling from the outside and was about to reply when Xiang Shaolong's lips sealed over hers again.

Ji Yanran secretly grumbled, thinking why is this person so lecherous that he's even ignoring Zou Yan's calls.

That person called out again twice.

Ji yanran slowly regained her senses and knew that something is not right and at the same time realized that Xiang Shaolong is not that lecherous after all.

The person outside cursed quietly, "Prince is really doing extra work. There's obviously no one but he still wants me to go to every level and pretend to be Zou Yan can call out 3 times, hei!"

That person left after cursing.

The 3 of them all felt cold sweat down their bodies. Prince Xinling is really careful, and obviously he has many capable men under him. This person sounded really authentic in impersonating Zou Yan's voice, just that his voice is a little lower and hoarse.

Ji Yanran has always prided herself on her intelligence and although her senses were dulled by Xiang Shaolong's kisses, she still feel ashamed. At the same time she's totally in awe of Xiang Shaolong's intelligence and felt a love for him welling up from

deep within her heart. She proactively kissed Xiang Shaolong back fiercely.

Xiang Shaolong's hands explored the 2 women's back and buttocks greedily and for a moment lust filled the secret compartment.

The earlier danger served only to fuel and excite their passion.

Just as it was about to get almost out of hand, footsteps were heard again, followed by the opening of the wardrobe door and the lifting of the front panel.

The 2 ladies were so embarrassed that they buried their heads in Xiang Shaolong's neck.

Xiang Shaolong looked at Zou Yan with embarrassment as he said with a bitter smile, "It seems that I'm not some new saint at all, because I do not have the resistance of a saint at all."

Zou Yan was almost at a loss for words as he chuckled, "I think your recovery is even faster than what I imagined a saint would take."

Book 4 Chapter 7 – Escape From Daliang

5 days later, Xiang Shaolong was able to get off the bed and walk. Besides the wound under his armpit, which still gave him some pain, he has regained all his strength.

The relationship between him and Zhao Qian has grown to a point that they cannot bear to be apart from each other. Although they are in hiding in the room all day long, they don't find the confinement difficult at all.

Ever since that day, Ji Yanran had not returned and according to Zou Yan, Prince Xinling has always been suspecting her so he's keeping a very close eye on her.

Xiang Shaolong believes that Daliang's security will ultimately loosen up, because that is human nature, there's no way they can carry on with this forever. Besides, even after such a thorough search revealed nothing about their whereabouts, anyone would have thought that they have escaped.

That night just as they were embroiled intimately, Ji Yanran arrived and upon seeing the blushing Zhao Qian, her own face reddened as well, which made her look even more alluring and beautiful.

Xiang Shaolong's body was all heated up but he dare not get into the real act with Zhao Qian and on seeing this lady whose beauty is more than Zhao Qian arriving, he was secretly overjoyed. Just as he was about to start flirting with her, Zou Yan came up.

Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to let go of Ji Yanran whom he was half forcing into a hug and let her sit on the rug.

Ji Yanran stared at him daintily for a moment, blaming him for behaving more and more rudely with her before she said, “10 days ago I sent some people out of the city and ordered them to dress up as both of you, even carrying a fake wooden sword with the purpose of letting others discover them. Now the plan is indeed working. Yesterday Prince Xinling personally led the troops and went towards the border of Chu in pursuit. The security at the gates of Daliang is more relaxed now, so it’s time for you to leave.”

Xiang Shaolong and Zou Yan both cheered, they did not expect Ji Yanran to have such a splendid plan. What is even more rare is that she only talked about it after the plan is a success, which shows how much self control she has.

Ji Yanran looked at Xiang Shaolong with sadness and unhappiness, her pretty face revealing how she cannot bear to part with him.

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and he asked, “You’re not leaving with us?”

Ji Yanran shook her head, “I really wish to, but if I leave, everyone will know that I am connected with you and I will put many others in jeopardy, maybe even Mister Zou included. That day Prince Xinling came to search this observatory precisely because Yanran kept finding excuses to come here and look at the

stars, and that aroused his suspicions.”

Xiang Shaolong knows this to be the truth so he sighed and asked, “Then when can we meet again?”

Ji Yanran smiled prettily, “Don’t worry! Yanran’s greatest wish in life is to be able to assist the new saint in unifying the world so that the people need not have to suffer wars any more, so I will not let you off from now on.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head with a bitter smile, “I don’t believe that I’m really the new saint. Even if I can return to Zhao, the way will be fraught with dangers. If you want to find the true new saint, you’d better be more patient in your search in case you find the wrong person and regret it in future.” His words were filled with jealousy, naturally because the reason Ji Yanran fell for him is all because he is that new saint.

A strange look flashed past Ji Yanran’s face and she lowered her head, not speaking.

Zou Yan said seriously, “What you’ve said further affirmed that you’re the new saint, because the especially bright star that represents you is now being chased by other stars. According to the heavens, you’ll need at least 20 years before you can unify the world and before that you’ll naturally face countless dangers.”

Xiang Shaolong’s body trembled as he heard all this and looked at Zou Yan dumbfounded and for the first time he dare not belittle this ancient astrologer because it is indeed about 20 years later that

Emperor Qin unified the warring states and became the first emperor in history.

Ji Yanran suddenly said, “Mister Zou, Princess Qian, Yanran would like to ask you to wait outside the hall for a while. There’s something I have to speak with Xiang Shaolong about.”

Zou Yan and Zhao Qian understood her meaning so they went out the room and even closed the door.

Ji Yanran’s head was still lowered as she said quietly, “Xiang Shaolong, I want you to know clearly that Ji Yanran likes you as a person, and it has got nothing to do with whether you’re going to be the new saint or not.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that his words earlier have hurt her and was feeling extremely apologetic so he reached out to hug her.

Ji Yanran exclaimed angrily, “Don’t touch me!”

Xiang Shaolong is an expert in the field of love and knows that she finds it a loss of face if she accedes so he ignored her warning and jumped over, pressing her down on the rug and kissed her hard on her lips.

Ji Yanran gave a token struggle before her stronger reaction took over and she can’t help but want to join with him immediately.

After their lips parted, Ji Yanran said sadly, “Tomorrow

morning, Mister Han Fei will escort the grains he borrowed back to Han. Yanran has made arrangements with him, one of the carriages carrying the grains will have a secret compartment in it and it will certainly be able to bring you out of Daliang safely. Xiang Lang! Alive, Yanran will belong to your Xiang family and no matter what I will look for you. Don't forget about me!"

Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Qian hugged each other as they lay in the secret compartment under the carriage and left Daliang without much trouble towards the canal. When they reach that place they will change into traveling by boat and follow the river up west to the Han border.

Late snow was falling outside and the carriages moved slowly. With thick blankets lining the bottom of the secret compartment, the 2 of them don't feel too uncomfortable at all. In fact they felt as if this is a warm and sweet little heaven.

The 2 of them behaved intimately for a while before they suppressed their desire so that they will not lose self-control and engage in the real act.

Zhao Qian looked at the top of the secret compartment and said sincerely, "I've never seen a girl more beautiful and intelligent than Sister Yanran. Just a little trick from her and she can escort us out of Daliang comfortably."

Xiang Shaolong looked at her beautiful profile but his mind was on another matter as he asked with a smile, "Would you mind not being a Princess!"

Zhao Qian turned around, leaned her face in her hands, her pretty eyes shining as she looked at him with love and said, “Qian’er will only mind one thing, and that is not becoming Xiang Shaolong’s woman. I don’t care about anything else.”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her lips lovingly and said with a low sigh, “That will make things easier. I’ll find a way to hide you, then report that you’ve been killed by Xiao Weimou so you need not return to the palace and become a pitiful princess.”

Zhao Qian was ecstatic, “Will you really do that for Qian’er? You’re not afraid Imperial Father will punish you?”

Xiang Shaolong boasted, “I am the new saint, how can I possibly be so easily dealt with.” He continued with a chuckle, “Actually I’m doing this for myself, it’s been too torturous suppressing myself.”

Zhao Qian blushed brightly as she buried her head in his arms, saying quietly with a mixture of shyness and happiness, “Whenever Xiang Lang wants Qian’er, I’ll give myself to you.”

Xiang Shaolong was touched and hugged her tightly.

Zhao Qian said gently, “Didn’t Qian’er ask Xiang Lang to kill Zhao Mu for me as revenge? I’ve now changed my mind, and only hope I can flee far away with Xiang Lang. I don’t care about anything else.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, what about avenging Shu'er? Zhao Mu and him, there can only be one.

The carriage stopped, it has reached the pier at the canal.

3 ships from the state of Han with twin masts returned to Han with the 10,000 stone of grains.

Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Qian, with Han Fei's cover, came out and hid inside a small cabin.

Although all the soldiers on the ship are Han, Han Fei is still cautious in case news gets leaked out.

The 2 of them were happily ensconced with each other especially now that they have unlocked the restriction of not being to join as one and both knows what will soon happen. Nothing much needs to be said about the flirtatious Xiang Shaolong, but even the usually gentle princess is starting to become bolder.

Han Fei sent his trusted aide to send them their dinner and the both of them sat shoulder to shoulder on the rug, enjoying the meal.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to drink some wine but Zhao Qian forcefully took his wine cup away and said coquettishly, "No! Zhao Qian will not allow you to drink, I want to be fully aware of what you're doing."

Xiang Shaolong looked at her pretty face and said while shaking and bobbing his head, “Even if wine will not intoxicate, the person will still feel intoxicated. Later when I see Princess’s beautiful body lying on the bed, I will definitely be thoroughly intoxicated, how can I still stay sober!”

Zhao Qian fed him a piece of meat as she exclaimed happily, “So well said, and making me so happy on hearing it. I’ll reward you with a piece of meat.”

Xiang Shaolong took the piece of meat in his mouth and leapt over hugging her and extending his hands to loosen her clothing, saying with a smile, “Let me take a look at Princess’s tender meat.”

Zhao Qian was greatly embarrassed and tried to use her hands to fend him off but the ultimate winner is naturally Xiang Shaolong and his hands reached into her clothes through the sleeves and started having fun with the tender flesh inside.

The pretty princess’s body totally softened as she curled into his arms as she accepted her beloved’s attack with a mixture bashfulness and joy, saying gently at the same time, “It’s snowing outside!”

Xiang Shaolong’s hands were enjoying themselves so how can he possibly be bothered if it’s snowing outside. He went close to her face as he continued his caress and said, “Is what I am doing now considered stealing what I’m supposed to guard?”

Zhao Qian guffawed and stroked his face a few times with her finger to signify that he should be feeling ashamed.

Xiang Shaolong's felt warmth in his heart.

Ancient beauties are even better than 21st century beauties. Because in this society where men are the center, their entire life is dependant on men, so they are more caring, more giving, not keeping away any part of themselves at all.

Zhao Qian suddenly thought of Ji Yanran and said, "Do you know that Sister Yanran is not a Wei, but the descendant of Yue royalty. That's why she's so beautiful and her martial arts so good."

Xiang Shaolong asked in puzzlement, "How do you know?"

Zhao Qian replied, "Of course I know it, when you were unconscious, we talked a lot." She paused and continued with a smile, "Make a guess why the state of Han sent Master Han Fei who is not eloquent at all to come here and borrow rations? It turns out that the King of Wei is frustrated with him trying to urge him to change policies all the time, so he deliberately gave him an impossible mission so as to humiliate him."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed, "The state of Han is weak enough, and now there's such a muddleheaded King who use such a serious matter of borrowing grains to vent his temper."

Zhao Qian replied, "But the King of Wei made a wrong guess.

Because Master Han Fei has Sister Yanran to help him persuade the King of Wei, who finally agreed to lend them rations. But of course the loan will have to be repaid.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Something is not quite right. It seems that Wei will really attack Zhao, or else there’s no need for them to be so nice to Han.”

Zhao Qian pouted, “Let’s not talk about such dampening matters, all right?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly apologized and laughed, “Come! Let me take a look at Princess’s pretty legs!” and he reached out his hands to remove her robes.

Zhao Qian screamed and leapt out from his arms.

Xiang Shaolong sat up and moved to her side before stretching his body lazily and groaned in comfort before yelling out incoherently, “Come! Let us do something great that will be unforgettable for the rest of our lives!”

3 days later, the ships entered the border of Han.

Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Qian bid their farewells to Han Fei and Han Fei ordered his man to bring them a handsome and extremely excellent horse that is totally black in color, saying, “Brother Xiang! This is Miss Ji’s most beloved horse, and she especially told me to bring it along for you to use on your journey.”

Zhao Qian exclaimed with an 'Ah!', recognizing it to be the handsome horse that Ji Yanran rode that night while saving them and happily caressed its head.

Xiang Shaolong saw how the beauty has once again helped them and can't help but miss her, heaving a great sigh.

Naturally Han Fei understands his feelings and as he shook his hand in farewell, he said, "The trip to Wei this time, my biggest gain is getting to know a confidante like Yanran and a great hero with ambitions like Brother Xiang. This horse is named Jifeng (Gust of Wind). Take care!"

Xiang Shaolong recollected his emotions and bounded up Jifeng with Zhao Qian, speeding away like lightning and from far away they could still see Han Fei waving at them.

The 2 of them traveled by day and rested by night, traveling along the Han border up north towards Zhao.

Ji Yanran also prepared rations and a simple tent for them as well as some necessities needed for camping so that they need not worry over such matters.

Their mood during the return to Zhao is a lot different then when they were going to Wei. Now they're more relaxed and Zhao Qian has tasted for the first time the joining between a man and a woman and has changed from a girl into a woman. She's as happy as a lark and kept singing tunes from Zhao in Xiang Shaolong's

ears, giving him another sense of enjoyment.

The more the travel up north, the colder it got and when it started snowing, they had to find caves to hide in.

10 odd days later, they reached the wide forests of the Han border and after this area they will once again enter Wei border. It will take another 3 days before they can reach Zhao's border.

This is a famous hunting ground in Han, with low hills and valleys, with a mixture of pine trees and trees with wide leaves growing there as well as a large variety of other trees.

Black bears, horses, deer, mountain goats, wild rabbits etc can be seen everywhere as well as wild wolves, who sometimes ran after the horse in a pack. Xiang Shaolong had to kill a few with his needles and the wild wolves stopped to fight over and consume the bodies and finally stopped chasing them.

Both of them on one horse, galloping though the snowy forest with a layer of snow cloaked over the trees. The pure and clean scene is enough to take one's breath away.

This day they came to the western bank of a long river, the heart of the river has not yet turned to ice and the water reflected the snow and sun, flowing towards the northeast.

The weather turned harsher. The both of them were heavily wrapped up to their heads in thick cotton robes and on top of that

wore cloaks to keep out the wind and all these could barely keep them warm from the snow.

The snow on the ground was up to knee level and even Jifeng had difficulty walking though it so they ha no choice but to dismount and walk, hoping to find a family where they can spend the night with and hide from the snow.

Although it was bitterly cold, the scene of the endless snowy forest, the ever changing snowflakes are enough to take this pair of lovers' breaths away.

Silence surrounded them, with only the sounds of their feet stepping on the soft snow can be heard.

Once in a while the roars of a ferocious tiger or howls of a wild wolf could be heard from the distance, making their hair stand.

At noon, the wind suddenly blew madly and the snowflakes flew haphazardly around like thousands of silver needles, shooting towards them, making them unable to keep their eyes open and their steps unsteady. After a while, Jifeng refused to move further.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that no matter what they have to avoid this blizzard, but there no one in front of them, neither did they pass by any houses. Suddenly he remembered how he learnt to build an Eskimo's igloo while in military training, which is quick to make and appropriate. He suddenly felt like a kid again and went to the riverbank and using his sharp knife, dug out frozen blocks of ice from the river. Under Zhao Qian's doubtful

stare, he made a large ice house enough to house man and beast. He used the tent as a blanket and even chopped some wood and started setting up a fire inside and soon the whole house was warm and cozy. The blizzard became a romantic and fun event instead. Even Jifeng regained his usual calm.

Zhao Qian saw how capable her beloved is and all the more she idolizes him and sincerely wanted to make him feel good and enjoy her gentleness.

The 2 of them slept naked under the blanket, their limbs intertwined, whispering never-ending sweet nothings to each other and in the end fell into a sweet sleep in each other's arms. At dawn, they were suddenly startled awake by a strange noise.

They listened carefully and it turned out to be the sounds of birds happily playing as they flew across the sky. They got up and looked out the small snow window cut out for ventilation and saw that the sky is now clear and the blizzard has stopped falling.

They were ecstatic and hurriedly packed up, finally leaving that igloo filled with sweet memories with a tinge of sadness.

Xiang Shaolong was afraid that Jifeng would be too cold so he wrapped up it's limbs with cotton strips and the belly as well so that the cold will not penetrate into its organs. He also made a simple sled and put all their luggage on it so that Jifeng can pull it along with Xiang Shaolong leading him and Zhao Qian walking along by his side as they continued their journey north. By now they cannot tell if the land they're walking on belongs to Zhao or Wei. After all, borders are something made by men and nature

itself will definitely not adhere to it.

The sheltered Zhao Qian was tired after walking less than half a mile and sat on the sled, letting Jifeng pull her along effortlessly.

The forest looks like it's filled with layers of tall walls, never ending as they weaved through it, making them feel as if they're lost in a maze. Luckily Xiang Shaolong is experienced in military travel and while the weather was clear a few days earlier, he found the position of the Polar Star and ascertained his location so they did not travel towards the wrong direction.

Snow was stacked up beneath their feet and occasionally they would see the prints of animals on the snow crisscrossing one another, making it into a strange and unique drawing. Naturally they also left behind them another set of endless scars.

The weather won't stay good for long, and it started snowing after noon, getting bigger as well.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly troubled, just as he was wondering if they should stop or continue, 7 wooden huts appeared amongst the trees towards their left.

The 2 of them were overjoyed as they went towards the houses.

The few wooden houses were built on a foundation of stone and made of pine wood with railings surrounding the house. There was snow packed on the roof and tall trees surrounded the front and

back of the houses, making it a picturesque scene.

They liked what they saw on first sight and came to the front of the house and called out loudly but there was no reply.

Zhao Qian suddenly screamed and pointed at the entrance of the largest house, only to see it filled with bloodstains, the scene utterly shocking.

Xiang Shaolong walked closer for a look and realized that the bloodstains were still quite fresh, obviously the incident happened not too long ago. Therefore he instructed Zhao Qian to wait outside while he went into the house alone. Not long after he came out with a solemn expression and after checking the other houses, returned to Zhao Qian's side and said, "Qian'er don't be startled, a terrible crime and tragedy just happened here. It seems that all the men, women, old and young were all gathered to this house in the middle and slaughtered. Even the dogs were not let off, and the women had signs of being raped."

Zhao Qian's expression paled as she asked, "Who did such a cruel thing?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Either horse thieves or army troops, or else they would not have so easily taken control of these strong hunters."

Zhao Qian stammered, "What should we do?"

Before Shaolong could reply, hoof beats were heard.

Their feelings still unsettled, they turned around to take a look, only to see a person on top of a horse coming towards them. A huge burly man was seated on the horse and behind the horse he carried a pair of hunted wild deer.

That person is about 25 or 26 years old, his arms stouter than an average person's, his eyes gleaming, his face rough and gallant with a great aura about him. He saw them from afar and called out in greeting, "Friends, where are you from!" and added, "Teng Yi is back!"

Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Qian exchanged a look, both feeling sad for this returning man.

The burly man called Teng Yi slowed down his horse's progress, a strange look came over his eyes as he looked at the houses with no family coming out to welcome him, obviously feeling that something is not quite right.

Xiang Shaolong went forward first to block him and said earnestly, "Friend, please listen to me first."

Teng Yi jumped off his horse nimbly and asked him coldly, "Who are you people?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "We're just passing by, inside..."

Teng Yi pushed him away as he shouted, “Move aside!”

With Xiang Shaolong’s weight and steady stance, to be pushed aside like that, and although he was caught unawares, it can be seen that this Teng Yi has amazing arm strength.

Teng Yi dashed into the house like the wind, followed by an earth shattering and heart rending cry. Men truly do not cry easily, unless they are really heart broken!

Zhao Qian felt her nose stifling and leaned onto Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders and wept as well.

There was a wild roar and Teng Yi rushed out with bloodshot eyes and his sword in his hand, pointing at Xiang Shaolong and asked, “Did you do this.”

Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Qian looked at each other in shock.

Obviously extreme grief and fury has made Teng Yi lose his normal senses and he slashed towards his head with the sword.

Xiang Shaolong is already well prepared and pulled out his wooden sword and forcefully blocked this blow while pushing Zhao Qian away with his other hand.

Xiang Shaolong felt his arm go numb from blocking that blow and just as he was secretly thinking that this person’s arm strength is comparable to Xiao Weimou, Teng Yi has made another attack

like a crazed tiger. His swordplay was wide and extremely intricate and excellent.

Xiang Shaolong never expected to meet such a frightening swordsman in this wild snowy forest and dared not even split his concentration to try to explain. He followed the Mozi swordplay and only defended, not attacking and retreating as he fought. After blocking off his opponent's 100 odd attacks, Teng Yu suddenly cried out piteously and knelt down on the ground, holding his head and sobbing bitterly.

Zhao Qian ran over in fear and hid behind Xiang Shaolong as she called out, "Big man! We didn't kill those people inside."

Teng Yi nodded his head as he cried, "I know! You're using a wooden sword and there are no bloodstains on you. It's just that fury got to my head." He then continued crying in the snow.

Teng Yi knelt in front of the newly erected tombstones, his expression wooden.

Right below, buried were his parents, brothers, wife and children.

A self-sufficing happy life is no longer something he has.

He doesn't even know who his enemy is, so he can only use all his effort and life to find them.

Hatred was gnawing at his bleeding heart.

Zhao Qian cried along with him.

Xiang Shaolong came up to Teng Yi's side and asked solemnly, "Does Brother Teng want to take revenge!"

Teng Yi suddenly lifted his head, a look of resolution shot out from his eyes as he said, "If Brother Xiang can allow me to avenge this hatred, I will give you my life."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this person's sword skill is excellent and his martial arts outstanding as well. If he has his help, it'll be even better. He nodded his head, "Did Brother Teng think why the thieves would gather everyone into one house?"

Teng Yi was stunned as he replied, "They're thinking of keeping the other 6 houses for use."

Xiang Shaolong was extremely impressed with his quick thinking and said, "So they will definitely come back, and it will be before dusk."

A strong look of hatred came over Teng Yi's eyes and he leaned forward to kiss the wound before coming towards Xiang Shaolong and grabbing his shoulders, said with gratitude, "Thank you! You'd better be on your way! Or else it'll be even more dangerous if you bump into them."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “If you want to kill all your enemies, then you should not ask me to leave.”

Teng Yi looked at Zhao Qian and shook his head, “Your little wife is both pretty and kind hearted, I do not wish harm to befall her. Although my 3 brothers are not as good as me, but they’re not easily trifled with as well so obviously the enemy is a big group and highly skilled. We might not be able to fight and win them.”

Xiang Shaolong said with confidence, “If it’s a head on attack, naturally we’re not their match but now that we’re planning something against the unguarded, it’s another story altogether. There’s still some time left, we need to start preparing immediately.”

Book 4 Chapter 8 – Revenge On The Snowy Grounds

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi sat on the 2 sides of the window inside the house, waiting quietly for the cruel enemy to arrive. Teng Yi's emotions have calmed down, revealing the collected and stable composure of a highly skilled fighter but the pain and sadness in his eyes was intensified. Xiang Shaolong wanted to keep his mind away and asked, "Has Brother Teng been hunting here for a living since young?"

Teng Yi was silent for a moment before saying quietly, "To tell you the truth, I once had the dream of doing a little something for Han so I was in the military before and even raised to the position of commander. Later I saw that the people on top were too much, they only know how to belittle talents and pander to outsiders so disheartened, I brought my family with me to live in seclusion here. But who'd expect..."

Sounds of hoof beats were heard. The 2 of them were immediately energized and stood up to look outside the window. Amongst the falling snowflakes, in the silvery white world outside, a group of men and horses rode towards them slowly. Xiang Shaolong was stunned on seeing the scene and exclaimed hoarsely, "There's at least 60 to 70 people!" Teng Yi replied coldly, "It's 90 to 100."

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look and looked back at him in surprise, saying with a nod, "Your observation is very accurate." Teng Yi said, "Brother Xiang, you better leave! Just with the 2 of us, even with the traps we won't be able to handle so many

people.” Xiang Shaolong was originally feeling numb and was toying with the idea of retreating but now that he knows that Teng Yi has his mind made up to fight to the death, his valor was stirred instead and he said seriously, “Brother Teng do not be pessimistic so quickly. As long as we can persevere a little longer, once the sky turns dark, it’ll be beneficial to our movement. Humph! I, Xiang Shaolong, is not one to retreat at the last moment.”

Teng Yi looked at him in gratitude before focusing all his attention on the slowly approaching enemy. By now the sky is slowly darkening and Xiang Shaolong looked hard before he exclaimed in shock, “It’s Xiao Weimou!” And he felt a strong surge of apology.

Teng Yi had already heard his story and was stunned, “It’s Xiao Weimou from the state of Qi!” He sighed and continued, “Brother Xiang need not blame yourself, this has got nothing to do with you. You’re a victim as well!” Xiang Shaolong saw how understanding he was and felt a little better and at the same time gained more admiration for this highly skilled swordsman who is willing to lead a peaceful and boring life.

By now the large group came to the empty space in front of the houses and dismounted. The house that Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were hiding in was where the tragedy happened so logically, Xiao Weimou’s men won’t step in here. Xiao Weimou looked gloomy and Zhen Lei stood next to him, his expression not any better either.

Looking at his men move the saddles and luggage from the horses back and moving them into the other houses, Xiao Weimou cursed

and fumed, “I’m definitely not wrong. Xiang Shaolong pretended to escape to Chu but that is just a trick. If he wants to return to Zhao, there’s only 3 ways. I bet he will not dare to travel through our Great Qi and the state of Wei, so the only route left is this path in Han, but why is it that we still cannot find him?” Zhen Lei commented, “We came here by ships and traveled on the official paths, so it’s not strange that we’ll be about 10 days faster than him. Now we will stop and set a trap here and once he passes by this place, he’ll certainly not be able to escape unnoticed from the 10 odd sentry posts we set up.”

Xiao Weimou replied, “Remember not to hurt Zhao Qian!” After he spoke he walked towards the house Xiang and Teng were hiding in. The both of them were overjoyed and moved separately to the 2 huge windows next to the door and raised their bows, getting ready to shoot as soon as he steps within shooting distance. Zhen Lei called out, “Head! That house...”

Xiao Weimou grinned fiendishly, “Such an exciting sight, it’s good to see it one more time. I love to see women who has been raped and killed by me.” And then he walked forward with large strides. Xiang and Teng were ecstatic, as they got ready.

Suddenly someone cried out from afar, “Head! Something’s wrong! There are fresh graves here.” Xiang and Teng instantly regretted their actions. They did not expect Xiao Weimou to be so cautious as to send his men to take a look around. They know that the chance is not to be missed and the sound of the bows rang as 2 arrows shot out the window towards Xiao Weimou. At that point in time that fiend was about 300 steps away from them and on hearing the swishing of the air he was startled and immediately dodged aside.

He could have avoided both the arrows but because Xiang Shaolong knows that he's very nimble, he deliberately shot a little to the side so although he avoided Teng Yi's arrow, he could not avoid Xiang Shaolong's arrow, which shot through his shoulder. He cried out in pain as he fell backwards. A pity that it did not strike any of his vital points but it's enough to make him suffer.

At this point in time almost half of the 100 men were already in the 6 houses while the rest of the 40 odd men outside all cried out in alarm and dashed towards the house they were hiding in. Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi hurriedly retreated towards the back door and once they reached the back of the house, they lighted the fire arrows and shot them towards the other houses.

These roofs and pine wood walls have all been tampered by them and a layer of inflammable pine oil has been poured on it so once it made contact with fire the flames spread immediately through the whole house and even the windows and doors were smeared with them. With the northern wind blowing, those who went into the houses seems to be in a space where they are cut off from the outside world and after traveling for the whole day, they all lied down to rest, not knowing that something has happened outside. By the time they realized something was wrong, the whole house was engulfed in flames. For a moment screams were heard everywhere, as if it's hell on earth.

The 10 odd men who were running towards the house saw that they were about to reach the steps to the house when they suddenly felt the ground give way and they fell into the trap that Xiang and Teng made earlier, into a deep hole more than 10 feet deep and filled with pointed spikes so there's no way they can stay

alive even with luck. In that instant, more than half of the almost 100 enemies were either killed or injured and even the leader Xiao Weimou was injured.

With fire seemingly shooting out from his eyes, Teng Yi roared as he dashed out, killing everyone on sight. Xiang Shaolong dashed out from the other side, 2 flying needles flew out and killed 2 bewildered thieves before he drew out his wooden sword and killed his way towards the direction of Xiao Weimou.

Xiang Weimou was being helped up by Zhen Lei and another man and he felt the intense pain on his shoulder where the arrow injured him as he moved. He knows that he cannot fight and although he saw his greatest enemy Xiang Shaolong, there's nothing he can do except grind his teeth in hatred and now that there's only 20 odd men left, he cried out angrily, "Let's leave!" Zhen Lei and his man hurriedly helped him towards the nearest warhorse as they left in a hurry.

Xiang Shaolong looked around and shouted, "Xiao Weimou is leaving!" The remaining thieves saw that it is indeed true and realized that the 2 of them were extremely highly skilled and although they have more people on their side, they could not take any advantage of them at all. In an instant their enemy killed another 5 of them and they all ran away in fear. Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi saw that it's a chance not to be missed and they went after Xiao Weimou.

A few men who were loyal to Xiao Weimou turned back to stop them but they were soon gotten rid of by these 2 ferocious and highly skilled fighters. After Xiang Shaolong kicked a man flying

away, he soon caught up with Xiao Weimou. Zhen Lei saw that they still have another 10 odd steps before reaching the horse so he pulled out his sword and turned back to block Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong shouted, “Teng Yi! Give chase!” as he slashed towards Zhen Lei. Zhen Lei is indeed a highly skilled fighter and blocked the blow with his own sword. He dashed forward without fear for himself and for a moment the sounds of swords slashing in the air was heard and the fight was intense. The worse thing is that Zhen Lei is fighting with the thought of perishing together with the enemy and for the time being there’s nothing much Xiang Shaolong can do but to wait for the moment his attacks turn a little weaker. By now Xiao Weimou has jumped onto the horse. Teng Yi arrived just in time and slashed with his sword. One of the men was about to turn around to fight but was caught in the slash and he was thrown 7 steps back away by the impact, his blood spurting. This shows how strong is the hatred in his heart.

Xiao Weimou tolerated the intense pain as he clasped his legs around the horse’s belly and rode out. Teng Yi roared and he leapt forward, his great hand extending out and he actually managed to grab the horse’s back leg. The horse lost its balance as with a terrified neigh, fell down on the snow and Xiao Weimou was thrown off its back. Zhen Lei turned around for a look and was immediately terrified.

Xiang Shaolong was not one to miss the opportunity and he slashed thrice successively and on the 3rd slash, Zhen Lei’s long sword was thrown off and a huge opening was revealed. When Teng Yi leapt over and was tumbling around with Xiao Weimou, Xiang Shaolong’s wooden sword pierced forward like lightning and Zhen Lei gave out a horrifying cry before he was thrown back by

the impact and died on the spot. At this time Xiao Weimou was struggling, his hand pinching Teng Yi's throat and just as he was about to gather his strength to shatter the throat, Teng Yi pressed down hard on the arrow wound on his shoulder and the pain thoroughly numbed him for the moment and he loosened his grip as well.

Teng Yi sat on him and using his left hand, pulled out the arrow together with a piece of flesh as blood spurted out from the wound. Even as Xiao Weimou was reeling from the pain, his right fist was plummeting on his chest like a hammer more than 10 times and the sounds of bones breaking can be heard. Blood flowed out from the orifices of Xiao Weimou's face and he died horribly on the spot. Teng Yi then fell off his body and crouched on the snow, crying bitterly.

Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong found his lost Flying Rainbow on Xiao Weimou's body and a wave of feelings rushed upon him. When Xiang Shaolong carried Zhao Qian up from the hidden hold underground, Zhao Qian was pale from worry and her delicate body was trembling.

The heavy snow stopped, stars filled the sky, pretty and alluring. Xiang Shaolong kissed her fragrant lips lovingly and carried her up by her waist and walked towards the graves. Teng Yi cut off Xiao Weimou's head and put it in front of the graves with incense as an offering.

Xiang Shaolong put Zhao Qian down and asked, "What does Brother Teng intend to do from now on?" Teng Yi said calmly, "I have nothing left, except for my life and my sword, and I have no

other concerns. If Brother Xiang doesn't mind, I will follow you in future. I am not afraid of any hardship or danger, or even death, as it will end this pitiful fate of mine!" Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed as he replied, "I'd really love it, but Brother Teng need not wallow in sadness. You should get back your fighting spirit and start a new life!" Teng Yi shook his head, "Brother Xiang will not understand the feelings I have for my wife, children and family. They are everything to me, now that I have nothing left, besides the gratitude I feel for Brother Xiang, I will no longer have any feelings for anyone else. That is too painful."

Zhao Qian felt her nose sniffing, and started weeping. Teng Yi sighed, "Ai! Weepy little princess!" Xiang Shaolong hugged Zhao Qian as he said offhandedly, "Xiao Weimou's head will be worth a lot, does Brother Teng have any way of preserving it!" Teng Yi replied, "That's easy, just leave it to me!"

With Teng Yi with them who is familiar with the environment, their journey became a lot smoother. Not only is he an outstanding hunter, he's also an expert in barbeque and knows how to season the food with wild herbs and plants, gaining much compliments from Xiang and Zhao on the food. Teng Yi treated nature as if it is a religion, believing that there are various types of deities in nature so whenever they came to a new place, he'll kiss the soil and pray for luck.

5 days later, they reached a large village near the border of Wei. There were a few hundred houses and a few animal enclosures scattered on the wide snowy plains and the scene looked beautiful and peaceful. It's really a paradise that one can hide away from in this chaotic warring period.

Not only is Teng Yi very familiar with the people here, he's also well respected. A few young shepherd saw him arriving and immediately flew back to the village to report and some even came to welcome him with their gongs. Zhao Qian found all of these interesting and revealed a sweet smile, making Xiang Shaolong feel like carrying her into the room immediately and spend the night together.

Along the way there're always men, women, old and young who walked over to greet Teng Yi, the men can't help but stare at Zhao Qian while the women were stealing glances at Xiang Shaolong. 10 odd dogs came out from all over the place and ran after their horses, shaking their heads and tails at Teng Yi, showing their welcome.

“Brother Teng!” The sound came from the top. Both Xiang and Zhao were startled and lifted their head to look only to see a skinny youth about 16 or 17 years old with long limbs. He's not considered handsome, but he has a suave, happy-go-lucky air about him with a happy and honest smile, his 2 legs swinging as he sat on the branch of a huge tree filled with snow about 3 feet off the ground, making one worry that if he were to lose his balance and fall, that'd be terrible.

Zhao Qian exclaimed in alarm, “Be careful! Stop shaking!” That youth went ‘Ah!’, as if he only realized the danger now and fumbled, all the more causing him to lose his balance as he fell. Zhao Qian was so frightened she closed her pretty eyes but did not hear the sound of anything heavy falling. When she opened her eyes, she saw the youth with his legs hanging off the tree, his arms around his chest and grinning at her as he blinked. Zhao Qian stared at him angrily, upset with him for putting on such an act to

scare her. Xiang Shaolong was extremely impressed and complimented sincerely, “Friend, what great moves.” Teng Yi shouted, “Jing Jun aren’t you going to come down!”

Jing Jun chortled and made 2 somersaults as if he’s making a performance before landing lightly and nimbly on the snowy ground before asking Zhao Qian, “This regal and pretty looking miss, may I ask if you already have a husband!” Zhao Qian stared at him with annoyance and thought that she is leaning so closely in Xiang Lang’s arms and yet he had to ask this question.

Teng Yi said unhappily, “Control your slick mouth! This is the royal 3rd Princess from the state of Zhao, how can you be so rude?” Jing Jun was stunned as he looked at Xiang Shaolong and shouted, “This must be Xiang Shaolong who defeated Hui Wu and Ren Lang!” Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong exchanged looks of puzzlement before the former asked, “How did you know?”

Jing Jun replied, “I heard the Wei soldiers at the border talking about it. They instructed us to help them keep a look out for Master Xiang and the Princess and if I find out anything, they’ll give me a hundred taels of silver.”

Zhao Qian was frightened, “You wouldn’t do that right?” Jing Jun jumped up without any effort and did a back somersault before kneeling on the ground, his hand clasped around his fist as he said, “Of course I won’t. I have made a decision to follow Master Xiang and roam the outside world. Master Xiang please accept my request.” Xiang Shaolong felt a liking for this person and looked at Teng Yi, meaning that he will respect his thoughts on this.

Teng Yi nodded his head, “Jing Jun is the most outstanding hunter here and an expert in sneaky acts. I came especially to this village this time because I would like Brother Xiang to meet this lad who dreams of roaming the outside world all the time.” Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Get up! Follow me in future then!”

Jing Jun was so happy he jumped up and made 3 continuous somersaults as he cried out, “Let me go and scout the roads first, I’ll certainly come back tomorrow morning with a report!” and he was far away in an instant. Xiang Shaolong saw how obedient he is and was secretly happy.

That night they stayed in the village head’s house and received the warmest welcome. During the feast, all the elders in the village came and it was extremely lively. Before bedtime, Teng Yi told the 2 of them. “If you hear any weird sounds tonight, do not come out, because someone will be here to kidnap the village head’s daughter.” Xiang and Zhao were perplexed and could not understand why would there be thieves stealing women away. Teng Yi explained, “This is a local custom, the night before the wedding there will be a ceremony to steal the bride away. Everyone will pretend nothing is happening and after the groom steals the girl home, they will consummate the marriage immediately. The next morning they will return to the girl’s home to hold the wedding ceremony. You can take part in the wedding feast as well.”

The sounds of drums shocked the lovers awake from their dreams. At this time the sky is not yet bright and Xiang and Zhao climbed out from under their warm blankets bleary eyed and hurriedly washed up and changed. By the time they walked to the hall, it’s already filled with people here to take part in the wedding

ceremony. They were arranged, together with Teng Yi, to sit behind the family to view the ceremony.

The village head and his 4 wives were seated at the front row and the newly weds were dressed in red robes and crowns, each kneeling on one side and holding a basket of fresh fruits. The guests all clapped and sang to express their congratulations.

Zhao Qian was smiling from ear to ear and she went closer to Xiang Shaolong's ear and whispered, "Xiang Lang! Qian'er wants to wear a wedding outfit like that as well and marry you." He felt a sweetness in his heart and replied, "One day when we escape from Handan, we'll hold a wedding ceremony like theirs immediately, all right?" Zhao Qian nodded her head furiously.

At this time, someone tied strings made with 7 colors around the wrists of the newly weds and everyone gave their blessings like wishing them togetherness til old age and hearts joined forever. The ceremony is simple yet significant. After that they had a feast of more than 10 tables at the great ancestral hall in the middle of the village where the whole village attended. The little kids wearing new clothes were even more happy, using their laughter and noisy play to add to this joyous atmosphere.

As the wine warmed them up to their ears, Jing Jun returned and went behind Teng and Xiang, saying with a lowered voice, "The defences between Wei and Zhao are tighter than normal, everyone is keen on capturing Master Xiang and the Princess to get the reward. Luckily I know of a secret route via the water so if we take advantage of the snow and the cover of the night, we'll definitely be able to sneak back into Zhao." Xiang Shaolong said happily, "If

only it'd start snowing soon!" Teng Yi looked up the sky and commented, "Don't worry! There will certainly be a heavy snowfall tonight."

Teng Yi's prediction truly did not disappoint as balls of snowflakes started falling since dusk. By now the 4 of them have already passed the border between Han and Wei and made their wooden rafts, to be controlled by Teng and Jing. With the water and wind going in the right direction, they safely returned within Zhao's border the next morning.

Book 4 Chapter 9 – Shocking And Sad News

The next day at dusk, the 4 of them arrived at the sentry post just inside the Zhao border and outside the city of the Zi district. By now Zhao Qian has dressed up as a man, masquerading as Jing Jun's younger brother and because none of the generals outside has ever seen this beautiful 3rd Princess, so as long as they're out of Handan, no one will be able to reveal her real identity.

The guard on top of the city walls called out to the 4 of them to stop and when he saw it's Xiang Shaolong, the guard immediately opened the gate to let them in without even waiting for his superior's instruction. His attitude was extremely respectful, which shows how well respected and famous Xiang Shaolong is within the Zhao army now. The truth is when Xiang Shaolong sent back the heads of the thieves he killed, the weapons and war horses back to Zhao after each victory, the first to know are usually these guards, so naturally they have a very high opinion of Xiang Shaolong.

Under the escort of the Zhao army, Xiang Shaolong and the rest rode towards the city of Zi. Zhao Qian's horse riding skills are quite good and sitting high atop the horse, looks like a handsome young man. Before they reach Zi, suddenly there was a team of Zhao soldiers riding towards them. The 2 groups slowly got closer to each other and Xiang Shaolong recognized the 2 leaders. One of them is the general in charge of defending the city, General Wa Che, and the other is shockingly his great enemy Zhao Mu. Zhao Qian and Xiang Shaolong's expressions changed. But by now it's too late to avoid them so they can only grit their teeth and move forward.

Zhao Mu hastened his horse and came forward with Wa Che hurrying to keep up with him. The 2 groups met and all of them dismounted. Zhao Mu saw Zhao Qian dressed as a man and immediately recognized her, his eyes shone with greed as he knelt down and paid his respects, “The Marquis of Julu pays his respect to Third Princess!” This shocked Wa Che and the rest so much that they hurriedly fell to their knees in respect. Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting that Zhao Mu’s sudden appearance has spoiled what he thought was a perfect arrangement, and now he has to deal with the outcome if Zhao Qian is found to have lost her virginity. Zhao Qian was surprisingly calm as she said, “Marquis of Julu, please rise!”

This time it’s Xiang Shaolong, together with Teng Yi and Jing Jun’s turn to pay their respects to Zhao Mu. The 2 of them already knows the relationship between Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Mu so they pretended to be extremely respectful but of course were cursing the ancestors of this conniving fiend in their hearts.

Zhao Mu instructed Wa Che, “The 3rd Princess must have endured a lot of shock and suffering along the journey, send her quickly back to the city to rest.” Zhao Qian was quite obedient and without even taking a look at Xiang Shaolong, followed Wa Che back.

Zhao Mu and Xiang Shaolong rode alongside each other and he complimented, “Lady Ya and Cheng Xu has already told what happened in Daliang to his Majesty. His Majesty is extremely pleased with how Shaolong reacted to the situation and your intellect. The only problem is that muddle headed King Anli sent an envoy to blame his Majesty that he has not even set eyes on 3rd Princess and you’ve already kidnapped her. This matter is quite

troublesome and it seems that more will come.” Xiang Shaolong pretended to fully trust him and loyal as he said, “I hope that Marquis will say a few nice words in front of his Majesty for me.” Zhao Mu replied insincerely, “That is but of course!”

He also asked about Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Xiang Shaolong replied, “They’re Hans who have helped me and I have accepted them as my family servants.” He did not mention anything about Xiao Weimou. Zhao Mu asked quietly, “Did Shaolong meet with any enemies on the way back?”

Xiang Shaolong’s intuition told him that Zhao Mu’s words are not as simple as it seems. Besides with Zhao Mu’s status, why would he come here especially to wait for him? Or could it be that Zhao Mu and Xiao Weimou have some secret relationship? At the same time he remembered that Xiao Weimou once said that Zhao Qian must not be harmed, it could be because he promised Zhao Mu that he’ll hand her to him.

He replied, “I met Xiao Weimou, and also chopped off his head!” Zhao Mu was stunned and asked hoarsely, “What?” Xiang Shaolong is all the more certain of his guess. If Zhao Mu is not sure of Xiao Weimou’s ability, why else would he be so shocked. After he heard Xiang Shaolong repeat his words again, Zhao Mu was silent for a moment before he turned his head and stared at him, saying “According to our spies in Daliang, that night when you escaped from Prince Xinling’s residence you were surrounded by Xiao Weimou and his men, but someone later saved you and sent you out of Daliang. Who is that person?”

Xiang Shaolong is all the more certain that Zhao Mu is in cahoots

with Xiao Weimou. Because at that time things happened so quickly, and the residents there dared not witness the fight for fear of getting trouble on themselves. Besides, onlookers would not know that they were surrounded by Xiao Weimou and his men, they would think that they're Wei soldiers. But now Zhao Mu is so certain of what happened, the only reason is that the news came from Xiao Weimou.

He was secretly cursing but on the surface he pretended to be nonchalant as he sighed, "I'd like to know who was that hero who saved me as well, but he left after taking me and the Princess away from danger, not even leaving us his name." Zhao Mu furrowed his brow, "Weren't you seriously injured then?" Xiang Shaolong was secretly chortling, thinking that evil fiend has finally let the cat out of the bag. If not for Xiao Weimou telling him, how would he have known that he was seriously injured. He pretended to be puzzled and looked at him, asking "Who told you that I was seriously injured, it's just all superficial wounds!"

Zhao Mu knows that he has revealed too much and coughed dryly to cover up his embarrassment. By now the team has entered the city walls of Zi. Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: Just come! Let's see who shall be the ultimate victor.

The next morning Xiang Shaolong, Zhao Mu and the rest started the journey as soon as it was bright. Following the official path they reached Handan 2 days later and entered the Palace immediately to see the King of Zhao. He arranged for Teng Yi and Jing Jun to return to the Wu family first. The King of Zhao received him in the Politics Discussion Hall, and Zhao Mu was the only one accompanying him.

After respects was paid to the ruler, King Xiaocheng walked down the stone steps from his dragon throne and with his hands clasped behind his back, commented, “Shaolong! Tell me how I should deal with you? You successfully stole ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’ and killed Hui Hu, eliminating a troublemaker for our Great Zhao and achieved great accomplishments. But you did not wait for my instructions and brought the 3rd Princess back on your own accord, making me go back on my words towards the Weis. Tell me! Should I reward or punish you.” Xiang Shaolong pretended to be astonished as he knelt down and said, “Your subordinate knows he’s made a mistake, but I was really forced by circumstances, the Weis were...”

The King of Zhao interrupted him, “No need for more words, whatever you wanted to say, my royal sister Lady Ya has already told me. But ultimately you did not accomplish the mission I gave you. If King Anli goes back on the marriage agreement, then just let him go back on his words. But now it has turned out that he is putting the blame on me, tell me how should I account for this?”

Xiang Shaolong felt fury rising up and almost wanted to strangle King Xiaocheng. A father who does not care about the happiness of his own daughter, how can he be fit to rule a country. He controlled his temper and removed the bag on his back which contained the head of Xiao Weimou and said, “Your Majesty can return Xiao Weimou’s head to the King of Wei and he will know that we have found out about his collaboration with Xiao Weimou, then he will no longer pursue this matter!” The King of Zhao looked at the bag in surprise, then looked at Zhao Mu, not quite knowing what to do with Xiang Shaolong’s suggestion.

Zhao Mu pretended to be the good guy and said, “Shaolong,

you've made a very bold suggestion. But the King of Wei can always deny his relationship with Xiao Weimou, or even say that you're setting him up. Hai! Shaolong is still inexperienced indeed."

Xiang Shaolong expected that this conniving thief would say this so he said with a smile, "Both they and us are just looking for excuses! Your Majesty need only tell Anli that I was trying to save the Princess, that's why I escaped back to Handan in order to hide from Xiao Weimou's pursuit. It's simply not safe within Wei's borders. If the Weis want to marry the Princess, then ask him to send someone here to escort the Princess, let's see what he will do?" Zhao Mu did not expect Xiang Shaolong to come out with such a plan and for a moment had no argument.

The King of Zhao was stunned for a moment before nodding his head, "This is a good idea to round things up. We'll do just that and see how that old man Anli is going to react?" He then told Xiang Shaolong, "For now I'll take it that your accomplishments have atoned for your mistakes and you can keep your current position. Rest well for the next few days! If there's anything else I will summon you into the Palace." Xiang Shaolong was relieved and hurriedly bid his leave.

Xiang Shaolong had just stepped out of the Palace gates when Cheng Xu came up. However there was no joy of meeting after a long absence and instead he lowered his voice and said seriously, "Lady Ya is waiting for Commander Xiang.", followed by a sigh. Xiang Shaolong feels a dark omen and taking a deep breath, asked, "What happened?" Extreme sadness shot out of Cheng Xu's eyes as he gritted his teeth and said, "Lady Ni is dead!" Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "What?"

Cheng Xu said dejectedly, “It happened on the 3rd day after you left. When the maid went to her room that morning, she saw her holding a sharp dagger. Her belly had a fatal wound and the bed was stained red by her blood.” Xiang Shaolong felt as if he is falling from Heaven straight into hell, the blood in his body turning cold, his chest felt as if it has been pounded by a thousand kilo force, his breathing difficult and all the strength in his body suddenly disappearing. He staggered and almost fell to the ground if not for Cheng Xu supporting him.

His face turned as pale as paper and tears fell uncontrollably down his cheeks. He thought of Lady Ni’s love and elegance, yet such a horrible death befell her, is there justice in the world? After Cheng Xu steadied him on his feet, Xiang Shaolong said through gritted teeth, “She certainly will not commit suicide, don’t those maids know anything?” Cheng Xu sighed, “That’s all we know upon our return. Now all those maids have been dismissed and we can’t even find one of them to question. Those in court are fearful of Zhao Mu and dared not ask too many questions. His Majesty is now totally under Zhao Mu’s control and will not object to anything he says.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, “Zhao Mu?” And he slowly understood. Zhao Mu saw that Lady Ni has given in to him and was extremely jealous so he secretly went to rape Zhao Ni. Zhao Ni was distraught after the shameful ordeal so she used death to wash off her shame. That conniving thief Zhao Mu, who is worst than an animal! A sudden stab of pain and sadness rushed to his heart and Xiang Shaolong finally broke down and wept bitterly.

Xiang Shaolong hugged Zhao Ya tightly, as if he’s afraid that she will suddenly disappear like Zhao Ni. Lady Ya cried hot tears

together with him and wailed, “Xiang Lang! Brace yourself, all the more Zhao Mu will not let you and the Wu family off. If you don’t pull yourself together we’ll all die under his hands sooner or later.” Xiang Shaolong asked, “Where is Xiao Pan?”

Lady Ya replied, “For now he is under the care of my royal sister. This child is indeed strange, after crying for a few days, he kept quiet and has not cried since, only saying that he wants to wait for your return.” As she spoke the last words, Zhao Pan’s voice could be heard screaming madly from outside, “Teacher!” Xiang Shaolong pushed Lady Ya aside and hugged Zhao Pan who had ran into his arms.

This little lad has lost a lot of weight and he cried bitterly, “Teacher! It’s Zhao Mu that conniving thief who cause Mother to die, I feel such deep hatred in my heart!” Xiang Shaolong became calmer instead and asked, “Tell me what happened that night.” Zhao Pan replied, “I don’t know anything at all. That day his Majesty sent someone to bring over some snacks and I fell into a deep sleep after eating it. When I woke up Mother is already dead and even her body had been moved away. Mother is so pitiful!” and he cried bitterly again.

Lady Ya couldn’t control her sadness and leaned on Xiang Shaolong’s back and sobbed uncontrollably and a cloud of despair surrounded them. Xiang Shaolong reached out to hug Lady Ya and said quietly, “From today onwards, Xiao Pan you will follow your royal Aunt Ya. We must certainly avenge your mother, but we cannot act rashly or else it’ll only give that conniving thief an excuse to deal with us, understand?” Zhao Pan nodded his head vigorously, “Xiao Pan understands totally. All these time I have been practicing my swordplay everyday as you have instructed. I

want to kill Zhao Mu personally.”

Xiang Shaolong told Zhao Ya, “Ya’er, take good care of Xiao Pan. For now Zhao Mu will not dare to do anything to you and Qian’er, but it’s still better to be careful. Will you be able to get Qian’er out of the palace to stay with you at your residence outside the palace, and at the same time tell Zhao Da and the rest to increase defenses and not give Zhao Mu any opportunities?” Zhao Ya replied, “Although Imperial brother usually does not bother himself with Princess Qian’s matters, now because of her marriage agreement with the Weis, it might be a bit difficult to get her out of the Palace. But I will think of a way. After I retrieved the ‘Secret Manual’, Imperial Brother has regarded me highly, maybe I can persuade him.” Xiang Shaolong thought of something and after telling Zhao Pan to leave first, he told Zhao Ya that he’s already having a physical relationship with Zhao Qian.

Zhao Ya’s expression changed, “What shall we do? Zhao Mu will certainly coerce Imperial brother to give orders to check if Zhao Qian is still intact. If they find a problem, they’ll definitely not let you off.” Xiang Shaolong replied, “Zhao Mu is extremely distracted right now and may not think of this point for now.” He continued with a furrowed brow, “Just how do you determine if Qian’er is still a virgin?” Zhao Ya replied, “Mainly is to see if her hymen is still intact.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought so that’s the case and asked, “Who will do the inspection?” Zhao Ya replied, “It should be the empress who inspects personally, because of Zhao Qian’s royal status, no one else is allowed to touch her body.” Xiang Shaolong thought of the Zhao empress and a thread of hope filled his heart as he said, No matter what, try to get Qian’er away from the

dangerous Palace first, then we'll think of how to deal with Zhao Mu."

By now Tao Fang has arrived with Wu Tingfang and Ting Fangshi and after the long parting, the reunion is certainly a joyful one. If not for the death of Lady Ni, this would be the happiest moment in his life, but now it's a different matter altogether. In the secret chamber in the Wu family stronghold, they held the first important meeting since Xiang Shaolong's return. Besides Master Wu, Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang, there's also the leader of the family soldiers Wu Zhuo. Now he has become Xiang Shaolong's closest and most reliable battle mate.

Master Wu first expressed his admiration towards Xiang Shaolong, "Shaolong has outdone himself in Wei and his actions have caused quite a stir. Now everyone regards Shaolong as Zhao's most promising person. But at the same time it has aroused the jealousy of Zhao Mu's gang." Wu Yingyuan said, "Now we have no other choice but to throw in our lot with the Qins. That's the only chance of surviving, or else we'll just be sitting and waiting to die." Everyone's heart was heavy. Besides Qin and Zhao, of the remaining 5 states, Wei and Qi all hates Xiang Shaolong to the core, Yan has trouble protecting herself and is currently under attack by Lian Po while Han is weak. The remaining state of Chu is too far away and they don't have many connections with the Wu family as well. Therefore the only way out is to join Qin.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing bitterly to himself. When he came to the warring states period on the time machine, he had intended to ally himself with Emperor Qin who has fallen on bad times here but later troubles kept coming one after another and he did not even have time to take a breather. He did not expect that

after all the twists and turns, he'll ended up back on this old road. Wu Yingyuan continued, "I just made contact last month with the man Tu Xian sent." Looking at Xiang Shaolong's lost look, he explained, "Tu Xian is Lu Buwei's best family warrior, having both brains and bravery with excellent sword skill. He's on quite good terms with me."

He continued with a sigh, "According to Tu Xian, although [Qin's King Zhuangxiang](#) ascended the throne, but because everyone suspects that he killed King Xiaowen with Lu Buwei and King Zhuangxiang has been staying in Zhao for a long period of time, it's very difficult for Lu Buwei to become the premier for now." Tao Fang's expression paled, "If Lu Buwei is thrown out, it'll be the end for us too." Master Wu said, "We're now secretly helping Lu Buwei in various ways. Luckily this person is very experienced and cunning, he'll not be kicked out so easily. As long as King Zhuangxiang stands on his side, there will be a way."

Wu Yingyuan said, "This is the most important point. The woman King Zhuangxiang loves most is Zhu Ji (Concubine Zhu) and the son he pampers most is Ying Zheng. As long as we can send mother and son back to Xianyang, we'll be able to capture King Zhuangxiang's heart tightly. We're the only ones who can accomplish this matter, although it will be a difficult task." Tao Fang was afraid that Xiang Shaolong would not understand and explained, "Zhu Ji was originally Lu Buwei's beloved mistress and in order to make King Zhuangxiang happy, he gave her to him to become his wife."

Master Wu said, "This woman's beauty can rival a country and is very good in flirting and handling men. She's also extremely loyal to Lu Buwei, so if we have her next to King Zhuangxiang, we can

guarantee that King Zhuangxiang will not be against Lu Buwei.” Xiang Shaolong can’t help but ask, “So is Ying Zheng the son of Lu Buwei or King Zhuangxiang, how old is he this year.”

Wu Yingyuan was stunned, “I’m afraid the only person who knows is Zhu Ji. Ying Zheng was born before the battle of Chang Ping, so he should be more than 13 years old now, most likely between 15 or 16 years old.” Xiang Shaolong was perplexed, according to history books, Emperor Qin was only 13 when he ascends the throne a few years later. How can it be possible that the history books are so wrong.

Wu Yingyuan said, “I’ve made an agreement with Tu Xian and will try to send Zhu Ji and her son back to Xianyang in the shortest time possible. So the most important task at hand now is not to kill Zhao Mu, but to try and make contact with Zhu Ji and her son to see how we can stealthily take them out of Handan.” Xiang Shaolong asked somberly, “How many useful men do we have on hand right now?”

Wu Zhuo replied, “We have 2 groups of warriors under us, one group are the good fighters we attracted from the various states but these people are not reliable and may very well run away when something happens. The other group are the orphans I adopted for Godfather from various places and the blood relations of the Wu family, which amounts to about 2000 men and they are all trustworthy, willing to even lay their life down for the Wu family.” Xiang Shaolong asked, “If we want to move Zhu Ji and her son away, what would be the biggest obstacle?”

Tao Fang replied, “It’s still that conniving thief Zhao Mu, the

biggest problem is that he's made Ying Zheng so happy that he totally listens to him." Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, "That conniving thief again!"

Master Wu said, "Do not belittle Zhao Mu. Not only has that fellow controlled King Xiaocheng, he's also joined forces with Guo Zhong, so the largest Warrior Association and Mohist group here will be on his side. Even Lian Po and Li Mu, generals who hold military powers in their hands dare not step too much on his toes. Shaolong now you're a thorn in his flesh, so you must be careful all the way or else you will die any time." Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "What is the Warrior Association?"

Tao Fang replied, "It's a place which specializes in training professional warriors. The Zhao Warrior Association's leader is Zhao Ba and he's extremely highly skilled. You have to be careful when you meet him, he is very powerful in Handan!" All of them discussed the finer details a little more before Xiang Shaolong returned to his Hidden Dragon Abode.

Tao Fang accompanied him as he walked, "Our men went to the valley you described at Mulberry Village. The house is still there but they've waited until now and there's still no sight of Mei Canniang. But don't you worry! I'm trying my best to find her." Now Xiang Shaolong has another thing to worry about. It's been more than a year since he came to this era and he's falling deeper both in terms of relationships and feelings. Sadness and happiness came at him alternatively, making the 21st century moving further away from him.

Sometimes it's difficult to differentiate, between these 2 eras, which seems more like a dream. Or maybe life is just a big dream. Time is just an illusion, and the time machine is something that

allows one to experience different illusions. Maybe even Crazy ma, who invented the time machine, has no answers to such confusing questions.

Tao Fang said, “I’ve arranged for that 2 friends of yours to stay at the courtyard next to your Hidden Dragon Abode. Heh! Jing Jun and Teng Yi are the exact opposites, his eyes gleamed when he sees beauties whereas Teng Yi has no interest in them at all, how strange!” Hidden Dragon Abode was just ahead so Xiang Shaolong stopped and summarized to Tao Fang the tragic fate that befell Teng Yi before he parted ways with Tao Fang and went to see Teng and Jing.

Jing Jun was hugging a pretty maid and enjoying himself but when he saw Xiang Shaolong he was startled and jumped up, looking a little lost. Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Enjoy all you want! No need to bother about me!” and he went into the inner hall to look for Teng Yi. Teng Yi was sitting quietly alone on the rug in deep thought, and might be thinking of his dead wife and family again. Xiang Shaolong sat next to him and explained to him the current situation.

Teng Yi replied after listening, “If there are 2000 death warriors, it won’t be a problem to break out of the city, but it’ll be more difficult to deal with pursuing soldiers. If possible, I’d like to personally train these 2000 people.” Xiang Shaolong thought about it for a while before replying, “Let me discuss this with Wu Zhuo.” Teng Yi said, “Just say I’ll be his assistant! When it comes to military and wars, I once spent a lot of effort researching old and new military tactics. When I was a commander in the past, I’ve spent long periods fighting the Qins and Weis, so I have some insight and experience in this.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that this person is not one who boasts so if he can say this out, he must be very confident. He said happily, "Then we should not delay! We'll go and discuss this with Wu Zhuo immediately." Teng Yi greatly admires Xiang Shaolong's way of putting action to words and gladly agreed. Xiang Shaolong brought him to meet Wu Zhuo and the 2 of them hit it off immediately, having discussions about military and battles and both lamenting that they should have got to know each other earlier.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly glad and afraid that Wu Tingfang would blame him for ignoring her, he left the 2 to their talk and left on his own. Lady Ni's death re-ignited the hatred he felt towards Zhao Mu and at the same time he learnt the importance of striking first. The most important task at hand is to make connection with Ying Zheng and after that it will be the time to escape from Handan. Once he thought of this, he can't help but start to miss Mei Canniang.

Heaven has already been very cruel to him, and he hopes that nothing unfortunate will happen to her. He should also learn to control himself, unless he really have the ability to protect the women he loves, or else he really shouldn't involve himself in more relationships. For those who knows Xiang Shaolong very well, they would know that this change in his thoughts can be quite unbelievable.

Book 4 Chapter 10 – Each Executing Own Strategies

Xiang Shaolong stepped into the main hall of Hidden Dragon Abode and Wu Tingfang, Ting Fangshi together with the 4 maids were kneeling along the door to welcome him according to the procedures required of a wife and concubine to welcome the return of a long absent husband.

He did not expect Wu Tingfang to be so obedient and was feeling quite lost because he's not quite sure what he's supposed to do according to procedure. Wu Tingfang smilingly invited him to be seated at the main chair and personally helped to remove his clothes together with Ting Fangshi while the 4 maids happily went to the bathing pool behind to prepare hot water for him.

As Xiang Shaolong was enjoying the warm family atmosphere, he can't help but think of the ill-fated Lady Ni. Especially when he was soaking in the pool, he remembered how he frolicked in the water with this alluring beauty right before he left.

Wu Tingfang is a lot more mature and voluptuous now, and more understanding as well. Not only did she not blame him for being moody, she even attended to him meticulously together with Ting Fangshi, using their pretty bodies to sooth his seriously injured heart.

In his daze, together with the fatigue from a long travel, Xiang Shaolong did not even know how he got onto the bed and when he woke up, it's already deep into the night.

On the huge bed, beneath the warm blanket, there was only the flimsily clad Wu Tingfang hugging him tightly, sleeping sweetly.

Once Xiang Shaolong moved, she woke up immediately; obviously her concentration is totally upon her beloved.

Wu Tingfang asked gently, "Hungry? You haven't had dinner yet!"

Xiang Shaolong hugged her tightly, "With you in my arms, everything else is forgotten."

Wu Tingfang exclaimed happily, "It's so good that you're back. Without you, everything lost its interest and meaning. Fang'er did not want to ride horses, play archery, nothing at all, but everyday I'll be counting the days when you'll be back. I never thought that pining for a person could be so painful!"

"After Sister Ya returned, Fang'er went to bothered her everyday to tell me about what happened during your journey. Both of us totally idolizes you. I've long said that no one will be able to defeat you."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Lady Ni and felt a stab of pain. He went closer to her ear and whispered, "I'll eat my obedient Fang'er first before eating my late dinner, all right?"

Wu Tingfang exclaimed, "Of course! I've been waiting for your

loving for so long that my neck is growing long from the wait.”

Early the next morning Master Wu sent someone to ask him and Wu Tingfang to join him for breakfast.

Xiang Shaolong hugged Ting Fangshi and cuddled with her for a short while, then kissed the 4 maids who had been ‘painfully waiting’ for him before hurrying to the main residence with the recently ‘nourished’ and exuberant Wu Tingfang.

Once Wu Tingfang saw her grandfather, she expertly used her wiles and mischievous behavior to make him so happy that he was grinning from ear to ear.

During the meal Master Wu told Xiang Shaolong, “After Wu Zhuo returned, he gave me a detailed report of Shaolong’s trip to Wei. I am very pleased with what I heard, Shaolong not only are you more intelligent than others, you’re also brave and heroic. It really is Fang’er’s good fortune to have you as her husband.”

Wu Tingfang saw how her usually picky grandfather was complimenting her husband and was so happy she can’t help but smile sweetly.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was expressing his modesty embarrassingly, Master Wu said, “We’ll choose a time within these 2 days to hold a secret wedding between you and Tingfang. That Ting Fangshi will become your concubine, does Shaolong have any objections?”

Xiang Shaolong rose to bow and offer his thanks while Wu Tingfang lowered her pretty face in bashfulness and joy.

After he returned to his seat, Master Wu continued, “Whether we succeed or fail, Zhao Ya is the key point. Only through her will it be possible for you to get in touch with Ying Zheng and his mother. Luckily she is enamored with you so Shaolong should make use of this relationship well.”

Wu Tingfang pouted, “Grandfather! Sister Ya and Shaolong are truly in love with each other.”

Master Wu sighed, “Little girl! What do you know?”

Xiang Shaolong has no wish to argue with him over this, and he can't really blame him for this thought because Zhao Ya's reputation is really too horrible. No one will believe that she will remain true to one person, and even he himself is not totally confident.

Master Wu said, “Last night Guo Zhong sent a messenger over to invite Shaolong to his residence tonight for a feast to celebrate the success of stealing ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’. The other invited guests are Zhao Mu, the Juzi from Zhao Mohism Yan Ping and the person I mentioned to you yesterday, Zhao Ba from the Zhao Warrior Association. With such an arrangement, I’m afraid it’s not going to be something so simple as a celebratory feast.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows on hearing that and asked, “Can I bring some men along?”

Master Wu replied, “Of course you can! Now that you are our Wu family’s Grandson-in-law, and has made great military contributions, your status is different from the past. How can you not have some family warriors following you?”

Xiang Shaolong thought for a moment before asking, “There’s one matter which Shaolong is unable to figure out. King Xiaocheng and Zhao Mu all have the family name Zhao, do they have any blood relations with each other, but why is it they can mess everything up, and even have marriages between those of the same family name?”

Master Wu looked at him in surprise, “You’re confusing me instead. People from the wild mountains like you have never placed much consideration on marriages between blood relatives, so why are you so particular about this matter?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember his ‘real background’ and he pulled off a nonsensical reply, “I’m just perplexed that the royalty would learn from us as well.”

Master Wu would never imagine that he came from another dimension, and even if Xiang Shaolong told the truth, he would not have believed him. He explained, “There are 2 groups of people with the family name Zhao. One of the group is really from the Zhao family tribe, but after so many generations, the blood relations has been thinned greatly so everyone ignores it with some even encouraging marriages within the same family name. The other group are those bestowed the family name ‘Zhao’ by the King, and Zhao Mu is one of the examples.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in understanding.

Master Wu said, “There are 2 people whom Shaolong must be on guard against, and they’re Prince Xinling from Wei and Tian Dan from Qi. These 2 people are extremely formidable and have a lot of expert fighters under them. You’ve stolen the ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’ and killed Xiao Weimou, they will definitely not let you off. Unless they decide not to strike but if they do, it will certainly be after much planning and consideration and their strategy will be astounding, it’s not going to be something easy to deal with.”

Xiang Shaolong raised his brows as he replied, “Shaolong is already mentally prepared, Grandfather please rest assured!”

Master Wu raised his head heavenward and chortled as he reached out his hand to pat his shoulder, saying, “Good! That is my good grandson-in-law.”

Knowing oneself and one’s enemy well is the key to winning a hundred battles.

Even in the 21st century, gathering information is the most important task. It’s just that during that time they can rely on satellites, but here they have to rely on people’s ears and eyes.

Because of this Xiang Shaolong had a discussion with Tao Fang to decide how to find out what Zhao Mu’s strategy against them is. They also extended their spying network to Guo Zhong, Zhao Ba, Yan Ping as well as Zhao Mu’s 2 lackeys, the Physician Guo Kai and

General Yue Cheng etc. After that he went with Wu Tingfang to Lady Ya's residence situated outside the Palace.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun became his personal bodyguards. Once he steps out of the house, they will follow him like a shadow.

Wu Zhuo also chose another 10 excellent fighters to be his followers. All these people went to Wei with him so they have already established strong ties with him, therefore they can naturally work well with one another.

The streets of Handan is livelier and more crowded as well. Looking at the dressing and hearing the accents, a lot of them were traders from other places. Obviously Zhao is now slowly recovering after it's serious defeat at Changping.

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang rode alongside each other, followed by Teng Yi and Jing Jun with the Wu family soldiers following right at the end and everyone on the streets turned to look at them.

He can't help but feel a surge of emotions.

Thinking back on the day he just arrived in Handan, he couldn't even protect Ting Fangshi then and can't help but have mixed feelings about this.

But all these in front of him, is like a sandcastle built on a beach. One large wave is all it takes for everything to disappear without a

trace.

In fact the whole country can use this analogy as well.

Again he felt as if this is a big dream.

Why does life always feel like a dream?

Only during special moments, for example when fighting a battle or when enjoying himself like last night with Wu Tingfang can he clearly feel the presence of life.

No matter how he was thrown into this era, it's difficult for him to feel for what is happening in front of him like the others. Because after all he is from another era, with 2000 more years of experience, that's why he can see more clearly, more deeply and more objectively than any scholar of this era.

Wu Tingfang kept throwing sweet and beguiling smiles at him and soon, they were entering Lady Ya's residence.

Zhao Ya received them in the main hall.

Xiang Shaolong specially introduced Teng Yi and Jing Jun to her and said quietly, "Jing Jun is very good in stealth work at night, going over walls and into houses easily. If there is anything urgent I want to inform you, I will tell him to look for you."

After settling on some simple communication signals, Lady Ya smiled smugly, “Qian’er is waiting for you inside.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and curious at the same time, “King Xiaocheng really agreed to your request?”

Lady Ya led him and Wu Tingfang into the inner hall while Teng and Jing remained in the outer hall. As they walked, she explained, “I gave Imperial brother a proposal, saying that I want to teach Qian’er the secrets to enticing men so that when she becomes the concubine of another state, she can also make use of her natural beauty to push things that are beneficial to our Great Zhao. Imperial brother is not a person with a mind of his own so after I pointed out to him the advantages to it, he agreed.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly admired Zhao Ya for her quick and tactical ideas. He reached out and hugged her slender waist, tapped her buttocks lightly twice and said, “So Zhao Mu’s family name is not originally Zhao, I wonder who is he and what is his background?”

Zhao Ya replied, “No one in Handan dares to mention this, because Zhao Mu will go to unscrupulous lengths to deal with those who pursue his background. When he came to Zhao he was only 14 years old, and was introduced by an attendant. Because Zhao Mu’s swordsmanship was excellent and was obedient, and at the same time he has the same habit of liking men like Imperial brother so very quickly he won the heart of Imperial brother. At that time Imperial brother has not yet ascended the throne but because of their close relationship, even we could not say anything. I just did not expect that now that Zhao Ni’s death is so full of

loopholes, Imperial brother still allowed Zhao Mu to cover everything up. Now everyone in the palace has given up on Imperial brother, but what's the use of that?"

Xiang Shaolong forced himself not to think of Lady Ni and asked calmly, "Is the attendant who brought him in still around?"

Zhao Ya replied, "Not long after Imperial brother ascended the throne, that attendant was found to have lost his footing, fell into a well and drowned by someone. At that time we did not suspect anything at all but now that you're asking about it, I think this person is killed by Zhao Mu to prevent him from revealing the secret of his background."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Is that attendant from Zhao?"

Lady Ya thought for a moment before replying, "I'm not sure, but it's not difficult to find out."

Xiang Shaolong reminded her, "This investigation must be done secretly."

Lady Ya pouted, "All right! Do I still need you to tell me that?"

Xiang Shaolong was about to speak further when Zhao Qian ran into his arms like a fragrant breeze, her delicate body trembling and using all the strength she has to hug him tightly.

Wu Tingfang laughed, "3rd Princess, so you're equally enamored

of him as well!”

Zhao Qian left Xiang Shaolong’s safe embrace embarrassingly and holding Wu Tingfang’s tiny hand, led her towards Lady Ya’s tranquil little building, the 2 girls chattering non-stop, behaving very closely towards each other.

The 4 of them went to the small building and drinking the fragrant tea served by Xiao Zhao and the rest, enjoying the nice morning weather.

The large garden outside the building has turned into a silvery white world, with snowy petals on the trees.

Xiang Shaolong told Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian, “My 2 obedient lasses, the garden is so pretty, why don’t you take a walk downstairs?”

Naturally the 2 ladies will listen to his every command and knowing that he has business to discuss with Lady Ya, they obediently went down to admire the snowy scene in the garden.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong told Lady Ya about Ying Zheng.

Lady Ya took a long look at him before saying, “Xiang Lang, don’t blame Ya’er for being curious, but it seems that when you first came to Handan, you were already very interested in Ying Zheng. At that time you should not have known about the relationship between the Wu family and Lu Buwei yet, so how did you have

such foresight?”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded because with Zhao Ya's intelligence, no matter how he tries to explain it will still sound inappropriate. Because with his status at that time, he shouldn't even be aware of the existence of Ying Zheng.

Lady Ya went into his arms and continued, “No matter what secrets you have, Ya'er doesn't care as long as you love me.”

Xiang Shaolong was touched and after kissing her fragrant lips, said, “Is there a way to arrange a meeting between me and Ying Zheng.”

Lady Ya sighed, “It's no problem at all arranging for both of you to meet, at the most I'll sacrifice myself a little. The problem is there's no way this can be hidden from Zhao Mu. Besides, seeing Ying Zheng may hinder things instead. This person is engrossed with wine and beauty all day long, he's not much difference from a bum. He also believes that Zhao Mu is his benefactor and friend and worst, he may reveal your secrets to Zhao Mu. That would be terrible!”

Is Ying Zheng really such a person?

Xiang Shaolong felt a problem coming on and asked, “What about his mother Zhu Ji?”

Lady Ya replied, “She is a very smart and formidable woman, and

is about 30 odd years old now but she doesn't look that much older than me at all. She's really a rare beauty and Zhao Mu and her already started a relationship long ago. However I think she's only with Zhao Mu for survival. This woman is extremely ambitious and will never be loyal to anyone, including Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and said, "This would be much easier, I will work on this woman."

He secretly thought that as long as she is ambitious, she will not be satisfied staying in Handan as a hostage, then he will have a chance.

He won't even mind if he has to sacrifice his body a little.

In order to strike against Zhao Mu, he is willing to use any methods available.

When he returned to the Wu residence and just after lunch, Lady Ya's family warrior arrived to look for him, telling him to go to her residence immediately with the specific instructions not to bring Wu Tingfang along.

Xiang Shaolong felt goose bumps rising, and was totally perplexed. After bidding his farewell to Wu Tingfang and Ting Fangshi, he hurried to her residence with with Teng Yi and Jing Jun.

Zhao Ya stopped them in the main hall and with a somber

expression, said, “Empress Jing is here.” She continued with gritted teeth, “That conniving thief Zhao Mu really will not let you off even a little.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart sank, “It seems like I will have to enter the palace and seek King Xiaocheng’s forgiveness.” He did not expect that he can’t even delay this for half a day.

Lady Ya said, “The situation may not be that bad yet, Empress Jing wants to see you personally!” She continued with a giggle, “A handsome looking man indeed will have some advantages.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly and went into the inner hall to meet Empress Jing.

Empress Jing stood in front of the window with her back facing him and after dismissing her maids, said icily, “Xiang Shaolong you’re really bold! Are you not afraid of death? You dare to even despoil 3rd Princess’s virginal body!”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that he has to put on a convincing act so he knelt down and said, “Shaolong is true towards Princess, and has no intention of toying with her. I hope Empress Jing will try to understand what happened.”

Empress Jing turned around, her eyes furious but her expression cold as ice as she said, “I don’t care if you’re really in love. If his Majesty were to find out, he will surely think that you brought 3rd Princess back to Handan because of your own selfish desires. Besides, stealing what you’re supposed to protect is akin to the

crime of lying to the ruler, even his Majesty won't be able to find an excuse to let you off. It seems that even now you do not realize how serious this is, and to think that I thought so well of you."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that something is not right. Looking at her expression and tone of voice, it's nothing as simple as blackmailing him with this matter to have an affair with her. He has really underestimated her. He remembered Lady Pingyuan once said hers is one of the political marriages arranged for the unification of the 3 states, and she was a Han beauty who married into Zhao. He suddenly had an idea and immediately said, "Shaolong knows he's made a mistake, Empress Jing save me!"

Empress Jing's icy façade softened a little and she sighed, "Xiang Shaolong! Stand up!"

Xiang Shaolong stood up and stayed there, not moving.

Empress Jing turned around again, looking at the wintry forest outside the window and said slowly, "What should I do about this? If I hide it for you, it will be found out sooner or later and by then even I will be implicated. If the Weis were to immediately come and bring 3rd Princess back, what do you think will be the outcome?"

Xiang Shaolong emboldened himself and walked to Empress Jing's back, saying gently, "Don't worry Empress Jing, the King of Wei already had the intention of going back on the agreement. Besides Zhao Mu will try to disrupt this as well so this wedding agreement will certainly drag on. After 6 months to a year, even if 3rd Princess is going to marry, Empress Jing can just push all the

blame away.”

The Empress was silent for a moment before saying quietly, “I’m risking my life to hide this secret for the both of you, so how will it benefit me?”

Xiang Shaolong thought that here comes the chance and said determinedly, “If Empress Jing were to have any instructions, Xiang Shaolong will go through hell and fire, risking my life to accomplish it for you.”

Empress Jing still have not turned around but she said calmly, “Then kill a person for me!”

Xiang Shaolong moved closer, his body pressing against her back as his arms reached out to encircle her tiny waist tightly and nibbling at her ear, asked “Is Zhao Mu the person Empress Jing want to kill?”

Empress Jing’s delicate body trembled as she leaned into his arms, “Dueling with a smart person like you really saves a lot of time talking. As long as Zhao Mu remains alive, there is no hope at all for the state of Zhao and my position as Empress is just an empty title, do you understand?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I understand! There’s another person, right?”

The other person would naturally be King Xiaocheng because

once Zhao Mu and King Xiaocheng are killed, Empress Jing's son will ascend the throne and Empress Jing's status will raise to become the Dowager. Since her son is still young, power will naturally land in her hands. Who will care by that time whether Zhao Qian is still a virgin or not?

In order to gain power, people in this era are all vicious. Wives killing husbands, sons killing fathers, everything is done in the extreme.

Although Empress Jing's body softened with his hug, her mind was still sharp and she said quietly, "You are the one who said it, the person I want to deal with is only Zhao Mu. Ai! It's not that his Majesty does not want to give you opportunities, but you're now part of the Wu family and Wu Yingyuan is secretly on close relations with the Qins, so sooner or later they'll get into trouble and have the whole clan exterminated. But if you get rid of Zhao Mu, maybe I can protect you, or maybe even give you better opportunities."

Xiang Shaolong turned her body around, hugging her closely to his body. How can Empress Jing stand all these, her face blushed like fire, her breathing rapid, lust filling her.

Xiang Shaolong kissed her heavily on her lips, his hands greedily investigating the restricted areas.

Firstly it's because of her high and regal status, secondly it's because her body is voluptuous and alluring, thirdly it's because of her flirtatious behavior after her passion was flamed, which made Xiang Shaolong turn reel into real, and enjoy to his heart's

content.

Empress Jing used all her willpower and remaining strength to grab his disobedient hands, left his attacking lips and panted coquettishly as she said, “I never say what I don’t mean. Within 3 days, I want you to give me a satisfactory proposal, all right?”

The last sentence was filled with soft pleading, as if she has developed feelings for Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this woman is so formidable she resembles Lady Pingyuan a little. He has to show her how beneficial he is to her, only then can they work happily together. He kissed her face and said, “There’s no need for 3 days, I can give you an answer now.”

He paused and continued, “To deal with Zhao Mu, there’s only 2 ways, by wit or strength. By strength, the plan is naturally to assassinate him; by wit we will check out his background and then lay a trap for him. From what I guess, he must be a spy sent by another state to try and bring down our Great Zhao’s political situation from the inside. Or else if he has any love at all for Zhao, he wouldn’t have done what he has been doing.”

Empress Jing’s eyes lighted up and looked at him intently, “You’re not simple at all. But remember you’ll have to be swift and vicious when dealing with Zhao Mu, or else you will end up falling in his trap instead and you’ll never be able to pick yourself up again.”

A strong hatred gleamed in Xiang Shaolong's eyes as he said through gritted teeth, "Just the tragic death of Lady Ni is enough to make us stand on opposing ends, so Empress Jing need not worry."

Empress Jing voluntarily kissed him and said, "Shaolong! I have to go. Remember you must not look for me as you will, I will make contact with you instead."

Even after she disappeared around the door, Xiang Shaolong still did not feel relieved at all. On seeing that this woman did not ask to have immediate fun with him, he knows that she can readily control her lusts. This type of woman is the most fearsome and anytime she can turn around and point the gun at him while he is only a useful tool in her hand!

Xiang Shaolong hugged Zhao Qian tightly and reassured her, "Everything's fine now!"

Zhao Qian asked worriedly, "I really do not need to fear anything? If Qian'er has caused you trouble, I can only..."

Xiang Shaolong reached out and covered her tiny mouth, and told Zhao Ya, "You must keep a good watch over Zhao Qian. I will send Jing Jun to lead a few good fighters to pretend to be your family warriors. If it comes to the critical juncture we will be forced to strike."

Lady Ya said, "Please don't do that! In Handan I still have enough power to protect myself and Qian'er. Besides Imperial brother

holds me in very high regard now.”

She then pulled Xiang Shaolong aside and said quietly, “You asked me to check on that attendant who brought Zhao Mu in, and there’s now some headway. According to an old palace maid, that attendant called He Dan is from the state of Chu and was doted on and trusted by the late King. But what is the use of this news?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Right now I don’t know of what use it can be. But Zhao Mu may possibly be a spy sent by the Chus, and his task is to ensure that the 3 states will never be unified.”

Lady Ya nodded and said, “This guess is very reasonable, and also explains why Zhao Mu is linked with Xiao Weimou. Because what Zhao Mu represents is the common benefits for Chu and Qi, both do not want to see the unification of the 3 states.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows as he thought, “But even if we know this, for now it’s difficult to use this information to deal a blow to Zhao Mu.”

Lady Ya laughed, “Leave this to me, don’t forget I’m an expert in forgery. As long as I have a little information, I will be able to forge secret letters from the Chus to Zhao Mu. And even more delicately make it land in Imperial brother’s hands while Empress Jing and I will fan the flames at the side. Zhao Mu will be in for a hard time then.”

Xiang Shaolong happily hugged and kissed her a few times, “I will ask Tao Fang to keep an eye on any Chus who comes into

contact with Zhao Mu, if we can find real proof, that would be ideal.”

After having some fun with Lady Ya and Zhao Qian, Xiang Shaolong returned to the Wu family stockade and he had just stepped through the door when the guards told him, “The Juzi Mister Yan Ping came to look for you, Eldest Young Master is now attending to him.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that something is wrong, so he braced himself and went to Wu Yingyuan’s residence to meet him.

Wu Yingyuan saw that he has returned and made an excuse to leave, leaving the 2 of them sitting opposite each other in the hall.

Yan Ping said with a wooden expression, “Brother Xiang has shown off your capabilities in Wei, making everyone look at you differently, but it has also thrown you into a dangerous situation. I’m sure Brother Xiang knows about it!”

Xiang Shaolong was a little impressed by his straightforwardness and honesty, but because of Yuan Zong’s matter, it’s difficult for him to work with this person. He sighed and said, “Only idiots will not stir up feelings of jealousy, this is unavoidable.”

Yan Ping repeated the phrase ‘Only idiots will not stir up feelings of jealousy’ twice and was impressed, “Brother Xiang’s words are indeed profound, my apologies!” His eyes then turned sharp as he stared at him and said, “No wonder Yuan Zong is willing to hand you the Juzi token.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, naturally it must be Zhao Mu who told the Chus. From this he can deduce that Zhao Mu indeed has close connections with the Chus, that's why the Chus can get hold of the latest news.

Yan Ping said, "This Juzi token is of no use at all to outsiders, and will cause trouble instead. If Brother Xiang can give it to me, I will surely repay you."

Xiang Shaolong really had this urge to just give the Juzi token to him to avoid adding more trouble in future. But Yuan Zong would rather die than hand the token to Yan Ping, and he must have his reason for doing so. Yuan Zong also sacrificed himself so that he can escape to Handan safely so no matter what he cannot let him down. So although by doing so it will only be beneficial to him, he still persevered.

He smiled and said, "Even if the Juzi token is not on Brother Yuan, maybe he hid it or maybe he gave it to someone else, why are you so sure the token is with me?"

Yan Ping replied unhappily, "That means Brother Xiang is refusing to hand the token over. This is such an unintelligent move, now there are many people in Handan who wants to see Brother Xiang dead and if I help them, would Brother Xiang be able to handle it?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed icily, "You should be responsible for Brother Yuan's death, I have not settled this score with you and yet

you dare to threaten me.”

Yan Ping stood up suddenly and said calmly, “Fine! Xiang Shaolong! You’re brave. If you can reach the Guo residence safely tonight, then let me try you out on your Mohist swordplay!”

He laughed loudly thrice and left like the wind.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that others have threatened him since he was young so he’s not afraid of such threats at all. He left to look for Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo.

Book 4 Chapter 11 – The 3 Major Killer Strikes

Yuan Zong is really dead! A wave of sadness coursed through Xiang Shaolong. He thought of his desolate times in Wu An, Yuan Zong not only provided him with food and lodging, but also taught him Mohist Swordplay. Those 3 months he spent with him gave him the ability to survive in this messy time, he's really indebted to him. If he did not know that Yan Ping caused the death of Yuan Zong, he would not have made enemies with this Juzi from Zhao Mohism. Although he gained a few hundred more fearsome opponents because of this, his heart is still glad.

He laid on a bed and enjoyed the after bath massage given to him by Chunying and the other 3 maids, trying to relax himself so that he can deal with the continuous battles tonight. This is a lawless world where the strong will survive. Or else he would have made a police report and request for bodyguards. He toyed with the square token with the single word 'Mo' in his hand, the Juzi Token, and felt it's strange iciness.

Those traitorous Mohists Yan Ping and Fu Du, why are they going to all lengths to get this token? The 2 issues of Yuan Zong not having the Juzi token on him and the night attack at Prince Xinling's residence by the Chu Mohism, it must be because that conniving thief Zhao Mu who informed Yan Ping so that he can come cause trouble with him. This person is really extremely vicious, just a few words from him is enough to throw him into danger. He studied the token in his hand closely.

When he read martial arts novel in the 21st century, they always

wrote that whatever token, as long as it's in one's hands, that person will have ultimate power over a sect or group of people and can command them. But obviously this Juzi token has no such power or Yuan Zong can always hold it up and there'll be no need to run for his life. Therefore this Juzi token must have some other more substantial value, and not something so simple as a symbol of the Juzi status.

But if that's the case, why didn't Yuan Zong tell him. Or could it be he has not found out the secret himself, so he did not reveal it since he's doubtful as well? At this time Wu Tingfang and Ting Fangshi walked laughingly towards the pool and sat down next to him. 2 more pairs of delicate hands joined to massage his muscles. He was so comfortable he closed his eyes, but his fingers were still rubbing the Juzi token.

When he touched that word 'Mo', the 2 upper dots of the character seemed to have undiscernibly rotated a little and he opened his eyes to take a closer look in shock. He used his thumb to rub harder but the 2 protruding dots did not move at all. He quietly sighed and was about to give up when he suddenly thought that if it's so easy to find out the secret to the Juzi token, Yuan Zong would have found it long ago. So he concentrated on his study again.

Wu Tingfang was laughing at that side, "Xiang Lang! What treasure is this, you're looking at it more intently than when you look at us!" While Ting Fangshi commented, "That thing is so exquisite!" Xiang Shaolong just replied with a smile and used his fingertips to push hard on that 2 round dots but there is still not reaction at all.

Wu Tingfang was feeling mischievous so she leaned over and gently bit his ear and pulled it. Xiang Shaolong was so comfortable he moaned and was about to put the Juzi token and deal with her when he suddenly had an idea. If pushing it down is useless, what about pulling it up? So he instructed Chunying to get him a small plier, pinched one of the round dots and pulled up with his might. There was a 'tak' sound and the round dot rose up almost half an inch from the token. Xiang Shaolong was immediately energized and sat up.

The women all crowed around him in puzzlement and all of them joined in to study the token in his hand. Xiang Shaolong pulled up the other dot and now it looks as if there are 2 round pillars protruding on the 'Mo' word. He can't help but feel nervous and tried to turn the little pillar clockwise and it really turned, making another sound which sounded like a lock being opened. The women all tittered in amazement.

Wu Tingfang grabbed his arms and said, "Something is hidden inside, Xiang Lang, turn the other one quickly." Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath, suppressed his nervous feeling and turned the other tiny pillar. He tried but it did not move. However, when he turned it anti-clockwise, something strange happened. There was a 'tak' sound and the Juzi token separated, revealing a tiny rolled brocade parchment of about 5 inches inside. The women cheered. Xiang Shaolong was utterly shocked and knows that he finally found the secret to this Juzi token by sheer luck.

He opened the tiny scroll on the bed, and it's about 20 feet long, filled tightly with diagrams and tiny words. The first half is the upper volume 'Mohism Military Tactics', the lower volume on the second half are all sword strokes. At the beginning of the scroll it's

written 'Mohist Swordplay's addendum of the 3 major killer strikes'. Xiang Shaolong was extremely interested and upon a closer read, he was secretly ecstatic. It turns out that these 3 major killer strikes are all offensive sword moves, a great contradict to the idea of mainly defense in the Mohist swordplay. He wonders if it's because Mo Yu had a change of heart in his later years and created these 3 offensive moves to supplement the inadequacies of the swordplay.

Although it's named 3 strikes, but each strike there are at least a hundred odd diagrams, so obviously it's an extremely complicated move. The most intricate thing is these 3 stokes are all related to defense, so it can be used seamlessly with the Mohist Swordplay Yuan Zong taught him.

The first stroke is named 'Defending instead of attacking'. Those lifelike human drawings were drawn sitting, walking, holding swords, jumping and rolling, and in all kinds of positions. Each picture is accompanied by detailed instructions and ways of using it. Each word is marvelously written and clear, making one feel extreme awe for this person Mo Yu's intelligence.

The second stroke is named 'Attacking instead of defending'. If the first stroke is akin to stability like the mountains, this second stroke is like shocking waves that can split the shores, with unfathomable strength. Just these 2 strokes alone is enough to contain the essence of attacking and defending in swordplay. When matched with the Mohist swordplay, the power in increased many fold.

The third stroke is named 'Attacking and defending

concurrently', its changes are even more complex but it's not the merger of the other 2 strokes, but an extremely mysterious swordplay. Not only are there defenses in the attacks, there are also attacks in the defenses, and the most formidable part is that it is ever changing, at anytime it can change from attack to defense or vice versa, making Xiang Shaolong totally inebriated while looking at it.

For now there's no need for him to study the military tactics in the scroll, so he picked up his wooden sword and went to the courtyard, concentrating on studying and practicing these 3 sword strokes. The women all sat in the small pavilion in the courtyard, looking at their beloved concentrating as he danced with his sword.

Xiang Shaolong read as he practiced and initially he had to stop and read frequently but when he got used to the moves, every move he made, whether cutting, slashing, piercing or carving, all of it contained the essence of the swordplay. Unconsciously he was absorbed into the mysterious swordplay and forgot about everything else. Such wondrous feeling, it's the first time he tasted it ever since he learnt swordplay from Yuan Zong. The wooden sword seems to suddenly feel so light as he moved according to instructions, making sounds as it sliced thru the air, becoming the howl of a hero, increasing the formidable aura enough to make others afraid.

He combined it with the original Mohist swordplay and practiced again and for a moment the sword aura was everywhere, at times quiet and at times moving. When quiet it feels like the calm sea, but when moving it feels like angry waves, the changes unfathomable. The women were all intoxicated by the sight, only

feeling that Xiang Shaolong's every pose is extremely exquisite, every move showing the extreme capability of a human body, both quiet and exciting, forming into an earth shattering aura.

Time flies, and it was only when Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Zhuo came to look for him that Xiang Shaolong realized that he has unconsciously practiced swordplay for 6 hours. For someone who has never learned Mohist swordplay, he may not even gain any headway with these 3 strokes even after practicing for 3 years but for Xiang Shaolong, 6 hours is enough for him to learn a lot and change into a new person. Xiang Shaolong did not feel tired at all.

He was curious, the strange breathing method of Mo Yu must be related to the mysterious innate ability in humans. If in future he can follow his method of meditation and practice his breathing, the effect may be even more miraculous and he may very well become a martial arts expert like those portrayed in martial arts novels, having mysterious internal energy. After he hurriedly washed up, he went to the hall to meet with Wu Zhuo and the rest.

Teng Yi looked at him in surprise, "Brother Xiang looks energized, like you've changed into another person, has something worth congratulating happened." Wu Zhuo added, "Young Grand Master-in-law's are sharper than before, it's really astonishing!" Xiang Shaolong was secretly ecstatic but he changed the topic and said, "How many men can be used right now?"

Wu Zhuo replied, "We have enough men, it's no problem moving 500 to 600 of them but once we do that, we will reveal the real strength we have and in the long term it's more harmful than beneficial." Xiang Shaolong was extremely confident, "Why not

just the 4 of us, together with 10 elite fighters you pick, and we'll try it out!" The 3 of them were collectively startled, isn't this obvious who will be stronger or weaker?

Xiang Shaolong continued, "If we were to fight head on, we'll definitely lose but now our aim is just to safely reach Guo residence, so it's 2 different matters." Jing Jun said, "If I'm the only one, I'm very confident that I will slip into the Guo residence unnoticed." Wu Zhuo suddenly became excited, "To be able to fight together with Young Grand Master-in-law, is indeed the happiest thing. Come! Let us discuss this." He took out a painting from the front of his chest, and it turns out to be the street map of Handan.

Wu Zhuo pointed at a small hill in the city and said, "The Guo residence is on this hill, there are only 2 proper roads towards there, which leads to the front and back courtyards of the Guo residence. The other areas are either rocky terrain or dense forests." Teng Yi added, "As long as we can reach the hill, with the rocks and dense forests as cover, we need not fear them using arrows or long distance projectiles, nor need we fear their bigger numbers."

Wu Zhuo said, "The problem is that they will certainly send men to keep an eye on us, then they will be able to choose any point in the mile long journey to attack and kill us." Xiang Shaolong thought hard for a moment before saying, "We can use the tactic of 'Openly repairing the road while sneaking to [Chen Cang](#)'..."

Looking at them looking at him in bewilderment, he remembered that the story of Chen Cang happened during the

Chu-Han contention, so naturally they have never heard of it. He hurriedly changed his words, “Wu Zhuo you can send out 3 horse carriages at the same time, traveling towards 3 different directions. Those Mohists will certainly have to go after all the carriages and by the time they realize there’s no one in the carriages, their strength is already divided. Only then will we set off, throwing them into disarray.” The 3 of them thought that this plan is workable on hearing it.

Jing Jun commented, “We can use ropes and hooks to climb over family residences, and those following us will certainly be caught unprepared and not know what to do!” The more they talk the more excited they became, as if they have already won the battle. In the end Xiang Shaolong said, “If I am Yan Ping, I will definitely leave my men at the bottom of the hill where the Guo residence is, by then we can make use of the dense forest and have a good fight with them.”

Teng Yi’s expression changed, “Why don’t Jing Jun and I slip there first and lay some traps, then we’ll be even more confident.” Jing Jun loves making trouble and he jumped up, “No time to lose, there’s still 4 more hours to the feast, we will bring our equipment there immediately and start making traps.” Wu Zhuo stood up and said excitedly, “What do you need, I can provide everything.”

After the 3 of them left, Xiang Shaolong went back to his bedroom and took out his equipment and the belt filled with his flying needles and secured them around his body before kissing his wives and maids farewell and hurrying to meet with Wu Zhuo. On the way he saw a very happy looking Tao Fang. Tao Fang pulled him aside and said, “We’re really lucky, we found out about a mysterious person who just happened to meet Zhao Mu today and

from his accent he's definitely a Chu."

Xiang Shaolong asked happily, "Has he been captured?" Tao Fang replied, "He's still in the city. If we try to capture him we may alert the others. According to our spy's investigations, he booked the room at the inn until tomorrow morning. As soon as he steps out of Handan, we'll capture him alive and imprison him at our pasture. I don't believe his mouth can be as stubborn as our torture equipment." Xiang Shaolong put his arms around Tao Fang's shoulders and chortled as they walked out, "If we can get proof of that conniving thief's nefarious schemes, we'll make sure he'll get his just desserts."

At this time the 2 of them reached the large open space behind the main door where Wu Zhuo has prepared 3 horse carriages and was waiting for his instructions. Tao Fang asked quizzically, "There's only one of you, why do you need 3 horse carriages?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "The 3 horse carriages are all not for me, but a gift to that short lived Yan Ping!" As he chortled, he let go of Tao Fang and left.

end of Book 4

Book 5 Chapter 1 – The Dinner Feast At Guo Residence

Tiny snowflakes filled the sky, the weather bitterly cold. Luckily there were no gusts of wind or it'll feel even more terrible.

Wu Zhuo, Xiang Shaolong and over 10 odd men on horses left the residence hurriedly, all of them were wearing bamboo hats that covered most of their faces. Once they reached the streets they split ways immediately, 2 to a group, all traveling towards different directions. Firstly it's the 3 horse carriages, now there is this move to trick the enemy. Even if Yan Ping's 300 men are all waiting outside the residence, it's difficult for them to follow so many 'suspicious characters' at the same time. Besides who can be certain whether Xiang Shaolong is one of them.

This move is to force Yan Ping's Mohist warriors to retreat to the Guo's residence where the dense forest and the road leading up the hill is. Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo traveled a well planned route and swiftly left the forested area outside the Wu residence and arrived at the side of the main road where other common residences are. They did not travel towards the Guo residence but instead turned left in the opposite direction in spite of the snow. They did not care if they were being followed and when they reached the front of a large house, they gave the secret signal.

The door to the house immediately opened. The owner of this big house is someone who has strong relations with the Wu residence and naturally he was glad to assist them. The 2 of them did not say anything at all but just entered the house and went to the back alley from the building's backdoor. Only then did they hurriedly

ride towards Xiuyue Hill where the Guo residence is situated. It was Wu Zhuo who arranged all these so that even if they were being followed, they can still beautifully shake off the other party.

The snow hit their faces and Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt lost. Although it's only been a few short years since he arrived in this ancient era, but he has experienced many heart-rending tragedies. Shu'er and Su Nu's unjust deaths have given him a huge blow! But Zhao Ni's horrible death is something that he cannot accept even now! But it's another cruel and heartless fact!

Suddenly, these 3 blossoming beauties will forever disappear from this world and even if he killed Zhao Mu and Prince Shaoyuan, this fact will never change. Now his great benefactor Yuan Zong is confirmed to be dead as well. Hai! What is all these for?

He can be killed at any time as well, and will that be a form of release? Will there be a chance to see them again after he's dead. Ever since the beginning of life, the question of life and death have always troubled humans. Is it only a short journey where one throws oneself into, and a person's existence will not stop when he dies. No one has ever been able to answer or prove this question. A religion's answer where heaven and hell, or anything outside life and death, may very well just be an optimistic wish. But it's something that one cannot do without, if there is only emptiness after death, it's a situation which is very difficult to accept.

Wu Zhuo who was riding next to him called out, "Young Grand Master-in-law! Xiuyue hill is right ahead." Xiang Shaolong was woken from his reverie and gathered his thoughts, looking ahead.

By now they have left the residential areas and come to the foot of the hill. There's only one road which leads straight to the top of the hill and at the top ancient trees made up a forest and he could catch peeps of the huge building through the trees, looking extremely majestic. However there are no traces of men in ambush and there's an archway at the foot of the hill, written on it are the words 'Guo Family Residence' but there are no guards there at all.

The 2 of them turned to the woods at the side of the road and dismounted where Teng and Jing have left markings of the secret signal. The trees and grass were all covered by white snow and the scene looked pure and alluring but it's not advantageous for hiding or escape at all. Wu Zhuo found another carved signal at the foot of another tree and made a hand signal towards Xiang Shaolong first before going into the woods.

Xiang Shaolong put the Mohist sword in the brocade cloth Zhao Qian made for him and strapped it on his back and with his left hand holding his recovered Flying Rainbow, went after Wu Zhuo. Suddenly men and light appeared and surrounded them quietly. Wu Zhuo drew the 2 metal bars from his back and with a roar charged towards the front suddenly, not allowing the enemy to get a better feel of the surrounding area and strengthen their encirclement.

Xiang Shaolong was still feeling upset about the death of his beloved beauties and Yuan Zong, so he was filled with fury as he pulled out his wooden sword and held it on his right hand as he followed behind and killed a path towards the woods. Their opponents did not expect them to be so ferocious. Of the 2 Zhao Mohists who were blocking Wu Zhuo, one of them took a step back in frenzy while the other came charging with his long sword.

There was a ‘clang’ as the weapons clashed and sparks flew in the darkness. Wu Zhuo took advantage of the fact that his opponent’s arm strength is not as good as his so he flicked the long sword away, creating an opening at his enemy’s front and made a false move as if to attack another person but the metal bar in his left hand turned back and struck the opening as quick as lightning. That person is quite formidable as well, he moved his sword back to defend and blocked the metal bar but he forgot about the other metal bar on Wu Zhuo’s right hand. He only saw a flash while Wu Zhuo bent his waist as the metal bar struck upwards into his opponent’s stomach.

That Mohist did not expect the angle of Wu Zhuo’s attack to be so precise and with a scream, staggered backwards as fresh blood spilled on the snow and he died immediately. Wu Zhuo did not stop at all as his 2 metal bars seem to transform into 2 rays of light as he charged forward towards the other Mohist. The battle has finally started.

All these Mohists were highly skilled but they did not expect that an unknown Wu Zhuo would kill one of their men in such a short time. They were all furious and charged upon him and for a moment the air was filled with a murderous aura. Xiang Shaolong who was following closely behind Wu Zhuo went into the state of Mohist swordplay, every move his enemy makes is very clear to him. Because their swordplay all came from the same source, he is very familiar with his enemy’s attack and could even see their loopholes and inadequacies.

He roared as Flying Rainbow pierced and pricked madly in his left hand while in his right hand the Mohist sword slashed and

sliced heavily, his left and right hands actually executing 2 different styles of fighting and strength, gentle and harsh at the same time. A furious fire burned in his eyes but his expression was cool and calm, as if he's another person altogether, his aura extremely imposing. As the weapons clashed, 3 Mohists were struck down at the same time, one of them injured by Wu Zhuo's bars while the other 2 were naturally felled by Xiang Shaolong.

A loud shout came from Xiang Shaolong's right side. An especially tall and huge Mohist who looks like he's of a higher rank came out from behind a tree, leaning forward and running furiously. Under the torch his metal pole glittered and was aimed towards Xiang Shaolong's heart, the aim accurate, vicious and swift. Xiang Shaolong saw that he revealed no loopholes at all as he moved and knows that he has met an expert in Mohism. He dared not be lax and with his left hand he executed one of the Mohist's 3 killer strikes 'Defending instead of attacking' with Flying Rainbow. He moved his sword back, it's tip quivering, where his next attack will be still an unknown as he dealt with the 2 Mohist coming towards his left. He executed 'Attacking instead of defending' with the Mohist sword on his right as the sword seemed to turn into a beam of light and curved forward like a swimming snake as it engaged his opponent's metal pole.

The Mohist swordplay is useful as it allows a single person to fight against overpowering numbers so although he was dealing with attacks from 2 different sides, he was not at all confused. Also it relies on intuition rather than the eyes so that even if one's eyes were covered, he can still fight with the enemy. In such dark surroundings with only a few torches illuminating things at the perimeter, it's even more beneficial to Xiang Shaolong. That Mohist with the pole did not expect Xiang Shaolong to suddenly execute such an exquisite move and only felt his frighteningly

strong pole attack which is akin to a dragon bursting out of a cave, upon meeting his opponent's wooden sword, felt like a clay ox entering the water, empty and surreal, without any strength at all.

He was surprised and reflexively pulled his pole back and retreated when he realized there's a sharp pain on his stomach. It turned out that Xiang Shaolong has given a flying kick to his fatal point. Although his tolerance for pain is 10 times more than the average warrior, he still howled in pain as he fell backwards, never to climb up again. Naturally this kick has got nothing to do with the 3 killer strikes of Mohism, because for someone from the 21st century, naturally he will not stick so strictly to the rules.

The 2 Mohists on the other side thought that Xiang Shaolong is now on the defensive so they waved their swords to attack but did not expect that with a sudden glare of light, one of them had their right hand chopped off at the wrist while the other was struck in his thigh and as the retreated screaming, they knocked into the others advancing behind them and the situation was chaotic for a moment. Who would have expected Xiang Shaolong's swordplay to be so precise and vicious, a total deviation from the gentle nature of the Mohist swordplay.

Wu Zhuo's performance was not any worse either as he forced his way between 2 enemies, his hands moved to the middle of his metal rods as he executed close bodily moves. Although his enemy managed to slash him slightly on his arm, at the same time he pierced through one of his enemy's chest while another enemy's ear was hit by the end of the metal rod.

In a short moment they have advanced a few feet. They heard a

twang behind them. They hid behind a tree at the same time as an arrow shot past. Although they've killed many of their opponents, but the Mohists still continued to advance towards them from all directions in waves and the situation was not to their advantage. Xiang Shaolong saw that the situation was not right and returned Flying Rainbow to its scabbard and he reached into his robes to pull out the flying needles, shooting them continuously. This move was greatly unexpected by the others and for a moment quite a handful of people fell to the ground.

His opponents saw that wherever Xiang Shaolong waved his hand at, someone will be injured or killed, like magic and they all hurriedly hid behind trees. The 2 of them dared not hesitate and advanced towards the darkness and in a moment was hidden deep in the forest. The Mohists were all thrown off but they still gave chase.

Now there's another problem. With such running and in the darkness, how are they able to see the secret signals left behind by Teng and Jing. Luckily right at this time, the sound of a bird calling was heard from afar on their left, which sounded very authentic. The 2 of them knows it must be that mischievous and tricky Jing Jun who is making the sound so they happily made their way towards the sound.

The deeper they went into the woods the denser it became with thick snow, making it extremely difficult to walk. After butting of countless branches, there was a small light in the sky ahead, which dropped like a meteor. It turned out to be Jing Jun who jumped down effortlessly and blinked at them, saying, "This way!" The 2 of them hurriedly went after him as if they've found their savior.

The walked up a slope and came to a huge rock. They could almost make out the lights coming from the Guo residence amongst the woods ahead. Teng Yi suddenly appeared on the stone, with one knee on the ground and holding a huge bow in his hand. He looked serious as he scrutinized the human sounds and torches that's coming nearer. The tree of them went behind him.

Wu Zhuo asked in puzzlement, "What are you going to do?" Teng Yi did not reply. Wu and Xiang were perplexed, they can't see the enemy clearly in this dense forest, so what is the use of having a strong bow? Down below screams were heard. Jing Jun exclaimed happily, "They fell in!"

Both of them are excellent hunters so naturally they are expert in setting traps. 'Twang!' An arrow left Teng Yi's strong bow and shot into the dense forest. A cream was immediately heard. Impressed, Jing Jun said, "Brother Teng's 'Arrow of the night forest' is famed throughout the Han borders, even a passing rat would not be able to avoid it."

As he spoke, Teng Yi released 3 arrows continuously with alarming ease and dexterity and every time a shot was launched, a scream will definitely be heard. By now Xiang and Wu realized that there's no trace of torches below at all. It turns out that Teng Yi has shot all the torch bearers and the torches fell onto the snowy ground and were extinguished. Teng Yi continued shooting his arrows, and each arrow will definitely find a target. Wu and Xiang were utterly impressed and secretly thought that luckily he is not their enemy, or else they won't even know how they have died.

Teng Yi put down his strong bow and said calmly, "No one will

dare to come up now!” Jing Jun jumped up and said, “We’ve tied ropes and cut up a path so we only have to follow the rope and soon we’ll be at the Guo residence for the feast.” Xiang Shaolong did not expect to come out of the Zhao Mohist’s encirclement so easily, and obviously saw that it’s extremely important to have good strategies.

Once he thought that he can now try the prowess of the 3 killer strikes on Yan Ping, he was greatly energized and said quietly, “Let’s go!” The Guo family residence was built on top of the hill, following the curves of the hill. Although it’s not comparable to the Wu stockade’s imposing and strict aura, it boasts of the beautiful scenery that the Wu stockade lacks. In front of the residence there were 2 ancient trees that almost reached heaven, lanterns burned brightly at the front door with more lanterns hung on the walls on both sides, making it look as bright as day. Xiang Shaolong informed them of his name at the door and immediately a middle-aged man who introduced himself as the housekeeper Gao Ang came and led them into the residence personally.

Walking past a stone pathway through a bamboo forest, an imposing looking building suddenly appeared in front of them. Just a look at the building they know that Guo Zhong’s wealth is comparable to those of royalty. Lanterns filled the spacious garden on both sides of the road, the layout complimenting each other, making them feel that the 20 odd feet of long stone path beneath their feet is the middle line in the residence and the opulent building before them is situated right in the middle of this garden.

There are 2 pavilions in the garden, built on top of a rectangular pond with magnificent looking pillars and red tiled roof and at the

tip of the roof there's an magnificent looking cover made of white stone. Exquisite carvings can be seen on the beams. Regardless of the rare flowers and trees, the tiny bridges and flowing water, the quaint pathways, just these 2 pavilions alone is enough for one to appreciate the builder's taste and skill.

A lot of thought was put into the decoration of plants in the garden, with the main roles delegated to everlasting trees, which can withstand the cold, matched with trees that change with the season and flowers which bloom all year round, making it a lush greenery. Although the garden is now filled with snow, it still makes one think of the beautiful spring/ summer scenery. Once in a while they could see rare rocks brought in from other places, which increased the exquisiteness of the garden. The main residence looked even more imposing among the garden, almost comparable to the Zhao palace. It's so imposing that it's almost unbelievable.

Jing Jun who has lived almost all his life in the mountains was dumbfounded and went close to Xiang Shaolong and whispered, "Such a large house, how is one able to sleep in it?" Xiang Shaolong saw that the housekeeper Gao Ang was way ahead of them leading the way and can't hear their conversation so he replied with a laugh, "Hugging a beauty, do you fear not being able to sleep?" Jing Jun immediately rose his eyebrows, obviously he's thinking of the program tonight after going back to the Wu residence.

Xiang Shaolong thought of the Zhao palace and can't help but think of the perished Zhao Ni, remembering how he flirted with her in the royal garden. He felt a sharp pain in his heart and felt like stabbing himself to relieve that heart wrenching pain. Later he still have to put up an act with Zhao Mu, how will he be able to

stand it? Teng Yi saw him suddenly turning pale and understood his feelings. He reached out and grabbed his shoulder hard, saying, "The big picture is of most importance." The 2 of them exchanged a look, and a feeling of camaraderie welled up in them.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the pain in his heart and forced all thoughts out of his mind as he stepped up the wooden bridge, up the long flight of stairs, into the building. There were 16 tables in the building, split between the left and right side of the great hall. By the time Xiang Shaolong and his men arrived, the other guests are already there. Guo Zhong hurriedly came to welcome them and introduce him to the others. Zhao Mu brought a group of his family warriors to show off and all of them looked fierce and strong, obviously skilled swordsmen. He and his men, 12 of them altogether, already took up 4 tables.

Yan Ping was dressed in white hemp clothing and alone, and for a change he was wearing a pair of straw shoes, an air of a proud and suave loner. If not for the barrier of Yuan Zong's revenge stuck between them, maybe Xiang Shaolong could have befriended him but now they can only solve the problem using this era's most commonly used method, which is through fights.

For the first time he met the owner of the Zhao warrior association Zhao Ba. From the name he thought he'd be a huge burly man but in face he is a lot shorter than the average person, but with big bones. Everything was expanding horizontally, wide chest and broad back with an especially thick neck and with his slightly hunched back he formed a very impressionable piece of triangular muscle, making one think that even if you try to strangle him, there's no way you can manage to cut off his air supply. His complexion was dark, his forehead protruding with a

square face and huge eyes. It felt as if he has unlimited strength in his body and as he moved he gave off an imposing aura which created an impression on Xiang Shaolong as well. When he was in the special task force, fighting is as common as eating so he's good at analyzing his opponents. When he saw Zhao Ba, he immediately put him under the most difficult to handle enemy category.

Four of his disciples accompanied him to the feast and naturally they are all expert swordsmen but what caught their attention was one of them is actually a young lady called Zhao Zhi. At first glance she did not have the beauty to captivate one's soul but her face hides an indescribable sadness, matched with her shockingly dainty phoenix eyes, slim face and sexy lips, she does exude a womanly charm. Especially when she's so tall, a head taller than Zhao Ba and only about 3 inches shorter than Xiang Shaolong. Such a tall lady and with a perfect body trained from constant exercising, it makes her look extremely outstanding.

Zhao Ba, Zhao Zhi and their people all behaved coolly towards Xiang Shaolong, only giving a slight nod of their heads during the introduction, not hiding their animosity at all. When Jing Jun can't help but scrutinize Zhao Zhi from head to toe, the lady looked even more unhappy and a murderous look flashed past her pretty eyes. Jing Jun was so shocked he dared not look at her again. The other 2 guests are obviously Zhao Mu's main lackeys.

The philosopher Guo Kai looked like a Taoist deity, with an extremely long beard but his eyes were darting and just like what Lady Ya said, he looks conniving but he was the warmest towards Xiang Shaolong compared to the rest. What leaves a deep impression is his feminine and shrill voice. General Yue Cheng and Guo Kai are both about 30 years old, his eyes kept opening and

closing and was alternating between lively and lifeless looks. He gives one the impression that he's engrossed in wine and women, with a slim body and nimble limbs. His military outfit gave him an imposing aura. Both of them have their family servants with them and took up 4 tables.

Coming up next is Guo Zhong's 2 sons, Guo Qiu and Guo Ting, who looks thoroughly plain. Instead what caught their attention was this intelligent looking person among their family warriors called Shang Qi. His aura and grace exudes the obvious fact that he's smart and experienced, not someone to be belittled. After a round of introductions, Guo Zhong invited the guests to be seated. Firstly he asked Xiang Shaolong to be seated on the VIP table which is the first table on the right. Xiang Shaolong tried to reject unsuccessfully so he had no choice but to sit at this table meant for the main guest. Seated opposite him is naturally the host Guo Zhong, followed by Zhao Mu, Zhao Ba and Guo Kai.

Seated along the row on Xiang Shaolong's side is the very solemn looking Yan Ping, followed by Yue Cheng. Guo Zhong's 2 sons were seated right at the end. The truth is even up to now, Xiang Shaolong has no idea why Guo Zhong would organize this feast. If he was really injured earlier, it would not reflect well on Guo Zhong as well. After a round of drinks...

Guo Zhong exclaimed happily, "My whole life was spent next to a furnace making steel, now that I'm older, all the heavy work has been passed to my sons. Now in my free time I will trek around the forests, looking at iron mines, studying the making of weapons. To me, nothing is more precious than the hand written records of the late saint Lu Gong. This time Shaolong has returned with the treasure, others may not know what a great contribution Shaolong

as made but I am very clear about that. Come! Let us drink a toast to the comeback of great Zhao.” Everyone lifted their cups except for Yan Ping who did not touch the excellent wine on his table at all. Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented that once Guo Zhong said this, he’s obviously implying that Zhao’s rise and fall will all depend on him. In this era where people fight over power and status, how can such words not arouse jealousy in others.

Indeed a look of unhappiness flashed past Zhao Mu and Yue Cheng’s faces while Zhao Ba looked ferocious. Only Guo Kai remained smiling while Yan Ping looked totally listless. Xiang Shaolong secretly observed the unique Zhao Zhi, every time she lifted her cup she only took a tiny sip, unlike the others who emptied their cups. Wu Zhuo whispered in Xiang Shaolong’s ears, “Guo Zhong is trying to cause harm to you!” Xiang Shaolong nodded to show that he understood, and said loudly his thanks, “Mister Guo has flattered me. I am just trying my best to follow his Majesty’s and Marquis orders and they gave all instructions. I was just a little lucky and did not fail in my mission. I think this toast should be offered to Marquis instead.” Everyone hurriedly rose their cups towards Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong and his men were of course secretly cursing as they drank, scolding Zhao Mu for being a cruel, conniving thief. That beauty Zhao Zhi did not expect Xiang Shaolong to give such a good reply and a look of surprise flashed past her eyes as she quietly sized up Xiang Shaolong. Zhao Mu’s expression looked better as he chortled and happily drank up, as if all the merits should belong to him. But everyone knows that with his character, he will not be so easily taken in by Xiang Shaolong’s words and this superficial happiness is just a show put up for them.

Guo Zhong signaled the housekeeper Gao Ang who was standing behind him and the latter immediately passed the orders down. More than 10 odd pretty maids wearing butterfly looking outfits came out carrying piping hot, delicious food and placed them on the tables and warmly helped the guests top up their wine cups. Xiang Shaolong kept a close eye on Yan Ping and saw that there are only vegetables and rice on his table. Obviously Guo Zhong has made special preparations for his 'needs'. Guo Zhong chortled and said, "There have always been dance courtesans entertaining my guests during my feasts but since Juzi is willing to give me face today by attending this feast, there are slight changes in the program."

He clapped his hands hard. Suddenly 10 odd women came out from the 2 side doors at the back, a few of them came to the center of the hall and started performing various dangerous and exciting acrobatic stunts. 2 of the women were impossibly turning somersaults on the shoulders of another 2 women, exchanged places before standing on the shoulders of another girl standing opposite them. Everyone except for Yan Ping clapped and cheered. Jing Jun boasted quietly, "They should clap only after they've seen my skills!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled. Jing Jun is after all a big kid and filled with the desire to win. After the women performed their ever changing acrobatics, they retreated out of the hall amidst the clapping of the guests. Guo Zhong smiled, "The person whom we should really cheer is Miss Zhi. The skills of my maids here, were all taught by her." On hearing that everyone hurriedly cheered for Zhao Zhi, with Jing Jun being the loudest, making one feel at a loss whether to laugh or be angry. Zhao Zhi stood up and quietly acknowledged them, as if she doesn't care for such admiration at all, giving one the feeling that she has a lot of self-control.

Guo Zhong suddenly coughed dryly and asked Xiang Shaolong seriously, “I heard that there is a slight misunderstanding between Shaolong and Juzi, why don’t I be the mediator and solve this problem.” Xiang Shaolong was secretly hating him. Guo Zhong’s words all seem to be for his good, but in fact he is fanning the flames and trying to incite unhappiness. The reason is of course due to Xiang Shaolong’s relationship with the Wu family. Just a few words and it has put him in an embarrassing situation. Even if he hands them the Juzi token immediately, he will offend Zhao Mu because he has kept the fact that he actually has the token hidden from this evil fiend. But if he does not allow Guo Zhong to become the ‘mediator’, Guo Zhong will have an excuse to deal with him.

Luckily Yan Ping said coldly, “Mister Guo it’s too late for you to be a mediator now. Now the problem between me and Commander Xiang can only be solved according to Mohist rules.” Everyone knows without asking that a duel is the only way. How can all these powerful people in Handan not know about the Zhao Mohists trying to ambush Xiang Shaolong, and they also understood that Yan Ping has suffered a huge setback and this has planted an unsolvable enmity between them.

Zhao Mu said, “One is the most esteemed guest of his Majesty while the other is the most doted imperial guard of his Majesty, no one would want to see any side hurt. Why don’t I report to his Majesty tomorrow and let him decide?” Guo Kai and Yue Cheng were secretly chortling in their hearts. Yan Ping is well respected in Zhao and recently he made a great contribution at the city of Fuyi when the Yans invaded them and is now on a same standing as the king of Zhao. If this matter is put to him, the person who lose out will definitely be Xiang Shaolong. How can this wily old fox Guo Zhong not know what they are thinking about.

The animosity between him and the Wu family is not a recent thing and he was the one who revealed to the King of Zhao about Wu Yingyuan and Lu Buwei's relationship. Now that the Wu family has such a formidable Young Grand-Master-in-law, he has to destroy him no matter what. At first he did not understand Zhao Mu's stand but after testing him thru their conversation, they immediately came to a quiet understanding. But now King Xiaocheng regards Xiang Shaolong very highly and he has the support of Master Wu as well so they cannot openly deal with this young swordsman who was an unknown but has now become a person of standing.

Zhao Mu first tried the plan of testing the Princess's virginity but did not expect Empress Jing to have other plans and she helped Xiang Shaolong hide the truth. Therefore he chose the highly skilled Yan Ping who has many expert fighters under him and told him that no Juzi token was found on Yuan Zong in order to cause friction between them. Then he allowed Guo Zhong to organize this feast as a cover, but in fact it's to create the perfect chance for Yan Ping to kill him. Such ongoing vicious plans is indeed formidable. Once Zhao Mu said that, Yan Ping was the first to object, "I appreciate Marquis kind intention, but the Juzi token is our sect's ultimate treasure and it cannot be in the hands of an outsider a moment longer. This matter must be settled immediately." Everyone was secretly happy, knowing that Yan Ping will immediately challenge Xiang Shaolong to a duel.

Zhao Ba laughed loudly and after everyone's attention was on him, said, "The duel between Commander Xiang and Lian Jin has shocked the entire Zhao region. A pity I was at another place

testing the skills of the warriors of the school and could not witness the grand event, which up to now is a regret for me. My men are hoping to witness Commander Xiang's excellent sword skill. This is purely going to be an exchange of pointers and I hope that Commander Xiang would graciously give your advice." Wu Zhuo and the rest furrowed their brows, how can there be such an unfair situation in the world, aren't they trying to wear him down one by one? Besides, with Yan Ping testing Xiang Shaolong's skills first, it will be greatly beneficial to the later opponents.

Unexpectedly, Zhao Zhi stood up and with her sword came to Xiang Shaolong's table and said with a smile, "Would Commander please give me your pointers!" Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, what enmity does he have with her, that she'd actually challenge him? He was about to reject when Teng Yi gave Jing Jun, who was raring to duel, an eye signal. That lad jumped up happily, his feet tapping on the table, made a somersault in the air over Zhao Zhi's head and landed behind her, saying with a grin, "If there's anything your disciple will do the work for you. The master will fight with the master, the disciple will fight with the disciple. Let me have some fun with Miss Zhi." Xiang Shaolong and the rest saw that this lad is suddenly now his disciple, and he is sprouting nonsensical and flirtatious words as well and they all thought it funny. The others saw that Jing Jun is as nimble as a monkey and were all secretly startled, secretly thinking that Zhao Zhi has met her match this time. Because Zhao Zhi is famed in Handan for her nimbleness.

Zhao Ba has always thought highly of himself and secretly thought that Xiang Shaolong is not good enough to be placed on par with him. He was quietly furious and said icily, "Xiao Zhi will exchange pointers with this little lad than!" Zhao Zhi knows that her teacher is hinting to her not to show mercy, and also because

she's always hated men who tried to flirt with her so she acknowledged the order and turned around fiercely, her long sword piercing forward as fast as lightning, aiming right at Jing Jun's heart. Her pose was exquisite yet the moves were swift and vicious, it is indeed top rated swordsmanship.

Everyone saw her sudden attack and thought that Jing Jun would certainly be caught unawares and thus unable to avoid her. Even Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo's hearts almost jumped to their throats, afraid that something will happen to him. Only Teng Yi remained expressionless like Yan Ping, as if even when the sky and earth splits, there will still be no change in his expression.

Book 5 Chapter 2 – Open animosity

Jing Jun did not expect his opponent to immediately strike without even a greeting. But he has lived all his life in the forests and grew up among ferocious animals so he has met even more dangerous situations than this numerous times. He chortled, made a false move as if he's going to move diagonally to the left and when the long sword is about to reach him, he moved to the right by a few millimeters and dashed to Zhao Zhi's back towards the left, his speed even faster than a spirit.

Zhao Mu and Guo Zhong exchanged a look, and both could see the surprise in each other. With such a person helping Xiang Shaolong, it's akin to giving wings to a tiger. Therefore, that Wu Zhuo and Teng Yi must be formidable as well and they have no choice but to reevaluate Xiang Shaolong's ability.

Zhao Zhi was obviously not afraid, this sword stroke is purely to test Jing Jun's reflexes and now that she knows that her opponent is extremely nimble, she gave a soft grunt as she bent her legs and jumped up into the air, turning a huge somersault. The sharp weapon in her hand turned into a million sword sparks aiming towards Jing Jun from the air. Zhao Ba's men immediately cheered.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Zhao Zhi's swordplay looks nice and tightly executed as well, absolutely not just showy moves and was secretly startled as he can deduce from this that Zhao Ba will definitely be extremely formidable. At the same time he remembered how Lian Jin called himself invincible in Handan; people with elevated status like Zhao Mu and Yan Ping will naturally not duel with Lian Jin but Zhao Ba as the head of the

warrior association, why did he allow Lian Jin to have his way?

He had a sudden thought, as if he could grasp the meaning of it, but can't really accurately describe what he felt. Such a weird feeling is making him feel extremely uncomfortable. The empty handed Jing Jun who was standing in the middle of the hall finally took out his weapon, a dagger secured to his waist. His hand reached into his clothes and a ball of something blackish looking suddenly flew out from his hand, first aimed towards Zhao Zhi's right then it speeded up and turned back and hit Zhao Zhi's long sword with a 'dang!'.

Zhao Zhi's sword speaks were immediately dispersed and she also dropped to the ground. That thing belonging to Jing Jun flew above his head, turning circles above following the movements of his right hand, it turned out to be a shiny, silvery crescent shaped 'Flying Knife', which is extremely sharp on both sides, especially the sharp ends that is shaped like a cow's horns, making one feel it's horrible danger. It's the first time Xiang Shaolong has seen his specialized weapon and secretly thought that it will take little effort if it's used to kill beasts.

Jing Jun grinned and looked at Zhao Zhi, who seemed at a loss as to how to deal with his weapon, his eyes staring leeringly at her chest. Zhao Ba raised his voice, "Such unorthodox weapons, how can it be even taken out in public." A loud laugh was heard from the main door and someone commented, "Chairman Zhao's words are not quite right! In the world there are only weapons that can kill or cannot kill, there's no such thing as unorthodox."

Everyone turned around in surprise only to see the great general

Li Mu step into through the door accompanied by 10 over family warriors. Gao Ang and a few Guo family guards were running after him, obviously they did not even have the chance to announce his arrival. Xiang Shaolong took the chance to call Jing Jun back. A flash of icy murderous intent flashed past Zhao Zhi's eyes before she quietly returned to her seat.

The wily old fox Guo Zhong chuckled as he left the host table, his face full of smiles as he said, "When did general come back, or else you would certainly not be left out tonight." Li Mu's dynamic eyes swept over all the guests who stood up to welcome him and when he saw Zhao Mu, a murderous intent flashed swiftly in his eyes before he covered it up and said with a cold smile, "I just hope that Mister Guo will not blame me for coming uninvited."

He stared at the embarrassed looking Zhao Ba and said, "Chairman is in charge of cultivating talents for great Zhao, but please do not be such a stickler for customs. I have been fighting with barbarians for a long time and am used to seeing the countless changes on the battlefield. When 2 armies fight, the only goal is to win the other party, who cares what weapon is being used." Zhao Ba was so furious his face turned dark but he was at a loss for words. Li Mu turned towards Xiang Shaolong and his tone softened as he said, "Shaolong has accomplished a great merit, I came today to offer you 3 toasts. Bring me wine!"

This famous Zhao general who is almost on par with Lian Po shocked the entire gathering upon his arrival and even a bully like Zhao Mu dared not speak up and risk offending this number 2 person in the military. Words seem to be stuck in Le Cheng and Guo Kai's throats as they dared not reply as well. Xiang Shaolong was secretly surprised, he did not expect this person who

represents the Zhao military would show his support for him publicly, and now he is no longer fighting alone.

Only Yan Ping remained seated, not showing any deference to Li Mu at all. Li Mu did not blame him at all and just drank 3 cups of wine with Xiang Shaolong, even seating himself down at Xiang Shaolong's table. Wu Zhuo and the rest immediately left their seats while Guo Zhong summoned his men to arrange for 3 extra tables behind for them and Li Mu's men.

After everyone was seated, Zhao Mu gave a dry cough and said, "Great general has just returned, I wonder how is the situation at the border?" Li Mu replied icily, "This is the first time the Marquis of Julu has asked about the Xiong Nus but the reason I rushed back to Handan this time is because of Lady Ni's incident. After discussing with Premier Lian, we felt that there are many suspicious points regarding her suicide and decided that the military will jointly send in an official request to his Majesty to look into this matter thoroughly. Marquis is the person who dealt with this case single handedly, so you will know that my words are not baseless. I still need to seek your advice."

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened. He remembered Zhao Qian once mentioned that Zhao Ni is the daughter-in-law of Zhao She, a famed general of Zhao who once defeated the Qin army. Because of her insistence of preserving her chastity she was well liked by the people and even has the support of the military, that's why even Zhao Mu dared not touch her. Now that Zhao Mu's lust has gotten the better of him and caused her death, there's no way his relations with Zhao She, the military and the other generals can maintain cordiality and now they are going to fight each other face on. That's why Li Mu is being so open about his intention to

deal with Zhao Mu now.

Zhao Mu's expression changed for the worse immediately but because of Li Mu's military powers and status, he dared not throw his temper. Guo Kai said condescendingly, "Lady Ni committed suicide because of her pining for her dead husband, this is a fact and his Majesty is most aware of this matter. General is not putting your energy at the borders, isn't all this unnecessary?"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect someone as subtle as Guo Kai would actually rebut Li Mu. Obviously the fight between the military and Zhao Mu's gang have reached a burning stage where each will not give any face to the opposite party. Li Mu is indeed a hardened soldier. He looked heavenward and laughed loudly, "We're exactly afraid his Majesty will be tricked by unscrupulous people, that's why we have no choice but to interfere. The way to winning is first to settle internal problems before dealing with external problems. If you say this is unnecessary, this must be a very extreme joke."

Guo Zhong has never joined in any faction's fight but the various groups will try to pull him towards their cause due to his influence, hence he was able to make friends with all sides. Now that he saw that the atmosphere is getting more and more fiery, he felt that things might be getting out of hand so he interrupted and tried to cool things down by saying, "We will not talk about state affairs tonight, but only talk about entertainment. I have arranged a very exciting show of beauties dancing with swords, shall we all enjoy it?" He has not even given the signal when Yan Ping called out, "Hold it!"

Slowly standing up, he pulled out from his back the Juzi sword which is at least 1.5 times longer than the average sword and looked at Xiang Shaolong icily as he said, "Commander Xiang, tonight either you will perish or I will die. Let me see what that traitor Yuan Zong has taught you?" Because of Yan Ping's special status, there is no way Li Mu can find a reason to interrupt or interfere. Xiang Shaolong knows that this duel is unavoidable and thought to himself that he might as well let this duel be a form of offering for Yuan Zong. If not because that he has numbers on his side, there's no way Yan Ping can harm even a hair on that Mohist master! He stood up loudly, his eyes icy as he stared at Yan Ping and said, "Who is the traitor? You can debate about it when you see Mo Yi himself!"

Yan Ping snorted angrily, obviously he is feeling extremely furious as he moved to the middle of the hall and stood ready. The hall was silent, everyone knows Yan Ping's swordplay is unfathomable. Naturally some are secretly cheering while some were worried for Xiang Shaolong. Zhao Mu is secretly laughing, because if Yan Ping is killed, King Xiaocheng will still be extremely unhappy although he knows that Xiang Shaolong has no choice. If Yan Ping were to kill Xiang Shaolong and get rid of this thorn in his eye, it will be beneficial to him. So no matter what the outcome is, he has all to gain and nothing to lose.

Xiang Shaolong left his table and beyond everyone's expectations, he actually walked towards Zhao Mu's table instead, his eyes frosty as he stared at Zhao Mu unceasingly. Zhao Mu and his men were on the alert, some of them even moving their hands to their sword handles, getting ready to deal with any moves that might harm Zhao Mu. Xiang Shaolong came to the front of Zhao Mu's table and with a slight smile, removed the Flying Rainbow from his waist and placed it together with the scabbard on the

table in front of Zhao Mu, saying calmly, "This sword will be returned to Marquis. It has once happily drunk the fresh blood of Xiao Weimou, it has not shamed the reason why Marquis generously gave it away." He then stared hard at this conniving thief who now has a blood feud with him before turning around and walking towards Yan Ping who was standing in the middle of the hall.

Although Xiao Weimou died because of him, the real person who killed Xiao Weimou is Teng Yi. The reason why Xiang Shaolong said that is to deliberately antagonize Zhao Mu and at the same time let him know that he is already aware of his nefarious plan. The act of returning the sword signifies that a clear line will henceforth be drawn between them, an open rebuke. At this instant, he doesn't even care about King Xiaocheng, much less Zhao Mu. And only when he publicly shows his animosity like this can he get the full support of Lian Po, Li Mu and the military.

Indeed Zhao Mu was so furious that his face turned red and pale, looking extremely horrible. As for the rest it is the first time they found out that Xiao Weimou has been killed and were all surprised and whispered amongst themselves. An expression of shock even flashed past Li Mu and Yan Ping's faces. Xiang Shaolong felt greatly relieved that he now no longer have to put on an act with his enemy Zhao Mu. His eyes staring at Yan Ping, he reached out and drew his Mohist wooden sword as waves of murderous aura emitted from him like steam. At the same time his mind was clear, everything is inconsequential, forgetting even about Yuan Zong's revenge. Only his Mohist wooden sword and his opponent's Juzi sword is left in this world, with no place for anything else.

Although Yan Ping looks as stable as a mountain with no

loopholes at all, it seems that Xiang Shaolong totally understands his enemy's movement and intent, which are totally reflected in his calm mind. This is the method of 'keeping one's heart as clear as jade' in Mo Yi's 3 killer strikes, which uses an extraordinary breathing method and a resolute mind. The open animosity with Zhao Mu has also made him calmer, like a reverend who has suddenly found the Way, he has now reached the epitome of the way of the sword. In other people's eyes, Xiang Shaolong seems to have suddenly changed into another person, as quiet as still water but also simmering within an explosive strength and murderous aura.

Zhao Mu and Zhao Ba revealed a look of shock at the same time. They're all expert swordsmen so they naturally know that the essence of swordplay can be most effectively executed when once reaches such a stage. Yan Ping's expression turned somber, he deeply understands Mohist swordplay's reason of emphasizing more on defense than attack so thinking that Xiang Shaolong will be young and rash, decided that he will not attack first. If not for the fact that Xiang Shaolong is revealing such a frightening aura, he will never control himself and give way like this.

Xiang Shaolong's gaze fell onto his opponent's Juzi sword. Under the firelight, it seems to radiate an indescribable shine and dust could not even settle on it. Obviously it's extremely sharp. He can't help but feel puzzled, isn't Mohist sword play's dexterity based on its cumbersome weight, but isn't this sharp and swift long sword just the opposite of the essence of Mohist swordplay? Unless Yan Ping has some other skills, or else this type of sword can never fully execute the essence of Mohist swordplay. Once he thought of this, he has a plan in his mind and he lifted his wooden sword as he walked slowly but surely towards Yan Ping. Yan Ping's eyes were shooting daggers at him as he stared at Xiang Shaolong's

shoulders.

The hall was so quiet one can hear a pin drop. Only the footsteps of Xiang Shaolong, which seems to be in total synchronization with the tempo of the universe, can be heard. Everyone suddenly has a strange feeling, as if everything is now in Xiang Shaolong's control and everything in the universe will have to bow down to him but little do they know that this is exactly the essence of the Mohist's 3 killer strikes.

Xiang Shaolong thought of the Zou Yan's observation tower in Daliang, remembered the beautiful scene of the sky filled with stars and an encompassing feeling of the universe flared up in him as he roared and executed the move of 'Attacking instead of defending' from the 3 killer strikes. The Mohist sword seems to extend yet retract, suddenly it seems to be moving weirdly in a fashion that encompasses the meaning of the mystical universe straight towards Yan Ping's face. Even for a person as calm as Yan Ping, he was startled as well. He only felt his opponent's sword styles are like the Changjiang River, never ending, and if he only uses Mohist swordplay's defense style, he'll immediately be beaten. What is even more shocking is that his opponent's styles seems to be made to go against the Mohist swordplay and yet they are undeniably Mohist swordplay as well. Left with no choice, the Juzi sword morphed into icy sparks as it meets the attack with an attack.

Xiang Shaolong's intent is to force him to execute his secret skills and now that he saw his trick has worked, he suddenly retreated and executed one of the moves 'Returning sword stance' from 'Defending instead of attacking'. Yan Ping was ecstatic, thinking that his opponent's elaborate swordplay is just a farce and he

returned to the old method of Mohist swordplay. He invented this swordplay of his, and named it 'Breaking Mohism', used especially to deal with his enemies within the Mohist sect. That's why he's so confident of killing Xiang Shaolong so at this point in time he won't let such a splendid opportunity pass and hurriedly moved forward to attack, totally forgetting about his initial plan to use defense as the main strategy. Xiang Shaolong's mind is as clear as water and on seeing his opponent's sword sparks grow wider, but the aim is towards his right shoulder. However, that is the loophole he deliberately showed.

Defending instead of attacking is the first stance oh Mohist swordplay's 3 killer moves and it encompasses 120 moves and each move has a loophole which are in fact intricately designed traps to lure the enemy in, which is exactly the essence of using defense instead of attacks. On seeing that Yan Ping has been tricked, he laughed loudly as he moved forward like lightning and Yan Ping's sword stabbed into empty air. Xiang Shaolong turned his waist slightly and his Mohist wooden sword turned back like lightning and struck heavily but surely on his opponent's sword.

He knows that Yan Ping's swordsmanship is excellent and extremely experienced as well, so he's definitely not worse off when compared. Even if he has the 3 killer strikes, he'd just learnt them after all and not totally adept at it so he is not insisting on injuring his enemy at all. However he took the opportunity and used his wooden sword which is at least 3 to 4 times heavier than his opponent's sword in addition to his extraordinary arm strength to force his opponent to use his strength. Yan Ping was immediately greatly disadvantaged as he felt his right hand go numb and his Juzi sword almost slipped from his grasp. Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled. Although Yan Ping looks as skinny as a pole on the surface, his arm strength is extraordinary and the

rebounding force of the clash cause his right arm to go numb as well.

Yan Ping gave a quiet snort and moved away diagonally, executing the defense stance of Mohist swordplay, which is so tight, that even splashing water won't be able to get past him. Just as the onlookers were dumbfounded from what just happened, Xiang Shaolong moved his sword to his left hand and in a totally unexpected way, the wooden sword seemed like a swallow flying as it flew out in a curve and came back, sweeping Yan Ping's right shoulder. Yan Ping did not expect that his opponent can use the sword so well with his left hand as well and as his right hand have not recovered from the impact, he had no choice but to take another step back and face his enemy. The Juzi sword's execution was light and nimble as it tried to counterbalance his opponent's heavy handed sweeps.

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly, "You've been tricked!" as he wooden sword rose to tangle with his opponent's precious sword. The 2 bodies joined then separated. On the surface it seems there's no injury to either of them but everyone can see that Yan Ping has been greatly disadvantaged and his face is now extremely pale. Xiang Shaolong took 3 steps forward towards Yan Ping. Yan Ping gritted his teeth and retreated in unison. At the same time they moved to the left in unison, as if there's an invisible thread joining the two of them together.

Yan Ping is indeed someone who has trained hard for many years and his expression quickly returned to normal, as if he is not injured at all. It turned out that earlier Xiang Shaolong had kneed Yan Ping on his lower calf and if not for the fact that his stance was steady and he immediately moved his strength down, he would

have fallen to the ground. However the pain is still throbbing and he knows that he is not able to fight a long battle and he gave a low snort and the Juzi sword attacked towards his opponent, moving like a meteor. Xiang Shaolong fighting mood is at its peak as he counted Yan Ping's breathing and steps. Before his opponent struck, he can already predict accurately if it's a real or fake move by observing the slight change in his opponent's quickened breathing and lighter footsteps. He executed the most formidable move, 'Forgetting feelings' from the 3 killer strike's 'Attacking and defending concurrently', throwing himself at death's door, using only the earlier advantage he gained to compete with his opponent on their innate ability and gut reactions.

There was a cry as Yan Ping's sword dropped to the ground and he hurriedly retreated, the expression on his face as pale as a dead person. His left hand clasping his right arm as fresh blood oozed from between his fingers. Although this slash did not take his life, Yan Ping will not be able to fight for the time being and it's still an unknown whether his right hand will be crippled. Immediately some people rushed out with the intention of helping to hold this proud man.

Yan Ping stood up straight and shouted at those who came forward to go away. He stared at Xiang Shaolong and asked, "Why did you hold yourself back?" Xiang Shaolong put his sword back into the sheath on his back and said calmly, "Although Yuan Zong died because of you, but it's after all the internal fight of your Mohist sect and has nothing to do with me, so is there a need to fight to the death?"

Yan Ping asked quietly, "What swordplay were you using earlier?" Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "It's a swordplay I created

myself, what does Juzi think of it?" A deep hatred flashed from Yan Ping's eyes as he shouted, "Good!" and he walked towards the main door without even turning back, not even bothering to take his sword with him.

Book 5 Chapter 3 – Mother Of Emperor Qin

After Yan Ping left quietly after his defeat, Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to take his leave.

Li Mu happily gave him a lift and his men gave up 3 horses for Teng Yi and the rest while Xiang Shaolong was invited up the carriage with him.

The entourage rode slowly down the hill of the Guo residence.

Li Mu was silent for a moment before he bared himself, “This time we can tolerate it no longer and decided to throw in the hatchet, using Lady Ni’s incident to have a last confrontation with Zhao Mu.” He put his hand on Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and said seriously, “The Premier and I have been keeping a close watch on you. Shaolong you are our Great Zhao’s a rare talent of this generation, and you’re still so young.” He sighed before continuing, “If his Majesty still wants to protect Zhao Mu this time, Shaolong should leave Zhao immediately and go somewhere else to find your fame. Don’t be like us and stay on blindly to protect a country with no hope.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “We’ve gotten the secret manual, why are you still so pessimistic. I think the people of Great Zhao are slowly getting prosperous and in another few years we’ll regain our lost strength!”

Li Mu interrupted him, “Shaolong you’re still not very familiar with affairs of the state. Even without the battle of Changping

which greatly weakened us, we still have our disadvantages. They are the Xiongnu who kept encroaching on our borders, and in order to deal with them, our resources will be depleted in the long run. That's why among the various states, only Great Zhao has the least population. Although we have many famous generals, but ever since the beginning of the empire, we can only defend our soil and does not have the ability to expand."

Xiang Shaolong sincerely felt a liking for this famous general who is on par with Lian Po and can't help but ask, "Since you can see this point so clearly, why are you still in Zhao and not leaving?"

Li Mu looked out the window, a look of extreme sadness flashed in his eyes as he sighed quietly and said, "Man is not without feelings, unlike plants and trees. I have been defending the northern border for so long, fighting the Xiongnu, and have established a deep relationship with those living at the borders. If I abandon them and leave, who else can stop the vicious and merciless Xiongnu, how can I bear to let them be murdered. Hai!"

There was helplessness in his words.

Xiang Shaolong was moved and asked, "Can you delay the submission of your document to his Majesty for 1 to 2 days?"

A light flashed past Li Mu's eyes as he stared at him and asked, "You seem to be confident, what ingenious move do you have?"

Xiang Shaolong respects him from the bottom of his heart so without hiding a single thing, told him about the possibility that Zhao Mu is a spy sent by the Chus to create havoc.

Li Mu grabbed his shoulders tightly, a ray of hope shot from his eyes as he said, “Shaolong you’re really something. We’ll use this point, which has never been thought of to deal with Zhao Mu. I’ll be staying in Handan for a few days, we’ll keep in close contact and coordinate the timing to submit the document.”

The 2 of them discussed a little more and soon they arrived at the Wu family stockade. Before he left the carriage, Li Mu held him back and said, “Shaolong you’re still young and full of vigor and may find it difficult to resist temptations. You may know that wine and women can harm a person, even an iron man will not be able to withstand days and nights of merry making. Shaolong you must remember that.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that his flirtatious escapades, especially his affair with Lady Ya, have spread far. That’s why Li Mu had such an advice for him. He blushed and lowered his head to accept the lecture.

He had just stepped into the Wu residence when the guards immediately called him and Wu Zhuo to meet with Wu Yingyuan while Teng and Jing both returned to the back courtyard to rest.

Wu Yingyuan was accompanied by Tao Fang and received them in the secret room in his inner chamber. After listening to the report on this recent trip, he praised them before saying, “Tu Xian just sent someone to contact me, saying that Lu Buwei’s situation

now is not too good. His enemies in the Qin court is using the reason that he's not a Qin to carry rumors to King Zhuangxiang and wants him to be excluded. King Zhuangxiang is someone who is easily swayed and he may be convinced by them. Therefore the matter of moving Ying Zheng and his mother back to Xianyang cannot be delayed further. With she and her son next to King Zhuangxiang, Lu Buwei's status will be as stable as a mountain and he may even become the premier. Otherwise even our hopes will be dashed."

Xiang Shaolong was still moved by what Li Mu had said so he furrowed his brows, "Can we delay it for a few days, and see if there's hope to topple Zhao Mu first?"

Wu Yingyuan looked at him with concentration, "I know you can't wait to tear Zhao Mu to pieces, but this is after all a personal feud. You should take into account the bigger picture. Now the fate of the Wu family is on your shoulders, one mistake and everyone will perish."

Xiang Shaolong sighed quietly, "If Zhao Mu is toppled, is there still hope for Great Zhao?"

Wu Yingyuan was irritated and interrupted him, "That's just wishful thinking. Even if Zhao Mu is killed, with such a muddleheaded ruler like King Xiaocheng, the Zhao family will still be destined to die. The Crown Prince is nothing good as well. The only way out for the Wu family is to rely on Qin, that is the only hope."

Xiang Shaolong lowered his head speechlessly, and knows that

after his conversation with Li Mu, he has been greatly moved by his great sacrifice.

Only Wu Yingyuan, this 100% businessman is more formidable. He doesn't talk about feelings, only about actual benefits, because history has long proven that what he said is indeed correct.

Wu Yingyuan dotes greatly on this son-in-law in his heart and knows that his words have been a little too stern, so his voice turned more gentle as he said, "I know that Shaolong is smarter than others, I wonder if you have any headway regarding the matter of sending Ying Zheng and his mother back?"

Xiang Shaolong braced himself up and said, "It's still too early now. After I rest for a while, I will look for Zhuji. Only if she can be convinced will the matter be able to succeed."

Wu Yingyuan and the rest were stunned.

It's already the 'Mou'* hour and he still said it's too early?

(*Mou – Time between 7pm to 9pm)

Does he want to wait until the middle of the night to sneak into Zhuji's bedchamber?

Xiang Shaolong soaked himself in the pool, his mind in a dilemma.

He is someone who places great emphasis on relationships. The first place he came to after traveling in the time machine is the state of Zhao and after spending these time with the Zhaos, and after how he and the Zhao army relied on each other when they went to Wei, he's already established close relations with them. Subconsciously he has regarded Zhao as his own country and hope to do something for her.

But he knows that even if he gets rid of Zhao Mu, the state of Zhao won't be any better. Such a torn feeling made him even more dejected.

Ting Fangshi who is next to him asked gently, "What is Shaolong thinking about?"

Wu Tingfang who is on the other side said with a little jealousy, "Of course he's thinking of Sister Ya and Princess Qian!"

Xiang Shaolong hugged the 2 naked beauties and remembered Li Mu's warning about not indulging in wine and women so he said with a bitter smile, "With you two beauties next to me, how can I think of other women. It's because I have a matter to attend to tonight and cannot accompany you, that's why I was feeling troubled."

Wu Tingfang said understandingly, "Master Tao has informed us, Xiang Lang just put your mind at ease and go. We will wait for your return obediently. Ai! I forgot to tell you, ever since you went to Daliang, Sister Ting has been sleeping with me every night,

talking about our secrets. Tonight us sisters will wait for you on the bed.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought, “Oh heavens!”, if they want intimacy everytime, it’ll be very difficult even if he wants to avoid wine and women.

Wu Tingfang continued excitedly, “I did not expect even Yan Ping is not your match and I really hope you can put that Zhao Ba down a peg or two as well.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Zhao Zhi and can’t help but ask about her.

Wu Tingfang lowered her head with embarrassment as she replied, “I heard she’s one of the lovers of that baddie Lian Jin. You killed Lian Jin so naturally she’ll hate you to the core.”

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened.

The reason why Zhao Ba is so full of hatred for him may be related to this, and not because he is in cahoots with Zhao Mu. But of course there may be other reasons as well.

Whether in this era or the 21st century, whoever have power will certainly have other people who will side him, this is a fact that will never change with time.

Xiang Shaolong saw that time is almost up and told Chunying

who was adding hot water into the pool, “Help me get Masters Teng Yi and Jing Jun here.”

The snow fell relentlessly on the ancient city of Handan.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi hid themselves in a dark corner, looking at the huge house with lanterns still lighted in it.

Xiang Shaolong whispered in Teng Yi’s ears with a smile, “That rascal Jing Jun must be secretly cursing now because I dragged him out from a warm bed with a woman in it.”

Teng Yi gave a cold snort, “Dare he? I’ve warned him, if he starts going overboard, I’ll send him packing back home.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that with Teng Yi controlling Jing Jun, it’ll not be easy for this lad to go overboard.

The wind howled and Jing Jun who is 10 times more nimble than the average person jumped down from the wall and came quickly to where they were hiding. He said quietly, “I didn’t expect the inside to be so huge! I’ve found out where Zhuji lives.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, “Let us go then!”

The 3 of them dashed out from the dark place and came to the bottom of the high wall.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the snowing sky and thought that a dark and windy night like this is perfect for espionage. Everyone would be snuggling in their blankets in such cold weather and even the guards will be hiding in the rooms lighted with stoves.

In this quiet and lonely night, they seem to be in another unique world. Especially when Xiang Shaolong is thinking that he can see the beauty who gave birth to the first Emperor of China, he felt both excited and exhilarating.

Xiang Shaolong savored this strange feeling carefully as he followed Jing Jun and climbed over the wall swiftly, landing within the courtyard.

Inside the houses all joined one another, making it difficult for one to see everything at once. What is unexpected is that with Ying Zheng's status as a hostage, why is he able to use such a big place.

They landed in a rectangular opened air courtyard and facing the high wall is a row of houses, which looks like the residences of servants.

Jing Jun executed his skills and led the way in front with familiarity. They passed by numerous houses, came to a garden forest with a pond, a fake hill and pavilion.

Jing Jun pointed at a 2 storey building on the other side of the garden forest, which still has lamps burning in it and said, "I overheard the maids talking earlier, Zhuji should be staying there but I don't know which room?"

Teng Yi scrutinized the surroundings and said, “We’ll keep a look out here for you, if the situation is not right, Jing Jun will give out a bird call to inform you.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in agreement and snuck towards the building. He chose a window with no lights and after checking that nothing is amiss, dashed inside.

This place looks like a small hall.

He quickly walked to the wooden door leading out and plastered his ear on it. On hearing that there’s no one outside, he pushed the door open and went out.

Outside is a corridor with one end leading to the outer hall and the other end to a flight of stairs leading upstairs.

The house was quiet, it seems that the maids are already in dreamland.

He had not finish this thought when he heard footsteps from the top of the stairs.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly hid back into the room and wondered why someone is still awake at a time like this.

The footsteps stopped in front of the door.

Xiang Shaolong was astounded, there's not enough time for him to leave by the window and he hurriedly went to a corner and squat down behind a small cabinet. Although it's not a good place to hide, it's better to come face to face with the person coming in.

Indeed someone pushed the door and entered, followed by the sounds of cups and plates knocking on one another.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the other party has no idea that someone is hiding in a corner so he boldly extended his head out for a look. It turned out to be 2 pretty maids.

One of the maids yawned and said, "He's the worst, every time he comes Madam would not be able to sleep, and we'll have to serve them at the side."

The other maid said, "Madam is usually a person of few words but when she sees him she seems to have endless things to say."

The maid who spoke first laughed, "It's better than serving that lecher. His body can't make it yet he wants to rely on hateful toys. Sister Xiang has only half a life left after being toyed with him for 3 nights in a row. Hai!"

Xiang Shaolong's heart dropped, needless to say this lecher must be Ying Zheng. Now that the maids are talking about it, it seems that Lady Ya's words are not wrong at all.

What is this all about? How can the heroic and smart Emperor Qin be someone like that, how is he going to exterminate Lu Buwei in future and consolidate the 6 states, building the largest foundation for China.

Amongst the chatter, the 2 maids prepared the tea and left.

Now that he knows that someone is still awake, Xiang Shaolong dare not go upstairs via the stairs so he left by the window and saw that there is a darkened window on the second floor. He was climbing halfway up when a group of patrol came with lanterns from the small path in the garden. Xiang Shaolong was startled, because if this is where Zhuji stays, the guards will certainly be extra alert and will not miss this person hanging in midair.

He gritted his teeth and increased his speed, in a moment he went through the window into the room.

It's a large bedroom for a lady, the floor was piled with thick and soft rugs while the bed is empty. Besides a few tables and mirrors, on the walls pretty paintings were hung. Xiang Shaolong was suspecting if this is Zhuji's bedroom when the familiar footsteps of the 2 maids sounded outside the door again.

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented.

This is what they say, 'a wolf in front and a tiger below'. Luckily there is a large wardrobe at the corner of the room and left with no choice, he ran over and opened it for a look. There are 2 compartments inside, although there are clothes piled on the

lowest compartment, but he can still squeeze in, if barely. He dare not hesitate any longer and immediately squeezed in and just as he closed the wardrobe door, the 2 maids pushed open then door and came in.

Followed by sounds of them arranging the blankets.

After a moment the 2 maids walked out but they did not close the door.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, it seems that Zhuji and her lover will come in anytime, then won't he have to suffer in here and listen to Zhuji's moans.

Tonight seems to be a difficult time to get in touch with Zhuji. Spending the night under the blankets with Wu Tingfang and Ting Fangshi is naturally a hundred times better than being curled up in here.

Besides if Teng and Jing sees that he has not come out after so long, something may happen.

Just as he was feeling troubled, footsteps, one heavy and one light, could be heard coming closer, followed by the sound of the door closing.

Xiang Shaolong secretly cried out, 'Heavens!' and he closed his eyes and left everything to fate.

Outside he could hear the friction of the clothes moving, and the moaning made by a man and woman.

Since Xiang Shaolong was feeling bored, he started guessing who Zhuji's lover might be.

Reasonably it definitely cannot be Zhao Mu, since he knows that the military will soon be going to King Xiaocheng tomorrow to settle scores with him, so now he should be going to the King of Zhao and trying to poison his mind. Because after all, the King of Zhao does have some feelings for Zhao Ni and if he really finds out that the person who caused her demise is Zhao Mu, he may ignore all 'marital' feelings and order Zhao Mu's death. So there's no way Zhao Mu will take this flippantly.

But Zhuji and her son has always been under Zhao Mu's supervision, and anyone else who wants to go near will need his permission.

Who can this person be then?

An extremely gentle voice can be heard from outside the wardrobe, "The thing that I asked of you, how is it now?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly complimenting her. Just by listening to her voice, he knows that this woman is very well versed in using her gift of beauty to ensnarl men. No wonder the newly crowned King Zhuangxiang could not forget about her.

Since Lu Buwei chose her to captivate King Zhuangxiang, naturally she is someone extraordinary.

That lover replied, “Now the situation is uncertain, it’s still not the time to return to Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and he immediately recognized him as the effeminate philosopher Guo Kai.

He did not expect it to be him. No wonder he linked up with Zhuji, just that he wonders if Zhao Mu is aware of this matter.

Zhuji pouted, “What’s so uncertain. Now that my husband has ascended the throne, as long as my son and I can return to Xianyang, Zheng’er will be the crown prince to ascend the throne. What’s there to worry about!”

Sounds of kissing was heard again and Zhuji’s moans became more intense. Obviously Guo Kai is trying all his means to pacify Zhuji.

Zhuji exclaimed breathlessly, “Don’t!”

Guo Kai replied, “Every second of the night is worth a thousand gold, it’s rare for us to have this chance. Come! Let’s talk further within the bed!”

Zhuji replied a little angrily, “You’re only interested in my body but not at all concerned about my troubles. Tell me! Why didn’t

you do what you promised me.”

Guo Kai replied anxiously, “Don’t you know that I’ve put a lot of work into it? It’s just that King Zhuangxiang has just ascended the throne and all parties are now keeping a close eye on both of you. Besides, Lu Buwei’s status is not that stable now as well and he’s in danger of being overthrown at any moment. No matter how we see it, you should not be sneaking back into Xianyang at this moment.”

Xiang Shaolong gradually understood, the reason Zhuji ensnarled this important person in Zhao Mu’s gang is because she wants to make use of his power to escape Handan.

It’s just that one wonders if Guo Kai is really planning to betray Zhao Mu or he just wants to cheat her of her body, and it seems more likely that it’s the latter. One just have to think that Guo Kai now has power in his hands and he has a large extended family in Zhao, so no matter how selfish he is, once he is faced with a life and death decision, he’ll certainly think of his own parents, brothers, wife and children first.

The most embarrassing thing is if Guo Kai were to go to Qin, he will certainly lose his life and Zhuji. Because Zhuji’s 2 other men, regardless of whether it’s Lu Buwei or King Zhangxiang, will certainly kill him because of jealousy.

For someone as smart as Guo Kai, how can he not consider about something so important?

Of course Zhuji understands this reasoning as well, but she's just too anxious to return to Qin and become the Empress so she couldn't care about anything else.

Indeed Zhuji remained silent.

Guo Kai said gently, "Come! The weather is so cold! What can be a more comfortable place than beneath a blanket?"

Sounds of clothes being removed followed.

Zhuji's voice said, "You get onto the bed first, I'll join you shortly after undressing."

Guo Kai is obviously very tired and he yawned and went up the bed.

Outside sounds of Zhuji removing her robes and accessories were heard.

A strange noise was heard, it turned out to be Guo Kai snoring.

Xiang Shaolong was affected as well and felt his eyelids getting heavy. Just as he was falling asleep. Footsteps came nearer.

Any drowsiness was immediately dissipated, and he secretly thought that it can't be that much of a coincidence that Zhuji is actually coming to the wardrobe to take her sexy lingerie.

He has not finished his thought when the wardrobe door was pulled open.

Xiang Shaolong had an idea out of impulse and jumped up, hugging her and throwing her down to the ground with one hand covering her tiny mouth, pressing her voluptuous and scantily clad alluring body beneath his. At the same time, he whispered close to her ear, “I am Xiang Shaolong, here to look for you on Lu Buwei’s orders!”

He repeated it 3 times before Zhuji stopped her struggle and her delicate body softened.

On the bed, the rhythmic snoring of Guo Kai was heard.

Xiang Shaolong thanked heavens and raised himself up a little, and came face to face with Zhuji.

He can’t help but feel his heart beat faster.

He saw the lady under him was extremely enticing, filled with the allure of a mature woman with eyes that could speak volumes, which are now sizing Xiang Shaolong up.

Suddenly Xiang Shaolong could feel her whole alluring body and a wave of lust coursed through him. He was so startled he hurriedly suppressed his lust in case the other party feels it.

He slowly removed his large hand that was covering her mouth and immediately saw Zhuji's pretty face.

She's certainly not a perfect and delicate beauty like Wu Tingfang, Lady Ya or Ji Yanran. Her face is a little too long, the bridge of her nose a little crooked and her lips a little too thick, but when matched with her pretty eyes, it formed a wild beauty and allure that can take one's soul away. Especially her lips which seems to be full of character, the corner lightly curved up, making men think that it's not an easy task to subdue her.

Heavens!

This is Emperor Qin's birth mother!

He has been looking for Emperor Qin all this time but never in his dreams did he think that he could take advantage of his mother like this.

Her body fragrance drifted into his nose.

Zhuji looked at him unblinkingly and said quietly, "I know who you are, because the person Zhao Mu most want to get rid of now is you."

Xiang Shaolong recollected his wandering thoughts and went close to her ear and said, "I hope you also know the relationship between the Wu family and Mister Lu. He sent Tu Xian to make contact with us to get you and your son back to Xianyang as soon

as possible.”

Xiang Shaolong tried to bear with the itch he felt in his ear and suppressed the urge to take advantage of her, but he can't help but lightly bit on her rounded earlobe and said, “Firstly I have to make contact with you to understand the situation before we can settle the details of escape. I...”

The sound of someone turning was heard on the bed.

The both of them were startled.

Zhuji said hurriedly, “Come again tomorrow night! I'll wait for you.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly rolled aside.

Zhuji stood up nimbly and at this time Guo Kai called for her from the bed.

Zhuji blushed slightly as she lowered her head and stared at Xiang Shaolong for a moment.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel lust welling up as he reached out and grabbed her calf, pinched it before letting go.

That captivating feeling is even more touching than the actual act of copulation.

Zhuji rolled her eyes at him before walking towards the bed.

Only after she extinguished the lamp and went into the bed curtains did Xiang Shaolong regain his thoughts.

He secretly thought that this woman is indeed formidable before leaving hurriedly.

By this time even if he made any noise, Guo Kai would not find out.

Book 5 Chapter 4 – No Route For Advance Or Retreat

After breakfast, Xiang Shaolong went to see Master Wu and his son but he did not see Wu Zhuo and Tao Fang.

He remembered the suspicious Chu who was in contact with Zhao Mu and knows that those two must be away because of this matter.

When he reported the situation last night when he saw Zhuji, Master Wu and his son turned somber.

Wu Yingyuan furrowed his brows and said, “This woman is extremely formidable, no man can escape her allure. But why is Guo Kai so bold, the servants there should all belong to Zhao Mu, so how can he hide his visits from Zhao Mu?”

Master Wu replied, “Zhao Mu allowed Guo Kai to handle a lot of matters for him, for all you know those people there are all placed by Guo Kai. That’s why he can steal what he’s supposed to protect without any fear at all.”

He turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, “The 2 new family warriors you recruited are rare talents. Treat them well, wealth and women, just give it to them.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I understand!” but he secretly thought to himself that a relationship based on such material goods, how

can it sustain?

Wu Yingyuan replied, “It seems that Shaolong can easily smuggle them out now, the question is how to leave Handan and avoid the pursuing soldiers along the way?” He paused and asked suspiciously, “Isn’t this a little too easy!”

Xiang Shaolong was only worried about the other aspect, “Our Wu family has such an extended family, easily more than a thousand, how can we escape out of Zhao?”

Wu Yingyuan smiled, “I’ve arranged for this since 2 years ago. The Wu family has business all over the world, so all along there’s always been people who were sent to other areas to take care of business and the farms. Recently, with the excuse of setting up a new farm, even Tingwei has been sent out, in case he lets slip of our plans when he’s out merrymaking.

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened, no wonder he have not seen Wu Tingwei. He asked, “Since the King of Zhao is aware of father-in-law and Lu Buwei’s being in correspondence, and now that we keep sending our family people out of Handan, how can he not be suspicious?”

Wu Yingyuan replied, “They can only suspect! They have never gathered any concrete proof. Besides, both the Guo family and us have connections with the various powerful people in other states and sometimes we even helped the King of Zhao in overseas secret missions. If not for Zhao Mu fanning the flames at the side, what’s the big deal about having relations with Lu Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong is even more perplexed, “Why is Zhao Mu so intent on getting rid of the Wu family?”

Master Wu slapped on the table and exclaimed angrily, “It’s all because of that fellow Guo Zhong who caused all these. I don’t know how he managed to find out that one of our family ancestors is a Qin, and investigated that the family name Wu is a major family name over at the Qin side, that’s why the King of Zhao’s suspicions of us grew day by day. Zhao Mu is just following the King of Zhao’s wishes and taking the opportunity to trample us!”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong manage to find out what happened.

Wu Yingyuan returned to the earlier topic, “Since Guo Kai has secretly entangled himself with Zhuji, we have to think of a way to make use of this matter to affect the relationship between Guo Kai and Zhao Mu. Without Guo Kai around to give nasty ideas to Zhao Mu, it’ll be easier to handle Zhao Mu.”

The corners of Master Wu’s lips revealed a slight mysterious smile as he said, “We’ll talk about this later.” He turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, “You better think of a more concrete plan so that you can strengthen Zhuji’s confidence when you see her tonight, then it’ll be easier to cooperate in future.”

At this time a servant came to report that there’s a guest looking for Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling perplexed, who could be looking for him?

By now Xiang Shaolong's status in the Wu family is even greater than before, and is obviously the most important person after Master Wu and Wu Yingyuan, so he received the guest in the main hall of the main mansion.

He went to the hall, and his visitors turned out to be the old family warriors of Prince Shaoyuan, Liu Cao and Pu Bu.

Xiang Shaolong came forward joyfully and helped the 2 of them up, asking with a mixture of surprise and joy, "I've been waiting for you to arrive everyday, and finally my wait is over."

The 2 of them saw how Xiang Shaolong holds them in such high regard and were so grateful that hot tears welled in their eyes.

Xiang Shaolong asked about the situation in Daliang.

It turns out that ever since Xiang Shaolong escaped out of Prince Xinling's residence, Prince Xinling has been livid. After he found out that besides the front section of the 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual', the rest has been swapped and stolen, he was so upset he almost committed suicide. He even suspected his sister Lady Pingyuan had leaked the news to Xiang Shaolong and started behaving coldly towards her and her son.

Because of this Prince Shaoyuan became very bad tempered and

kept on scolding and beating his family warriors. Pu Bu and the rest took the opportunity to resign.

Without the support of Prince Xinling, Prince Shaoyuan faces the difficulty of supporting 200 odd family warriors so he might as well dismiss them. Therefore Pu Bu and 40 odd other men returned to Handan.

They are familiar with the surroundings here and after finding out that Xiang Shaolong is safe, came to find him immediately.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly has an idea and after summoning someone to borrow from Wu Yingyuan a large sum of money, he stuffed the money to the 2 of them and said, “Find a place to settle down but you must remember not to reveal your relations with me. Have fun and make merry all you can, when I need your help, I will look for you.”

The 2 of them knew that he is now in a life and death fight with Zhao Mu and on hearing what he said, understood his meaning. They also saw that he is 10 times more generous than Prince Shaoyuan but his character is a 100 times better, so obviously they will want to follow him loyally.

Liu Cao said, “We’re very popular in Handan, and now that we’ve officially left the Pingyuan Residence, why don’t we pretend to throw in our lots with Zhao Mu’s devious faction so we can become your eyes and ears.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this is indeed a good idea,

who would have thought that the family warriors of Pingyuan Residence who used to be his enemies would now belong to him. They discussed who they should align themselves with and decided on how to make contact before the 2 of them left happily.

Xiang Shaolong felt more relieved and went to look for Teng Yi. Seeing that he was training the warriors of the Wu family, he thought of the idea of the special task force and told him, “See if my suggestion is doable, among these 2000 warriors, choose about 100 of the best and name them ‘Superior Troops’. Bring them to the farm and train them separately, let them learn the various different skills. If every one of them has half the skills of you and Jing Jun, it won’t be an impossible task when the time comes to force our way into the hostage residence to save people.”

At first Teng Yi furrowed his brows deeply when he heard that, secretly thinking how can a hundred people accomplish anything great, until Xiang Shaolong explained the method of keeping the strong and eliminating the weak as well as the strict training he underwent while in the special task force. This extremely experienced and ferocious warrior had to admit defeat and say, “This is the first time I’ve heard of such training methods, Shaolong you’re absolutely an incomparable military genius. War in your hands has become a form of art.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed, if he can change the sabers, swords and arrows into guns and cannons, just this ancient special task force will be able to conquer the 6 states and unify the world. By then would he need to fear a mere Zhao Mu.

The 2 of them discussed in detail the methods of training and

equipment needed before Xiang Shaolong led Jing Jun and that 10 personal bodyguards towards Lady Ya's residence.

While riding on the road, Xiang Shaolong thought of the missing Mei Canniang and had the urge to immediately turn his horse around and go to Mulberry Village to take a look for himself.

He then remembered Ji Yanran at faraway Daliang, and for a moment was helplessly filled with sadness.

Jing Jun who was riding alongside him was looking at his surroundings and looking at the pedestrians on the streets, he suddenly said earnestly, "Xiao Jun is very grateful towards Brother Xiang and Brother Teng. Without both of you who brought me to such an exciting and fun place, I don't know how I am going to spend my life?"

Xiang Shaolong cast aside his troubles and said with a laugh, "But it may also cause you to lose your life!"

Jing Jun grinned and said suavely, "Then I can only accept my fate! Precisely because of this danger that I may lose my life anytime, it makes fun time with beauties all the more interesting. That feeling is just like when I was 5 years old and the first time I helped my father hunt tigers."

Xiang Shaolong asked hoarsely, "A 5 year old kid can't even walk steadily, what help can you render?"

Jing Jun laughed as well, “That I forgot, I only remember when the ferocious tiger fell into the trap, the horrible roars were so frightening that I peed in my pants.”

Xiang Shaolong can't help but chortle loudly, his sadness momentarily forgotten.

Behind them hoof beats were heard.

Everyone turned their heads back in unison on hearing it.

A horse came nearer, the rider's cloak covering the whole head and for a moment they can't see the face clearly. Only when it got near did they recognize the person.

Jing Jun's eyes brightened immediately.

Xiang Shaolong was slightly surprised as he called out, “Where is Miss Zhi going?”

Zhao Zhi slowed her horse down and went to Xiang Shaolong's other side, turned her face towards him and looked at him frostily, “Where is Commander going then?”

Jing Jun who was on the other side blinked at her and said, “Miss Zhi have yet to reply Brother Xiang's question?”

Zhao Zhi felt angry upon seeing Jing Jun, feeling that he's more irritating than anyone else and retorted with fury, "When adults are talking, it's not your place to interrupt!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Miss is wrong, Xiao Jun is my good brother, his words are my words."

Jing Jun did not expect Xiang Shaolong to think so highly of him and he immediately became proud, puffing up his chest and deliberately heaved a sigh of pity as he said, "And I thought Miss Zhi is here to look for me!"

Zhao Zhi was so furious that her pretty face turned pale, "Who wants to look for you?"

Without knowing why, Jing Jun's words and actions always irritated and anger her.

Jing Jun chuckled, "Who are you looking for then!"

Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel that this lad is indeed quite good at making fun and flirting with women.

Zhao Zhi knows that she has fallen into Jing Jun's questioning trap. If she answers that she's here to look for Xiang Shaolong, it will mean that Jing Jun's earlier insinuation that she has taken a liking for Xiang Shaolong and is therefore here to look for him. But if her answer is no, naturally she's here to look for Jing Jun.

But the truth is Zhao Zhi doesn't even know herself why she is here to look for Xiang Shaolong.

Last night Xiang Shaolong had an outstanding victory over Yan Ping, who is a highly respected martial arts master in Handan, shocking everyone present.

Zhao Ba who has always thought highly of himself is now feeling afraid, especially since the military is now backing Xiang Shaolong up, Zhao Ba will not dare to embroil himself in the fight between the 2 big political and military powers. After the feast he immediately warned all his disciples, especially Zhao Zhi, not to antagonize Xiang Shaolong.

But Zhao Zhi is a proud person and after she went home, the more she thought about it, the more upset she became. After she woke up, she unconsciously went up her horse and came riding to the Wu residence and on the way there actually bumped into Xiang Shaolong, that's why she caught up with them.

Right now she is dumbfounded and her pretty face blushed.

Xiang Shaolong does not know the degree of closeness she has with Lian Jin, so he said with a quiet sigh, "At that time, being in a situation that one is forced to determine life and death in a duel, it's either Lian Jin will perish or I will die. Besides Lian Jin and Zhao Mu used underhanded tricks first while my fight with him was aboveboard, so who can blame me?"

Zhao Zhi was stunned, and lowered her pretty face.

The matter regarding Lian Jin and Zhao Mu using aphrodisiac to weaken Xiang Shaolong's energy has spread through the powerful in the imperial court long ago. Although Zhao Zhi has heard something about this, she forced herself to ignore it. But without knowing why, the way that Xiang Shaolong just talked about it like a passing matter, made her truly believe what has happened. Or maybe it's because last night Xiang Shaolong's conduct has shown that he is not one who is afraid of the powerful and that he is aboveboard in his attitude!

Her love for Lian Jin may be strong, but it's all superficial attraction to the opposite sex. Lian Jin had made use of her young blossoming heart and took the opportunity to steal her heart.

Such first love may be unforgettable for her, but it has not reached the stage where it has eaten into her soul. When Lian Jin's perfect image was destroyed, this love dissipated with the wind as well and for a moment her mind was in a blank, and she did not know what to do.

Xiang Shaolong seems to understand the change in her perfectly and asked with a smile, "Miss Zhi, will you let Jing Jun send you home?"

Zhao Zhi was startled, "I don't need anyone's escort!" She slapped her horse and went galloping into the side street on the left.

Xiang Shaolong gave Jing Jun an eye signal and Jing Jun was

overjoyed as he slapped his own horse and went after her, ignoring the looks of others as he shouted, “Miss Zhi, wait for me!”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted.

That lass Zhao Zhi is really not too bad, and extremely compatible with Jing Jun both in terms of age and appearance. Most importantly he could tell that Jing Jun has fallen for her at first sight but it seems that if he wants to woo her successfully, he'll have to put in a lot of effort.

Suddenly Xiang Shaolong realized that he has changed a lot.

If it was in the past, women to him are the more the merrier and he will never reject any who approaches him. Maybe now he has too many beauties, or maybe the pain of having the women he love die horribly one after another has made his attitude towards women a lot more cooler and he doesn't really feel like stepping into the love arena now.

Everyone who is born will have to face the deaths of people around him, and the end will come with his own death.

For the past year, he has experienced the heart wrenching pain of such deaths.

He thought of what happened with Zhuji last night. At that time although he felt great lust, it has nothing to do with love or feelings at all, just the rash desire of pure basic attraction to the

opposite sex.

But it's so difficult to control.

He'll have to be careful when he sees her tonight, or else if he were to have a physical relationship with her, things will become even more complicated.

He only hopes that she will not flirt with him, this woman truly understands how to lure men.

Lady Ya's residence came into view and Xiang Shaolong sighed before riding in.

The guards hastened their horses to follow him closely and 11 steeds swept into Lady Ya's residence like the wind.

Lady Ya has gone to the Palace and only Zhao Qian and Master Pan is in the residence.

Zhao Pan has matured in a short time, unlike in the past where he will slip out and have fun the whole day or make fun of the maids or forming up gangs to create trouble.

Zhao Qian pitied him because of the horrific experience he went through and accompanied him in his studies. As for Zhao Pan, in front of his beautiful cousin, changed his character and studied hard as well.

Xiang Shaolong's heart ached on seeing this and he took Zhao Pan to the garden where he conscientiously taught him the Mohist swordplay and ordered his men to spar with him.

While Zhao Pan was forgetting himself in his sword practice, Xiang Shaolong started chatting with Zhao Qian who was looking from the side, "I didn't expect this child to become so understanding."

Zhao Qian's eyes reddened as she replied, "The person he loves most is Aunt Ni. Now his heart is filled with hatred, not only does he hate Zhao Mu, he also hates Imperial Father. That's why he sees you as a role model and wants to become as smart and brave so that he can avenge Aunt Ni."

Xiang Shaolong looked at Zhao Pan, who has a face of darkened concentration and determination, which is clearly a mismatched expression for a person of his age at all and he felt iciness in his heart.

His intuition tells him that Zhao Pan will definitely not be an ordinary person in future but for now he cannot guess what great things will he accomplish.

Zhao Qian said quietly, "He accepted me partly because I belong to you, and also because like him, I hate Imperial Father and Zhao Mu greatly as well."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt terrible and he asked, "Doesn't

your Imperial Father respect Lady Ni the most? Why would he just sit there and look at Zhao Mu commit murder? At least he should look into this matter thoroughly. Besides this matter has caused the military much unhappiness and this can become the greatest danger for Zhao since the battle of Changping.”

Zhao Qian sighed sadly, “No one can understand Imperial Father, he wasn’t like that in the past. But after the battle of Changping, he changed totally, becoming indecisive and kept on changing his mind about matters, to the extent that he’s even a little afraid of facing his officials, especially the generals from the military. He allowed Zhao Mu to exercise sole power and cover everything up. Like this matter regarding Lady Ni, he should have given strict orders for a thorough investigation but after Zhao Mu’s interference, he made this into a small matter very easily and thus settled it, making all in the palace disheartened with him.”

From Zhao Qian’s words, Xiang Shaolong saw the other effect the battle of Changping has done to the state of Zhao.

The defeat of that battle is mainly because King Xiaocheng fell for the Qin’s extremely juvenile trick of sowing discord and allowed Zhao Gao to replace Lian Po. It can also be considered a clash of power between a newly crowned leader and a powerful old general.

After this greatest defeat in the history of Zhao which totally weakened them, King Xiaocheng lost his confidence and became someone who runs away from reality, to the extent that he’s even afraid of seeing the silent reproach in his ministers’ eyes.

Therefore Zhao Mu took the opportunity to come in and fulfilled his mental and physical needs.

Maybe the King of Zhao became a homosexual because he has given up on himself, and was embarking on destroying himself out of guilt. Of course it is also possible that he is born like that but what is the true reason, maybe even King Xiaocheng does not know himself.

Zhao Qian said sadly, “I still miss the time when we were escaping from Daliang, hoping to have you hugging and loving me every night. Shaolong! When will we leave this hideous place, find a deserted place and let Qian’er cook for you while you hunt for our livelihood?”

Xiang Shaolong was laughing bitterly to himself, if he had stayed on at Mei Canniang’s valley, maybe he would be able to spend the rest of his life like that. But now it’s as if he is already riding on the tiger and finds it difficult to dismount, and he can’t do it even if he wants to.

Even if he goes to Qin, what he will meet may be even more complicated fights for power. In this ancient warring states period, it seems that there is no paradise to live in. Or else Mei Canniang would not have been almost raped by bandits and Teng Yi’s wife and children would not have been killed.

He sighed and told the story about paradise to Zhao Qian. When this pretty princess is totally engrossed in the story, as if her soul has flown to that human utopia, Zhao Ya came back with a somber expression.

Xiang Shaolong and her went into a quiet room for discussion.

Zhao Ya sighed, “On the battlefield Li Mu is an unmatched and fierce warrior, but when it comes to political intrigue he is really too impetuous and also underestimated Zhao Mu’s influence over Imperial brother.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and asked, “What happened?”

Zhao Ya did not reply him directly but said with a troubled look, “They do not understand that after the battle of Changping, what Imperial brother fears most is others telling him he has made a mistake. Now Li Mu is obviously trying to force Imperial brother to admit that he has slipped up in the matter of Sister Ni and blaming him for covering up for the suspected murderer, so how will he be willing to accept this.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brow, “What actually happened?”

Zhao Ya looked at him and said, “After the feast last night, Zhao Mu entered the Palace immediately to look for Imperial brother, but no one knows what he told him. Most likely he’s blaming the military for using this opportunity to create chaos and to shake Imperial brother’s hold on the throne; naturally he won’t have anything good to say about you either.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand the term a muddleheaded ruler will bring downfall to the country. When

power is concentrated in the hands of one person, this person will become the key to success or failure. Although the modern democratic system is full of cons, but it's a hundred times better than having a muddle headed ruler controlling the life and death of everyone.

Zhao Ya continued, "This morning Imperial brother summoned me and asked me in detail about you and forced me to reveal my real relationship with you, I almost could not handle the questionings."

Xiang Shaolong asked in shock, "How did you answer him?"

Zhao Ya started to look a little unnatural as she replied, "Of course I won't reveal the truth, but it seems that he still believes that I am not enamored of you, or maybe because my reputation in the past was just too bad!" After she spoke she lowered her pretty face, looking troubled.

Xiang Shaolong pinched her chin and lifted up her pretty face, saying, "Now I'm involved with the military and the Wu family, 2 important factions, your Imperial brother won't dare to do anything against me rashly!"

Zhao Ya exclaimed miserably, "I'm worried to death! You must not overestimate the power of the military and the Wu family. If Imperial brother ignores everything and execute you immediately, by then it'll be too late and no one will really come to a face to face confrontation with Imperial brother over you."

A fury welled up within Xiang Shaolong as he said with an icy laugh, “Want to kill me, I’m afraid King Xiaocheng will need to mobilize his army to do that, I will not let myself be caught so easily.”

Zhao ya pouted, “Sometimes you’re really like a person with all brawn and no brains. Just Imperial brother’s personal guards alone total 20,000, there are about 30,000 soldiers guarding the city and the commander Le Cheng is Zhao Mu’s man. If something happens, who can save you. If something were to happen to you, how can I continue living!” As she finished her sentence, hot tears flowed out, obviously she is extremely worried and frightened, but it seems that there’s something else as well.

Xiang Shaolong gathered her into his arms and said with a smile, “Don’t worry! Someone has once said that I am the new saint who will face many dangers, so I definitely won’t die.”

Zhao Ya was stunned, “Who said that? What is a new saint?”

She paused and continued without interest, “I am at a loss right now and feeling very troubled, Shaolong teach me quickly what I should do.”

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before replying, “Now there’s not much choice left, only by escaping from Handan will we have a chance of survival. But before we leave I must tear that Zhao Mu into pieces before the hatred in my heart can be appeased.”

Zhao Ya caressed his cheeks lovingly, “You must promise to bring Ya’er with you!”

Xiang Shaolong said with surety, “That is of course, not only will I bring you, Xiao Pan and Qian’er will come with us as well.”

Zhao ya asked quietly, “Are we going to Qin. Hai! The Qins are even more frightening than the people from other states!”

Xiang Shaolong said with a laugh, “Don’t forget I am the new saint.” He stood up and continued, “I’m afraid I will only have time to accompany all of you after we reach Qin. King Xiaocheng’s reaction is totally beyond my expectations, I have to look for Li Mu immediately to discuss this and try to mollify your Imperial brother’s feelings.”

Zhao Ya accompanied him out and said, “I will be in charge of keeping an eye of the situation in the palace. Luckily Empress Jing is on your side speaking up for you and Imperial brother is still wavering, so for the time being he would not dare to use such harsh methods to deal with you yet.” As she finished her words she suddenly lowered her pretty face, a look of unfathomable confusion flashed past her pretty eyes.

Of course Xiang Shaolong did not see that, but he just felt troubled.

Zou Yan may really believe that he is some new saint, but he knows that there’s no such thing at all.

If there is a new saint, it should be Ying Zheng.

But the Ying Zheng now, how can he be the new saint who unifies the world?

Xiang Shaolong greatly misses the high tech weapons he used in the 21st century.

In this era, even the most formidable swordsman can only deal with a dozen odd people but not a hundred odd people, much less thousands of well trained soldiers.

Therefore he can only use strategies and tactics so that he will have a chance to preserve his life and escape.

Suddenly, he felt as if he can't bear to leave Handan.

It's finally time to leave this great ancient city.

Book 5 Chapter 5 – Secret Discussion Of The Grand Plan

Xiang Shaolong came to Li Mu's Great General Residence in Handan, over a thousand men and horses were gathered in the open area within the walls, all decked out as if they are about to leave immediately.

Xiang Shaolong's heart sunk and when the guard took him to see Li Mu, Li Mu happened to walk out from the building, all dressed in his military attire. When he saw Xiang Shaolong, he pulled him aside and said, "There's no hope for Great Zhao. His Majesty summoned me to the palace today and wants me to return to the northern border immediately to deal with the Xiong Nus. He did not give me a chance to bring up Zhao Ni's matter at all and even said openly that Zhao Mu will be in charge of Handan. You better leave quickly! Or else you might lose your life."

King Xiaocheng's reaction is obviously beyond the expectations of this famed general.

Li Mu continued in a low voice, "A lot of commanders within Handan used to be my subordinates. I have told them about you and instructed them to help you secretly." He then told him a few names.

He added, "If Zhao Mu sends people to go after you, you can escape to the northern border. As long as you're within my region of power, I will have a way to protect you and even his Majesty can't do anything about that."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect that this person whom he has only met 3 times would actually have such strong feelings of friendship and chivalrous. He was so touched that he was at a loss for words.

Li Mu removed his sword and pressed it to him, "This sword is called 'Blood Wave' and a lot more times better than Flying Rainbow. It can cut a flying strand of hair and slice through enemy's armor like air. With your out of the world swordplay, having this would be akin to adding wings to a tiger. Do no reject, or else I will look down on you."

Hot tears streamed out from Xiang Shaolong's eyes as he received this precious sword with the frightening name.

Li Mu patted his shoulder and said, "Wherever can accommodate you, just go to that place! Maybe one day we will meet on the battlefield and by then we're serving different masters and we may have to fight to the death. I will definitely not give way and you must do the same to me as well."

After he finished his words he laughed loudly, with seemingly unending sadness and bravery. He then got up his horse and left his residence, towards his journey north.

Xiang Shaolong's feelings were mixed as he looked at him numbly and for a moment felt all alone in the world.

He took the sword out for a look and saw on the especially long and shiny sword, there seems to be red lines on the body, looking

like waves.

On the pommel of the sword were the words 'Blood Wave' written in the ancient form.

The joy from last night has suddenly flown away without a trace and the only thing he can do now is to rely on his own intelligence and ability and make sure that the Wu family and those that he love will be able to leave this lawless place safely.

Xiang Shaolong left the Great General Residence feeling at a loss.

Without a highly respected man like Li Mu handling the situation, no matter how unhappy the military is with Zhao Mu, they would not dare to risk the lives of their whole clan and speak up about Zhao Ni's case, and no one will dare to stand on his side. He has no wish to implicate others too, so now he can only rely on the Wu family and himself.

Li Mu has been ordered to return to the northern border, the military world in the state of Zhao all knows clearly the King's wishes, which is to stand on the same side as Zhao Mu and he, Xiang Shaolong, is Zhao Mu's biggest thorn in the flesh so naturally he will have difficulty keeping himself alive.

Not many will be willing to help others in distress, but there'll be a lot of people who will gladly rub salt into wound, because they can strike a blow to the Wu family and at the same time ingratiate themselves with Zhao Mu.

Now the biggest question is, when will Zhao Mu gain the King of Zhao's agreement to get rid of the Wu family and Xiang Shaolong.

Is there a way to delay the King of Zhao from making this decision?

Just as he returned to the Wu fortress feeling troubled, Tao Fang came up and said, "That Chu person called Dan Jin has been captured and locked in our jail. However this is a very stubborn person and refused to talk at all. Now we're waiting to see what you suggest, maybe we might have to torture him seriously."

Xiang Shaolong seems to see a ray of hope and asked, "Have you searched his bags?"

Tao Fang sighed, "It's just some unimportant stuff. With Zhao Mu's cunningness, he will never let others catch hold of him so easily." He continued, "Even if this person is willing to cooperate obediently and stand out to testify against Zhao Mu, Zhao Mu can still push all blame away and instead point out that we're accusing him. Hai! Do you think King Xiaocheng will believe his man or us?"

Xiang Shaolong quietly sighed, "As long as we know clearly the relationship between Zhao Mu and the Chus, we'll be able to set a trap for him. That's why we cannot let go of this clue so easily."

By now the 2 of them have arrived at the back courtyard and entered a secret doorway in a building into the heavily guarded underground jail.

That Chu spy Dan Jin was tied on a wooden pillar, blood and dirt on his face, looking dispirited. Obviously he has suffered and he lowered his head without saying anything.

Although Xiang Shaolong pities him, but there's no other choice. This is like a war, to be lenient towards an enemy is akin to committing suicide.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly has an idea and pulled Tao Fang aside, "This person is obviously one who is not afraid of death, or else the Chus won't have sent him here to be in charge of such an important mission. But there is a limit to anyone's tolerance, as long as we can find that, we can destroy his will."

Tao Fang said with exasperation, "The question is what way?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "This method is called relentless questioning. Find another 10 odd people and keep on asking him repeated questions, do not allow him toilet breaks or food and most importantly do not let him sleep. During questioning you must use strong light and shine it into his face, I'll want to see how long he can hold on."

This is the first time Tao Fang has heard of such a questioning method and asked doubtfully, "Will it really work?"

Xiang Shaolong replied with certainty, "I guarantee it will. Get someone to deal with the injuries on his body first, give him some clean clothes to change into and you can proceed."

He then told him some techniques on questioning and things to ask, making Tao Fang think that it all sounds very feasible before he left to look for Wu Yingyuan.

Wu Yingyuan is receiving a guest in the secret room and when he knows he has come, immediately invited him in.

He is a totally nondescript merchant, tall but with a dreadful face, his looks doesn't look appealing at all.

After Wu Yingyuan invited Xiang Shaolong for a seat, he said, "Shaolong! This is Mister Tu's most reliable man who has the reputation of being a resourceful strategist Mister Xiao Yuetan."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, so this is the secret envoy sent by Lu Buwei's number 1 headman, Tu Xian. So from this it seems that Lu Buwei is going all out to send Zhuji and her son back to Xianyang in the shortest time possible.

Xiao Yuetan is quite polite and said, "Before I came to Handan, I've already heard the great name of Master Xiang. Please do not be offended, but my face now is a fake one but due to uncontrollable circumstances, I cannot see others with my real looks."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that this person is an expert in disguise, and no flaws could be seen at all on the surface. He had an idea and said, "So it means that Mister can turn the Crown Prince and his mother into any looks."

Xiao Yuetan nodded his head, “Master Xiang’s train of thought is very quick, this is exactly one of the reason Master Tu send me here to Handan. But as for sneaking them out, it will have to depend on all of you.”

Xiang Shaolong was about to say that it’s not difficult at all to sneak them out but Wu Yingyuan gave him a kick under the table so he hurriedly swallowed his words.

Wu Yingyuan interrupted, “If we can save mother and son, how will Mister Lu receive us on his end?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that with their abilities, and with Xiao Yuetan’s skills for disguise, it’s not a problem saving mother and son at all. The difficulty is that the Wu family are all going to run away at the same time, that’s why Wu Yingyuan is linking Yingzheng and his mother with the Wu family in order to force Lu Buwei to receive them as well.

Indeed Wu Yingyuan added, “The Hostage Residence is heavily guarded and ever since King Zhuangxiang ascended the throne, a troop of Imperial Guards have been stationed permanently in the residence. The city of Handan’s strict security is also famed throughout the land so other than a forceful attack, there is no other way. But Mister Xiao need not worry, we have already made plans and can guarantee that we will send both mother and son out of the city without any danger to them.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is exaggerating, there’s no grand

plan to save them yet but if it was him, he can only do the same thing as well and lie to gain the other party's trust.

Xiao Yuetan replied, "My Master has discussed this matter with King Zhuangxiang. When the time comes our army will pretend to attack Prince Taiyuan and attempt to take over the city to lure the Zhao's attention while Master Tu will personally lead a troop of elite soldiers and infiltrate into the Zhao border to receive you. As long as you can reach the western bank of Northern Liaoyang's lake, Master Tu will be able to escort you past the borders of Wei and Han back to our country." He paused and asked, "Can I first listen to your marvelous plan."

Xiang Sholong secretly thought him formidable. He has said so many things, but in actual fact he did not reveal at all the position and route of the elite troops Tu Xian is leading, because if they are to work in tandem, Tu Xian should already be within Zhao borders.

Wu Yingyuan kicked him under the table again, obviously he wants him to immediately present a nonexistent plan to deal with this esteemed guest.

Xiang Shaolong has no plans at all, so he pretended to be mysterious and said, "Can Mister Xiao wait for 3 days, because the most important factor in the plan is to make contact with the mother and son and I am still in the midst of arranging this matter. Only after I get some headway on this can I make final confirmations on the other details."

Xiao Yuetan said a little unhappily, "At least you should reveal a

little information to me?”

Xiang Shaolong said calmly, “Your appearance may lead to changes to the whole plan. We may even make use of your skill of disguise to let us leave Handan without anyone even realizing it, that’s why we need to make new arrangements.”

Xiao Yuetan’s expression looks a little more soothed as he said, “I understand a little now!” He turned towards Wu Yingyuan and said, “I heard that the dance courtesans in the Wu family are famous throughout the land, how can I miss that.”

Wu Yingyuan chortled, “I’ve made arrangements for you long ago!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he’s no longer needed so he slipped out.

As soon as he stepped out of Wu Yingyuan’s inner residence, Xiang Shaolong felt extremely fatigued. The fortress is peaceful in the afternoon. In the garden the maids and children were playing ball, with waves of laughter. The snow on the ground has already been swept clean but icicles still hung on the tree branches.

When he walked past, the prettier maids were making eyes and flirting with him, hoping to gain his attention.

But this man who has always been flirtatious only felt a sense of sadness.

Although Wu Yingyuan said that he will move most of the people out of Zhao earlier, but everyone knows that it only means the closest and direct family members, as for the distant relatives and these maids in front of him here, they will all be heartlessly deserted and ultimately become the object of the Zhao people's wrath.

This is a helpless matter, even Xiang Shaolong can do nothing about it.

In this era where men vie with one another, a person's fate is not controlled in his own hands.

Heaven will suddenly turn into horrible hell!

He is not worried that Lu Buwei will betray them. In this unstable land with constant wars, the Wu family's livestock business is extremely important to the military and economy and with the formidable father and son team in the Wu family, they will certainly spread out part of their resources and won't leave anything to the Zhaos. That will be a fatal blow to the state of Zhao and they will find it even more difficult to survive. This is also the retribution of the King of Zhao.

Wu Yingyuan is a strategist, and has already planning everything quietly since a few years ago. Just looking at how he has taken a liking to him and married his most beloved daughter to him, is enough to proof how bold and far sighted he is.

Only this kind of person can live happily in a world like this.

Whistling was heard from behind.

Before he even have a chance to turn his head back for a look, Jing Jun is already next to him like a gust of wind, his attitude relaxed.

Xiang Shaolong asked curiously, “Succeeded?” Naturally he’s asking about Zhao Zhi.

Jing Jun shook his head happily and said nonchalantly, “She kept on ignoring me, in the end I followed her home but she chased me away with her sword.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “Then I really cannot guess why you can still be so happy now!”

Jing Jun chuckled, “The interesting thing is that her father is actually a school teacher, he came out and reprimanded me sternly, saying a whole lot of things about see no evil and speak no evil or words to that meaning. Actually I didn’t hear a single word he said, but on the account of his pretty daughter, I pretended to accept his teachings and lowered my head. Maybe he saw that I should be good in studies, he actually said something about teachings, and told me to go to school everyday and learn the ways of being a man. I just have to give him some smoked meat during the New Year or major festivals. Hee! At that time Zhao Zhi was almost mad with fury and kept staring at me, but there’s nothing she can do at all. Brother Xiang don’t you think this is exciting?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and laughed. To be harassed by someone like Jing Jun, Miss Zhao Zhi is going to be in trouble. She can't win him in fights nor can she chase him away, how is she going to deal with him?"

Jing Jun asked, "Where has Brother Teng gone?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "He has a special task and has gone to the farm outside the city."

As he said this, he suddenly had an idea and asked, "Is there a way to make thousands of warhorses suddenly feel weak in the legs and unable to walk?"

Jing Jun furrowed his brows, "Just have to feed them some herbs, but if the quantity is too huge, it might be a little difficult."

Xiang Shaolong thought that he should be asking Wu Yingyuan this, since the Wu family has been in the livestock business for generations. No one would be more experienced than them.

Jing Jun said excitedly, "Is there anything you want me to do!"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "Just go and study in peace! But remember Brother Teng's instructions, don't go overboard, we still have to go to the Hostage Residence tonight."

Jing Jun gave a reply and left laughingly.

Xiang Shaolong stepped into his Hidden Dragon Abode and only thought of having a good sleep, not wanting to think of anything else.

When he woke up, it's already dusk.

Xiang Shaolong regained his spirit and he felt more optimistic and energetic as well.

Naturally Wu Tingfang and the rest served him meticulously.

Chunying and the rest of the maids looked a little upset, naturally they were blaming him for not having had his way with them today yet.

He can only laugh bitterly in his heart. His stamina may be a lot better than the average person, but resources are still limited and although the 4 ladies are young, beautiful and alluring, but more important matters are at hand so he can only suppress his urge.

During dinnertime, Lady Ya's loyal servant Zhao Da actually came looking for him.

Xiang Shaolong thought that Zhao Ya has something urgent so he hurriedly put down his bowl and chopsticks and invited him into the inner chamber.

Zhao Da has a strange expression and it was only after a while that he said, “Lady has no idea that I’ve come here to look for you.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that something is very wrong and asked sincerely, “Just say it out boldly! I will be responsible for you.”

Zhao Da said, “Actually for servants like us, we have no right to interfere in Lady’s affairs at all, but in our hearts, the few of us brothers have already viewed you as the Master who is most worthy of our loyalty, therefore we can’t be too concerned about other matters now!”

All the more Xiang Shaolong felt that something is amiss and egged him to reveal the purpose of his visit.

Zhao Da made up his mind bravely and said somberly, “After Lady returned, in less than a month, a person called Qi Yu who is a royalty from the state of Qi came to Handan as an envoy. This person looks even more handsome than Lian Jin, and famed in Qi for his intellect and swordsmanship, he’s also an expert with the ladies. But after he arrived in Zhao, he seems to be smitten with Lady and was pursuing her relentlessly. His Majesty and Zhao Mu also kept creating chances for him to meet with Lady and it seems that Lady is a little interested in him too.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved on hearing that, he is very confident of himself in this aspect and he also does not believe that Zhao Ya, who has gone through difficult times with him, would have a change of feelings so easily.

Zhao Da looked at his expression and said anxiously, “There are some things which I must say even if I don’t wish to. After Lady came back, she missed you so terribly that she has no appetite at all, and there were constant rumors in the city about your death. That Qi Yu took the opportunity and spent a few nights in Lady’s room. It was only after your return that Lady kept her distance from him but he came last night again to harass Lady and only left this morning. Us brothers had a discussion before deciding to come and inform you.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart froze immediately. With Zhao Ya’s sluttish character, in such a situation where she was pining for him, she really needs the consolation and excitement of other men in order to rid herself of the pain and loneliness.

Humans are not without feelings. Such matters between men and women, once started will be difficult to break off, especially when this Qi Yu is not any worse than him. That’s why Zhao Ya is still being tangled up with him right now.

Hai!

A slut is always slut. It may be something to do with the hormones in her body, to ask her not to have a man for a long period of time will be a very difficult matter.

A feeling of pained betrayal welled up in him.

Zhao Da lowered his voice and said, “If Lady is just having fun

with that man, we won't do something so unscrupulous as to tell on her. We are extremely gratuitous towards Lady and are willing to die for her, but we're afraid that not only is she being cheated of her feelings and body, there might be something else and if it harms you, it won't be worth it."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "What is it all about?"

Zhao Da said painfully, "We have been secretly checking on this Qi Yu and realized that every time after he meets Lady, he will immediately sneak over to see Zhao Mu."

Xiang Shaolong was utterly shocked, "What?"

Zhao Da's eyes reddened as he lowered his head, his hands clenched tightly into fists, obviously his heart is filled with fury and regret.

To him, Xiang Shaolong is a trustworthy hero and only he can be a match for Lady Ya whereas Zhao Mu is a person everyone in Handan hates, so one can imagine his feelings right now.

Xiang Shaolong slowly understood.

This lure of using handsome man is truly formidable!

If Zhao Mu can control Zhao Ya again, then on their side no one will be able to leave Handan and it will also be the end of Zhu Ji and her son. Because Zhao Ya is extremely familiar with all their

movements and secrets.

But it seems that although Zhao Ya is still being tangled up with Qi Yu, she has not betrayed him yet. Thinking of her distressing expression today as she told him to take her away from Zhao, and yet afraid that the Qins would be unreliable, he can understand her feelings of uncertainty. After all, the King of Zhao still dotes on her a lot, will she really be willing to betray King Xiaocheng?

She wanted to leave the state of Zhao mainly because there is no hope for the state and she does not wish to end up being in a destroyed state, and Qi Yu can give her protection, bringing her back to the state of Qi, which is separated from the Qins by the state of Zhao.

Obviously there is a secret agreement between Qi and Chu and they will go through all means to stop the 3 states from joining, to the extent that they will split the 3 states among themselves. Therefore Zhao Mu was able to invite Xiao Weimou to deal with him and now he can ask the expert in love to snatch his beloved away from him.

Naturally the King of Zhao is backing this up because he does not want Zhao Ya to get involved with the Wu family, and at the same time he wants to make use of Zhao Ya to understand the Wu family's secrets and when the time is ripe, he will exterminate the Wu family from the roots and take over all the livestock farm, getting rid of this thorn in his flesh.

Xiang Shaolong's train of thought kept expanding, and thought that maybe the King of Zhao may also be a participant in Zhao Ni's

incident, because Xiao Pan once said that they fell into a deep sleep after eating the snacks the King sent them.

The King of Zhao allowed Zhao Mu to do this because he thought that Lady Ni gave herself to Xiang Shaolong only because she could not tolerate the loneliness. Therefore as long as Zhao Mu can give her the same enjoyment, they will be able to win her back. They did not expect Zhao Ni to be so fiercely protective of her chastity that she actually committed suicide after being raped.

With such comprehension, everything that he did not understand in the past now seems to fall into place.

The reason why Zhao Mu can single handedly cover up the case of Zhao Ni's death is because he had the approval of the King of Zhao. He did not want to reveal his own part in the evil deed so he'd rather offend Li Mu and forcefully suppressed this matter.

He has truly given up on the state of Zhao.

On his revenge name list, the King of Zhao's name has been added.

Now the most problematic matter is Zhao Ya.

Has she fallen too deeply with Qi Yu?

No wonder the King of Zhao handed Zhao Qian so readily to her.

But is it possible Empress Jing is also putting on an act? Deliberately luring him to assassinate Zhao Mu so that the King of Zhao will have an excuse to execute the Wu family.

Once he thought of this, he can't help but feel cold sweat running down his back.

Zhao Da asked, "Master! What should we do now?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed and said, "You will just pretend that you don't know anything about this at all, and from now on don't follow or carry any investigations about Qi Yu. This is extremely important, understand?"

Zhao Da nodded his head, wanting to say something but stopping himself.

Xiang Shaolong thought of a matter and asked, "All of you are so loyal towards your Lady, but aren't you going to tell her when you obviously know that Qi Yu has been going to see Zhao Mu?"

Zhao Da replied, "We told her long ago but was instead reprimanded, saying that Qi Yu is the envoy from Qi, so naturally Zhao Mu will have to make him feel welcome. She even said she will not let us off lightly if we continue to follow Qi Yu."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed, it seems that Qi Yu has really enticed this fickle minded slut, why else would she not allow

Zhao Da to continue his investigations.

If he can snatch her away from Lian Jin's hands, of course others can snatch her away from his hands. This is very fair.

Besides, with Lady Ya giving out favors so readily in the past, proves that she always like to try new things.

Zhao Da could not take it any longer and said, "If Lady really allies herself with Qi Yu, we all hope that we can come and follow you instead."

With Zhao Da's loyalty, to actually say such words that betrays his master, obviously shows how disappointed and upset they are towards Zhao Ya.

Zhao Ya has already betrayed him once, will history repeat itself again.

When she knows that there's no hope of escape, will she betray him again because of Qi Yu and her own interest?

Xiang Shaolong felt extreme fury and said quietly, "One day, if I can really become someone important, I will be most happy to accept all of you if you come and look for me."

Zhao Da thanked him happily before leaving.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling troubled, his mind in a blank, not wanting to think at all.

The ladies all saw his strange expression and hurriedly asked him for the reason.

How can he tell them his worries, so he hardened his heart and said, “Chunying, all of you go and prepare hot water, I want all of you to accompany me in the pool.”

Chunying and the rest all understands what he is referring to and their pretty faces blushed immediately, but they cannot conceal their happiness as they all rushed towards the pool.

Xiang Shaolong forced his spirits up and secretly thought that he will face problems as they come. He’s not afraid of anyone at all.

At this moment what he needs the most is excitement, so that his spirit can be released from feelings of despair and anger.

The stronger person will conquer.

Fine!

Let me, Xiang Shaolong, see who is the stronger person.

Book 5 Chapter 6 – The Real And Fake Ying Zheng

As the northern wind blew, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun climbed over walls quietly, avoiding the patrols and gantry posts and arrived at the garden outside Zhuji's building.

Jing Jun stayed behind as a look out while Xiang Shaolong took the familiar route to the window on the 2nd floor, pushed it gently, and the window opened immediately.

Zhu Ji's voice called out quietly from inside, "Is it Shaolong? Come in quickly!"

Xiang Shaolong slipped in through the window.

Zhu Ji hurriedly closed the window, turned around and leaned on the window ledge, her chest heaving, obviously she is feeling very nervous.

Only a weak, lone lamp was shining in the room but because it's placed on the corner of the window ledge, it will not reflect their shadows on the papered window.

The lamp emphasized half of the right side of Zhu Ji's body while her left side was cast in the shadows, making her dainty and voluptuous body look all the more dimensional and extremely alluring.

A stove was lit in the room, making it as warm as spring, which is why although Zhu Ji was thinly dressed, she still felt comfortable.

Her pretty eyes burned like fire, with a warmth that can scald as they stared unwaveringly at Xiang Shaolong, as if she's trying to scrutinize him inside out.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong has met such a bold and wild character, a woman who is not afraid of men at all and his heart can't help but beat faster but on the surface he looked at her coolly.

This is definitely not a simple woman.

Zhu Ji's lips quivered slightly as she asked, "Xiang Shaolong! Can I trust you?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled slightly, "It seems that Lady has no other choice!"

Zhu Ji's pretty eyes stared at him, "Even if I can trust you, but what ability do you have that will enable you to take me and my son away."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought, "Since I can infiltrate into this place, naturally I can bring you out. He was about to blurt this out when he suddenly felt that something was amiss and changed his words, "This is the reason why I came to discuss with Lady, because I guessed that Zhao Mu will certainly gather all his men at

the Hostage Residence.”

Zhu Ji nodded her head, “You’re very astute, no wonder Zhao Mu is so wary of you. Every time they talk about you, I will listen very carefully. I did not expect Buwei to actually find you, it’s really great.”

Xiang Shaolong heard that when she was talking about Lu Buwei, she seems to be talking about a stranger and was secretly startled. It seems that she will not be loyal to any man. Men are making use of her, she is also making use of men.

He furrowed his brows and asked, “How is the situation at the Crown Prince’s side?”

Zhu Ji sighed lightly, “Unless you can lead a huge army and successfully attack Handan City, or else you can forget about taking him away. Ever since my husband ascended the throne, Zhao Mu has transferred 200 highly skilled warriors who are constantly by his side day and night on rotation shifts. He also added high walls outside, making it a residence within a residence. Also, there is a troop of almost a thousand soldiers who have been posted here permanently to guard. Unless you can turn into a bird, or else you can forget about infiltrating that place to see him.”

Xiang Shaolong’s brows furrowed deeply on hearing this. When Wu Yingyuan was telling Xiao Yuetan about how heavily guarded the Hostage Residence is today, he was not exaggerating, instead he even ‘understated’ the real situation.

Zhu Ji continued nonchalantly, “Besides it’s no use even if he is saved. Zhao Mu is an expert in using drugs and has given him a strange herb and he must take the antidote regularly to ensure his safety. If there’s no antidote, he will die of poisoning in less than 10 days.”

Xiang Shaolong feels as if his whole spine has been frozen into an ice pillar.

Oh my gosh! Is this going to be the future Emperor Qin?

This time he is really stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to advance or retreat at all.

And he thought that saving mother and son would only require the lifting of a finger, he is really too naïve.

He breathed out a gush of cold air, “By keeping the Crown Prince like this, besides giving vent to their anger, what other good does it do to the Zhaos?”

Zhu Ji said lightly, “You should have heard of Zhao Mu’s nefarious plot, to deliberately use wine and women to make him into a useless person. To tell the truth, Zhao Mu can’t wait to send him back to become the King of Qin. But the time is not yet ripe, because Lu Buwei will stand to gain from it, do you understand?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong understands. The reason why Lu Buwei is so anxious to send mother and son back to Xianyang is

because he wants to strengthen his relationship with King Zhuangxiang.

At this instant he finally realized that when Zhu Ji was talking about her son, she only said 'he' and did not address him in any other form or utter his name directly. His tone was so indifferent that it's scary and for a moment he can't help but feel perplexed.

Zhu Ji suddenly said with hatred, "It's better that this lad is dead, I get furious for no reason just at the sight of him."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, people said that no matter how vicious a tiger is, it will not eat its offspring. Why would Zhu Ji curse her precious son who can make her become the Empress Dowager?

Zhu Ji moved over, took his hand and pulled him as she walked towards the bed and said gently, "Come! Let's continue the conversation on the bed!"

Firstly Xiang Shaolong is totally not in the mood and secondly, he just had a wild time with Chunying and the maids and is still tired and thirdly, he remembered the advice not to have any amorous relationship with this woman whom both Lu Buwei and King Zhuangxiang was enamored with so he immediately slipped his hand away and grabbed hers, saying "I'm afraid this is not a suitable time and place!"

Zhu Ji pouted, "Don't you think I know? It's just that those maids have been ordered to come and check on me every once in a

while. It's a lot safer hiding in the bed."

Xiang Shaolong thought that he has misunderstood her so he hurriedly followed her into the curtained bed and immediately a fragrance wafted into his nose.

Zhu Ji told him to lie down inside and used the blanket to cover the both of them. She turned around and snuggled into his arms and hugged him tightly, her tiny mouth going up to his ears and whispered, "I want to tell you a huge secret, but first you must make a blood oath not to tell anyone else before I can let you know. Hai! I have no other choice but to tell you as well. I am not allowed to take even a step out of this place and there's no one I can trust."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly surprised, what secret can be so great that he needs to make a blood oath?

He answered, "I, Xiang Shaolong, is a man of my words. Once I've made a promise, I won't go back on my words, Lady can rest assured."

Zhu Ji said with relief, "I know you are a trustworthy man, but I am still worried, so why don't you just give in to me!"

With a beauty besieging him like this, he has no choice but to make a blood oath. At the same time he was secretly laughing, he doesn't even believe a blood oath will become true, so what restriction can this promise do to him? But since he's made the promise, he will not reveal it so readily.

Zhu Ji was hesitant for a moment before saying quietly, “The child they imprisoned is not my son at all.”

Xiang Shaolong almost shrieked in surprise.

Heavens! What is this all about?

Before Zhu Ji has a chance to talk further, there was a knock on the door and the maid outside asked, “Is Lady asleep? His Marquis is here!”

Xiang Shaolong was terribly startled and was about to jump up when Zhu Ji pressed him down. She extended her hand and pushed on a decoration at the front of her bed and the place where Xiang Shaolong was lying on immediately became a movable board and he was flipped to a secret compartment under the bed.

In that instant, instead of lying in the warm blankets on the bed above, Xiang Shaolong is now lying in the secret compartment beneath which only has a blanket as a base. Luckily there are holes for ventilation so he has no lack of air.

The door opened and Zho Mu’s voice said, “Beauty, I’ve come to visit you!”

Zhu Ji replied, “Marquis looks so energetic today, something good must have happened today to make you so happy, I am so happy for you as well!”

At this moment Xiang Shaolong, who is hiding in the secret compartment, guessed that where he is lying must be the personal secret compartment of that ‘adulterer’ Guo Kai. After hearing what she said he has to compliment Zhu Ji for knowing how to make a man feel good.

Later he could ‘feel’ Zhao and Zhu sitting down on the bed, followed by kissing sounds and Zhu Ji’s alluring ‘moans’ and panting.

After a moment, Zhao Mu smiled, “I heard that your lover Lu has sent Tu Xian to come to Handan to save you, are you happy, beauty?”

Zhu Ji pouted, “Don’t you know my heart? Without you, I am not going anywhere, besides it’s only a rumor! Who would be so stupid as to come here on a death mission?”

Xiang Shaolong who is below was secretly thinking that she’s formidable because Zhu Ji is obviously trying to test Zhao Mu’s news.

Indeed Zhao Mu gave a cold snort, “How can it be a rumor, now the old officials of Qin are in a fierce fight with Lu Buwei and wants him to bear the responsibility of the death of the previous King. I’m afraid even your King Zhuangxiang won’t be able to protect him. Once Lu Buwei is dead, I will naturally send you and your son back to Xianyang, by then do not forget about me.”

Although Zhao Mu did not say anything, but Xiang Shaolong and

Zhu Ji both guessed that the news must have come from the powerful Qin officials who want to topple Lu Buwei.

The fights between the Qin court and the local control for power have now widened.

The main battlefield is in the Qin court while the side battle is being fought at Handan.

An originally very simple matter has now become extremely complicated, especially what Zhu Ji said earlier, it extremely unexpected and earth shattering.

Zhu Ji threw a tantrum and said, “Not going back! Not going back! I am definitely not going back, just let Zheng’er go back, I want to stay here with you.”

Even Xiang Shaolong below was dumbfounded on hearing that. How can she sound so sincere and real, if she’s in the 21st century, she’ll definitely be a superstar in the entertainment industry.

Zhao Mu was totally taken in and they started kissing again, followed by the sounds of Zhao Mu removing their robes and the lecherous laughter and moans of the coupling between a man and a woman. Xiang Shaolong can only lament on his bad luck down below. If they start to have fun on the bed, he will feel even worse.

If he wants to kill Zhao Mu now, it’ll be as easy as lifting a finger, but of course he won’t be so stupid as to do that.

Luckily Zhao Mu is still in the mood for talking so he stopped Zhu Ji's attack and said, "The reason I'm so happy today is because that slut Zhao Ya has finally fallen into my trap and unable to pull herself out of it. No one understands her more than I do, not only does she hanker after wealth and riches, she also loves the new and will discard the old. But she's been giving special treatment to Xiang Shaolong. Luckily I still have a killer move, which is King Xiaocheng using their relationship as siblings and by telling her on the pros and cons, there's no way she will not submit."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sunk to the bottom. It's the end! Zhao Ya has really betrayed him. He wonders how much about him has she revealed to her imperial brother? Luckily in order not to cause her undue worry, he did not tell her a lot of things, or else the outcome would be unthinkable.

Zhu Ji asked deliberately, "Why are you talking about Xiang Shaolong all the time with such hatred, what has he got to do with me? I am not interested in him at all."

How would Zhao Mu know that this sly woman is testing him, or maybe he won't put his guard up against a beauty who has lost her freedom, so he said lightly, "How can there be no relation? The Wu family has always been in contact with Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong is the grandson-in-law of the Wu family. If Lu Buwei wants to sneak people out, he'll obviously need the help of the Wu family." He paused and continued with a cold snort, "Xiang Shaolong better not end up in my hands, or else I'll make him regret that he was ever born. You shall watch at the side when I torture him!"

Xiang Shaolong who was hiding beneath was gritting his teeth on hearing it and wished he can jump out and kill him.

Of course Zhu Ji knows that Xiang Shaolong is listening so she can't help but laugh and ask, "How can that inexperienced lad win you? He'll end up in your hands sooner or later, and you can do what you want with him."

Apparently Zhao Mu got excited on hearing it and said, "Come! Get up the bed!"

At least Zhu Ji has some conscience and she objected, "You come looking for me in the middle of the night and now you've made me hungry, where can I find the mood."

Obviously Zhao Mu is totally enthralled by her and hurriedly summoned the servants to prepare snacks for her before saying with satisfaction, "No one in Zhao dares to offend me now. As soon as I exterminate the Wu family from the roots, no one else will dare to do anything without my approval."

Zhu Ji flattered him and said gently, "I think Xiang Shaolong must be a total idiot, or else why would he think that Zhao Ya who is famous in the world for being a slut would be loyal to him?"

Xiang Shaolong can only laugh bitterly, these few words of Zhu Ji are obviously meant as a free gift for him.

Zhao Mu did not expect that there is a twist to all this and replied seriously, “You’re wrong! Zhao Ya has indeed given her true feelings to Xiang Shaolong, that’s why she’s still helping him hide a lot of things. But I understand her too well, so there’s no way she can win me. If she doesn’t want to die together with Xiang Shaolong, she’ll have to work with me obediently.” He sighed comfortably and said, “Not only is Xiang Shaolong not an idiot, he’s very formidable as well. If not for Zhao Ya this weak link, it’ll still be uncertain who will win in the end.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of one thing and was sweating immediately.

If Zhao Qian told Zhao Ya about how Ji Yanran and Zou Yan saved them in Daliang, and she told Zhao Mu, then Ji Yanran and Zou Yan will be in big danger.

At this time the maids came to inform that the food is ready.

Zhao Mu and Zhu Ji went out of the room.

What better time to leave than now?

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked heavens and slipped away.

Zhao Qian tossed and turned in bed, unable to get to sleep.

Without Xiang Shaolong next to her, she felt lost and alone.

She then thought of Zhao Pan, this child who has lost his mother is slowly becoming frighteningly melancholy. Only when he's with her or Xiang Shaolong will he show a little naivety and happiness, and he won't even give any face to Zhao Ya.

If he has shown himself to be a little weaker, maybe Zhao Qian will feel better.

Right at this time, the curtains were suddenly lifted and she was about to scream when she heard Xiang Shaolong's familiar voice call out, "Qian'er! It's Shaolong!"

Zhao Qian never expected her beloved would appear next to her bed in the middle of the night and threw herself at him in joy, hugging him in a death grip.

Xiang Shaolong removed his shoes, hugged her and snuggled into the blankets. He gave a long kiss before asking quietly, "Did you tell Lady Ya about how Sister Yanran saved us?"

Zhao Qian is extremely astute and she asked in shock upon hearing his words, "Is there something wrong with her? Why would there be a problem telling her?"

Xiang Shaolong's expression changed, "That means you've already told her!"

Zhao Qian shook her head, "I didn't. But it's not because I don't

trust her, but because I've promised Sister Yanran that I will never reveal this matter to anyone. That's why I only told her the story that we agreed on long ago."

Xiang Shaolong heaved a great sigh of relief.

Zhao Qian's body trembled, "Heavens! What has Lady done? To make you actually sneak in here in the middle of the night just to ask me such a question?"

Xiang Shaolong caressed her back lovingly, "Have you seen her tonight?"

Zhao Qian replied, "I heard that she has a guest so it's inconvenient for me to go over. Hai! I remember now, every time they say there's a guest, Xiao Zhao and the rest will have a very strange expression, as if they are furious but unable to say anything about it. Could that guest be Zhao Mu?"

Xiang Shaolong has already been numbed by all these, he will no longer get agitated over Zhao Ya and Qi Yu's secret rendezvous. He is someone who is able to take things lightly.

He had once suggested to Zhao Ya to allow Jing Jun and the rest to protect her but she rejected him determinedly. At that time he didn't think too much of it but now he knows that she did not want to let him know about her affair with Qi Yu.

Zhao Qian pleaded, "Xiang Lang! Please tell me what this is all

about?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Did you notice anything strange about Lady these few days?”

Zhao Qian thought carefully for a moment before replying, “Now that you mention it, it really seems that Lady is different from the past. Not only is she listless, there was even once I found her crying alone but when I asked her, she just said that she was thinking of Lady Ni. Sometimes she would also throw her temper at the servants for nothing.” She pouted and hastened him to talk, “What is this all about! This suspense is making me feel terrible!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed and said, “Think again, did she say anything special, for example words like we’ll never be able to escape or something along that line.”

Zhao Qian replied, “That she did not, but she did mention once that Lu Buwei can’t even protect himself now and he can face clan extermination any time. If we follow the Wu family and throw our lots with him, it’s akin to sending the sheep to the tiger’s den.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Then how did you answer her?”

Zhao Qian kissed him and said, “I said as long as I can follow you, death doesn’t matter at all.” She trembled and continued, “That’s right! At that time she had a very strange expression, now that I think of it, she looks almost ashamed and regretful. After that she made an excuse and left.”

By now Xiang Shaolong has totally given up on Zhao Ya.

Zhao Mu is right, he understands Zhao Ya more than him. That's why he can use make use of this fickle minded woman twice to harm him.

After heaving a sigh, he told the gist of what happened to Zhao Qian.

Zhao Qian had already guessed what has happened and was strangely calm.

Xiang Shaolong told her, "You have to pretend that nothing has happened."

Zhao Qian kissed him lovingly and said gently, "Qian'er understands, I have great confidence in this new saint here and I know you will definitely be able to bring Qian'er and the Wu family past this difficult period safely."

Before Xiang Shaolong left he asked, "Will you be able to bear abandoning your father and follow me to an unknown fate?"

Zhao Qian nodded her head with certainty, "As long as I can leave Imperial father, Qian'er is not afraid of anything. There is something I have not told you, which is after my mother died, Qian'er's nanny once said something bad about Zhao Mu and the words drifted to Imperial father's ears. He immediately offered poisoned wine to nanny and before she died, she held my hands

and said as she cried, if there is a chance I must go far away from the Palace, being a commoner's daughter is far better than being a Princess."

Xiang Shaolong was full of thoughts when he heard this.

He really cannot understand the mind of royalty, just like how he cannot understand Zhao Ya.

Book 5 Chapter 7 – Lies And Trickery

After Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun returned to the Wu Residence, they each went back to their own rooms.

Before they parted, Jing Jun seemed to have something to say but he stopped himself.

Xiang Shaolong knows what he's thinking and said, "Nothing will happen during the day, just rest assured and go to school! But be careful, now in Handan, besides the Wu residence, there's no other safe place."

Jing Jun was ecstatic as he replied, "I am a born hunter, I won't become prey so easily."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is cunning and smart, and his skills at escaping is unparalleled so he was not worried.

When he returned to Hidden Dragon Abode, all the ladies were already in dreamland.

Although Xiang Shaolong is extremely tired, but his mind and spirit was greatly affected by the string of events that has happened tonight and was not in the mood for sleep at all. He suddenly had an idea, so he sat down on the bed next to his wife and concubine and followed the meditation skills written on the '3 killer moves', sitting cross legged as he adjusted his breathing, his mind melding with his heart, his heart joined with his spirit, his spirit joined with the universe as he eliminated all thoughts and

unintentionally went into a state of nothingness, something he has never experienced before. His spirit seems to leave his body, joining and parting and when he regained his senses, it was already morning and the ladies were awake.

Xiang Shaolong ignored the ladies' surprise and he was secretly astounded. He has been meditating for more than 2 hours but it felt as if he was asleep and woke up in the blink of an eye. He was sitting cross-legged but he did not feel any numbness in his limbs at all from lack of blood circulation.

When he was training in the special task force, he has learnt Qigong as well, using different methods but he's never had such a refreshing feeling before and for a moment he's not really concerned about Lady Ya's matter.

During breakfast, Chunying and the maids served him especially meticulously with bright and sweet smiles and although it's the cold winter, he can still feel the allure of spring and his mood turned for the better, filled with the strong desire to fight.

After kissing the ladies, he hurriedly went to look for Xiao Yuetan, who was still sleeping with a beauty in his arms. When he knew he was looking for him, he put on a robe and came out.

At this time Xiao Yuetan's disguise has been removed, revealing his sharp features, a far cry from what he looked like yesterday, even having an air of flirtatious charm.

After exchanging civilities, Xiang Shaolong said quietly, "The

news of Master Tu coming to Zhao has already been leaked by those in your country who are against Mister Lu, and the King of Zhao and Zhao Mu has learnt of this.”

Xiao Yuetan’s expression changed slightly, revealing a look of surprise and uncertainty.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “But it seems that they still do not know where Master Tu is but it’s certain that they have sent men to search.”

Xiao Yuetan said, “I will send someone to warn Master Tu. Shaolong, Master Tu will be very grateful to you, this news is too important.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that Xiao Yuetan have not come to Handan alone. Seeing that his tone towards him has changed, he was secretly amused as he said, “Zhao Mu is keeping the Crown Prince very heavily guarded.” He then told him what Zhu Ji has revealed last night, even telling him about how Zhao Mu has been drugging Ying Zheng.

Xiao Yuetan’s expression really changed totally and he was quiet.

Xiang Shaolong has already felt last night that his main purpose is to bring Zhu Ji and her son back to Xianyang and is not at all enthusiastic about how they should bring the Wu family over to the Qin border. Now that he’s heard the true situation, he finally understood that for outsiders like them to save Zhu Ji and her son is impossible, even with the most expert skill of disguise.

Just like what Zhu Ji has said, unless they attack the city, or else how can they bring Ying Zheng away and even if they did, he'll end up dying from poisoning.

Xiao Yuetan took a deep breath and said, "Where did Shaolong get these news from?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "I have men planted around Zhao Mu and last night I finally had the chance to make contact with Lady Zhu Ji, she told me personally."

Xiao Yuetan was impressed with Xiang Shaolong's abilities, and after a moment's hesitation, said, "Shaolong please forgive me for being straight, it seems that the King of Zhao has long been suspecting that the Wu family is in secret contact with our Master Lu, and now that the news of Master Tu coming here has been leaked, anyone can guess that the purpose is to steal away mother and son. Now you are stuck, how will you be able to proceed with the plan?"

Xiang Shaolong said confidently with a smile, "I can only answer you tomorrow, anyway we have not come to the end of the road. Can you please pass the message to Master Tu that if he really wants to bring the Crown Prince and his mother back to Xianyang, both sides must be able to cooperate sincerely."

Xiao Yuetan knows that Xiang Shaolong has seen through their intentions and said with a slight blush, "This is but of course... of course! Heh! I will inform Master Tu."

He continued with furrowed brows, “Zhao Mu is famous for his art in using drugs, how can we solve this issue?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Tomorrow I will have a satisfactory answer for you.”

Xiao Yuetan saw how energized and relaxed he looked and his confidence was raised as well and said with a nod, “It seems that I’ll have to make a personal trip to see Master Tu and I can only be back about 3 to 4 days even at the earliest. I hope by then Shaolong will have good news to share.”

Xiang Shaolong continued talking to him in secret a little more before he left and on the way back bumped into Tao Fang who was out looking for him. He looked spirited and Xiang Shaolong thought that the Chu spy could not even hold out for a day and has revealed the truth. However, Tao Fang only said, “Shaolong’s plan is really useful, it’s just one night and he’s almost half collapsed and only wants to sleep. I don’t think he can hold out much longer and will soon confess.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this can also be considered good news. Such methods may be inhumane but it’s a little better than torturing his body. No matter how strong a person is, under such a situation, will also become extremely weak.

Tao Fang said, “Young Master left the city early this morning to the livestock farm and won’t be back for a few days.” He lowered his voice and added, “He’s going to make arrangements for pulling

out of Zhao, it'll be the Farmers' Festival in 10 days time and we traditionally have a 'prayer ceremony' and the King of Zhao will come personally to the farm to oversee it. At that time we will send part of the family to a secret hiding place which has been prepared long ago and after the grand event, we will send them towards Qin one by one."

Xiang Shaolong was a little relieved. With Wu Yingyuan's farsightedness and planning, anything that he thinks is secure will definitely not have any problems.

Tao Fang led him towards the Wu family mansion and said along the way, "At that time when I met Shaolong at Mulberry Village, I already knew you're no ordinary man but I did not expect you to have such accomplishments today."

Once he mentioned Mulberry Village, Xiang Shaolong can't help but think of Mei Canniang and he turned gloomy!

He did not expect that after coming to this ancient period, there are a lot more things that makes him worry compared to in the past.

Tao Fang knows what he was thinking and tried to console him a little, but he knows that his empty words are of no use at all so he said, "Old Master wants to see you!"

Master Wu met his Grandson-in-law alone in the secret meeting room and came straight to the point, "Find a time today and I'll hold a simple ceremony for you and Fang'er to become official

husband and wife.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly kowtowed and offered his thanks.

He’s already developed deep feelings for Wu Tingfang and was glad to have such a pretty wife.

Master Wu furrowed his brows, “I thought with all the intimacy you’ve had, Fang’er would get pregnant very quickly, it’s so strange...”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled, although he has thought of this question before, he’s never too bothered about it.

Master Wu did not seem too bothered too and continued, “I want to tell you something important regarding the life and death of the Wu family and even Tao Fang is not aware of this matter. Only a few people who are from the immediate Wu family is aware.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at him quizzically.

Master Wu said with seriousness, “All the residences of Princes and Royalties will have secret tunnels used for escape and this is an open secret to all. We are no exception, we have 4 secret tunnels leading to the outside of our estate and the exit are all near the fortress. But for us, this is just a cover.”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes immediately brightened and he asked unbelievably, “Is there a secret tunnel that leads to outside the

city?”

Master Wu said proudly, “Exactly, this tunnel that leads to outside the east city gates took 3 generations about 70 odd years to complete and is 3 li long. Countless Wu family members have sacrificed their lives building it, a lot of effort was put into just the layout of the ventilation holes. It’s more than 10 feet deep underground and even digging a well won’t be so deep down. We made use of an underground river to build it and the entrance is at a secret cave at the back of the hill and it can only be reached via a short tunnel at the back of the house and is extremely covered.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why the Wu father and son are so confident about escaping from Handan.

Master Wu said, “That’s why as long as you have the ability to bring Zhu Ji and her son to the Wu residence, we will be confident of escaping.”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly excited and felt his confidence soaring, it seems that the most difficult problem has suddenly been solved.

Master Wu suddenly exclaimed, “This secret tunnel is not easy to travel, it’s wet and stuffy. I’ve used it once when I was young and have never gone down since, and I had hoped that I will never have the need to use it to escape. Now that I’m old, it’ll be even more difficult for me to travel!”

Xiang Shaolong said, “I heard from Master Tao that during the

Farmers' Festival, we will take the opportunity to send a group of people away, Grandfather you..."

Master Wu interrupted, "If I were to leave as well, it'll be strange if that muddle headed ruler King Xiaocheng does not take immediate action. Everyone can leave except me."

Xiang Shaolong's expression changed on hearing this.

Master Wu smiled slightly, as if he's almost at the end of his road and said gently, "The world now belongs to youngsters like you. I am old and my days are numbered, I do not have the courage to face a new life in Qin and neither can I survive the scares and difficulties involved in escaping. That's why I've already told Yingyuan that I have decided to stay here and not leave."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "How can the King of Zhao let you off then?"

Master Wu chortled, "Who wants him to let me off? I won't even leave a piece of my skin for him to find. I have been prestigious all my life and even in death will I not be humiliated."

Xiang Shaolong cried out hoarsely, "Grandfather!" For the first time he felt sincere admiration for this plump old man from the bottom of his heart.

Master Wu said suavely, "Don't behave like a woman or a child, I have high expectations of you. In all great matters, someone must

be sacrificed. If King Xiaocheng wants to attack my Wu family fortress, he'll have to pay a terrible price. I am really happy, even at a time like this, I still have a group of men who are willing to lay down their lives with me."

He paused and continued, "Once you take Zhu Ji and her son away, King Xiaocheng will attack immediately. If there's no one to block him for a few days, how are all of you going to escape?" He added with resolve, "My mind is made up, do not say anymore."

Xiang Shaolong knows it's difficult to make him change his mind, and in fact this is what he has asked for. He asked, "How many people know about the secret tunnel? It seems that even Tingfang is not aware."

Master Wu replied, "That's why it can remain a secret. Don't worry! Those who know about this is very reliable. If you see Wu Zhuo over the next few days, tell him to lead you to it. As long as we can get out of the city, no one will know how to survive better than generations of livestock farmers like us."

He gave a cold snort and added, "Since he's dishonest, I need not be loyal. Since King Xiaocheng can treat me this way, I want him to have a taste of the most bitter fruit he's ever had after the battle of Changping. I'll make sure there won't be a single usable warhorse in his whole country and let him sit and watch while the state of Zhao is slowly carved apart and disintegrate."

Looking at the gleaming hatred in Master Wu's eyes, Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood that once a person views death as a certainty, he can be a really scary person.

Xiang Shaolong is already mentally prepared for this and riding on his beloved steed which Learned Lady Ji has given him, he went to Zhao Ya's residence and met her at the inner hall. Looking at his beauty who is only a few feet away, Xiang Shaolong however felt that the distance between their hearts is like lakes and mountains apart.

He was more alert to his surroundings and indeed noticed that Xiaozhao and the other maids were a lot quieter, their faces expressionless, with sadness hidden in their eyes.

Zhao Ya is smiling like a flower as usual but Xiang Shaolong can see that beneath the forced smile the dilemma deep within her heart.

She looked at him in surprise and said, "Shaolong you looked especially in high spirits today, are there new developments." She lowered her voice and added, "Have you caught a hold over Zhao Mu already?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said, "It's not that easy!"

Zhao Ya asked, "Then are there developments over at Zhu Ji and her son's side?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to look troubled and said with furrowed brows, "The place where mother and son are kept are heavily guarded, there's no way to infiltrate it as well. Do you have a way to let me meet up with them?"

Zhao Ya lowered her head and bit her teeth, “Let me think about it!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she indeed has feelings for him, or else she would not have revealed so much uncertainty and could have pretended that she’s totally not up to the task.

He said with a straight face, “I’ve been thinking last night, and decided to follow Empress Jing’s words and assassinate Zhao Mu.”

Zhao Ya was stunned, “Shaolong!” She lifted her pretty face and looked at him with misery.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling secretly pleased and said with a low voice, “Only by killing Zhao Mu will we have a chance to kidnap Zhu Ji and her son. I now have a batch of about 500 Wu family warriors who are not afraid to die and we have the strength to fight openly with Zhao Mu. As long as I do everything nice and clean, who would dare to say I am the murderer?”

Zhao Ya looked at him, in a loss.

Of course Xiang Shaolong knows that she thought he has already fallen into Empress Jing’s trap, and only felt an indescribable pleasure.

Slut, since you want me to die, then let me lie to you for some fun.

“What is the best place to make the move?”

Zhao Ya lowered her head and said quietly, “It’s the Farmers’ Festival 10 days later, Zhao Mu will go with Imperial Brother to the livestock farm outside the Wu family fortress for prayer ceremonies. Hai! Shaolong you must think it through again.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel her inner struggle and pain and his heart softened a little as he said gently, “Don’t be so unconfident in me! I will split the 500 men into 2 groups, one group will lay in ambush along the way to ambush your Imperial Brother and Zhao MU’s carriage...”

Zhao Ya exclaimed hoarsely, “What? Even Imperial Brother...”

It is exactly Xiang Shaolong’s intention to force Zhao Ya to thoroughly betray him. Only by making use of Zhao Ya will he be able to trick the King of Zhao and Zhao Mu. He need not make a pretense of the deep hatred in his eyes as he said, “The way your Imperial Brother covered up for Zhao Mu regarding Lady Ni’s matter, needless to say it’s because he is the cause of all this. Such an evil fiend, why keep him in this world?”

Zhao Ya looked at him in a loss, then suddenly lowered her head as if she has come to a decision as she bit her lips and said, “Then the other group will go to the Hostage Residence and kidnap them, but how are you going to leave the city?”

Xiang Shaolong said confidently, “I will open a short tunnel that

will lead us out of the city at the west of the city. The Wu family has enough manpower and equipment in this area so it's guaranteed that no one will find out. We will also prepare men and horses outside the city and will leave by over 10 different routes to escape. Along the way there will be pre-prepared hiding areas so that even if the big army comes after us, it would be difficult for them to find us. Besides, by then the city of Handan will not have a leader after your Imperial Brother and Zhao Mu's death so they will certainly be in a mess. If Empress Jing comes to power, she won't be so enthusiastic in going after us. This plan can be considered foolproof, and later on I will arrange for you and Qian'er the time and place to meet."

Zhao Ya lowered her head and did not speak, the rapid changes in her expression, which she tried to hide, are all revealed to Xiang Shaolong's eyes.

He pretended to be surprised and asked, "Ya'er! What's wrong? Is there something wrong with my plan?"

Zhao Ya was startled and regained her composure as she shook her head and replied, "Nothing's wrong, it's just that everything's too sudden for me to accept so quickly."

Xiang Shaolong deliberately made fun of her and said, "This is being deliberate, as long as we strategize well, I guarantee that the muddle headed ruler and corrupt official will only live for the next 10 days."

Zhao Ya took a sad look at him and did not say further.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has laid enough groundwork so he stretched lazily and stood up, “Come! Let us go and look for Qian’er and Xiao Pan!”

Zhao Ya lowered her head and said quietly, “Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that something is wrong, yet he is filled with hope as he asked, “What’s the matter?”

Zhao Ya was hesitant for a moment before shaking her head and said, “It’s nothing, we can talk after we reach the state of Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly, knowing that Zhao Ya has let go of the last chance she has to retain him.

Their relationship has now been terminated!

From now on, all feelings have ceased and they will have nothing to do with each other.

After he left her residence, he can feel the joy of pain.

Pain because of Zhao Ya’s change of heart, joy because he has discarded this relationship baggage.

Ever since the last time Zhao Ya allowed Prince Shaoyuan to enter her bedchamber without a reason, he’d already known that

she has a weak will when it comes to matters revolving men and women, and this is in her nature. Zhao Ni and her faced almost the same situation but she was not like her, flirting with men everywhere.

This is called a short pain is better than a lengthened torture.

Once he thought of this, he immediately felt an indescribable sense of release.

These 10 days until the actual day, the King of Zhao will deliberately make things easy for him so that he can take his time to arrange the assassination attempt and he can use this as an excuse to confiscate all of the Wu family's extensive assets.

Without a grand excuse, the King of Zhao will never dare to touch the Wu family because it will cause other wealthy families in the country to fear for themselves and start moving to other states and the situation would be terrible. He has really put a lot of thought into this.

Now he only has to find out where the real Ying Zheng is and he will be able to proceed with his secret plan.

Maybe he can even persuade Master Wu to leave with them.

Once he thought about this, he wished that he could sprout wings and fly into the Hostage Residence immediately and ask that alluring beauty Zhu Ji this question.

The weather was bitterly cold as the northern wind howled.

There were not many people or carriages on the streets, all those who can would rather stay home than come out and face the bitter cold.

Hoof beats were heard and a group of riders appeared ahead and as they came nearer, it turned out to be Cheng Xu and 10 over soldiers.

On seeing a friend, Xiang Shaolong went up and greeted him warmly.

Who would have expected that Cheng Xu would suddenly look stunned and he forced out a smile as he said, "Commander Xiang, I have something urgent to attend to, we'll chat if there's a chance next time." And he hurriedly rode away.

Xiang Shaolong stood there stunned.

He can only think of the famous words 'Men's heart can turn cold and the world turn icy'.

It seems that no one in Handan welcomes him now.

Behind him he heard hoof beats again as a rider rode past him and swiftly handed him a ball of paper. He opened it and it turns

out that Pu Bu is arranging to meet him and it's written on the paper the place and time.

Xiang Shaolong felt a warmth filling his heart as he returned home after tearing up the piece of paper.

Book 5 Chapter 8 – The Secret About Ying Zheng

Xiang Shaolong sat alone in the garden in his Hidden Dragon Abode, a manmade fountain spurting water from the stone, forming a winding stream through the rocks. By now the stream is almost turning into ice, with only a small portion of water still flowing in the middle, looking extremely intriguing.

Wu Tingfang and the rest all dared not disturb him.

Thoughts rolled in his mind as he thought of how he first met Zhao Ya on the streets on Handan, how he conquered her in his own way. He also thought of how Zhao Mu touched her all over in the carriage, of how aroused she was with all his ministrations. That there are already premonitions that she will develop feelings for someone else, because she cannot defend herself from any man's flirtations at all.

She is just following her heart, not caring about right or wrong, or else she won't have been so intimate with Zhao Mu knowing fully well that he is causing harm to the country and the people, until he has treated her so badly before she left him. If it were Zhao Ni or Zhao Qian, they would not have gone against him under such threats.

But he still trusted her, upon seeing her pretty and wonderful side, he truly believed her honeyed words.

Of course, if he is still planning to stay on in Zhao, maybe their

relationship could have continued. But now it has been proven that she cannot withstand the test of benefits and lust.

People of this era all likes to use ‘trickery of the heart’, the higher the position of the person, the more so.

Cheng Xu who had once gone through thick and thin with him would do a sudden turnabout now caused him much heartache.

Many in this world are those who add salt to wounds, very rare are those who come to help when one is in need.

As he became lost in his thoughts, he was unconsciously following the Mohist meditation technique to stop his thoughts and he immediately felt better. He was suddenly jolted by the sounds of footsteps, it turned out that Tao Fang has come to look for him.

He saw the look of delight on his old friend’s face, who came up to him, swept off the thin layer of snow on the huge rock next to him, sat down and said, “That lad is even lousier than imagined, he’s finally confessed.”

Xiang Shaolong counted the time, if they started the questioning from yesterday, they have at least bombarded him with questions for more than 30 hours, which is not something that one can easily hold up against. He asked happily, “What inside news have you found out?”

Tao Fang was a little miffed as he answered, “Actually he’s only a messenger, and has no idea what is Zhao Mu’s background at all. He purely reports verbally what is happening in Chu and then he’ll relay Zhao Mu’s words back to Chu’s Prince Wen Xin, Chu Leng, who is a top official whom the King of Chu trusts.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “What is Zhao Mu’s message this time?”

Tao Fang replied, “He only asked Prince Wen Xing to send someone over with gifts 3 months later, only this point is a little unique. The rest are all normal recent news like the one regarding Xiao Weimou’s death.”

Xiang Shaolong had a thought and asked, “Is he still being questioned now?”

Tao Fang replied, “Of course! I was afraid he was lying so I followed your instructions and kept forcing him to repeat the details to see if anything does not correspond.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Has he ever been to Handan in the past?”

Tao Fang shook his head, “It’s the first time he made contact with Zhao Mu. In order to avoid suspicions, I believe they send different people here every time.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “How long does it take at the fastest to travel between Chu and Zhao?”

Tao Fang said, “If it’s a rushed journey on a quick horse, and because there are many checkpoints along the way, just the journey alone will take 2 months. That’s why I suspect that this person is lying.”

Xiang Shaolong is adept at spying techniques and said with a smile, “No, he is not lying, this is a secret message that will prevent others from forcing the information out. 3 months may be half the time actually meant, in fact he is referring to half a year. Sending gifts over meant the opposite, I’ve already thought that if Zhao Mu is sent here by the state of Chu, he will never let the ‘Secret Manual of Lu Gong’ fall into the hands of the Zhaos, so the real meaning is he wants the Chus to send over skilled exponents in half a year’s time to steal the secret manual. Zhao Mu is really loyal to the state of Chu.”

Tao Fang was enlightened, “So the words all meant the opposite, it’s taking gifts, not giving gifts. The Chus are really wily, and Prince Wen Xing already knows that the ‘gift’ refers to so he will know once he hear the message.”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes shone, “Most importantly we have to find out who he pretended to be when he came to Handan and what are the ways he used to make contact, the more details the better. I was just worrying that I won’t be able to kill Zhao Mu but this trip will really prove to be exciting.”

Tao Fang is beginning to understand his thinking and left excitedly.

Tao Fang had just left and Jing Jun came looking for him,

looking totally dispirited.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and smiled, “It seems that the lesson is not that interesting, right?”

Jing Jun came to him and said honestly, “I was bored to death and I dared not offend my future father-in-law. And to think that I had to spend money to buy 10 catties of waxed meat for him, and I did not even get to touch Zhao Zhi’s hand in the end.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “You did not get to see her?”

Jing Jun sighed, “What’s the use of seeing her, there are so many students, do you think I can really walk up and start touching her? I think most of the people goes there for lessons because of her.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Is she having lessons as well?”

Jing Jun shook his head, “Initially she was sitting at a corner, making me think that she is accompany me for the lesson but in a short while she ran away with a smile and totally disappeared. I couldn’t find her anywhere after the lesson ended. Hai! I won’t ever go again even if you force me with a sword.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed, “Such impatience, how can you win the lady’s heart.”

Jing Jun only shook his head.

Xiang Shaolong said, “Come with me outside for a walk.”

The 2 of them changed into commoner’s clothes and went up the carriage and out of the stockade before slipping off the carriage at the corner. Jing Jun followed him from afar to see if there’s anyone following him.

An hour later, Xiang Shaolong met Pu Bu at a dense forest south of the city.

Pu Bu said excitedly, “Things are going a lot smoother than imagined. Zhao Mu’s number one man Zheng Yue recruited all of us. Not that I am boasting, but us warriors, when Prince Pingyuan was still alive, were quite famous and respected in Handan.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Is there any news?”

Pu Bu replied apologetically, “We have just settled down and have not heard anything. I think we will take at least 6 months to a year to fully gain their trust.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “It’s all right, you will stay there for a period of time, I will come back to look for you. After we accomplish a big mission, I will bring you back with me.”

Pu Bu replied, “We will listen to Master Xiang’s instructions.” He paused and continued, “Master Xiang! We only hope to follow you.”

Xiang Shaolong replied earnestly, "I understand, I will not let you down in your trust and expectations of me."

After they agreed on the mode of contact, Xiang Shaolong asked, "Do you know of this person from Qi called Qi Yu?"

Pu Bu replied, "That is a good question Master Xiang, the first task given to me and Liu Cao is to be his bodyguard and bring him around for fun. Hei! This lad really has a thing with women, all these women who saw him stuck to him like bees to honey."

Xiang Shaolong felt a pain in his heart and thought of Lady Ya and asked quietly, "Have you accompanied him to see Lady Ya?"

Pu Bu replied, "That we did not, but last night he did not ask for company and slipped out of the Envoy Lodge, maybe he went to look for her."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Don't tell anyone about this. All right! If there's nothing special, try not to make contact with me, no matter what you hear regarding Zhao Mu's plans to deal with me, do not try to let me know. You must remember that."

Pu Bu knows that he's smarter than the average person and although it doesn't sound very logical, there must be something to it, so he agreed.

After they parted, Xiang Shaolong went back to the Wu

Residence and surprisingly We Yingyuan, Wu Zhuo and Teng Yu were all waiting for him.

In the secret chamber, the few important members of the Wu family, Master Wu, Wu Yingyuan, Wu Zhuo, Tao Fang and Xiang Shaolong were all seated, even Teng Yi as well, which goes to show that because of his relationship with Xiang Shaolong and his outstanding performance, he has already gained the trust of all in the Wu family.

This is an important meeting that will impact the life and death of the Wu family.

Wu Zhuo gave his report first, “Teng Yi and I, under Young Grand-Master-in-law’s instructions, chose 500 men from the 2000 elite soldiers and followed his suggested method and kept testing them. Hei! I did not expect only 77 to pass the tests. We will start training them tomorrow, but I can guarantee that these warriors will be able to fight off a hundred men single-handedly.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “You only have 10 days, make good use of the time.”

Everyone were perplexed, and asked him why he’s so sure there’s only 10 days.

Xiang Shaolong sighed and told them everything, only hiding the matter regarding the fake Ying Zheng, because he has made a promise to keep it a secret.

Wu Yingyuan's brows furrowed deeply as he asked, "Then how are you going to get mother and son out? Won't it be even worse if he dies of poisoning after being rescued?"

Xiang Shaolong replied confidently, "There is a twist to this matter, but just as Zhu Ji was about to reveal it, Zhao Mu came and interrupted the conversation. In any case, just leave it to me."

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief, and regained their hope.

Teng Yi listened coldly, no change of expression on his face at all, giving one the impression of a hero with deep resolution.

Tao Fang complimented, "Shaolong is indeed smarter than others, making use of Zhao Ya to trick the King of Zhao and Zhao Mu. Seems that no matter what out of the ordinary things we do for the next 10 days, they will not interfere."

Master Wu nodded his head, "If we do not have Shaolong, we will surely fail terribly this time." He turned towards his son and said, "Is the livestock farm in Qin almost ready?"

Everyone was surprised, only now did they realize that Wu Yingyuan had gone to the state of Qin to make arrangements.

Wu Yingyuan replied, "I've chosen 4 places to run the farm and have already sent experienced hands to deal with it 2 years ago and now it's beginning to have some semblance of a farm and just about able to contain the resources and animals that we will be

moving there. Humph! I really feel like seeing with my own eyes the expression of that muddleheaded ruler King Xiaocheng's face after we leave."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but ask, "There are so many animals in the farm and along the way there will be roadblocks set up by the Zhao soldiers, how will we leave?"

Wu Yingyuan said with a smile, "We will not move even a strand of grass in this farm, what we're moving are the few farms near the Qin border. The past few years we've been using the excuse that we're going to deal against the Qins to slowly expand our farms near that area and the best animals are also sent there."

Tao Fang continued, "On the surface the Zhaos are still maintaining cordial relationships with the Wu family and the soldiers at the borders do not know the situation here at all. As long as the Qins agree, even if we move all the animals, it won't pose any difficulty at all. Besides, we're now only sending over the best animals to use as stud stock."

Wu Zhuo said, "Many of the Zhao soldiers at the border are Wu family disciples I secretly planted there whose names have been changed, so it's a lot easier to work."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed. It turned out that in order to save Ying Zheng and his mother, Wu Yingyuan has started working on it a few years ago, that's why everything can move at such a breeze now.

Teng Yi asked nonchalantly, “There won’t be any animals left behind for the Zhaos?”

Master Wu replied calmly, “Of course!”

Xiang Shaolong can’t bear to think of the scene where the farms will be filled with the corpses of cows and horses, but they have no choice but to do this.

He changed the topic, “The most important thing now is how many days we can defend the fortress, the longer we withstand them the better the chance of us escaping.”

Teng Yi and Tao Fang were just informed about the secret tunnel so they understood his meaning.

Because the Zhaos will think that they are trapped in the stockade and will not send anyone to go after them, while Zhu Ji and her son can leave the city via the tunnel. So the longer they can hold the stockade, the further they can escape, to the extent that they may even reach Xianyang before the border guards receive any news.

Wu Zhuo replied, “You can count on me and Teng Yi for this. Within these few days I will secretly move the equipment and men needed to defend the stockade in and hide them well while Brother Teng will be in charge of teaching them the art of defending a city.”

Wu Yingyuan told Tao Fang, “Master Tao better transfer those outsiders somewhere else and try to dismiss the unrelated maids and servants. As for the song courtesans, chose the best ones and send them out of the city, but you must pretend to be secretive about all these.”

Everyone else, with the exception of Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong, all laughed.

The former because he has seldom smiled since the horrible deaths of his wife and children while Xiang Shaolong is because he thought of Master Wu’s decision to perish together with the stockade.

He can’t help but utter, “Grandfather...”

Master Wu interrupted, “This matter can only be washed with blood, so that the descendents of the Wu family will never forget their hatred with the Zhaos. Whoever wants to deal with the Wu family will have to pay a terrible price.”

He sighed softly and a look of reminiscence shot out from his eyes as he said slowly, “Our forefathers are actually Qin royalty, but because of strife we were forced to end up in Zhao. Depending on our unyielding resolution, we set up a farm in the deserted areas and became the world’s number one livestock farm. Now my descendents are finally returning home while I can only die heroically. That life has turned out this way, what more can a man ask.”

Wu Zhuo was silent while Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang looked miserable.

A look of respect shot out from Teng Yi's eyes as he said emotionally, "Good man!"

Master Wu smiled and stood up with some trouble, saying "That's why I am going to enjoy myself to the fullest for the next few days, do not bother me if there's nothing important."

He chortled and under the looks of everyone present, left the room humming a tune.

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong walked side-by-side back to the inner hall and asked, "What do you plan to do with Qian'er?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he dotes on this pretty princess and was worried that he will abandon her so he assured him, "I will bring her along no matter what."

Teng Yi was assured and turned around to look for Wu Zhuo.

That evening, Master Wu held a secret wedding ceremony for Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang and at the same time accepted Ting Fangshi as his mistress, so that both now have a formal status.

That night Xiang Shaolong infiltrated the Hostage Residence with Jing Jun again.

Xiang Shaolong was familiar with the place and avoided the guards on patrol, coming to Zhu Ji's bedchamber. The 2 of them hid on the bed and talked secretly.

Zhu Ji's pretty face is on the same pillow as him, her body pressed tightly against him. Because she is lying on her side, sounds of her alluring breathing drifted into his ears following her breaths and that sort of pull is something no man can resist.

Luckily Xiang Shaolong's eyes were staring straight ahead at the top of the curtained bed or else once he sees her eyes, he will definitely not be able to control himself and do something that he should not have.

In this era where men holds power, women all knows how to use their natural charms to control men. Zhu Ji is exactly one of the best in this area. Or else King Zhuangxiang won't be pining away for her and intelligent men like the bisexual Zhao Mu and Guo Kai won't be enamored with her at the same time.

Zhu Ji did not talk about business first and instead asked, "You have not fallen for that slut Zhao Ya?"

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that women are women after all. Time is precious yet Zhu Ji has the inclination to talk about such gossip, so he can only accede to her and asked, "Are you familiar with her?"

Zhu Ji answered unhappily, "Zhao Mu used to bring her to my

place in the past, do you consider that familiar?”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that Zhao Ya once hinted that she has something going on with that fake Ying Zheng, so it seems that it's under Zhao Mu's instructions that she was doing such ridiculous things. He felt a wave of nausea and at the same time felt as if he has been released, because he no longer need to be responsible for Zhao Ya relationship-wise.

Zhu Ji suddenly laughed lightly and said smugly, “Zhao Mu may be wily, but he is definitely not our match. You should know how to make good use of this slut!”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought her formidable, she was able to see through his plans immediately. He took a deep breath and said, “If the plan succeeds, it'll really be all thanks to her help.” He can't help but ask, “Lady! Where exactly is your son?”

Zhu Ji replied, “First tell me your plan, I can only tell you after I decide if it's viable.”

After going through so many experiences, Xiang Shaolong has learnt not to reveal everything. He told her the gist of the plan but omitted the most important part about the secret tunnel in the Wu family and changed the escape route to be from the west of the city.

Zhu Ji is already very satisfied and kissed his cheek gently, her slender hand caressing his broad chest and asked flirtatiously, “Your waist is so hard, what is tied around there?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, "It's equipment that can make me fly over walls and needles that can kill silently."

Zhu Ji's expression changed, "Does Zhao Ya know you have such abilities?"

Xiang Shaolong thought carefully and shook his head, "Although she has seen them before, I've never explained how they are used. Besides it seems that she is still hoping that I can escape alone and should not have told Zhao Mu about it."

Zhu Ji heaved a sigh of relief and whispered in his ear, "We cannot just depend on luck. Can you bring me some strong drugs tomorrow, if need be, I want to think of a way to slip out myself."

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to think that this woman is not simple at all and asked with a furrowed brow, "Even if we can drug the maids who are guarding you, we won't be able to pass the guards. You must not believe Guo Kai, he's just lying to get your body."

Zhu Ji guffawed, "Only a fool would believe him. The person I want to drug is him. This is the only route to escape after I pondered on this problem day and night over the last 10 years. I want to drug him because his build and weight is about the same as me. I only need to prop my shoes higher and tie something like what you have in my clothes."

She continued with a sigh, "Hai! If I don't find something to do,

I'd go crazy being locked up like this." She paused and continued in a sharp voice that sounded exactly like Guo Kai, "That's why I imitated his way of talking and actions everyday. If not for the fact that I know I won't be able to go far, or else I would have slipped away long ago."

Xiang Shaolong was bowled over and complimented her sincerely, "You did a really great imitation."

Footsteps were heard from outside the door and Xiang Shaolong hurriedly hid in the secret compartment.

The maids opened the door and came into the room, lifting up the curtains on the bed and only left after seeing Zhu Ji who was pretending to be asleep.

Xiang Shaolong squeezed out.

Zhu Ji leaned over again and hugged him, saying, "There's a man under Buwei who is adept in the skill of disguise..."

Xiang Shaolong interrupted her, "You're referring to Xiao Yuetan, I just met him!"

Zhu Ji exclaimed happily, "Only now do I trust you wholeheartedly. All right! I'll tell you, although I do not know the skill of disguise, but I had learnt some tricks from him in the past out in interest. When I am feeling bored everyday I will try to think of a way to disguise myself as Guo Kai. I'm confident that

unless I meet someone familiar, or else no one will be able to tell.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly, from this one can tell how much Zhu Ji yearns to leave this cage, and he can also see her fierce determination during such dire situation.

Zhu Ji said, “Most importantly you must bring me the drugs. Man is strange, regardless of committing good or bad deeds, once things get started it’ll be difficult to control, so sooner or later Zhao Ya will betray you totally. With Zhao Mu’s cautious and suspicious nature, he will certainly increase the number of people guarding this place.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed, “Now that you’ve said this, I too feel a bad omen. If Zhao Mu finds out that I have the ability to move about over high places, he will certainly pinpoint on this area and deal with it.” He then sat up.

Zhu Ji asked in alarm, “What are you doing?”

Xiang Shaolong did not reply her but moved to the side of the window and looked out, and it happened that a team of patrol just walked past. After they left, he made a signal to Jing Jun who was outside and in a short while, that lad slipped in swiftly through the window like a civet cat.

After Xiang Shaolong instructed him to return to the Wu family to take the drugs and saw him leaving safely, he went back to the bed.

Zhu Ji stared at him with her large eyes and said, “So you actually have someone who is so highly skilled helping you, no wonder Zhao Mu is so wary of you.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Lady, you better tell me quickly the matter regarding the Crown Prince!”

Zhu Ji said languidly, “Why the anxiety? You still have to wait for him to take the thing here before you leave. You don’t even know how torturous it is for me to keep everything to myself and it’s not easy for me to find someone like you to talk to.”

Xiang Shaolong felt both anger and humor over this and cajoled her, “Take it that I beg of you?”

Zhu Ji was ecstatic and she used her wiles and asked gently, “Shaolong! Will you kiss me?”

Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to turn his head around only to see her enigmatic and flirtatious eyes staring at him unwaveringly.

Their eyes locked for a moment and Zhu Ji took the initiative to kiss his lips, her slender body lightly moving against his.

Waves of giddiness swept over his body and Xiang Shaolong’s lust was immediately aroused uncontrollably.

Zhu Ji’s fragrant lips moved apart a little and she said with a light laugh, “And I thought you’re a weirdo who will not be

moved, so it turns out that you're no different from other men."

Xiang Shaolong felt irritation and because of this his attention was diverted and he suppressed his lust while exclaiming angrily, "Lady!"

Zhu Ji extended 2 fingers and pressed on his mouth, and as if cajoling a kid, said, "Don't be angry, I sincerely want to be close to you!"

Just when Xiang Shaolong could do nothing about her, Zhu Ji said with a serious tone, "At that time in order to avoid being seen, Buwei and my husband did not bring me with them. I had just given birth to a son then and he was not even a month old. After they left, I knew the situation is not right and the Zhaos may very well kill Zheng'er to appease their anger so that night I ordered my servant to go find another baby to take Zheng'er's place."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened, "So that's how the fake Ying Zheng came about."

Zhu Ji said with worry, "Things done in a hurry will certainly have loopholes. We can't find a baby around the same age at such short notice so we could only pay a large sum of money to buy a 3 year old kid to replace him. Luckily at that time no one thought highly of my husband and they don't even know if he has children. That night when Zhao Mu found out that Lu Buwei and my husband had left, he sentenced all the maids and servants to death in fury, leaving only me and my fake son but his suspicions were not aroused at all."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand, no wonder Ying Zheng's age is different from the history books, so the real situation is so twisted.

The battle of Changping happened during 260BC, and he has been here for a few years and now it is 249BC, a difference of 11 years.

If Emperor Qin was born in Zhao after the defeat of Changping, and with the difficulty in news being passed during this ancient era, the news may have been delayed by one year. Therefore Ying Zheng should be born at the beginning of the year, the year after the defeat at Changping, and he ascended the throne on 246BC, which is only 3 years away from now. Hence he should be 13 years old by then, which proves that the history books were correct.

He's so stupid not to have guessed that this Ying Zheng is a fake one.

The things that he could not figure out in the past immediately became logical.

This is more reasonable, with Emperor Qin's intellect and bravery, how can he be a useless person.

Zhu Ji took out from within her clothes an exquisite jade piece with a unique design, with a phoenix carved on it. She removed it and somberly pressed it into Xiang Shaolong's hand and used his palm to cover it up, her 2 hands grabbing his hardened fists tightly

and said gently, “The real Zheng’er has been sent to a poor family in Handan who had just lost 2 sons in the defeat of Changping, and it’s been agreed that in future this jade piece will be used to identify each other. Zheng’er has the same jade piece hung around his neck. This has a phoenix carved on it while his has a dragon carved on it.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Does that couple know about the Crown Prince’s background?”

Zhu Ji’s eyes revealed both joy and worry and she was so nervous her breathing quickened as she breathed out, “Of course we can’t let them know, we just told them he’s an illegitimate son borne by a girl from a rich family. At that time I didn’t expect to be put under house arrest immediately and the servant who knew about the matter has been killed. Therefore I only have the opportunity to tell you this matter when you came today. Heavens! You must find him for me, or else I won’t want to live either.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel the remaining body warmth of Zhu Ji from the jade piece in his hands and he said confidently, “I can guarantee with my head, I will certainly find him.”

Of course he is confident, or else history would not have ended up thus.

Zhu Ji whimpered, “Don’t try to cajole me.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I am someone with special abilities, my intuition will certainly not go wrong.”

Zhu Ji looked at him doubtfully for a moment before moving to his ears and telling him the secret in her heart, the name and address of the person who took in her son.

Xiang Shaolong memorized it.

There was a soft sound at the window, Jing Jun has returned and he was carrying a big bag of drugs and came grinning to the curtain. He was eyeing Zhu Ji up and down and was immediately dumbfounded and forgot to speak.

Zhu Ji giggled and naturally she looked alluring.

Xiang Shaolong said with a reprimanding tone, "Xiao Jun!"

Only then did Jing Jun's senses return and he said, "This is a very strong drug, just a little can knock a person out for a day and even cold water won't rouse him. There's enough here to knock out over a hundred people."

They could hear hoof beats coming nearer from afar.

Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong were both stunned and knows that Zhu Ji has indeed made the correct guess about Zhao Ya.

Xiang Shaolong knows that not only is Zhao Ya sinking deeper and deeper, but she has been controlled by Zhao Mu again, or else

Zhao Mu won't have sent people here to increase defenses in the middle of the night. Obviously Zhao Ya has revealed to Zhao Mu in bed regarding his ability.

After he hurriedly made an agreement with Zhu Ji on the time and place for escape, the 2 of them left swiftly.

They've just climbed over the wall when the guards came rushing over from where the fake Ying Zheng stayed to start a new defense formation.

From this moment on, this resilient mother of Emperor Qin, will have to use her own strength and intellect to escape.

Book 5 Chapter 9 – The Big Exchange

Early the next morning, an impatient Xiang Shaolong slipped quietly into the streets and deliberately went a big round before coming to where the poor lived in at the west of the city.

Although it's where the poor lived, their lives are not that bad, only their houses were a little run down and the fallen walls not repaired! Most of the people here used to be farmers but the wars destroyed their farms and hence they have no choice but to find work in the city.

He followed the address and came at last to the South Alley which Zhu Ji told him.

At this time he can't help but feel nervous as he grabbed a passerby and asked, "Where is Zhang Li's house?"

That person saw that he looked respectable and pointed to a fenced up house at the end of the alley and said, "That is his house!" He seemed to have some words which he found difficult to say, but he just shook his head, sighed and left.

Xiang Shaolong was not concerned at all and his mood became more relaxed. He secretly thought that this should be right, and walked over. He went to the door and shouted, "Zhang Li! Zhang Li!"

A forty over year old average looking woman stuck her head out and eyed Xiang Shaolong suspiciously for a moment before asking,

“Who is looking for Zhang Li?”

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “You must be Madam Zhang!” He took out the jade piece and showed it to her.

With a ‘bang’, Madam Zhang slammed the door close as if she has seen a ghost.

Xiang Shaolong was totally dumbfounded by her reaction and stared at the closed wooden door like a retard.

In a short while an argument between a man and a woman can be heard from inside.

Xiang Shaolong now understood. Naturally they are unwilling to return a child whom they have raised for 10 years, so he can only compensate them well with money.

He reached out and lightly knocked on the brass ring on the door.

After a pause the door opened and a man stood next to the door and said with lowered head, “Sir, please come in.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that he looked honest and secretly complimented Zhu Ji’s subordinate for knowing how to choose a person rightly.

He stepped into the house and saw that woman sitting at a corner

weeping. A cloud of gloom hung in the house and there's no liveliness in it at all.

He did not even hear any child's voice or clothing and items.

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brow and asked, "Where's the child?"

The woman sobbed even more uncontrollably.

Zhang Li's eyes reddened as he said painfully, "Dead!"

That word sounded thunderous and made Xiang Shaolong's body tremble. He almost had an heart attack as he exclaimed in shock, "How did he die?"

Zhang Li said miserably, "Few years ago when the Yans attacked Handan, all children above the age of 13 were conscripted to defend the city, and he was killed by one of the random arrows shot by the Yans. Although we took your money, we could not protect the child, just kill us! There's no meaning living on anyway."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, "But he wasn't even 10 years old last year!" He remembered the behavior of the passerby earlier and now understood that he was feeling sorry that they have lost their son.

Zhang Li replied, "We can only blame that he's a lot bigger built than 13 year old kids. While he was outside playing one day, he was

captured by passing soldiers.”

Xiang Shaolong collapsed onto a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Heavens! Emperor Qin is actually dead, what should he do?

No! This is impossible, this couple must be lying. But looking at their expressions, he knows that this is the truth, especially when there's a new memorial tablet placed on a table on one side of the wall.

Zhang Li took out a jade piece and handed it to him, “This was taken from his body. He's buried in our back garden, would Sir want to take a look?”

Xiang Shaolong removed his hands and his eyes fell on the jade piece.

A ridiculous yet bold idea came uncontrollably to him.

Xiang Shaolong went to Lady Ya's residence and as expected, Zhao Ya has not returned.

There are more unfamiliar faces in the residence. He did not see any of those whom he is familiar with like Zhao Da and the rest. Amongst the maids, with the exception of Xiao Zhao and Xiao Mei, the rest have all been transferred away.

Xiang Shaolong knows that Zhao Ya will certainly have a very good excuse for all these arrangements, but he still wants to hear her say it personally. The more she lies to him, the more he can turn his love for her into hatred.

Zhao Pan was practicing his swordplay alone in the back garden with deep concentration but once Xiang Shaolong stepped into the garden, he could detect him and he ran forward with his sword as if he has seen the only family he has in the world.

Xiang Shaolong pulled out the sword named Blood Wave which Li Mu gave him and shouted, “Lad, look out for the sword!”

Zhao Pan’s eyes gleamed as he slashed forward with his sword.

Xiang Shaolong stood easily with his sword and said with a stern expression, “Do you think this is a game? Be more vicious!”

Zhao Pan roared as he executed the Mohist swordplay and slashed and stabbed at Xiang Shaolong, making a total of 7 attacks.

When he reached the 7th stance, he was finally disarmed by the reverberations mainly because he is smaller sized and not as strong.

Zhao Pan looked totally dejected and extremely unhappy over his defeat but there’s nothing he can do.

Xiang Shaolong picked up the long sword for him and took him to the tiny bridge in the middle of the garden. They sat on the low barrier and he said seriously, “Xiao Pan! Do you really have the perseverance to eliminate all difficulties and avenge your mother?”

Zhao Pan nodded his head with resolution, “No matter what, I must kill Zhao Mu and the King.”

Xiang Shaolong asked solemnly, “Aren’t you good friends with the Crown Prince?”

Zhao Pan said unhappily, “He’s never been my friend, he only knows how to use his position to bully me. Ever since Mother got to know you, he’s been going around telling everyone that Mother is a slut. If it’s possible, I want to kill him as well.” He suddenly added, “But even if I become as formidable as Teacher, I still won’t be able to kill them, or else Teacher would have killed them long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly surprised at his astute observation and said with a smile, “You want revenge, I want revenge as well. Why not we split duties, I will deal with Zhao Mu while you will deal with that muddle headed ruler King Xiaocheng, how about that?”

Zhao Pan did not expect Xiang Shaolong to think so highly of him and he stared at him with huge eyes, looking morosely at his only ‘family’.

Xiang Shaolong said, “Now I am going to tell you a very important thing, if you really have the determination to avenge your mother’s humiliation, then instruct me to go ahead. Otherwise you are never to reveal anything about this at all, not even to Princess Qian and Lady Ya.”

Zhao Pan jumped up, kneeled on the ground and kowtowed to him 3 times, his eyes reddened as he said, “As long as I can avenge Mother, I am willing to do anything.”

Xiang Shaolong said quietly, “Stand up!”

Zhao Pan stood up, his eyes filled with the look of extreme curiosity.

Xiang Shaolong smiled a little and continued, “I want you to become Emperor Qin who unifies the 6 states!”

Zhao Pan was stunned for a moment before asking quizzically, “What is Emperor Qin?”

By the time Zhao Ya came into the garden, Xiang Shaolong has just hung the jade piece on Zhao Pan’s neck.

From this moment onwards, he is the heir to the Qin throne Ying Zheng.

Zhao Pan looked both shocked and overjoyed, but the look in his eyes was unwavering, filled with a determination which was never

there before.

No one can understand better than him, a child who grew up in the Palace, how rare this chance can be.

And only by becoming the ruler of the strongest state in the world can he have the ability to kill the King of Zhao and avenge his Mother Lady Ni.

Not only does he hate the King of Zhao, but also every other Zhao who just stood by the side and gave him the cold shoulder.

Now the only person he trusts totally is Xiang Shaolong.

Zhao Ya came towards them with a smile and complimented, "I've never seen Xiao Pan so hardworking before."

Xiang Shaolong gave a look to Zhao Pan and the latter slipped off obediently.

Zhao Ya tried to force a smile on a face, but her countenance was pale and tired, obviously she did not have a good night.

Xiang Shaolong asked deliberately, "Ya'er are you feeling unwell?"

Zhao Ya stammered slightly, "No! Nothing much. I was going around these few days trying to gather information for you and am

so tired.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows as he asked, “Why are there so many unfamiliar faces here now, where has Zhao Da and the rest gone?”

Zhao Ya seems to have prepared an answer long ago and said nonchalantly, “I had them transferred to my residence in the Palace. Without their help, it’s inconvenient for me to work in the Palace.”

She was afraid that he would pursue the topic so she changed the subject, “How is the plan progressing? Have you contacted Ying Zheng?”

Xiang Shaolong answered dejectedly, “It seems that other than a direct attack, there is no other way. But the Wu family’s warriors can fight one against ten, so my plan will definitely succeed. Zhao Mu and King Xiaocheng can forget about living past the Farmers’ Festival.”

Zhao Ya lowered her pretty face, unable to hide the pain and uncertainty in her expression.

Xiang Shaolong thought secretly: let me give you another chance, and asked with concern, “Ya’er you seem very troubled these few days. Why don’t you say what is troubling you so that I can share your problems, there is nothing that cannot be solved.”

Zhao Ya was stunned, “Nothing is troubling me, I’m just a little scared!”

She gathered up a smile and collected her spirits and said, “Shaolong you better tell me the details of your plan on that day so that Third Princess and I can work with you, in that way we can avoid any last minute mishaps.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “No need to be so anxious, I will tell you the detailed arrangement in a few days, because there are some areas which we still have not settled on.” He secretly sighed and understood that Zhao Ya is really going all the way out to betray him.

Zhao Ya suddenly asked, “Shaolong! Have you heard any rumors about me recently?”

Xiang Shaolong said lightly, “You’re referring to Qi Yu’s matter! How can it be? I absolutely trust my good Ya’er, and understand that you are pretending to be on their side so that the King of Zhao will not suspect us.”

Zhao Ya’s expression started to look unnatural, as if she’s a little afraid to be alone with Xiang Shaolong, and said, “Aren’t you going to see your beautiful princess?”

Xiang Shaolong stood up suavely.

Zhao Ya looked at his expression which is full of heroic air

morosely, her eyes looking totally lost.

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort in his heart, and once he thought of the fact that later on, she will understand that he has been lying to her, and he felt an extreme satisfaction rising in his heart.

The next few days, everyone in the Wu family were getting ready. Men and supplies were constantly streaming in secretly from the tunnel into the stockade.

Xiang Shaolong personally trained those 77 members of the Wu family's special task force. The methods he used overwhelmed even Teng Yi, who is well versed in the art of warfare, and how could he have known that these are the training methods from the 21st century.

He also visited Xiao Pan frequently and taught him how to pretend to be the Ying Zheng who has lived with a poor family for 10 years and in the end, it was Xiao Pan who told him the things he has thought of instead.

Xiang Shaolong saw how smart and obedient he is and was greatly assured.

Unconsciously, it is now only 3 days away from the Farmers' Festival.

The situation became tense.

The most worrying thing for Xiang Shaolong now is Zhu Ji. If she cannot get out, they will really have to invade Hostage Residence by force. Without her, Xiao Pan will not be able to become Ying Zheng.

That's why they have another back up plan.

That afternoon, Xiao Yuetan who has been gone for 7 days finally returned.

After entering the secret room, Xiao Yuetan's attitude is vastly different and said apologetically to Wu Yingyuan and Xiang Shaolong, "Firstly! Master Tu asked that I apologize to you first, because we had other selfish plans then and the words I used were not the whole truth. But I guarantee that from now on, we will sincerely co-operate with all of you."

To Wu Yingyuan it is like a dream and he doesn't know what has Xiang Shaolong done to make this person's attitude change so drastically.

However Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled and knows that this Tu Xian is a courageous and wise person and only then will it be possible for the plan to succeed.

Xiao Yuetan said, "Luckily Xiaolong tipped us off, or else Master Tu may have been captured by the Zhaos."

Xiang Shaolong asked, “How many of your men are here?”

Xiao Yuetan replied, “There are 30 men who came into the city with me and they are all top notch fighters.” He paused and continued, “There are 120 men with Master Tu and they are the most elite among his men.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Mister Xiao better order all those who have entered the city to come to the Wu residence.”

Xiao Yuetan was stunned and asked, “Is Shaolong thinking of fighting head on with the Zhaos?”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “It may be that, but it may not be that too. Please allow me to keep you in suspense first, I will reveal the whole plan the day after. This matter is too important and I hope you will understand.”

Xiao Yuetan smiled, “Shaolong is so confident, I am even more assured instead. Master Tu is now hiding in a dense forest outside the city near the hills, quietly waiting for us to send the Crown Prince and Lady out.”

Wu Yingyuan laughed, “Mister is really formidable, those few song courtesans who had served you were all pining for you. Just a word from you and we will send them to your residence in Xianyang...”

Xiao Yuetan looked overjoyed and replied, “Everyone says that

the Wu family is generous and you indeed live up to your reputation. I am definitely making you my friends.”

Xiang Shaolong took his leave and on the way bumped into Jing Jun who came to look for him. It turns out that Teng Yi had something to discuss with him.

They went to a small building near the city walls which has now become their temporary command center. Teng and Wu were studying the detailed map of the Hostage Residence.

Xiang Shaolong asked quizzically, “Where did you get such good stuff?”

Teng Yi said smugly, “I drew it. I just have to see it once and will be able to memorize and write it out.”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly surprised and did not expect Teng Yi to have such amazing memory and excellent drawing skills. After complimenting him, he continued, “I hope we don’t have to use the backup plan of invading the Hostage Residence by force. Otherwise even if we succeed, we will suffer heavy casualties as well.”

Teng and Ma nodded their heads at the same time, obviously they have some fear and reservations about attacking the Hostage Residence.

Jing Jun said, “If we were to successfully attack the Hostage

Residence, it is indeed an extremely difficult task. But if we only need to rescue Zhu Ji, the situation will be totally different. I just have to lead those ‘Elite Army’.” He then revealed his plan, which sounded totally reasonable.

The other 3 were astounded and all changed their impressions of him.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this lad is really born to be in the special task force, even better than him, and said seriously, “From now on you will be the leader of the Elite Army. It’s best that you forge good relations with them so that when you work together in future, there will be no problems.”

Jing Jun was ecstatic. While others were overwhelmed with duties, he had nothing to do but just be a runner for Teng Yi. Now that he’s suddenly the leader of the Elite Army, naturally he is overjoyed.

With a shout, he went looking for his subordinates.

Wu Zhuo shook his head with a wry smile. Without his orders, who would listen to the commands of a young and inexperienced lad.

Teng Yi closed his eyes and recollected his thoughts for a moment, then opened his eyes and said, “I still worry about Qian’er.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Logically speaking, they won’t do anything to Qian’er before the Farmers’ Festival in case our suspicions are aroused.”

Teng Yi said, “In the eyes of the King of Zhao, Qian’er has committed an unforgivable crime. I’m afraid he will sentence her to death on that day and we will live to regret it.”

Now that he’s said that, Xiang Shaolong is worried about Xiao Pan as well. With the King of Zhao’s ruthlessness, maybe he will not let a child off as well and he asked in alarm, “What should we do then?”

Zhao Mu has forced Zhao Ya to transfer all her own people away, on one hand his people can keep an eye on Lady Ya so that she will not dare to betray him, and at the same time they can control Zhao Qian’s life and death.

Xiang Shaolong’s concern is clouding his thinking and his brains is totally not working, unable to think of any way that can change this terrible situation. The biggest problem is that they can only wait until the last moment to save Zhao Qian.

Teng Yi said, “If the King of Zhao summoned Zhao Qian back into the Palace a day earlier, there will be nothing we can do at all.”

Although it is now winter, Xiang Shaolong was sweating as he exclaimed, “I have not thought of that!”

Teng Yi said calmly, “Just leave this matter to me. Zhao Mu is still not aware that we have seen through his evil plans so he won’t send a huge army to keep an eye on Lady Ya’s residence. Even if he were to send people to escort Zhao Qian back to the Palace, he won’t use so many manpower too. As long as we send men to keep an eye on Lady Ya’s residence round the clock, we can act according to circumstances and need not worry about any mishaps.”

Xiang Shaolong is the only one who knows what the problem is, and it is Xiao Pan. He is determined not to tell anyone about Xiao Pan impersonating Ying Zheng. In future only he, Zhao Qian, Wu Tingfang and a limited number of people will know of this, no one else will know Xiao Pan’s real identity.

Teng Yi said, “What I fear is that the King of Zhao would be so ruthless and sentence his daughter to death. This is really problematic.”

Xiang Shaolong hardened his resolve and said, “Maybe I will have to do it the hard way, I will pressurize Zhao Ya to let me bring Qian’er here. Her only way is to seek the King’s advice. If he really has the intention of killing his daughter, he won’t mind her coming to the Wu family, and can even accuse us of one more crime, kidnapping the princess. By then they will have even more reason to back them up.”

Teng Yi said, “Logically speaking you should take Zhao Ya along as well. Won’t she be suspicious?”

Xiang Shaolong also felt that this plan is not really workable and

just as he was worrying over it, Lady Ya sent someone to invite him over to her residence.

Xiang Shaolong went on his way hurriedly, knowing fully well that it is time to give Zhao Ya all the fake cards.

Book 5 Chapter 10 – Going Along With The Mistake

Xiang Shaolong met Zhao Ya at the quiet inner hall.

It was a sunny day, the sun who has not shown his face for many days shone gently on the silvery white world.

This time Xiang Shaolong did not even see Xiao Zhao and Xiao Mei, it seems that everyone in the whole residence has been changed with Zhao Mu's men.

Zhao Ya was dressed in yellow and she seemed to be in better spirits but it still could not hide her sad and tired face. There is a kind of heartbreaking, lonesome beauty, which revealed the torture and dilemma in her heart.

But Xiang Shaolong has no pity for her at all. He only thought that she deserves it.

After they were seated and the maid who served tea left, Zhao Ya said quietly, "How are things progressing?"

Xiang Shaolong gave a small smile and replied, "Quite smoothly. Do you have any new information on your side, did Zhao Mu hear of anything at all?"

Zhao Ya shook her head, "Imperial Brother and Zhao Mu's

attention are all placed on the war with the Yans, and has no time to bother about other matters for the moment.” She paused and continued, “Instead Empress Jing is urging you to strike quickly and wants me to tell you that Imperial Brother is very unhappy because you submitted the document together with Li Mu and it’s quite possible that he will deal with you and the Wu family after the Farmers’ Festival.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that they are trying to make him more determined to strike. Zhao Ya, you’re really hardworking.

Zhao Ya saw that he was quiet and asked, “Have you made contact with Lu Buwei and the rest? If there’s no one from Qin to help, how are we going to send Zhu Ji and her son back to Xianyang?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be troubled and said, “We’ve made contact long ago. They sent Tu Xian and his men over first but they still do not trust us. They only said that if we can get Zhu Ji and her son out of the city, then we are to meet them at Magu Hill west of the city.”

How is Zhao Ya supposed to know this is all nonsense so her pretty eyes brightened and she pressed on, “There’s only 2 days left, is the secret tunnel out of the city ready?”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly had a bright idea and said, “Everything is ready.” He continued with an earnest voice, “To me, you and Qian’er are more important than Zhu Ji and her son, so I’ve decided to send you, Qian’er and Xiao Pan out of the city first

before I activate the attack on your Imperial Brother and the Hostage Residence. Otherwise I'd rather cancel the whole plan."

Zhao Ya's delicate body shook as she lowered her head and said, "Are we really that important?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing to himself as he replied, "What joy do I have left if I lose all of you. According to past experiences, your Imperial Brother's troops will leave the city the day after at the hour of Chen (between 7am to 9am). I will wait for you at the back door a little earlier, around the hour of Mao (between 5am to 7am). If everything is appropriate, I'll immediately send someone to send all of you to the west of the city and after I've kidnapped Zhu Ji and her son, I will meet up with you and leave the city together via the secret tunnel."

Zhao Ya asked, "Who is in charge of the ambush outside the city?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Of course Wu Zhuo will be in charge. When the troops pass by the tall grassland, our men who are already in hiding in pre-dug ditches will shoot arrows when they are caught unprepared and they will be unable to react. This plan can be considered flawless."

Zhao Ya's lips quivered slightly and with a voice as soft as an insect buzzing, said, "All right! At that time I, Third Princess and Xiao Pan will slip out to meet up with you."

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has reached his aim and went to look

for Zhao Qian. Zhao Ya used the excuse that she's returning to the Palace to report to Empress Jing and left the residence. However Xiang Shaolong of course knows that she is going to report the latest situation to the King of Zhao.

Naturally Zhao Qian is overjoyed at seeing him, but also worried that he won't be able to win against the King of Zhao and Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong hugged her, whispering sweet nothings to her and at the same time telling her about the plan to change Xiao Pan into Ying Zheng.

The expression on Zhao Qian's pretty face changed, not knowing whether to feel scared or excited as breathed out, "No wonder Xiao Pan has been behaving strangely these few days, talking to himself. I was so worried that he has lost his senses because he missed his mother too much yet I dare not tell you for fear that you will be distracted."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Besides you and Tingfang, no one else knows his real identity, so under no circumstances must you reveal the truth of this matter."

Zhao Qian replied, "I understand!"

To assure her, Xiang Shaolong told her what he said to Zhao Ya earlier and further discussed how they could help Xiao Pan disguise before he returned to the Wu family's stockade.

The next day Xiang Shaolong went back to Zhao Ya's residence to look for her and to test her.

As expected, Zhao Ya has no objections to this arrangement.

Standing from Zhao Mu's viewpoint, Xiang Shaolong and the Wu family is just toying within his palms, and there's no way they can escape from his hands. That's why he will never let go of this opportunity that seems heaven bestowed to totally eliminate Xiang Shaolong and all of the Wu family's power in one fell swoop.

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "Kids are more easily frightened, I'd like to take Xiao Pan away first, does Ya'er have any thoughts about this?"

Why on earth would Zhao Ya bother about an unimportant orphan so she nodded her head in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and was about to leave.

Zhao Ya called out softly, "Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong turned around and Zhao Ya threw herself into his arms, her slender hands encircling his neck as she kissed him, using all her strength to portray the pain in her heart.

Although Xiang Shaolong is not at all interested, he had to pretend to lustily savor her tiny mouth.

As their lips parted, Zhao Ya's tears flowed uncontrollably.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and asked, "Do you have any problems?"

Zhao Ya leaned on his shoulder and wailed, only recollecting herself after a long while and said, "I'm just too happy, that's why I behaved this way."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing.

Zhao Ya stepped away and wiped her tears as she said, "Go and look for Xiao Pan!"

Xiang Shaolong took Xiao Pan away openly and along the way he changed him into some torn and old clothes he prepared earlier and gave him some instructions before bringing him back to the Wu stockade.

Before that he has already told the needed people that Ying Zheng is actually another person. Those in the Wu family were very excited and the happiest is Xiao Yuetan, because this has changed the entire situation.

They have just stepped through the door when Wu Yingyuan and Xiao Yuetan rushed forward and knelt down, calling out Crown Prince.

Xiao Pan pretended to be overwhelmed and hid behind Xiang Shaolong, and kept crying out that he wants to see his real mother.

Xiang Shaolong told them, “He’s still not used to his real identity. Let me bring him to Tingfang for her to look after and we’ll talk again after he’s seen the Empress.”

They did not suspect a thing at all and happily showed this fake prince into the inner mansion.

Time passed, and the day of the Farmers’ Festival finally arrived.

Everyone in the stockade woke up before dawn.

All the ladies and children used the excuse that they are going to the farms to celebrate the Farmers’ Festival to leave the city. Ting Fangshi and the 4 maids were one of the batch who were sent away.

Wu Tingfang threw a tantrum, insisting on staying by Xiang Shaolong’s side. No one could do anything about her so they had to agree.

Inside the stockade, besides the 2000 elite soldiers under Wu Zhuo, there are also 700 odd loyal warriors and 200 odd male and female strong servants, in all about 3000 people. In addition to the high walls and the moat, they are a force not to be reckoned with.

This is also the reason the King of Zhao dare not make any rash

moves. It'll be easier to deal with them if they can be lured out of the strong fortress.

After their meal, Xiang Shaolong led Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Xiao Yuetan and his 30 highly skilled men as well as Wu family's 77 elite warriors who are akin to the special task force, out of the city in the dark.

Shortly after they left the stockade, Wu Zhuo led another 50 skilled men and a horse carriage towards Lady Ya's residence.

The sun only came out slowly an hour later, after they reached the back door of Lady Ya's residence.

The back door opened immediately and Zhao Ya and Zhao Qian dashed out from inside.

Someone opened the carriage door and invited them in.

Zhao Ya followed Zhao Qian into the carriage and only saw Wu Zhuo and 2 other people sitting inside, and he said coldly, "Lady, hello!"

Zhao Ya tried to be calm as she asked, "Where is Shaolong?"

Wu Zhuo signaled the 2 men with his eyes and they immediately struck, tying Zhao Ya up sturdily and even sealed her pretty mouth.

Wu Zhuo passed the pre-prepared clothes to Zhao Qian to let her wear over her clothes and in a short while, she has turned into a man. Unless one looks closely, no one will be able to tell the difference, especially the fake moustache above her lips is so well made.

Zhao Ya's alarmed and pretty eyes looked at Wu Zhuo, and looked at Zhao Qian who seemed not to care about her and finally realized what is happening. She felt a mixture of shame and regret.

Wu Zhuo looked at her with distaste, "You're such a stupid and cheap slut, how dare you betray our Master Xiang, you really do not know your own ability." And he spat at her.

By now the carriage has turned into a small lane, and Wu Zhuo and Zhao Qian dismounted before the carriage continued on its way.

Zhao Ya's tears finally flowed uncontrollably.

Outside the carriage window, snow suddenly fell.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Xiao Yuetan etc were hiding in the dense woods opposite the Hostage Residence, concentrating on the happenings at the main door. Everything seems to look normal, there aren't even guards at the door, as if they are not prepared at all.

Xiao Yuetan asked doubtfully, “Would Lady be able to slip out so easily?”

Xiang Shaolong looked at the falling snow and secretly thought that it is indeed written in history books that Zhu Ji and her son arrived at Xianyang safely, so this seemingly impossible matter should happen smoothly. He said with confidence, “Definitely!”

Before he could finish his words, the door to the Hostage Residence opened. First 10 Zhao soldiers on horses came out, followed by an elaborate horse carriage, and another 20 riders followed behind it as they came out to the streets pompously, turned left and rode towards the west.

Everyone was ecstatic and hurried to act.

Jing Jun who was hiding in ambush at that side received the flag signal and immediately gave orders to prepare to attack. 30 elite members swiftly used their pre-prepared ropes and climbed up the trees lining on each side of the road, their bows and arrows aimed at the fast approaching target.

Just as the carriage was about to reach the trees where the men were hiding in ambush, loud hoof beats were suddenly heard from behind and a Zhao soldier on horseback came rushing up, signaling them to stop their advancement.

The leader of the carriage team was startled and ordered his men to stop moving.

Suddenly the sounds of arrows flying were heard and 31 men, including the last Zhao soldier were all killed, with one arrow in each of them as they fell down their horses.

The elite soldiers all jumped down and landed squarely on the horses backs, controlling the alarmed and neighing war horses.

Jing Jun landed lightly on the roof of the carriage and just as he was about to lean upside down and poke his head in to claim his reward from the 'fake Guo Kai' who is in fact Zhu Ji, a man with a sword banged the door open and dashed out.

Everyone were stunned.

This person was dressed in finery and looked to be about 25 to 26 years of age, his height comparable to Xiang Shaolong, his looks extremely handsome and suave. His eyes were so alluring it captivates the soul and he is more than qualified to be the dream man of any woman.

He's also very alert, on seeing the bodies of the Zhao soldiers on the ground and surrounded by enemies, he roared and wanted to dash into the woods at the side. However, his neck felt tight and he was grabbed around the neck by Jung Jun who was on top of the carriage and the sword in his hand fell to the ground.

2 elite soldiers dashed up and immediately tossed him flat on the ground and at the same time punched and kicked him. He was in such pain that he curled up on the ground.

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan and the rest arrived and on seeing such a scene, their expressions changed.

The horse carriage was empty.

Xiang Shaolong stepped on that man's stomach and shouted, "Who are you?"

Jing Jun grabbed his hair and pulled his face up to reveal a pretty toy boy.

That man was so frightened he turned pale as he stammered and pleaded, "Sirs spare my life, I am an envoy from the state of Qi and has no enmity with you."

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun looked at each other, they did not expect this Qi Yu to be so useless, cowardly and afraid of death.

Xiao Yuetan exclaimed agitatedly, "What shall we do? Obviously Guo Kai did not go to Lady's room last night."

Everyone were immediately aware that this man in front of them must have tried to go and take advantage of Zhu Ji and only left now after breakfast. Even though Zhu Ji has the ability to entice all men on earth, there is no way she can use her ability because since she wasn't able to get Guo Kai to her bed, of course she has no chance to drug him.

Xiang Shaolong pulled out Blood Wace, pointing it at Qi Yu's eyes

and roared, “You want your left eye or right eye?”

Qi Yu stammered, “Spare me! I promise to do anything you ask.”

Xiang Shaolong regained his calm and composure and said with a smile, “I only want you to go back to Hostage Residence.”

The team rode back to the Hostage Residence in spite of the heavy snow.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan sat in the carriage, holding the shaking Qi Yu as hostage. Looking at this Casanova, they don’t know whether to be angry or to laugh.

The door opened and someone called out, “Why has Master Qi returned?”

Under Xiang and Xiao’s threatening gestures, Qi Yu called out, “I’ve left an important document behind and need to take it back from Lady’s place.”

That guard said, “Master Guo has ordered that no one is allowed into Hostage Residence.”

Qi Yu followed what Xiang Shaolong whispered in his ear and said, “This document has something to do with your country’s King and is extremely important. I’ll be responsible for anything that happens, let me in quickly!”

That guard had no choice but to let him in because of his special status and also because he just came out of the residence earlier.

The accompanying Zhao soldiers are of course Jing Jun and his men in disguise. Firstly, it was snowing heavily and also because these soldiers sent to protect Qi Yu are from a different camp to those guarding the residence so they do not know one another and for the moment no one could detect anything wrong.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief as the carriage hurriedly arrived at the empty space next to Zhu Ji's residence.

Jing Jun is in charge of staying outside the residence and on seeing the various defense setup in the garden and the ditches for archers, he can't help but heave a sigh of relief, feeling glad that they need not force their way in.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan escorted Qi Yu on his left and right, with 4 more men following them and went into the building. The 4 Zhao soldiers standing guard at the steps recognized Qi Yu and although they saw that he looked pale, they thought it's because he exerted too much 'energy' last night and so did not suspect anything amiss.

2 of the guards followed them into the building.

2 pretty maids were cleaning up the hall and they both smiled and came towards Qi Yu to welcome him once they saw him.

Xiang Shaolong gave a secret signal and the 4 elite soldiers struck at the same time, using the techniques they learnt from Xiang Shaolong to knock the 2 maids and 2 guards out. They immediately tied them up tightly with ropes, stuffed their mouths and dragged them to a corner.

Xiang Shaolong asked Qi Yu frostily, “How many others are there in the house?”

Qi Yu replied obediently, “There are another 5 maids and 2 of them are accompanying Zhu Ji.” To stay alive, he is indeed revealing everything that he knows.

Just as the 4 elite soldiers were about to go search, the main door suddenly opened and Guo Kai dashed in and asked Qi Yu unhappily, “Why have Master Envoy come back again, didn’t you have enough fun last night?” His tone was filled with jealousy.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he must have heard the news from the fake Ying Zheng and this came over hurriedly to make sarcastic remarks at Qi Yu who has taken his Zhu Ji and felt like laughing.

Qi Yu could only look at him and smile bitterly.

Only now did Guo Kai have the time to look at the people accompanying Qi Yu and when his gaze fell on the coldly sniggering Xiang Shaolong, his expression changed immediately

and before he has the chance to shout, a sword was already at his throat.

Xiang Shaolong asked with a smile, “How have Master Guo been!”

Guo Kai stammered, “You will never be able to escape!”

Xiang Shaolong replied nonchalantly, “Who is escaping?” He deliberately emphasized on the word ‘escaping’.

Xiao Yuetan ordered, “Escort them them.”

2 soldiers went off first to look for the other maids whom they have not captured while Xiang Shaolong and the rest took the 2 of them and went up the second floor to Zhu Ji’s tightly closed room.

Guo Kai was threatened and had no choice but to order the strong maids who were inside guarding Zhu Ji to open the door.

The door opened slightly and Xiang Shaolong forced his way in and knocked the 2 maids unconscious.

Zhu Ji was sitting in a daze in front of the copper mirror, looking unhappy when she suddenly saw a Zhao soldier dash in and hit the maids. Just as she was totally scared stiff, Xiao Yuetan has already dashed forward and knelt on the ground, saying quietly, “Your subordinate Xiao Yuetan was late in saving you, Lady must have suffered!” As she spoke, he was so overcome by emotions that he

almost wept.

Xiang Shaolong thought that this person really does know how to act, no wonder Lu Buwei thought so highly of him. He reminded them, “Lady, disguise yourself as Guo Kai quickly.”

Only now did Zhu Ji recognize that it's Xiang Shaolong and she jumped up with joy. She first went to Guo Kai and Qi Yu and gave each of them a slap on the cheek.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought her formidable and at the same time ordered “Bring the 2 of them out first, remove Master Guo's clothes and then tie him up.”

2 members of their group obeyed the orders and pushed them out of the room.

With Xiao Yuetan's expert help, when Zhu Ji put on Guo Kai's signature long beard and wore his official robes and hat, even Xiang Shaolong could not see the difference.

Zhu Ji remembered something and asked, “Where is Zheng'er?”, he voice obviously shaking.

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “Fortunately he's still alive!”

Zhu Ji exclaimed in joy and almost wanted to rush forward to hug and kiss Xiang Shaolong. She turned to Xiao Yuetan and asked, “Does... does he look like his Majesty?”

Xiao Yuetan coughed drily and stole a look at Xiang Shaolong before replying with embarrassment, “Extremely like him, but he looks as good as Lady too.”

With such a question and answer, Xiang Shaolong knows immediately that even Zhu Ji herself is not sure who this son of hers belong to. Of course she would never imagine that the son she is about to see is not her own flesh and blood at all. Such a messy affair, who knows how it can be explained.

They dare not stay any longer and walked out of the room.

Guo Kai was tied tightly and when he saw ‘himself’ walking out from the room, he was so shocked his eyes almost fell out.

Zhu Ji imitated his voice and said, “Kill him for me!”

Guo Kai and Qi Yu’s faces immediately paled.

Xiang Shaolong has no wish to kill a defenseless person, so he said laughingly, “Keeping him alive will be even more torturous than killing him.”

Zhu Ji rolled her eyes at him and said, “You are a very good man!” and walked downstairs first with a smile.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest have now turned into followers, and

escorting Qi Yu, ran after her.

Zhu Ji, disguised as Guo Kai, walked out the main door first and imitating Guo Kai's voice and tone, reprimanded Qi Yu who was following behind, "If you're not an honored guest from the state of Qi, I would have punished you severely."

Qi Yu lowered his head, looking as if he has made a great mistake.

As 'Guo Kai' continued his reprimands, he went up the horse carriage together with Qi Yu and of course Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan followed them in.

The horse carriage drove out and arriving at the main gate, the leader of the guards guarding the gate walked over and said, "Master Envoy..."

Zhu Ji interrupted, "I am going out with Master Envoy for a while, all of you guard the doors closely."

The leader was stunned, "Sir! This place needs you here."

Zhu Ji said with her most officious air, "I know what to do. You, Chen Gui, are in no position to tell me what to do, open the door quickly!"

The wonderful part is that she even knows the other person's name.

That leader has no choice but to order the doors to be opened.

The team left Hostage Residence with no trouble at all.

Book 5 Chapter 11 – Army Arrives At Stockade

The carriage stopped.

Zhao Ya was just blaming herself and feeling ashamed and regretful when Wu Zhuo went up the horse carriage and released the ropes that bind her.

After she has flexed her limbs, Wu Zhuo ordered her off the carriage.

Zhao Ya recognized this to be a dense forest not far away from the Wu family stockade and just as she was feeling alarmed, a few people appeared from behind the trees and the leader is none other than the person she betrayed, Xiang Shaolong.

Zhao Ya's legs weakened and she collapsed onto the ground, hot tears streaming from her eyes, unable to talk at all.

Xiang Shaolong pushed the person next to him and that person fell next to Zhao Ya as he said icily, "I'll let you adulterous pair become a pair of lovebirds with the same fate."

Qi Yu stammered, "Don't kill me. Sir, you promised me."

His cowardice made even Zhao Ya feel despise and loath.

This good looking man seems like an upright and arrogant man usually but it turns out that he is so timid and useless. Especially when he is next to Xiang Shaolong, compared to the latter's heroic air who is not concerned about his own life or death, one can immediately see the difference is as vast as heaven and earth.

At this time even Zhao Ya feels as if she has been blinded by ghosts to have actually fallen for a person like him.

Zhao Ya forced herself to get up and cried piteously, "Shaolong! I've let you down and I'm not good enough for you, kill me!"

Xiang Shaolong looked heavenward and laughed long and hard, saying coldly and unfeelingly, "I do not want a slut like you to sully my precious sword. Remember? I once said that anyone who tries to kill me will have to pay a terrible price. Now I will prove it to you, tell your Imperial Brother and Zhao Mu to come!"

Zhao Ya was stunned, "Weren't you trying to escape?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled mysteriously, "Of course! I will leave immediately. Now that I have Zhu Ji, I can account to the King of Qin."

Sounds of hoof beats could be heard from afar.

Xiang Shaolong revealed a look of surprise and exclaimed, "Oh no! We've been found out."

Wu Zhuo exclaimed frightfully as well, “We have no time to leave, return to the stockade first.”

Zhao Ya looked with tears in her eyes as this man who has once let her tasted real love leave. The pain and regret she felt is like a poisoned snake biting her heart.

Qi Yu who was next to her exclaimed happily, “Look! The Zhao soldiers are here, we are saved!”

Darkness appeared before Zhao Ya’s eyes as she fainted away.

Mission accomplished, Xiang Shaolong and the rest returned triumphantly to the cheers of the Wu family warriors, passed the drawbridge and rushed straight into the stockade.

Master Wu welcomed them personally at the square while Xiao Pan hid behind Wu Tingfang who was dressed in warrior clothes and Zhao Qian, looking as his ‘mother’ Zhu Ji who has changed back into herself entered the stockade and alighted from the carriage.

At this point in time, in Zhu Ji’s eyes, she can only see Xiao Pan. The expression on her face is a touching, ecstatic joy that cannot be hidden as she ran towards Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan ran out crying as well and threw himself into her arms as mother and son hugged each other and sobbed uncontrollably.

After being separated for 10 years, her flesh and blood whom she has been pining for everyday is not back in her arms. How can she not cry.

And because of this ‘mother’ he thought of his real mother so he sobbed even harder than Zhu Ji and even more honest, the anger that has been simmering inside him flooding out in waves.

Master Wu came to the mother and son and said with much feeling, “Lady, this should be a time of joy.”

The horns were sounded, it means that the Zhao soldiers have already arrived at the stockade.

Zhu Ji lifted her pretty face, her pretty eyes now red and swollen from the crying as she looked at Master Wu and said, “It’s all thanks to Master Wu’s chivalry that us mother and son will have this day. I won’t say any words of gratitude, but as long as us mother and son still have some say in Qin, we will protect the Wu family and ensure you’ll have riches and your descendants will be safe.” She has already learnt that Master Wu is planning to perish with the stockade heroically so that they can escape, so she spoke sincerely from the bottom of her heart, which she seldom does.

With tears shimmering in his eyes, Master Wu laughed loudly, “With Lady’s words, I will be able to smile in the underworld.”

Xiao Yuetan was worried that any delay might bring more problems so he hurried her, “Lady! We have to leave immediately.”

Wu Yingyuan and Jing Jun's elite troops, together with Xiao Yuetan and 30 of his skilled fighters escorted the mother and son, as well as Zhao Qian who was saying her goodbyes sadly to Xiang Shaolong, towards the back of the house. Naturally they are going out of the city via the underground tunnel to meet up with Tu Xian's group.

Xiang Shaolong, Wu Zhuo, Teng Yi and the rest stayed behind because without them, how can they fend off the Zhao army who is more than 10 times bigger than them.

The Zhao army did not invade the stockade immediately but set up defenses outside. The other soldiers in and around Handan kept coming as backup, bringing with them various tools used for invading a fortress. It was only the third day did they complete the whole setup to surround them.

This is exactly what Xiang Shaolong and the rest hoped for, which is to lure and keep the Zhao army here so that Zhu Ji and the rest can escape safely to Xianyang.

The most wonderful part of this whole plan is that the Zhaos think that Ying Zheng is still in their hands so they're not too bothered that others have escaped. They'll be satisfied as long as they can bring the stockade down and kill everyone in the Wu family.

Xiang Shaolong appeared periodically at the walls of the stockade and even made special arrangements for Master Wu and Wu Tingfang to appear there as well so that the Zhaos will not suspect that they have other plans.

On the third night, the warriors who were in charge of keeping an eye on the 4 underground tunnels that leads only to the woods outside the stockade found Zhao soldiers making their way in and hurriedly threw in the burning firewood. With the help of huge fans, they literally burnt a few hundred of the arriving Zhao soldiers alive before sealing the underground passages with rocks.

Naturally the King of Zhao was fuming over this and sent someone over to curse at them beneath the stockade walls early in the morning.

Xiang Shaolong found this very amusing, this is the first time he saw such meaningless ‘cursing’.

Teng Yi did not said a word but took out his specially made strongbow and made the Zhaos dumbfounded by shooting the extremely loud cursing expert off his horse. The distance was more than 800 steps away and the range several feet further than an ordinary bow.

The cheers from the Wu family warriors were deafening.

Whereas the Zhao soldiers were speechless.

Suddenly a person rode over but this time he has learnt his lesson, pulling his horse to a stop when he was a thousand steps away and shouted loudly, “Xiang Shaolong, his Majesty wants to speak with you.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing to himself and thinking that he is not so stupid as to shout and strain his throat just to converse.

Wu Zhuo who was next to him summoned a man over and said with a smile, "It's good to humiliate him in public!"

Xiang Shaolong understood his meaning and said, "Tell him to go ahead and fart!" He can't help but laugh after he said this.

Wu Zhuo and Teng Yi couldn't restrain their smiles and to Teng Yi, this is a rare expression.

That person was stunned for a moment before shouting down, "Go ahead and fart!"

His voice reverberated along the walls.

Those on the Wu family side all chortled and the atmosphere was filled with happiness while the Zhaos were fuming on their side.

The conversation could not proceed and amidst the booming sounds of the war drums, the Zhao army prepared to attack the stockade.

The huge Zhao army surrounding the city, without including the reinforcements, totaled about 30,000 odd men consisting mainly of

foot soldiers. This is all the strength the Zhaos could gather within such short notice and they thoroughly surrounded the stockade.

In the chapter 'Masculine & Feminine Cities' in Sun Tzu's Art of War, cities are mainly grouped into 2 types: cities on higher ground or backed against mountains with a good source of water are called 'Masculine Cities' and is extremely difficult to besiege. Cities on lower ground, or are between 2 mountains, or if backed against a valley, and where plants do not flourish are called 'Feminine Cities' and as long as one has enough strength, they can be easily overtaken.

The Wu family stockade is the typical 'Masculine City'. When the city was initially built the King of Zhao was hoping that it would become another important post, which they can defend the city from, but how could he have expected that now it's a place of betrayal against himself now.

Therefore the Zhaos did not want to attack the stockade rashly so that they will not suffer heavy losses. Initially they thought there would be problems regarding rations and the people in the stockade but now that they saw that the morale in there is so high, they know they've made a big mistake.

The generals had initially wanted to have a drawn out siege of the stockade but they did not expect that Xiang Shaolong's sentence would infuriate the King of Zhao so much that he could not control his temper and ordered a head on attack.

The Wu family is enormously wealthy and the way the stockade was built was according to the strictest standard at that time and is

extremely solid. The stockade walls are thick and high, enough to fend off the enemy's direct attacks, climbs and knocks. The moat is deep and wide and at the top of the walls there are the elite Wu family warriors. Hence, even though the Zhao army is more than 10 times bigger, they are still not confident of breaking into the stockade. Their only advantage is that they have unlimited reinforcements that is enough to let them have a long battle of stamina.

Although Xiang Shaolong and the rest have the convenience of the underground tunnel, they have already transported all their store of rations inside, while the farmers outside the stockade have to escape to Qin, so they've now become a lone army. However their aim is just to defend for a short period of time, so they are feeling lighthearted, and to them this is just a game with the Zhaos of defending the city.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the grandly approaching Zhao army with their shields up and asked with furrowed brow, "Why don't they cut off the water source to the moat, instead they're going through the trouble of crossing the moat?"

Wu Zhuo said with a laugh, "This is a live river, we need not irrigate water in. There is a spring supplying water beneath the moat and they can't stop the water supply even if they want to."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened, his knowledge grew with each experience.

Teng Yi said calmly, "The way to break this is to divert the flow of the water, but that will take at least 10 odd days to complete. I'm

guessing that they are swiftly trying to build mobile bridges at the back end to put across the moats to make it more convenient for attacking the stockade.

Xiang Shaolong asked quizzically, “Then those people below are just putting up a show?”

Teng Yi explained, “A besieging army fears boredom the most, so there is a need to make them move. They can take it as a form of stretching or exercise, as that’s the only way to maintain morale.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head to indicate his understanding. In a war, a person’s psychology cannot be neglected, it’s the same in the past and for the future.

The Zhao army below gave a shout as they charged forward until they reached the bank of the moat and squatted down, hiding behind their shields. Thousands of archers charged behind them and after hiding behind those shields, raised their bows to shoot and for a moment arrows rained down on the walls.

Teng Yi gave an order and the Wu family warriors all hid behind the ditches and did not return the strike.

Teng Yi shouted in a voice even louder than that cursing officer, “Prepare sand! Fire extinguishing teams get ready.”

Before he could finish his words, another 2000 odd soldiers from the enemy side dashed out and shot at the city walls with burning

arrows.

The attack on the stockade finally started.

Both sides used burning rocks to attack each other, the outer walls and top of the stockade bore the damage made by the impact and the fire but it's just superficial damage, the basic structure is not affected at all. The Wu family warriors are on higher grounds and has sufficient rocks so their defense was tight with minimal casualties whereas the Zhaos had more than a thousand dead or injured within a day, a heavy cost to pay.

Until now, the King of Zhao and Zhao Mu still cannot understand why their opponent is so well prepared. They have been secretly keeping an eye on the movements in the Wu family and only saw people and rations being moved out of the stockade but nothing has been transported in.

They could not imagine the existence of the underground tunnel, so they can't be considered stupid. Firstly, it's almost impossible to build such a long underground tunnel. Also, if there is a underground tunnel, Xiang Shaolong and the rest will have no reason to stay here. How could they have guessed that this is the most crucial factor in Xiang Shaolong's plan.

News came that night that the Qin army is near the border and the King of Zhao was so frightened that he hurriedly forced his generals to attack the stockade relentlessly day and night.

On the 10th day, after suffering heavy losses, the Zhaos finally

successfully built 3 mobile bridges for crossing the moat and moved their ladders in to climb and attack the stockade walls as well as use huge logs to batter the stockade gates.

The Wu family warriors used rocks and fire weapons to return the attack and also used a weapon resembling a long hook to deal with those enemies climbing up, as well as pouring cauldrons of boiling water and oil down. After killing and injuring almost 2000 of their enemies, the Zhaos retreated, only defending the 3 wooden bridges.

About 50 odd men died and a hundred odd injured on the Wu family's side.

Those injured were immediately transported out of the city.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong truly feel that in a war, one person's strength is so miniscule and to him, it certainly does not feel good.

By the 20th day, the Zhaos finally managed to divert the flow of the water after which they spent another 3 days to fill up and flatten the moat with soil and rocks. The Wu family stockade has lost its advantage.

The Zhaos launched their attack, pushing the armored battle vehicles used for attacking cities over the flattened moat.

These battle vehicles came in various types with the most

formidable being the Climbing City Vehicle, Smashing Vehicle and Flying Platform.

The Climbing City Vehicle is about as high as the city wall so that the enemy can swiftly reach the top of the walls in the vehicle; the Smashing Vehicle has a sturdy log on it and used to smash continuously on the city gates and walls; the Flying Platform is for the use of the archers to attack the defending soldiers at the top of the walls.

The only way to deal with this is to use huge rocks to attack them.

In less than 2 days, all the huge rocks have been used up. Xiang Shaolong gave orders to retreat.

By the time the Zhao army entered the city, the whole Wu family stockade has been set ablaze. Because the buildings have all been smeared with oil, they can't extinguish the fire even if they wanted to.

The Zhaos looked on as the fire burned for 10 days and what remained were charred and totally destroyed buildings burnt down to the last tile. They couldn't describe their feelings but in any case, they definitely did not feel good.

More than 8000 Zhaos perished with another 10,000 odd injured. The whole country was in shock.

The Wu family have always enjoyed good reputation among the common Zhao people and now that the King of Zhao had forced them to rebel, there were naturally lots of complaints.

By the time the King of Zhao found out the underground tunnel leading out of the city from amongst the rubbles and realized that he has fallen for Xiang Shaolong's trick, it's already more than a month later.

Although the King of Zhao was fuming, there was nothing he could do.

At this time he did feel a small sense of regret. Such a capable man like Xiang Shaolong, not only did he not make good use of him, but have now given him away to the Qins. How torturous indeed!

end of Book 5

Book 6 Chapter 1 – Arriving Safely In Xianyang

The State of Qin was founded on the eastern bank of the upper streams of the Qin River.

Ever since their ancestors started the kingdom, the Qins have favored taking over by strength, and were formed by traveling nomads. They struggled to survive in this difficult land and had long drawn battles with the Barbarians. Hence, every single word in their history is written with blood and tears.

Although their ways of battling in organized nomadic groups weakened their links with the earth and making it difficult for them to settle down in a place, but it resulted in the Qin's ancestors not being restricted by boundaries and were able to continuously venture into the never trodden land in the east and battle with the barbarians.

During the time of King Zhou, one of his subject with the family name Ying was given this place because of the contribution he made by helping the Zhous rear horses for battles and he established this region near the capital. In actual fact, this is a difficult task of helping King Zhou defend his borders and preventing the barbarians from attacking.

The 400 odd years of Western Zhou dynasty are the Qin's most difficult and arduous times. With sweat and blood and the countless lives of their own people, they protected their overlord, the Zhou Dynasty's western border and at the same time continued with their expansion into the west. Facing such relentless

challenges and with stubborn heroism, the Qins built an extremely solid foundation.

The chance of a lifetime finally fell on the Qins.

Because of the incompetent King You, the barbarians attacked the city and the King was killed. Thus the power of the Zhou dynasty was disintegrated.

King Ping moved to the east and due to his contribution in protecting the King, the Duke of Qin was bestowed a dukedom and the Qins finally have a place to call their own.

When the states first started their wars, the weakest among the 7 states was Qin. It was only when Duke Mu of Qin took over and he depended heavily on foreign advisors like Baili Xi, Jian Shu, Songsun Zhi etc, that he established a strong foundation.

The country and army really prospered due to the reforms of Duke Xiao and Shang Yang. They totally overturned the traditional setup of the tribes and established new military setups, where those who contributed militarily will be promoted and brought the power of the imperial family to its peak during their time. They also moved the Capital to Xianyang and built a majestic city with grand palaces and standardized weight measurements in the country. They divided the country into 31 provinces and abolished the borders set up in the past. The people are allowed to own their own land for farming, with the government taxing them directly.

Hence the state of Qin took a great leap and became the strongest

and was feared by all the other states.

At the time when Xiang Shaolong escaped and traveled the long journey from Handan to Xianyang, the Qins were just enjoying the fruits of Shang Yang's reforms.

Xianyang is located south of Mount Jiuji and north of River Wei. Hence it's also known as Wei City.

Together with his pretty wife Wu Tingfang and leading Teng Yi, Wu Zhuo and more than a thousand family warriors, Xiang Shaolong brought them into Qin and received a warm welcome from the leader of the border patrol, who quickly sent someone to report back to Xianyang and also prepared 5 huge ships so that they need not make the arduous journey through forests and mountains. They disembarked on the northern bank of Xianyang where Wu Yingyuan, together with the family warriors and Zhao Qian, as well as Lu Buwei's number one subordinate Tu Xian, are already waiting. The scene was magnificent.

Wu Tingfang was reunited with her father and they were both ecstatic, feeling as if they have been parted a long time; at the same time they remembered how Master Wu had committed suicide heroically and all the different emotions were mixed.

Xiao Yuetan and another youth whose dressing looks like a military advisor accompanied Tu Xian as they came forward to welcome Xiang Shaolong.

This Tu Xian is tall and thin and looks to be about 30 years of age.

He's very sturdily built, tanned and nimble, his movements seems to have an air of overwhelming power and his eyes energetic. With a horse like face, he's not considered handsome but he does have a strong, manly aura and charisma.

He took a huge step forward, pulled Xiang Shaolong's sleeve and said with a long laugh, "Tu Xian is extremely lucky to be finally able to meet such an extraordinary person whom I've admired for so long. Besides Xiang Shaolong, who else can accomplish such a historic task?"

Xiang Shaolong doesn't really know how to react to such an enthusiastic welcome and hurriedly expressed his modesty. At the same time he thought that this is the honeymoon period between Lu Buwei and the Wu family, so Tu Xian must have been instructed by Lu Buwei to take good care of them.

Tu Xian was introduced to Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo one by one and his reaction was enthusiastic and warm.

At this time Jing Jun darted out from some obscure place. After being apart for so long and now reunited, everyone were overjoyed.

Xiao Yuetan behaved as if he's an old friend and introduced that youth to Xiang Shaolong, "This is a famous man from Chu, Mister Li Si. He is now Big Master's She Ren."

She Ren means houseguest.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that the name 'Li Si' sounded extremely familiar. He suddenly remembered and exclaimed, "So it's that Mister Li Si who has the grand ambition of helping a great ruler conquer the world!"

Li Si's body trembled as he lowered his head and said, "Mister Xiang must be joking. I can't call this a grand ambition. I only hope that I can make good use of my abilities under the leadership of Premier Lu and will be contented if I can accomplish that!"

A puzzled look flashed past Xiao Yuetan's face. He quietly thought that when he introduced Li Si as a famous man from Chu, it's just out of courtesy. The truth is Li Si is a nobody, just that he is a smooth talker and Lu Buwei has some liking for him. He had asked to follow them today so that he can witness Xiang Shaolong's glory, so why did Xiang Shaolong seem that he has long heard of this name? He can't help but ask, "Where has Shaolong heard about Mister Li?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed himself, he can't possibly tell Xiao Yuetan that he got to know about Li Si from the movie 'Emperor Qin'. He quickly changed the topic and asked, "Has Master Lu become the Premier?"

Tu Xian went to Xiang Shaolong and said with gratitude, "Master Lu has instructed me to clearly express his gratitude towards Old Master Wu, Master Yingyuan and Shaolong. If Empress Ji and Crown Prince Zheng did not return to Xianyang safely, things might have been totally different. Empress Ji and Crown Prince Zheng has been praising Shaolong in front of his Majesty and Master Lu and his Majesty is going to throw a feast for you

tomorrow night so that you will have some time to rest. We'll all be one family in future."

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly to himself that this all sounds very nice but in fact they just want to trick him into becoming Lu Buwei's lackey.

He has long been sick and tired of politics and the fight for power and has no interest at all in the power struggle between the outsider Lu Buwei and the local royalty, so he secretly came to a decision.

Just looking at the Wu family's new residence in Xianyang, made up of 12 courtyards, one knows just how importantly the Qins is regarding the Wu family and the love King Zhuangxiang has towards Zhu Ji and Ying Zheng, who is actually Xiao Pan in disguise, and his trust towards Lu Buwei.

Although the new Wu residence cannot be compared to the Wu family stockade in Handan in terms of size and grandeur, but it's situated near the Palace in Xianyang in an area where all the highly ranked officials stay in. On a trotting horse, one can reach the main entrance of Xianyang Palace in a short span of time.

Xianyang is split into the inner and outer city.

The inner city is mainly made up of Xianyang Palace situated north of River Wei and Xinle Palace south of Weinan, spanning over the River Wei and is joined by a bridge about 280 steps long, forming a majestic cluster of Palaces and the scale is far greater

than what the palaces in Handan or Daliang can achieve.

The 2 Palaces looked majestic and tall, looking as if it's almost reaching the sky, and one can imagine a ruler descending to earth from Heaven.

The outer city is more than 10 times bigger than the inner city where the commoners reside in where trade is flourishing with a wide variety of goods at good prices.

When Xiang Shaolong's party went past the market east of the city, they witnessed the sale of various animal products like meat, leather, veins, horns, fats etc. There were also handmade products from ceramic, wood, metal, cloth etc. The range of products far surpassed what Zhao and Wei can offer, obviously there is a direct relation between the power of the state and its economy.

According to Tu Xian, who was traveling in the same carriage as them, the commerce in Xianyang is split into private and official commerce. The government has set up procedures and officials to look after market trading to check and encourage trade expansion. For example officials in charge of salt, metal, handicraft as well as the Minister over the Masses, Minister of Horses, Minister of Works, Minister of Cultivation etc oversees the specifications, quantity and production of the products and all these reflects the Qin's strong economic power.

On the way to the Wu family's new residence, they saw that the dressing of the people are not as bright or grand as those in Wei and Zhao but the population is even more than Daliang, and of course Handan can't even be compared to them.

It was a pleasant change for Xiang Shaolong as he secretly thought that this should be the scale of a strong country.

Most of the passersby were armed and has the air of fighters, something that Wei and Zhao cannot be a match against.

After arriving at the square in front of the Wu family's residence, Tu Xian and the rest bid their farewells and before Li Si left, he secretly indicated to Xiang Shaolong that he would like to come and visit him tomorrow morning. After Xiang Shaolong agreed wholeheartedly, Li Si left looking a little bewildered.

Everyone in the Wu residence came to the main door to welcome this group of Wu family heroes, especially Xiang Shaolong, who is like a star in the Wu family and idolized.

Wu Yingyuan arranged 4 groups of houses as temporary housing for the men as most of them will start on their journey tomorrow morning to the large farm at the outskirts north of Xianyang. Because the state of Qin is so big but under populated, therefore the scale of the farms can be even bigger than before.

It was only after Xiang Shaolong dealt with the congratulations from the clan can Chunying and the other maids were able to surround him with Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian and bring him to his new Hidden Dragon Abode.

Ting Fangshi was unable to take the difficult journey and had fallen ill and Xiang Shaolong was so alarmed that he hurried to her

room.

His love has lost much weight and her countenance pale, She fell sick partly because she was worried about Xiang Shaolong and now that he is back, she hugged him and cried with joy. By dinnertime, she was in better spirits and was able to get down from her bed.

Looking at how happy Chunying and the other women were, Xiang Shaolong's worries were all gone as he embraced Ting Fangshi and Zhao Qian's trim waists and asked happily, "Who will accompany me tonight?"

The 2 girls blushed prettily, naturally they both would like to be with him.

Wu Tingfang said with a smile, "Why don't the 3 of us accompany you! I'm just afraid you won't be able to handle it."

Zhao Qian added with a giggle, "What about the other 6 maids? Let's see how you'll handle it?"

Xiang Shaolong looked at Chunying and the other 3 maids and asked bewilderedly, "How can there be 6?"

Ting Fangshi said with a smile, "You forgot about Princess Qian's Cuitong and Cuilu?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "Didn't they stay behind in Handan?"

Zhao Qian pouted, “You forgot about them! Luckily I told Master Tao to secretly bring them out amidst the chaos. They arrived in Xianyang 10 days earlier than you.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed, “Why don’t you ask them in quickly see me?”

Zhao Qian called out and 2 pretty maids ran out from the inner hall and collapsed in front of Xiang Shaolong and started crying uncontrollably.

Xiang Shaolong felt apologetic that he has forgotten about them and felt really sorry for them. He got up and helped them to their feet and after consoling them, he went to the grand hall of the main building to have dinner with Wu Yingyuan. Tao Fang, Wu Zhuo, Teng Yi and Jing Jun were also there.

After a round of drinks and congratulatory words, Wu Yingyuan thanked him earnestly, “It’s all thanks to everyone here who worked and fought together without fear of their own lives that our Wu family can have a chance to survive.”

Tao Fang added, “This time we can really settle down in peace. After the Empress and the Crown Prince returned to Xianyang, Master Lu was immediately appointed as the Premier. If he makes another military contribution, he will be appointed as a Duke or Marquis and with the Wu family having such a huge backing, Old Master will be able to rest in peace in Heaven.”

With the mention of Master Wu and his wives, concubines, maids and servants who chose to perish with him, everyone became somber.

Wu Yingyuan said through gritted teeth, “Premier Lu will certainly collect this blood debt for us. Supervisor Tu told me in private that the Premier already has plans to attack Zhao and hopes that Shaolong can lead it.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting. Honestly, his main enemy is Zhao Mu, the King of Zhao is at most just an accomplice. It is not his wish to lead an army to destroy the cities in Zhao and bring misfortune to the people.

He deeply felt the revulsion towards offensive wars.

There’s another bigger problem. He must not become Lu Buwei’s lackey no matter what, because in history, Emperor Qin was on bad terms with Lu Buwei 10 years after he ascended the throne, so how can he stand on Lu Buwei’s side?

But it seems that everyone in the Wu family has long regarded Lu Buwei as their new Master and looked as if they are going to live and die with him. He can’t possibly tell them how history will turn out and knows there’s no way he can make them believe him. This is indeed an extremely bothersome problem.

He sighed and said, “The King of Qin has appointed Master Lu as Premier, didn’t the royalty and officials in Qin have any objections?”

Wu Yingyuan saw that he didn't seem very concerned that Lu Buiwei is about to hand him an important task and looked at him in puzzlement before adding, "Not only were there objections, their reactions were very vehement as well." He paused and continued "Ever since the outsider Shang Yang, the Qins have been very intense about their prejudice against outsiders. Later, in order to deal with the Union* set up deal with the Qins and to avoid being attacked by the 6 states in the east, they had no choice but to use [Zhang Yi](#) to deal with the Union. Later they also relied heavily on Fan Sui and used his strategy of attacking those close to them and having cordial relations with states further from them to deal with the Union of the 6 states. We can say that it's only when they had no other choice did they make use of talents from other states to help them."

(Union – Collection of the 6 states Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Han and Wei who joined forces to fight against Qin)

He sighed again and said, "But after Bai Qi forced to commit suicide by King Zhaoxiang, the Qin military were very displeased and they finally forced Fan Sui to lose his official post and the prejudice towards outsiders were reinforced again. Although we have Qin blood in us, we're still being regarded as outsiders and under Master Lu. Therefore we must help Master Lu with all our efforts, otherwise if he falls, we won't have it easy as well."

Naturally the last few words were meant as a reminder to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong thought of Mei Canniang and a wave of sadness

came over him as he hugged Ting Fangshi and fell onto the bed. He pulled her outer robe aside, revealing her heaving bosom which is still wrapped up in her white inner robe to his eyes.

A mesmerizing fragrance wafted into his nose, her ample bosom can be seen from the loosened collar.

Xiang Shaolong buried his face in her chest as his tightly wound emotions relaxed and at the same time he felt the weariness towards fights and revenge. He only hopes that he can retire to some peaceful woods in future together with Ji Yanran and Mei Canniang as well and live a life with his loved ones that even immortals would be envious of.

In his mind an image of flowing rivers, green grass, lush woods, high mountains and clear water surfaced.

What he wants is not grand clothes and sumptuous feasts, but a life back to nature and hard work.

In this under populated world, to find a paradise on earth and start his own farm to grow some crops while his ladies will rear ducks as he fished and hunted. He'll be contented if he can live such a life until his death.

Ting Fangshi's pretty face reddened, her eyes closed tightly, her breathing heavy as she moaned daintily, totally enrapturing his soul. Obviously she is in the mood for love, which is insatiable.

Xiang Shaolong is not in the hurry to possess her. He thought of the primitive jungles they passed on the way here, there were heavy fog, thousand feet tall waterfalls and great lakes. His imagination soared and he was secretly determined that he will certainly live the rest of his life in the forests one day.

To someone from the 21st century, this type of lifestyle is the most alluring.

Ting Fangshi forced her pretty eyes to open, her fiery and sultry eyes blaming him for taking his time to join with her.

Xiang Shaolong was intoxicated in both body and mind as he forgot everything else and concentrated all his energy into her mesmerizing body.

Book 6 Chapter 2 – Dinner Feast At The Qin Palace

Sweet voices roused him up from his deep sleep and he opened his eyes. The sun is already rising and he sat up suddenly.

The pretty Princess Zhao Qian was startled, and she said with her hand covering her smile, “The 3 of us have lost, we all thought that you won’t be able to get up.” Her pretty face blushed with embarrassment as she finished her words, obviously she remembered the exciting ‘battle’ they had last night.

Xiang Shaolong was reminded of this by her and he tried flexing his body and realized that he is still feeling energetic. He laughed loudly and threw Zhao Qian onto the bed with a hug and said, “Let’s do it one more time with obedient Qian’er!”

Zhao Qian tried to resist but her body went soft and she did not have the strength to get up as she moaned, “Mister Li Si from the Premier’s Residence has come to look for you!”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the appointment Li Si made with him secretly yesterday and sighed. He put his hands into Zhao Qian’s robes and groped around first before he got up and let his wives and pretty maids help him wash and change. He did not even have to move a finger and everything has been done for him. He was thinking of how he should get the 2 pretty maids Cuitong and Cuilu up the bed as well and can’t help but laugh to himself that he has not changed at all in the sense that he still likes to try out new things like all men.

Li Si was waiting for him at the inner hall, looking calm, or at least that is the way he looked on the surface.

After making some small talk and Qiuying had served them tea and snacks, Li Si went straight to the point, “Where has Mister Xiang heard about my name, why do you seem so familiar about me?”

Xiang Shaolong had asked Tao Fang last night about the background of this famous official who will help Emperor Qin unite the 6 states in future and found out that he is Han Fei’s Junior Brother and wanted to lie and say that he heard about him from Han Fei. But he thought that there may be a day where his lie will be exposed so he gave up the idea. He smiled and asked, “Has Mister Li ever heard about such a thing called fate?”

Li Si was puzzled, “What is fate?”

It was only during the Han Dynasty that Buddhism which expounds on ‘Fate’ came to China, so naturally Li Si does not understand what Xiang Shaolong is saying at all.

Xiang Shaolong took a sip of hot tea before explaining, “Fate is like an invisible hand, which will inevitably join different people together no matter how different their background, how far apart they are, into friends, rulers and subordinates, or maybe husbands and wives or masters and servants. This is called fate.”

Li Si looked surprised and he thought over it for a while before

nodding his head, “I did not expect that not only is Mister Xiang’s sword skill famous in the world, your ideas are thought provoking as well. I just wonder what has this got to do with Mister knowing about me?”

Xiang Shaolong replied nonchalantly, “It’s very difficult to explain what fate is. Although it’s the first time I met you, it feels as if I have long known about your aspirations so I just blurted those words out. Or maybe it’s because I have heard of Brother Li’s tutelage under [Xun Zi](#)!”

Li Si furrowed his brows. Although he is Xun Zi’s disciple, their philosophies are far apart. He was about to speak further when Xiang Shaolong changed the subject, “What are your views on ruling a country?”

Li SI was stunned for a moment. If it was King Zhuangxiang who was asking him this question, he’ll certainly be pouring out his views. But not only does Xiang Shaolong not have an official post, he is also under Lu Buwei’s faction. If he were to speak so closely to his heart to someone he has just made an acquaintance of and revealed all that he knows, he may get into trouble. He can’t help but hesitate.

After he came to Xianyang, although he had a few in depth talks with Lu Buwei and Lu Buwei has also expressed his admiration towards him, but he can tell that not only is Lu Buwei extremely ambitious but overbearing as well and will get into trouble sooner or later. Besides, he was feeling secretly bothered as their views on ruling a country is vastly different from each other so it’ll be very difficult for him to be recognized or entrusted with heavy

responsibility.

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “Mister does not want to be just a small fry whom no one bothers!”

Ji Si was startled and hurriedly said, “Mister Xiang must be joking!”

Xiang Shaolong said with a straight face, “In order to accomplish great things, then one must take great risks. If Mister cannot put aside your fears for your life, then our conversation today will end here and we will not breath a word about this to anyone else in future, how about it?”

Li Si looked at him intensely for a moment, and felt that Xiang Shaolong shows a sincerity that can move others. He felt a burning passion in his heart as he threw all caution to the wind and said, “I wonder what views and suggestion Mister Xiang has?”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “In Mister Li’s opinion, how does the future bode for Premier Lu?”

Li Si’s expression changed slightly as he exhaled a long breath and said with a sigh, “Mister Xiang is making it difficult for me.”

Xiang Shaolong understands the difficult position he is in and asked gently, “What work is Mister Li doing now in the Lu Residence?”

Li Si replied frankly, “I am helping Premier Lu write his ‘Lu Chronicles’ according to his instructions. The Premier hopes that with this book he can come up with a complete philosophy and reforms for ruling the country. Hei! I am just one of his many subordinates, the word ‘helping’ is a bit of an exaggeration.”

Xiang Shaolong is not a historian and this is the first time he has heard about this and asked in puzzlement, “So there’s actually such a happening. I wonder what are the new ideas on ruling a country in the book?”

A look of disdain appeared slightly on Li Si’s face as he said calmly, “What kind of new ideas can he have? It’s mainly a collection of the essence of the philosophies of others before, who supports the idea of ‘Divinity of Heaven’, which means that one can only rule the world well if he follows the natural order of heaven and earth. The ruler and subjects will walk their own path and not interfere with one another. A ruler should rule the country with benevolence and reflect on himself from time to time, seeking virtuosity constantly until in the end, the ideal state of having nothing to govern is achieved.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that he was clear on his reasoning and was secretly impressed and asked gently, “Does Mister think that Premier’s ideals will work?”

Li Si dare not reply him at all and asked instead, “What does Mister Xiang think?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that if he doesn’t show off a little, he will be looked down upon by this learned, ambitious and younger man,

so he said coolly, “Premier Lu is governing the Qin politics as a Han, and places more trust on people from Zhao, Wei and Han. The Empress who was his companion is from Zhao as well. On top of that, ever since Shang Yang’s reforms, Qin has been using legalism and militarism to govern the country, which is a polar opposite of Premier Lu’s ideals. There is no where the 2 can blend at all and as for what will happen in future, I hope that Mister can advice me.”

Li Si slapped the table and stood up, saying, “With such a talent like Mister Xiang in Qin, I should return to my hometown and be a farmer instead.”

Xiang Shaolong grabbed his arm and pulled him back onto the chair and said earnestly, “Mister is exaggerating. Firstly I know nothing at all about ruling a country but most importantly I have no interest in an official career. Everything that I have done in the past is for survival and not fame. There will come a day when I will retire to the woods and not bother myself with worldly affairs. Whether Qin can unify the 6 states will have to depend on you.”

Li Si was momentarily stunned and secretly thought that these words would be more appropriate if King Zhuangxiang told it to him. Although King Zhuangxiang was impressed with Xiang Shaolong, he is not a wise ruler at all and follows Lu Buwei’s advice on everything. With the current situation, who else can outsiders like them rely on other than Lu Buwei? But Xiang Shaolong seems to imply that there is a new leader, which is really incomprehensible to him.

Xiang Shaolong put his hand on his shoulder and said with a

smile, “Mister Li will understand my words in future, just rest assured and stay in Xianyang! This is the only place you can expand your ambition.”

After Li Si bid his farewell, Xiang Shaolong went to look for Teng Yi for breakfast.

During the meal Teng Yi asked, “What are your plans for the future?”

Naturally Xiang Shaolong will have his plans, which is based on the information he gathered from the movie ‘Emperor Qin’. Help set a solid foundation for the fake Yingzheng, Xiao Pan, so that he can handle Lu Buwei’s attempt to wrestle power in future and the appearances of evil officials.

Now that he has found Li Si, there is still the father and son Wang Jiang and Wang Bi. They are all famed generals who will help Emperor Qin unite the world in future. With these 3 helping Xiao Pan, he can retire to the woods in peace.

He gave a relaxed sigh as he sat back on the chair and stretched, “To tell the truth, I have no great ambitions at all. After I kill Zhao Mu, I will move to one of the Wu family’s farm far away and live a secluded life. I’ll be contented with hunting or fishing during my free time.”

Teng Yi revealed a small trace of a rare smile and said nonchalantly, “If you can do that, I’ll go hunting with you.”

At this time Jing Jun rushed in like a gust of wind and said energetically, “Come! Let me be the guide and show you 2 big brothers the glorious sights of Xianyang.”

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, “Whom have you been making hanging out with recently?”

Jing Jun sat down on the rug opposite them and replied excitedly, “Of course it’s the people from the Premier’s residence. It’s so exciting here, there are fights and injuries everyday. Just a few days ago some swordsmen from the Premier’s residence were ambushed in the largest officials brother in Xianyang, with 3 dead and 7 injured. Those thieves who made the sneak attack were lucky that I was away at the temple north of river Wei to peek at those ladies offering prayers. Otherwise, there won’t be so many dead and injured.”

Xiang Shaolong and Tengyi exchanged looks, both secretly alarmed. This lad is young and rash and may cause trouble.

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, “Don’t the Qins value law and legalism? How can there be fights?”

Teng Ji replied smugly, “Now Xianyang is in a mess, who can be bothered to interfere. Especially when it involves the people of the Left and Right Premier’s residences, no one dares to intervene.”

Xiang Shaolong said sternly, “You better not cause any trouble these few days. Once we are clear about the situation, we’ll go back to Zhao immediately to deal with Zhao Mu, understand?”

Jing Jun was ecstatic and bowed respectfully, “Xiao Jun understands. Great! I can get Zhao Zhi back here.”

Teng Yi reprimanded in a low voice, “You are getting more and more ridiculous!”

Jing Jun fears Teng Yi the most and was so frightened he immediately bowed down and dared not make a sound.

Teng Yi sighed and said to Xiang Shaolong, “Shaolong! This lad is still young and doesn’t understand the severity of the situation. I will take him in hand, you don’t have to worry.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a laugh, “Why would I blame him?”

Jing Jun said, “Xiao Jun respects both brothers the most!”

Teng Yi shouted, “Shut up!” He made an eye signal at Xiang Shaolong, signifying that he wants to reprimand Jing Jun in private.

Xiang Shaolong understood his meaning and went back to Hidden Dragon Abode alone. He has not even stepped through the door when he heard the cheers and laughs of the ladies near the well. He hurried over for a look and it turned out that his wives and maids have all changed into light and short dresses and happily playing ball while Ting Fangshi sat at a side and watched with a smile.

Chunying and Xiaying rushed forward and dragged him into the game.

This day was therefore spent amidst such happy atmosphere. At dusk, Wu Yingyuan asked someone to invite him over so that they can go to the Palace together for the feast.

When he thought of how he will soon be meeting this famous Lu Buwei who can affect the history of the warring states, Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel a little nervous.

How could he have expected that just a fight at 'Black Leopard Bar' can totally change his fate!

The horse carriage drove slowly into the grand entrance, past a round shaped corridor, into the square in front of the main hall.

There were rest areas for soldiers on both sides of the main door, where there are 2 camps of troops under the command of the Military Official. After some routine questionings, they allowed the 12 riders who were protecting Xiang and Wu's carriages into the inner palace.

Although Xianyang Palace is a few times larger, its layout is the same as the Zhao Palace where it's 'front court back rest' format. The outer part is where the King of Qin deal with state matters and hold court, the inner part is where the King and his concubines and children's bedrooms are.

The 3 main halls in the front part looked grand and majestic, the Premier Hall and various departments are on each side; the inner part consisted mainly of the King of Qin and the Empress's 3 back palaces, and on the right and left side there are the 6 Eastern Palaces and 6 Western Palaces, where the Empress Dowager, Concubines and various Princes reside in.

Xiang Shaolong was sightseeing along the way and saw halls, courtyards, woods, pavilions, platforms, corridors etc, which looked solemn yet respectable, something that the Zhao Palace cannot be compared to.

The construction of the buildings at the inner court is even more diversified and the layout compact with groups of buildings surrounding a courtyard with walls surrounding them and the different sections separated by tall walls. If there's no one to lead the way, being lost is no big surprise.

Once he thought that Xiao Pan will one day become the master of this place, and he was the one who single-handedly facilitated all this, Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel pride and a sense of achievement.

King Zhuangxiang's feast is held at the 'Health Cultivating Palace' at the back, which is also the inner Palace's most grand wooden building, a 3 storey tall building. On the tall platform there are 2 pavilion looking buildings and on each side of these buildings and the lower platform there are each 10 rooms of different sizes. There are bedrooms, rest areas, bathrooms etc which are connected by corridors. There are drawings on the walls

and the steps on the corridors are carved with dragons and phoenixes, and the whole place looked grand and magnificent.

The horse carriage stopped at the square and Lu Buwei had specifically told his housekeeper Mister Tu to welcome them there. Naturally he was especially happy and courteous when he saw them.

As they walked up the long steps, Tu Xian said in a low voice, “Besides Premier Lu, Lord Yangquan is also here tonight. This person thinks that he has made a great contribution to his Majesty in the past and is extremely proud and overbearing. Even his Majesty and Premier Lu have to give in to him a little, the 2 of you will have to handle him carefully.”

Wu Yingyuan saw how forthright he was towards them, obviously he is regarding them as family and was secretly overjoyed as he kept on agreeing.

Xiang Shaolong thought that there will come a day when they have to oppose Lu Buwei and was secretly sighing instead.

Maybe this is the pain one has to suffer for knowing the future and he can't help but feel all the more determined to retire away from the world.

They had just stepped into the door when they heard a long laugh and saw a grandly dressed man whose body shape and limbs are a lot more stout than others striding towards them. He was wearing a tall hat with feathers and ornaments on it and the feathers

flapped as he walked, boosting the power he exuded.

This person is about 40 years old with a square face and big ears. He looks a little unique, and his eyes a little too thin and long but shining, giving others the impression that he is profound and formidable.

Wu Yingyuan hurriedly pulled Xiang Shaolong to kneel and pay his respects, crying out Premier Lu.

Before they were on their knees, Lu Buwei has already dashed forward to help them up, his lighted eyes landed on Xiang Shaolong as he exclaimed in surprise, “No wonder Empress Ji and Mister Xiao kept complimenting Xiang Shaolong. I, Lu Buwei, have traveled the world and it’s the first time I’ve seen such a talent like Shaolong.”

His loud booming voice reverberated in the hall.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Lu Buwei is only a little shorter than him but his aura is intense. He was secretly impressed and hurriedly said humbly, “Premier, you flatter me!”

He sneaked a peek and saw that besides the 3 tables at the top level, there are 2 other tables each on the left and right side of the hall and next to each table stood 2 palace maids. He heaved a sigh of relief as he need not handle so many people and was naturally a lot more relaxed.

Lu Buwei did not put on the airs of a Premier at all as his left and right hand grabbed theirs and pulled them towards the table on the right at the top level as he said quietly in Xiang Shaolong's ears, "I was just worrying that I have the army but no general and it's good that Shaolong is here, I no longer have to worry I won't accomplish great things." And he chortled.

Wu Yingyuan who was on the other side said happily, "We will have to depend on Premier to promote us."

However Xiang Shaolong is secretly lamenting. Man have feelings and with Lu Buwei having such high regard for him, how will he be able to extract himself from all these and retire to a life in the farm?

At this time 3 people came to their table and Lu Buwei waved his hand and dismissed the maids first before saying in a low voice, "I have already arranged with his Majesty to let Shaolong become the Vice-General to General Meng Ao. General Meng is originally from the state of Qi but has always been ostracized by the local generals ever since he came to Qin. He was depressed that he was unable to use his abilities. In fact his military strategies are something no one in Qin can compare with and if he has Shaolong's help and make great military contributions, I will certainly reward both of you well."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Lu Buwei is formidable to use such a method to pull him over to his side, direct and forceful, how can anyone not work for him wholeheartedly. He pretended to be touched before saying, "Premier regards Shaolong so highly, I am willing to die for you with no hesitation at all. The problem is

Shaolong's greatest enemy Zhao Mu is still living. As long as I am unable to tear that fiend to pieces, it's difficult for me to put my mind on other matters."

Lu Buwei grabbed his arm tightly as his eyes flashed and said, "I can't wait to skin him and break his bones as well. Shaolong just go ahead and do whatever you want, I will support you in everything. After you get his head, remember to bring it back to Xianyang so that his Majesty and I can have a look at it!"

It's only now that Xiang Shaolong fully have a taste of Lu Buwei's formidability. No wonder he can become the Right Premier of the strongest state in the world although he is only a merchant.

Also, he could deduce with just those few words he said that he was planning to sneak back into Handan to assassinate Zhao Mu. From this it can be seen how quickly and astutely his mind works.

The Door Official cried out, "General Meng Ao arrives!"

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to blurt out, "To speak of Cao Cao and here he comes."*, luckily he remembered that Cao Cao has not been born yet and hurriedly kept his words.

(*Chinese idiom – similar meaning to speak of the devil)

Lu Buwei turned around and said with a loud laugh, "What can be happier than meeting an old friend?"

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Yingyuan looked towards the front door and saw a tall and skinny man dressed in brocade robes and striding into the hall with big steps, bowing with respect from far away as he said, “Meng Ao pays his respect to Premier Lu!”

With his unique way of walking, Lu Buwei stepped forward and put his arms around Meng Ao warmly and walked towards Wu and Xiang.

This Meng Ao has a longish face, about 40 odd years old, tanned with a weather beaten face. His brows looked as if they are frequently furrowed but his eyes are alert, which gives others the feeling that he is extraordinary. His body is very healthy and nimble, obviously he could maintain this top form due to the amount of exercise he gets.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Lu Buwei has an eye for talent, therefore this Meng Ao is definitely a man of ability.

Meng Ao and Wu Yingyuan are already acquainted with each other and after exchanging greetings, his sharp eyes landed on Xiang Shaolong’s face.

Xiang Shaolong did not want to exchange looks with him so he hurriedly bowed to show his respect.

Lu Buwei introduced the both of them.

Meng Ao obviously doesn’t really know how to socialize, his

tense face has no smile at all as he said a little stiffly, “Glad to meet you!”

Wu Yingyuan laughed, “That lad Jing Jun has just been here for a few days but has already made friends with General Meng Ao’s sons and they have been going to the outskirts to hunt and have fun!”

Lu Buwei complimented, “That lad is indeed skilled. He’s only been in Xianyang for such a short time but he has already defeated 3 famous local swordsmen. However he concedes to no one except Shaolong, making all of us itch to witness Shaolong’s ultimate swordplay.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that Jing Jun has been doing all these things and he doesn’t know whether to be happy or worried. It seems that for the time being he has no choice but to stand on Lu Buwei’s side.

Meng Ao heard his sons being mentioned and revealed a trace of a rare smile and said, “Let’s see when Shaolong is free, please come to my house. Xiaowu and Xiaotian both idolize Shaolong a lot!”

Before Xiang Shaolong has a chance to answer, the Door Official cried out again, “Left Premier Lord Yangquan, Great General Wang He arrives!”

Meng Ao’s smile immediately disappeared while Lu Buwei gave a cold snort. It seems that the battle between the new and old, outsiders and locals have reached a stage when they don’t even try

to appear cordial.

Xiang Shaolong looked towards the main door and saw a short, fat man wearing a grand robe together with a big and stout man wearing battle robes walking over with large steps and heads held high.

The Qin's style is really different from the Zhaos. There are no family warriors surrounding them or a band welcoming them. Everything is simpler and this made Xiang Shaolong more relaxed.

Xiang Shaolong secretly found it funny that both Lu Buwei the Right Premier and Lord Yangquan the Left Premier brought with them a general to the feast and this is obviously not a coincidence but an arrangement by the King of Qin to ensure that the power on both sides are balanced.

But this Wang He is an important pillar in Qin while Meng Ao is an unsuccessful general. Obviously Lu Buwei has not gotten the support of the Qin military and this can be his fatal weakness, which is why he is trying so hard to get Xiang Shaolong on his side. Otherwise this materialistic merchant will not be bothered to take even a look at him.

Lord Yangquan and Wang He's gaze fell onto Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Yingyuan hurriedly bowed to show their respect.

Wang He is very magnanimous and smiled in return.

Lord Yangquan looked proud and nodded slightly as he squinted his evil looking eyes surrounded by flesh and said with as cold laugh, “How many days have Commander Xiang been here! If I did not come and attend this feast today, I’m afraid I still wan’t be able to see you in your glory!”

These words were obviously blaming Xiang Shaolong for not visiting an important person like him after he arrived in Xianyang.

Wu Yingyuan was secretly cursing but on the surface he smiled and said, “My foolish son-in-law arrived only yesterday and I hope Lord Yangquan can be magnanimous about his lapse and not take it to heart.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved instead. This Lord Yangqun’s moods are reflected so clearly on his face and he is quite ordinary, definitely not Lu Buwei’s match. Instead it is Wang He who is more formidable.

“Dang!”

A sound was heard.

18 stout and broad warriors with long spears came into the hall from the back hall in neat lines and stood on both sides.

Next, sounds of close footsteps coming down the stairs could be

heard from behind the hall.

Xiang Shaolong then realized that King Zhuangxiang had been in the hall upstairs all along and only came down to host the feast when he was informed that all the guests have arrived.

At the same time he guessed that Lu Buwei was upstairs earlier in a secret discussion with King Zhuangxiang and from this one can see how close their relationship is.

Everyone split into 2 sides and knelt to welcome the arrival of King Zhuangxiang.

Firstly 4 guards with serious expressions stepped out, followed by 8 pretty young palace maids. They are dressed mainly in purple, with red and blue sleeves, which looked a little dowdy as compared to the embroidered and grand dresses of the palace maids in Zhao and Wei.

They were split into 2 groups, with 2 men and 4 women in each group, standing in 2 straight lines looking very serious.

The sounds of accessories clanking could be heard.

A pretty lady with the bearing of royalty and wearing long robes holding the hand of a splendidly dressed child about 10 years of age walked in slowly.

Xiaong Shaolong peeked and thought that it was Zhu Ji and Xiao

Pan but upon close look, he realized his mistake.

At this time the servant cried out, “Lady Xiuli, Prince Cheng Chongqiao arrives!”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself, so this is the prince that Lord Yangquan is supporting. That lady’s beauty is extraordinary, she should be a concubine that King Zhuangxiang appointed after his return to Qin from Handan. For her and her son to be able to attend this feast, it means that she has the ability to vie with Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan. Obviously King Zhuangxiang is smitten with her too, otherwise she would have been banished to the cold palace.

The sounds of accessories can be heard again and Xiang Shaolong’s eyes brightened immediately.

Zhu Ji was in a short dress with gold embroidered floral patterns which dazzled, with another floor length long dress beneath. Together with her coiffed hair, she walked lightly like a willow tree swaying in the breeze, showing off her slender waist, lush bottom and natural allure. Immediately she wins that Lady Xiuli hands down.

With one hand holding her dress and the other holding Xiao Pan, who is dressed mainly in black, she looked especially enchanting.

Xiang Shaolong remembered how he had once held her under the bedcovers and talked, that was another experience altogether. He lowered his head to avoid eye contact with her.

The servant announced, “Empress Ji, Crown Prince Zheng arrives.”

2 pairs of mother and son came to the side of the tables and knelt down to await the arrival of King Zhuangxiang.

Xiao Pan’s eyes did not shift, not even taking a single look at Xiang Shaolong at all.

Xiang Shaolong secretly complimented him. He had in the past instructed Xiao Pan not to treat him any differently, otherwise it may arouse the suspicions of Zhu Ji or other people.

The 4 guards cried out in unison, “His Majesty arrives!”

Xiang Shaolong dared not peek any longer and can only try to imagine what he could have looked like.

A gentle, melodious and calm voice rang out in front, “Everyone, rise!”

Everyone cried out in unison, “Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Xiang Shaolong rose together with everyone else and lifted his head for a look, and coincidentally came eye to eye with King Zhuangxiang who was observing him.

This King of Qin who was once held hostage in Handan is about

40 years old, tall and thin, and seems to look a little like a Taoist. His skin is as fair as a lady, his face pale but has a rare scholarly charisma with long, slender fingers. He gives others a feeling that he is from a good family background with the air of someone from a large family. A pity that his eyes doesn't seem alert enough, otherwise he would have outstanding magnetism.

He was wearing a long square board on the top of his head that made him look even more impressive as a ruler.

Naturally he was wearing a ruler's robes, with a black base and yellow patterns with gold edges, looking solemn and grand.

He saw that Xiang Shaolong is far better than other people in terms of body size and spirit, King Zhuangxiang's eyes lit up and the corners of his lips revealed a trace of a gentle smile as he said softly, "Only an extraordinary person can accomplish extraordinary things. Shaolong, you have not disappointed me."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect King Zhuangxiang to address him directly by his name and in such a friendly tone as well, and he hurriedly expressed his thanks.

King Zhuangxiang's eyes fell on Wu Yingyuan and he said gently, "To have such a son-in-law, what more can Mister Wu ask for. It is predictable that the Wu family will have great glory in future because of Shaolong."

Wu Yingyuan expressed his thanks happily.

Lord Yangquan and Wang He exchanged a look, both can see the unhappiness in the other's eyes.

King Zhuangxiang looked at everyone and said calmly, "Everyone be seated!"

The drum sounded again.

Another 18 guards walked out from inside and together with the previous guards, formed into teams of 9 and they went to their positions behind the tables and stood guard.

Everyone went to stand next to the tables and waited for King Zhuangxiang to be seated, the guards to take their positions and Ladies Xiuli, Zhu Ji and their sons were seated before they dared to sit down.

On the 2 tables on the right, at the upper level, was where Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong was seated, followed by Meng Ao and Wu Yingyuan; on the other side it was entirely different with Lord Yangquan and Wang He each taking a table.

Xiang Shaolong deliberately did not look at Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan to prevent King Zhuangxiang or the others from realizing that he has a special relationship with the 'mother and son'. This is what is called, 'Rather be suspected than to prove suspicions correct.'

The palace maids were like butterflies flitting amongst flowers as they served the guests wine and delicacies.

King Zhuangxiang said, “Now that Empress Ji and Crown Prince Zheng has returned to Xianyang safely, I no longer have any worries. Let us have a toast!”

Everyone raised their cups but Lady Xiuli, Lord Yangquan and Wang He’s expressions naturally looked a little uneasy.

King Zhuangxiang’s eyes landed on where Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan were seated and his gaze became even more gentle and with his melodious voice full of feelings, he said, “My Prince Zheng, Shaolong is your benefactor, aren’t you offering a toast to Mister Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but be charmed by him and he truly felt that his success is not based on luck. King Zhuangxiang was acknowledged by Lu Buwei as a ‘rare treasure’ while he was down and out and later he was able to move Lady Huayang, who was King Zhaoxiang’s favorite then, and she made him her son. In the end he won and became the successor to the throne and all these can be accomplished because of his unique charm. Otherwise, no matter how much money Lu Buwei spends on bribing, it would just be a waste of effort.

Xiao Pan stood up on hearing that and walked to Xiang Shaolong’s table.

It’s only at this time that the 2 of them had the opportunity to meet eye to eye.

Xiao Pan's eyes reddened immediately, full of feelings, but luckily he quickly hid what he felt.

Naturally palace maids came up to help pour the wine.

Xiang Shaolong stood up, bowed respectfully with his hands held above his head as he received the fine wine Xiao Pan handed him and drank it in one gulp.

Xiao Pan has grown more stout, his expression calm. When Xiang Shaolong thought of how he will grandly unite the world in future, he can't help but feel his heart tremble.

The 2 of them went back to their respective seats.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but take another look at Xiao Pan and realized Zhu Ji was looking at him with a smile, her eyes gentle and he was so shocked he quickly lowered his eyes.

After chatting with everyone for a while, King Zhuangxiang's gaze settled on Xiang Shaolong again and he asked calmly, "If we were to attack Handan, destroy Zhao and capture Zhao Mu alive, how much troops does Shaolong think will be needed?"

Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan's eyes lit up at the same time.

Lord Yangquan and Wang He listened intently, waiting to hear his response.

Lu Buwei laughed loudly and said, “Shaolong be brave and speak your mind!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled a little and replied, “With the current situation, we’ll only need 20,000 men to attack Handan but to destroy Zhao, even if everyone in Qin were put to work, it’s still impossible.”

Everyone was shocked.

Lord Yangquan said with a cold laugh, “It’s only been a short time that Commander Xiang is exposed to military warfare, that’s why he expressed such ignorant comments. Would Great General Wang explain these to Commander Xiang so that he won’t continue with his wrong understanding unknowingly.”

He still insisted on addressing him as Commander to remind others that he is just an insignificant and lowly ranked commander, and also to show that he still regards him as an outsider.

King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei’s expressions were initially unhappy upon hearing Xiang Shaolong’s words, then they thought deeper into it.

Zhu Ji on the other hand was smiling slightly, full of confidence in Xiang Shaolong.

Whereas Wu Yingyuan kept making eyes at Xiang Shaolong, hoping that he'll be careful in his words.

Meng Ao's eyes lit up, obviously he understood the meaning behind Xiang Shaolong's words.

Xiang Shaolong looked at Wang He calmly, his eyes shining intensely.

Wang He felt his heart turn cold upon his gaze and became more cautious as he said, "I'd like to ask Mister Xiang to explain why he would have such a stand."

Once he said that, King Zhuangxiang, Lu Buwei, Wu Yingyuan and Lord Yangquan, these 4 men who has no knowledge of military affairs immediately knew that Xiang Shaolong was not speaking nonsense, otherwise Wang He would not show such hesitation.

Xiang Shaolong smiled calmly and said, "After Changping, Zhao indeed suffered great damage and not only was military morale affected, it also greatly affected the confidence of the royalty and officials in the country. But it's exactly because of this attitude that developed the determination of everyone to defend against the enemy to the death. The defeat of the Yans is proof of that. My suggestion of using 20,000 men to attack Handan is to make use of the opportunity that our Wu family had just evacuated from Zhao and all the beasts in the farms had been poisoned and died. The Zhaos, in this aspect, will be at a loss for now and adding on to the fact that their morale has been beaten, I have the confidence of winning. But this must be a quick battle and take the opportunity

that Li Mu and Lian Po are still engaged with the Xiong Nus and Yans so they will be unable to extricate themselves for the time being. We will attack the city and then retreat, for that place is not suitable for a long stay.”

He continued somberly, “If we’re just going to attack the city, we need only 10,000 men but if we want a quick battle with minimal casualties, we will definitely need 20,000 men.”

Wang He was stunned for a moment before saying with a sign, “What Mister Xiang has said is not without reason.”

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but like him even more, because he is not someone who will lie thru his teeth.

Meng Ao said solemnly, “I totally agree with Shaolong’s words.”

Lord Yangquan was so furious that his face was alternating between being fiery red and deathly pale and after exchanging glances with Lady Xiuli, he was at a loss for words.

Zhu Ji laughed delicately and addressed King Zhuangxiang with a flirtatious look, “Your Majesty! I didn’t recommend the wrong person! It’s the first time the Great General and General Meng shares the same agreement on any matter!”

Once she said that, both Wang He and Meng Ao started feeling embarrassed.

Xiao Pan looked at Xiang Shaolong, feelings of admiration and longing welled up in him.

King Zhuangxiang took a look at Lu Buwei first before he continued smoothly, “Then can Shaolong explain why you said that we will not be able to destroy Zhao even if we use all out resources?”

Wu Yingyuan is the most nervous now. If Xiang Shaolong cannot convince the King of Qin on this matter, that whatever little advantage they gained earlier would be gone as well.

Xiang Shaolong explained, “Although it is said the most important thing in a war is the country’s strength and military power, but relationships with external parties and information is equally important. As the saying goes, the battle is won if one knows the enemy as well as one knows oneself.”

Lord Yangquan interrupted, “The Great Qin has never overlooked these 2 aspects. The late King appointed Zhang Yi as Premier and this took care of external relationships and destroyed the unification plans of the 6 states. As for information, we send spies regularly to the various states and have never slackened in this area.”

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to despise this senior statesman and asked impolitely, “Can I ask you then, if we were to attack Zhao with all our military resources, what will the reaction of the other states be?”

Lord Yangquan was dumbfounded, because if he does not have the support of actual information, how is he able to answer such a hypothetical question.

Lu Buwei patted Xiang Shaolong's thigh beneath the table to show his happiness that he has managed to put Lord Yangquan down.

Wang He is after all on the same boat as Lord Yangquan so he said, "Indeed this matter cannot be rushed. Let's not talk about Qi and Chu for now, but the other 3 states depend on one another for survival and they will certainly unite and fight against us. Any single one of the states do not have the strength to fight against our Great Qin's thousands of men but if they were to join forces, it'll be a different matter altogether."

By saying this, not only has he helped to intercede for Lord Yangquan, it also meant that he has affirmed Xiang Shaolong's explanation.

Xiang Shaolong did not allow them to have a chance to take a break and hurriedly added, "If Zhao is under attack, the other states will not just sit and watch. Even if at the beginning they have the intention viewing the fight of 2 tigers while sitting on a mountain, waiting to sweep in once both sides are injured, but once the Zhaos close their Pass to defend themselves from inside and at the same time send troops to cut off our reinforcements paths, the other states will send troops to help sooner or later. By then we will be surrounded by enemies and the situation is not optimistic."

King Zhuangxiang slapped the table and exclaimed, “What a good description ‘viewing the fight of 2 tigers while sitting on a mountain’, it’s the first time I’ve heard of such an interesting verse.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself, could it be that this verse has not been used during this era yet? After thanking King Zhuangxiang for his compliment, he continued, “Besides, Lord Xinling of Wei is still around and he can influence the other states. If they join forces again, we’ll be in even greater danger.”

Everyone went silent. 8 years ago, Lord Xinling from Wei, together with the troops from the other states, defeated the Qin army badly at Handan. Everyone still remembered the events as if it just happened and were apprehensive.

King Zhuangxiang sighed, “Then would it mean that we’ll just let the fiend Zhao Mu go off scot-free?”

Just with that sentence, he knows that King Zhuangxiang does not have the grand ambition of unifying the world, or else he would have said ‘how do we conquer the 6 states?’ instead.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a straight face, “If the intention is just to capture Zhao Mu, your Majesty need not use a single soldier at all, just leave it all to me.”

Everyone was stunned.

King Zhuangxiang's spirits rose as he asked, "Is this a boast?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Not a boast at all. I only need half a year to gather information, then I can set off and capture Zhao Mu back alive and kicking to your Majesty and you can do anything you want with him. But most importantly this must be kept a secret, otherwise I'm afraid I won't be able to come back alive."

King Zhuangxiang slapped the table and cried out, "Whoever dares to reveal this matter will be executed immediately with no excuse!"

At the same time Lu Buwei sighed next to Xiang Shaolong's ears, "How can you say that out?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he's worried that Lord Yangquan will try to harm him and he put his hand under the table and wrote on his thigh the word 'fake'. Lu Buwei immediately understood his meaning and looked at him with admiration and approval.

Lord Yangquan lowered his head so that others will not be able to see his happy expression.

Zhu Ji laughed coquettishly and teased King Zhuangxiang, "Zhao Mu alive and kicking, Shaolong really has some interesting phrases. Is your Majesty still in doubt about my suggestion earlier?"

Once everyone heard that, they knew immediately there's more

to this.

Indeed King Zhuangxiang chortled, “I am extremely happy to have this conversation with Shaolong. If we can capture Zhao Mu alive to appease the anger in my heart, he’ll definitely be handsomely rewarded. From now on, Shaolong will be my guest as well as the Crown Prince’s Grand Tutor, to teach Zheng’er martial arts and the art of war.”

Lu Buwei was ecstatic and hurriedly raised his cup to congratulate Xiang Shaolong.

The Crown Prince is the successor to the throne and if one can become his Teacher, when the Crown Prince ascends the throne in future, he will be able to exert the most direct influence. Therefore this is not a minor official post and everyone is eyeing this position.

Lord Yangquan walked out from behind his table and knelt on the floor, beseeching, “Your Majesty, please reconsider. Our Great Qin has been established for hundreds of years and are famed for our fighting ability. All those Grand Tutors who are fit to teach the Crown Princes are the best swordsmen in the country and never has an outsider taken this position. Besides, Commander Xiang firstly has not made any military contribution and secondly we do not know if his swordplay is really as good as rumored. Why don’t your Majesty decide again after Commander Xiang captures Zhao Mu back!”

His words can be considered reasonable, so obviously this person still has some brains but King Zhuangxiang is not listening at all

and said unhappily, “How can I possibly judge a person wrongly. We’ll just do it this way, there is no need for Left Premier to speak any further,”

Wang He can’t help but step out as well and knelt down, “Your Majesty must reconsider, otherwise I’m afraid others will not agree in their hearts.”

Once this great general speaks, it’s akin to the military in Qin voicing out their objections and although King Zhuangxiang was furious, he can’t help but hesitate.

On seeing this, Xiang Shaolong knelt and said, “What Left Premier and Great General said is not unreasonable. Your Majesty, please retract your orders. Let’s see if I can capture Zhao Mu first before you decide.”

Wu Yingyuan and Zhu Ji secretly thought it’s a great pity, and Zhu Ji was secretly lamenting that her chances of getting in touch with Xiang Shaolong has now been reduced.

Whereas Xiao Pan almost felt like giving Lord Yangquan a good beating.

King Zhuangxiang sighed and said, “Officials, please rise.”

Lord Yangquan and Wang He knows that he has changed his mind and went back to their tables happily.

Xiang Shaolong walked back to his table calmly.

Wang He saw that he did not seem at all bothered and can't help but feel curious.

Before King Zhuangxiang could speak, Lu Buwei laughed loudly and drew everyone's attention to him.

Lu Buwei said seriously, "How can the position of Crown Prince's Grand Tutor be left empty for more than half a year. Regarding military knowledge, Shaolong has shown his remarkable observations and in both Zhao and Wei, Shaolong managed to overcome enemy troops with a smaller number of men. He also executed Xiao Weimou and his famed has spread throughout the land. As long as Lord Yangquan and Great General invite who they think is the greatest swordsman in our country to have a duel at a later date in front of his Majesty, we'll be able to see immediately who is better."

King Zhuangxiang was overjoyed, "We'll do it this way! All right, let us drink and be merry."

He clapped his hands and a group of dancers floated into the hall immediately to sing and dance but they could not dispel the tense atmosphere hanging in the air.

Both sides were getting ready to make the other side fall badly.

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly to himself, knowing that he is

now embroiled in the Qin court's power struggle.

Maybe this is what they refer to as, 'having no choice when one is out in the martial arts realm'.

Book 6 Chapter 3 – News From Afar

The following 10 days, Xiang Shaolong spent the most relaxing time ever since he arrived in this ancient era.

Together with his wives and maids, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Zhuo and the thousand family warriors who followed him from Handan, they went to the Wu family's newly established farm at the outskirts to rest and relax.

The farm is very big and on a fast horse it takes at least 2 hours to ride from one end to the other and it has 18 simple but well equipped houses. They chose a courtyard next to a pretty valley and named it 'Hidden Dragon Courtyard'.

Every morning when they wake up, he will ride with his wives and maids on the open plains and at the same time practice his archery. He also got the 3 highly skilled fighters Teng Yi, Wu Zhuo and Jing Jun to duel with him and practice the use of various weapons as a warm up practice for the duel with that still unknown person whom Lord Yangquan and the rest are going to choose.

The 'Elite Soldiers' have expanded to 300 men from the original 77 men and they practice day and night to prepare themselves so that they can be chosen to return to Handan in future to capture Zhao Mu alive.

With a real special task force warrior like Xiang Shaolong heading the unit, this batch of people improved by leaps and

bounds and learnt the various spying and tactics used once they have infiltrated the enemy camp.

There are a lot of people in the Wu family and some of them are craftsmen who know how to work with metal. Following Xiang Shaolong's instructions, Wu Zhuo set up a workshop for the blacksmiths and they made secret weapons like climbing hooks and flying needles according to his designs.

Xiang Shaolong also did not forget to meditate according to the instructions on the scroll taken from the Mohist token. Teng Yi was very interested after he found out about this and learnt the technique from him and he practices it with greater effect than Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong might as well just give him the scroll so that he can study the military and sword fighting techniques on the scroll on his own. Their relationship is now even closer than real brothers.

Just as they were enjoying the bliss, Tao Fang came.

Everyone gathered in the hall for a meeting.

Tao Fang exclaimed excitedly, "There's news from Handan and it's really exciting." But he did not immediately continue with his story.

When everyone saw him trying to keep them in suspense, they

were so anxious. The only exception was Teng Yi who remained unmoving and calm as usual.

Tao Fang said with a laugh, “Let me tell you one issue at a time! This time the person who was most affected by us is Zhao Mu. Only when the Zhaos found our secret tunnel that led to outside the city did they realize they have been tricked. Later then received news that the real Ying Zheng has reached Xianyang and King Xiaocheng was so upset he fell sick and also gave Zhao Mu a terrible scolding, refusing to see him for one whole month. Their relationship only improved a little recently but Zhao Mu’s influence is not as before. Instead that Guo Kai must have said something and managed to trick that muddle headed King Xiaocheng into trusting him.”

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but ask, “How is Zhao Ya’s situation?”

Tao Fang knows that he has not forgotten this capricious beauty and said with a sigh, “She fell very ill as well. That Qi Yu still wanted to look for her but she chased him out of her residence and many people saw that!”

Wu Zhuo asked in bewilderment, “The King of Zhao did not blame her at all?”

Tao Fang said with a sigh, “It seems that she had once tried very hard to persuade the King of Zhao not to deal with Shaolong so now the muddle headed ruler is now feeling a little regret over that and she is so seriously ill as well. It could be due to these reasons that Zhao Ya’s standing is not very much affected. Now everyone in Handan is fearful, worried that we will lead the Qin army to

attack Zhao. Recently King Xiaocheng has sent envoys to the various states hoping to join forces with them to deal with the Qin's invasion. What a joyous outcome."

Teng Yi asked, "What's the fate of the fake Ying Zheng?"

Tao Fang shook his head and sighed, "Executed by Zhao Mu. He was so furious and he can only take it out on this innocent and pitiful person."

Although Xiang Shaolong felt a little sad about this, but it's something that cannot be helped.

Tao Fang suddenly reached out and put his hand on Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and said quietly, "Let me tell you something but you must not get angry."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and asked, "What's the matter?"

A strange look passed over Tao Fang's eyes as he said solemnly, "There's news of Mei Canniang."

Xiang Shaolong's expression changed as he asked, "She's dead?"

Tao Fang shook his head, "No! She married to another village nearby and even has a son now. Her husband is quite a famous hunter and it seems that he's quite in love with her."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a moment, and felt more relaxed instead. He thought of their parting and maybe at that time Mei Canniang has already made up her mind not to leave that peaceful place. That's good too! Most importantly she has found someone good.

Jing Jun went to stand next to Tao Fang and whispered, "Did you send my letter to Zhao Zhi?"

Teng Yi was shocked and exclaimed, "Did you reveal in your letter that we will be returning to Handan?"

Teng Yi was startled and replied, "Of course not, how can I not know the severity of this matter."

Tao Fang took out a letter and pressed it into Jing Jun's hands and said with a laugh, "It seems that Zhao Zhi is a little interested in you!"

Jing Jun exclaimed with joy, turned 3 somersaults and dashed off in a rush, causing everyone else to laugh at him.

Tao Fang saw that even after hearing the news about Mei Canniang, Xiang Shaolong still remained calm so he was assured and continued, "The man we sent to Daliang has returned with news, it seems that Learned Lady Ji has gone to the state of Chu."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "Oh no! She must be going to Handan to look for me."

At the same time everyone understood his meaning. Naturally Learned Lady Ji cannot go directly to Zhao to look for him so she can only go to Chu first and then travel to Handan via Qi.

In ancient times communications is not very convenient and most likely Ji Yanran is still unaware of what has happened in Handan.

However Xiang Shaolong could not think straight due to his concern and said with determination, “We’ll go to Handan immediately!”

Tao Fang replied, “We have to at least wait until the day after. The Qins have already selected a person to fight with you for the position of the Crown Prince’s Grand Tutor and the duel is set for the day after in front of his Majesty. Anyone who has some status will be there to watch the duel.”

Wu Zhuo asked, “Who is that person?”

Tao Fang replied, “I think he’s called Wang Jian!”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly stunned and thought how can there be such a coincidence.

Xiang Shaolong sat alone to think next to a tiny waterfall near the farm.

In this Warring States era, there is indeed paradise everywhere, just like the rare scenery right before his eyes. The mountain peaks standing in line, strange and unique rocks, clear water flowing in between, waterfalls and ponds and the moving water reflecting the rays of the sun. One can never grow tired of seeing this scenery.

He sat next to a pond, listening to the musical sounds of the waterfall falling into the clear pond, looking at the lush green bamboo trees next to the bank waving in the wind. The scene is filled with the sense of spring, life and growth and he can't help but feel energized.

But once his attention turned to the duel the day after, he's filled with gloom again.

No matter which one of them wins, he's afraid there'll be a problem.

The problem is whether he can change history.

If the answer is no, he can then not bother himself with anything and retire to the woods happily, enjoying life with his wives and maids everyday and Xiao Pan will naturally become the first Emperor of China.

The frustration is that he cannot be sure.

If he wins Wang Jian, will the other party still become a key official in unifying the 6 states in future?

This is really a test to his brains.

But he cannot lose as well, otherwise the Wu family warriors will be badly affected and it'll also be a great blow to Xiao Pan and even his trip to Handan may be affected as well.

Just as he was feeling troubled, the sweet laughter of young girls can be heard.

Hidden amongst the trees, the 2 pretty maids Cuitong and Cuilu, each carrying 2 small wooden pails, came to fetch water. They were talking and laughing softly and did not notice the presence of Xiang Shaolong.

The 2 girls came to the side of the pond and put down their small pails.

Cuitong sat down on a rock while Cuilu took off her shoes, revealing her pretty naked feet and stepped into the water. She was relaxed and occasionally let out a tinkling laugh.

Xiang Shaolong remembered how he flirted and had fun with Mei Canniang at the lake in the valley and a wave of emotions came over him.

Cuitong suddenly asked, "Has Young Master hugged you before?"

Cuilu giggled and asked her back, “What about you?”

Cuitong blushed and nodded her head. She looked bothered as she said, “Hai! He just lightly put his hand around my waist and kissed my face, that’s all.”

Cuilu laughed, “Our little lass is in love.”

Cuitong said angrily, “You’re not much better than me, you were calling out for Young Master last night in your dreams.”

Cuilu cried out with embarrassment, “Don’t say anymore!”

Looking at the 2 girls, the troubled Xiang Shaolong can’t help but feel his heart lurch and stood up from where he was hidden.

The 2 girls suddenly saw that there’s a person and turned their heads around. When they saw it was Xiang Shaolong, they were initially shocked, which quickly turned to embarrassment as they blushed, not knowing where to hide themselves.

Xiang Shaolong was afraid they’ll run away out of embarrassment and quickly moved to their sides and grabbed their soft hands.

The 2 girls’ bodies went soft immediately as they collapsed onto the ground next to the pond and refused to get up, their heads bowed so low that it seems they’re trying to hide them in their bosoms.

Xiang Shaolong's lust was ignited on seeing this and asked with a laugh, "You refuse to move? Then we can just have fun here in this pond."

The 2 girls were greatly shocked and cried out in unison, "No! We'll be seen."

Xiang Shaolong threatened them, "You don't want to be seen? Then come with me obediently!"

The 2 girls stood up helplessly, filled with embarrassment and joy.

Xiang Shaolong pulled the 2 girls along, stepping on the uneven rocks as they walked along the river upstream and after a short while came to a small pond at the highest level. It offered them a bird's eye view of the pretty scenery down the valley.

He told the 2 girls to sit down next to him and with his arms around their shoulders, they admired this fairy-tale like scenery.

The 2 girls can't help but lean towards his embrace, their fragrance intoxicating him.

Is civilization a good thing or a bad thing?

Man is caught in his own trap by the technology 2000 years later

by constantly spoiling this beautiful nature. If anyone could have come to his era like he has, they will certainly be filled with regret that nature has changed so much.

Cuitong asked quietly, “Has Young Master been sitting there all this while earlier?”

Xiang Shaolong replied mischievously, “I was sleeping and didn’t hear anything about a light hug, kissing faces or someone talking in their dreams last night.”

The 2 girls were immediately shamefaced and groaned as they buried their pretty faces in his arms.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly commending that men in this era is really fortunate as his hands caressed their soft cheeks, massaging them gently.

The 2 girls were trembling under his touch as their breathing quickened.

At this point in time, there is no need for words.

Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and as if looking for a treasure, searched for Cuitong’s fragrant lips and he kissed her hard.

Whereas his other hand started his invasion towards Cuilu.

Cuilu has no defense against his expert caresses and teasing so she moaned in protest, “Young Master!”

By now the sun is slowly setting and a white cloud happened to float across and became a bright red fireball hanging in the sky under the reflection of the setting bright sun.

Xiang Shaolong left Cuitong’s fragrant lips and this pretty young girl who was aroused gave a soft moan and turned around to hug his strong waist.

He lowered his head towards the blushing Cuilu whom he was caressing. This pretty girl was sneaking peeks at him and on seeing his direct gaze she became totally embarrassed. That captivating look made Xiang Shaolong unable to control himself and he asked with a laugh, “With the grass as our bed and the sky as our blanket, will the 2 elder sisters object?”

The 2 girls were moaning so much that they couldn’t speak.

That night Xiang Shaolong thoroughly enjoyed himself but even when he was being captivated, images of Ji Yanran, Mei Canniang and even Zhao Ya flashed through his mind.

The women all knew that he will soon be leaving for Zhao and in their sadness, they tried even harder to make him happy, unable to bear the parting with him.

Time seems to past especially fast under such situations and they

left this pretty little valley 2 days later to return to Xianyang City. With the exception of Jing Jun, Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo both stayed behind to continue the training of the elite troops.

They have just reached the Wu residence and Wu Yingyuan has already dragged him aside, saying seriously, “Tu Xian has done a check on that Wang Jian. It seems that not only is this person’s swordsmanship is the best in Qin, he is most formidable in horse riding and archery. He can fire 3 arrows consecutively and he uses an iron bow with copper string. No man or beast within 500 steps can escape.”

He thought of that irritating Lian Jin, whose archery skills may not even be better than this person’s, Xiang Shaolong can’t help but feel his head grow numb as he asked, “How old is this person?”

Obviously Wu Yingyuan is worried for him and said with a sigh, “He should be around 20 this year and it seems that he has quite gentle and scholarly features. No one would be able to guess from his looks that he is so formidable.”

He continued somberly, “Tu Xian found out that Lord Yangquan and Wang He have already decided long ago that he will duel with you but they dragged it for so many days so that he can make use of this time to practice harder. These people are up to no good and knows that you have been separated from your wives for so long, you’ll certainly expand a lot of energy between the sheets. To think that they can even think of that. Even Premier Lu is very worried now!”

Xiang Shaolong remembered his amorous night and felt guilty

and at the same time thought that he is indeed belittling his enemy.

Wu Yingyuan tapped his shoulder and said, “Try to conserve your energy as much as possible. I will explain to Fang’er.”

Xiang Shaolong returned to Hidden Dragon Abode and hid himself in the Solitude Room to meditate according to the Mohist instructions and in no time he was deep in meditation, forgetting about everything else.

“Kok! Kok!”

The sound of the door being knocked woke Xiang Shaolong up abruptly.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly opened the door only to see Wu Tingfang’s looking distressed and stammering, “Xiao Jun has been beaten up and he’s quite seriously injured!”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and hurriedly made his way to the main building. Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang were all there as well as the 2 Wu family’s resident physicians who were helping to stop the bleeding and bandaging Jing Jun.

Xiang Shaolong squeezed his way to Jing Jun and after instructing everyone else to stand back, he began to inspect his injury.

He has at least 7 to 8 stab wounds and the most serious was the one on his left chest, which almost pierced his heart. The other injuries may look scary but they're all superficial wounds. However, 2 of the stab wounds were so deep that his bones can be seen and his flesh and skin is opened wide, looking extremely frightening.

Jing Jun lost too much blood and is now in a semi-conscious state, his face contorting in severe pain occasionally.

Although Xiang Shaolong was upset, he knows that he should be able to survive this. He retreated to stand between Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang and asked, "Who did this!"

Wu Yingyuan replied, "We've already informed Tu Xian, they will send someone to investigate. Luckily this lad has a strong constitution. He's so seriously injured yet he only collapsed after he dragged himself back. He's really formidable."

Tao Fang said, "These people are obviously after his life."

The guard was heard calling out, "Premier Lu arrives!"

Everyone did not expect Lu Buwei to visit personally and they turned around in surprise to welcome him.

Lu Buwei walked in under the escort of a dozen odd bodyguards and after taking a close look at Jing Jun's injuries, he walked to one corner to speak with the 3 of them. He said seriously, "This

must be the ploy of Lord Yangquan and his men. They want to kill Xiao Jun so as to affect Shaolong's mind. Shaolong you must not be tricked."

Xiang Shaolong said calmly, "Obviously they've underestimated Xiao Jun's ability to escape. As soon as Xiao Jun wakes up, we will know who did this."

Lu Buwei replied, "No matter who did this, we will settle everything with our enemy after the duel with Wang Jian tomorrow. As long as Shaolong gets the title of Grand Tutor, I will give Shaolong all my support to help Xiao Jun claim this blood debt and let everyone know that Lu Buwei is not someone to be bullied."

Xiang Shaolong is in a dilemma. He does not want to be on such close terms with Lu Buwei but it seems that if the situation were to continue developing like this, he will become Lu Buwei's party sooner or later.

This is not the problem. He's most afraid that once everyone develop feelings for one another, it'll be a headache in future.

Jing Jun groaned and regained consciousness.

Everyone rushed forward.

Jing Jun only saw Xiang Shaolong and he exclaimed angrily, "Big Brother! They were so vicious!"

Xiang Shaolong reached out to press his shoulder down, “Don’t move!”

Lu Buwei asked quietly, “Who did this!”

Jing Jun calmed down a little and gritted his teeth in pain, saying, “There were 20 odd people, I only recognize one of them as ‘Scarface’ Guoxing.”

After Lu Buwei gave instructions for him to be carried to the room to tend to his injuries, his eyes gleamed murderously as he said, “This Guoxing is quite famous in Xianyang and is one of the 3 main tutors in Weinan Martial Arts School. The principal Qiu Risheng is quite close with the military and has never given any respect to my men. Shaolong, help me kick that school down at a later date. I want the Qins to know that they won’t have a good life if they offend me. How many people will you need? Just say it out.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed and thought that he wants them to be his fighter and replied, “This is just a small matter, we have enough resources to deal with this.”

Lu Buwei exclaimed happily, “With Shaolong around, our entire situation is changed. If Lord Yangquan and his men were not afraid of Shaolong, they would not have resorted to such tricks.”

He paused and continued, “I will come and meet up with you first tomorrow before we enter the Palace together. I am confident that

Shaolong will not disappoint.”

Xiang Shaolong had a thought and he made some eye signals with Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang first before saying, “Let Shaolong send Premier Lu out!”

Wu and Tao understood his meaning and let him send Lu Buwei to his waiting carriage outside alone.

Lu Buwei is an extremely astute man and he asked quietly, “Is there something Shaolong wants to say?”

Xiang Shaolong just smiled without talking, until they came to the carriage before he said, “Not a moment during the last 10 days have Shaolong not been thinking hard for Premier Lu and I think that it’s not a very good idea to continuously oppose the local Qin power. Maybe in the end both sides will be seriously wounded.”

Lu Buwei sighed, “Congeniality should be the key to everything. I’ve thought of this as well but the Qins have always been suspicious of outsiders and no one will believe that I’m sincerely giving my best for the state of Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong said calmly, “Since they joined forces because of mutual benefits, then we will split them up by luring them. For the hardcore people like Lord Yangquan or Weinan Martial Arts School, we will destroy them heartlessly and make use of the opportunity to stand our ground. But for people like Wang He who are not doing this for personal gains entirely, we can try to bribe him into joining our side.”

A strange light came over Lu Buwei's eyes and after eyeing Xiang Shaolong intently, he nodded his head and said, "Shaolong seems to have a plan, say it out quickly!"

Xiang Shaolong gave a short summary of his plan.

After hearing it, Lu Buwei said, "Naturally it'll be good if this can be done but I'm just afraid that if we're not careful, things can become worse and lives will be sacrificed in vain."

Xiang Shaolong said calmly, "The Wu family is hugely indebted to Premier Lu, so what's the big deal even if I have to take some risk?"

Lu Buwei chortled and grasped Xiang Shaolong's shoulders tightly before leaving.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has gained Lu Buwei's trust and he turned back to look for Jing Jun.

Book 6 Chapter 4 – The Imperial Duel

Thousands of people gathered at the huge square next to the hall in Xianyang Palace. It was like a marketplace, with everyone waiting impatiently to see the grand duel that's about to be held.

On one side there were the Qin's most famously invincible and fierce warrior.

On the other side is a rising star with great military merits, a swordsman from Zhao.

Everyone wants to witness how these 2 are going to fight to win.

The sun was shining brightly and 3 tall platforms were erected near the main hall with seats neatly arranged on them. The middle platform is naturally the seats for King Zhuangxiang, the Crown Prince and the Empress.

The platform on the left was filled with major officials and military generals who were on Lord Yangquan and Wang He's side.

On the platform on the right, besides Lu Buwei, Meng Ao and the major officials closer to Lu Buwei are already seated. Li Si is one of them. Actually he is not qualified to have a place there at all but because of his concern for Xiang Shaolong, he managed to talk and persuade his way into getting a seat.

Others who were of a lower status can only stand at the

circumference of the square to view the duel.

With the mail armors and helmet gleaming, the Qin soldiers who were taller and bigger built than people from the other 6 states, stood guard on the long stairway leading to the main hall and around the 3 viewing platforms. Their long halberds shone under the sun, giving the soldiers a dignified and serious air.

At this time Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong has just arrived in their carriage and they walked towards the right after they alighted. Immediately there was a commotion as people pointed and shouted at Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Buwei exhaled and whispered in Xiang Shaolong's ears, "The Qins love a good fight and hold heroes in high regard. You can only win and not lose in this duel."

Xiang Shaolong has already meditated according to the instructions on the Mohist scroll this morning and at this moment he's feeling very energetic so he said with confidence, "Premier Lu, do not worry!"

Lu Buwei commented, "That person dressed in black warrior outfit on the left platform is Qiu Risheng, don't forget his face." His tone revealed a deep hatred.

Xiang Shaolong looked over that direction only to see the eyes of almost a hundred people on the platform were all focused on him and hurriedly smiled and nodded in response. He took a glance at that Qiu Risheng and then looked away.

Lu Buwei led him up the platform and sat down after introducing him to the other people. He asked Tu Xian who was at the back, “Is Wang Jian here yet?”

Tu Xian replied, “Should be here! But I wonder where he is?”

The sound of the horn was heard.

Under the escort of the imperial guards, King Zhuangxiang who was dressed in his dragon robes, leading Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, Lady Xiuli and Prince Qi Chongqiao as well as a bevy of concubines, walked out from inside the hall towards the platform in the middle.

All the soldiers stood at attention while the rest of the people both on and off the platform knelt down to welcome them. For a moment the atmosphere in the whole square was solemn and silent.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly complimenting, on seeing this situation he can see the nobility of the King of Qin and how much importance the Qins place on compliance and discipline.

It's only after King Zhuangxiang and the Princes and Concubines were seated and the attendant declared everyone to rise and be seated did the atmosphere returned to what it was previously. However, everyone stopped talking and quietly waited for King Zhuangxiang's announcement.

The attendant cried out, “Where is Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly rose and at the same time removed his outer robe to reveal his perfect physique. He left the platform to come to the front of the main platform and bowed his acquiesce to the King.

King Zhuangxiang looked at Xiang Shaolong happily and kept on nodded his head to show his approval.

He has lived abroad for many years and basically he can be considered an outsider, therefore he feels a special affinity to this young swordsman from Zhao who rescued his wife as well.

The attendant cried out again, “Where is Wang Jian?”

He has just finished his sentence when the sounds of hooves were heard only to see a steed running in from the palace gates like a gust of wind.

The crowd cheered thunderously as they all gave way to let the steed past unobstructed.

When it comes to flaunting, Xiang Shaolong has obviously lost greatly.

Wang Jian’s horsemanship is astounding. In such a short

distance, he has already executed several difficult poses and just as he is about to stop, he miraculously curled under the horse's belly and mounted onto the horse's back on the other side before leaping off the horse to kneel at the ground as he cried out loudly, "Your soldier Wang Jian! Paying his respects to your Majesty!"

Once again everyone cheered deafeningly, pushing the whole atmosphere into a high.

Lu Buwei and the rest of the people on the platform, including Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang who were full of confidence for Xiang Shaolong, started feeling a little shaken after seeing his astounding horsemanship. The confidence of Lu Buwei and the others who have not truly seen the ability of Xiang Shaolong were even more affected.

King Zhuangxiang revealed a look of surprise and kept nodding his head.

Because Zhu Ji has a special liking for Xiang Shaolong, she grabbed Xiao Pan's hand anxiously only to realize Xiao Pan's palm is sweating as well.

Everyone on Lord Yangquan's platform looked ecstatic instead as if Xiang Shaolong's defeat is a sure thing. Wang Jian stood up and looked at Xiang Shaolong.

At the same time Xiang Shaolong looked across with a smile and they saw each other directly.

Both of them revealed a look of surprise at the same time, both shocked at the other's physique and charm.

This Wang Jian is indeed as Wu Yingyuan described, fair and delicate looking but it's not enough to really describe him.

He's only about half an inch shorter than Xiang Shaolong and he wore a red and black warrior's outfit with an armor vest. His arms and shoulders were wide and his build robust, giving out a heroic air.

His nose is high with deep set eyes which looked unfathomable, his jet black hair combed into a small bun at the top and secured tightly with a red rope with its 2 ends dropping down to the back of his neck which made him appear even more powerful.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly admiring him and smiled in return, thinking that with such a capabilities, no wonder he could help Xiao Pan conquer the world and unite the 6 states in future.

Wang Jian saw that Xiang Shaolong looked friendly and his countenance relaxed as well and politely returned the greeting but his eyes was still filled with enmity.

At this point in time the attendant from the main platform read out the purpose of the duel this time and naturally at the same time offered encouragement to the contestants and emphasized the importance of maintaining good sportsmanship.

Towards the end, the attendant announced loudly, “The duel today will be split into 2 parts, with horse riding and archery first followed by swordplay.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting and thought that although he has improved greatly on his riding skills recently, but if he were to compare with Wang Jian, he won't be able to catch up even if he goes back and train for a few more years.

Wang Jian accepted the orders loudly so Xiang Shaolong can only follow him and agree as well.

With a ‘whoosh!’, Wang Jian leapt up the horse in a graceful motion and rode off. When it looks as if he's almost knocking into the spectators standing at the corner of the square, he pulled his horse back with a stand and the horse turned around gracefully and came to a sudden stop.

Naturally another round of applause and cheers sounded.

2 soldiers took out a target board from the side of the square and placed it right in the middle of the broad square.

At this time Lu Buwei ordered his man to lead Jifeng out. Xiang Shaolong smiled calmly and jumped up the horse's back from its rump and clasped his legs around the horse's belly. Jifeng galloped around the square with astonishing speed and came to another corner of the square and they also received many cheers.

Wang Jian took out his steel bow from the side of his saddle and held it high above his head, which immediately caused another uproar of admiration.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is very confident and was prepared to display his archery skill. He recollected his feelings and shouted to Wang Jian from afar, "How can a still target be compared to a live target, why don't Brother Wang shoot 3 arrows at me? I guarantee that I won't use my shield to block."

Silence immediately spread through the square but everyone has an incredulous look in their eyes, as if thinking whether this person is seeking death?

But Xiang Shaolong is the only one who can understand the difficult position he is in. Instead of waiting to be defeated, he might as well take the risk and make use of his own swordsmanship and agility to deal with the other party's arrows. If he succeed, then he'll be able to pass this stage.

Wang Jian is not one who likes to take advantage of others and he shouted back, "Arrows have no feelings, has Brother Xiang thought clearly about this."

Xiang Shaolong bowed to King Zhuangxiang from afar and cried out, "Would your Majesty please approve!"

King Zhuangxiang hesitated for a moment before signaling with his hand his approval.

The almost 2000 odd people at the square held their breath, waiting for that heart stopping scene to appear.

Wang Jian lifted his bow with one hand while he pulled out 4 long arrows from his back with his other hand, holding them between his 5 fingers, his stance showing his familiarity and making others feel that it's as easy as breathing for him to shoot these 4 arrows.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting in his heart. It turns out that this person is so unfathomable, making others think that he can only shoot 3 arrows at once but only now did he reveal his true ability.

Silence.

Wang Jian laughed loudly, "My steel bow and arrows can pierce through any shield, so it doesn't matter even if Brother Xiang uses a shield. Be careful!" He clasped his horse's belly lightly and his warhorse sped forward.

Xiang Shaolong looked heavenward and laughed as he clapped his horse and dashed forward but towards the direction of King Zhuangxiang's side, trying to intimidate him as he will not dare to release the arrows towards King Zhuangxiang's direction and to put him down a little.

The 2 steeds got closer then further away, their positions exchanged.

Wang Jian pulled his horse's head back and immediately turned back.

Xiang Shaolong's mind went into the Mohist's technique of calmness. Heaven and earth seems to have gone totally quiet in this instant and there's nothing else besides Wang Jian.

At the same time he hurried his horse towards Wang Jian.

As long as he can stick close to Wang Jian and avoid the 4 arrows, he can consider this horse riding and archery contest a closed deal.

The 2 steeds got closer and closer, from over 1000 steps away to about less than 700 hundred steps away.

'Twang!'

Wang Jian pulled his bowstring and without knowing how, one of the arrows have landed outside the bowstring.

Instantly the arrow flew out.

Xiang Shaolong has never seen such swift arrow, as if they have just left the bowstring and in the next instant they're at his face.

Luckily his reflexes are 10 times more agile than the average person and with a shout, he drew Bloodwave from his back and hacked diagonally at the arrowheads.

The crowd, regardless of friend or foe, all cheered.

Xiang Shaolong reined in his horse, pulled out his sword and blocked, the few movements all done in one fluid motion like flowing water, the angle and timing executed appropriately and exhibiting an extremely splendid pose of movement and strength. Everyone who saw this were moved and cheered for him.

From this one can see that the Qins are straightforward and sincere people.

With a crisp ‘dang!’, the steel arrow landed on the ground.

Wang Jian cried out loudly, ‘Good’ and in an instant he was missing and it turned out that he has flipped under the horse’s belly.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly stunned. His opponent’s arrows earlier were filled with power and the impact cause his whole right arm to become numb and he almost dropped his precious sword Bloodwave. And now he can’t even see Wang Jian at all, which means that he did not even know how he fired the arrow, so how can he not be shocked.

The square is now so quiet one can hear a pin drop, and it seems as if everyone stopped breathing as well.

What are left are only the thundering hoof beats of the

warhorses.

Both parties drew nearer, from 700 steps away to 500 steps away.

Without hearing the bow twang at all, Xiang Shaolong saw from his angle 2 arrows shooting out at the same time from beneath the horse's belly from the right at an angle, one aimed at his heart while the other speeding towards his thigh, calculated with absolute certainty the precise point when Xiang Shaolong falls, his expertise making others pause in awe.

Xiang Shaolong knows that they are now 200 steps closer to each other and his arm has still not recovered from the numbness yet so there's no way he can use his arm strength to counter his opponent's powerful arrows so he made a risky decision and forcefully used the hilt of the sword to hit down on the incoming arrow and at the same time with his innate reflexes, his leg kicked out like lightning towards the other arrow.

Before the crowd can worry for him, he has already knocked the arrow off target with his sword hilt forcefully while he felt a sharp pain near the tip of his shoes as he kicked the other arrow. Because of the impact, the arrow flew off tangent and flew diagonally up past the front of Xiang Shaolong's body to the highest point in the air before falling down.

By now the 2 steeds are only 300 steps away from each other.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt that something was amiss. It turned out that the last arrow has flown out quietly from the side

of the horse's neck at a very difficult angle and unless he can flip down to the horse's belly, there's no way he can avoid the arrow. But by now it's too late.

Xiang Shaolong's arm is aching so much by now that he can't even lift or put it down and it's pure luck that he can still hold on to Bloodwave. He roared and his left hand drew out the wooden sword on the side of the horse and attempted to sweep his opponent's last arrow away.

“Puff!”

The steel arrow was swept aside.

The crowd cheered thunderously. Even Wang Jian can't help but cried out, 'Excellent' as he hung his bow back on his horse's back and pulled out his sword to charge towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong dare not let down his guard. He put Bloodwave back across his back and waving the wooden sword with his left hand, urged his horse forward.

The two of them brushed past each other and the continuous ringing of wood against metal rang throughout the square.

Xiang Shaolong could feel that his opponent's arm strength is the same, if not better, than his own and was secretly startled. He deliberately rode to the edge of the square before turning his horse back so that he can gain more time for his right arm to recover.

All the spectators felt as if their hearts are now in their throats.

Wang Jian raised his long sword high up and sped forward in his horse.

Xiang Shaolong transferred the wooden sword to his right hand, took a deep breath and rode towards this strong opponent.

The 2 steeds came closer and closer at lightning speed and when they're 50 steps away, Xiang Shaolong suddenly increased his speed as he sat on the handsome steed which his bosom confidante Ji Yanran gave him like an arrow on full speed, looking as if he was riding on a cloud and speeding towards Wang Jian's horse.

Xiang Shaolong executed one of the 3 killer moves of using defense to attack in the Mohist swordplay, 'Whirlwind Style'. The wooden sword sprang up halfway into the air and turned one round, extremely forceful as it swept across.

Because of his opponent's horse sudden surge, Wang Jiang's estimation was thrown awry. His plan to use his horsemanship to win came to naught, followed by he was confused by his opponent's strange moves. Only when the danger is almost in his face did he manage to barely block it with his sword.

Xiang Shaolong came up with such a strange plan precisely because he was wary of his horsemanship. If he can figure out Jifeng's speed and his own sword style, he'll definitely lose if it's going to be a long drawn battle. To Wang Jian, he is even more

agile on the horse than off.

There was a loud 'Clang!', and Wang Jian almost fell off his horse together with his sword from the upper hand slash because Xiang Shaolong's attack made use of the force of nature's gravity to increase the strength of his attack. The wooden sword is very heavy in itself, that's why he was able to achieve such an accidental upper hand.

Wang Jian leaned low on his horse's back to defend against Xiang Shaolong's attack.

Xiang Shaolong's wooden sword was a whirl of movement on his top right and at the same time when the 2 horses brushed against each other, he took the opportunity to use his feet to point at 2 spots on Wang Jian's thigh. However the spectators were all focused on his wooden sword and the horses' bodies blocked most of the view from the spectators, therefore only the two of them knew in their hearts what happened and not a third person was aware.

Naturally Wang Jian knew that he was being lenient.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the time is now ripe and he waved their prearranged signal with his wooden sword towards Lu Buwei who was on the platform.

By now the 2 steed have exchanged places and looking at each other from afar.

Wang Jian looked totally dejected. He is a valiant hero, so a loss is a loss and he will not attempt to deny it. Just as he was about to abandon his sword and admit defeat, Lu Buwei stood up forcefully and cried out, “Stop!”

Everyone looked at him in astonishment.

Lu Buwei walked to the side of the stage and knelt towards King Zhuangxiang and said, “Regardless of swordsmanship or horse riding and archery, both Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian are on par with each other. Your subordinate would not wish to see any of them injured. I beseech your Majesty to declare that there’s no winner or loser in this duel and both of them will have the honor of bring the Crown Prince’s Grand Tutor and bear the heavy responsibility of guiding the Crown Prince.”

Half of those people seated on Lord Yangquan’s side looked flabbergasted as they did not expect Lu Buwei to be so magnanimous. Although they did not see the 2 light kicks Xiang Shaolong gave to Wang Jian earlier, everyone saw how Wang Jian almost fell off the horse due to the impact of Xiang Shaolong’s sword and knew that he has lost his advantage.

King Zhuangxiang nodded his head slightly and asked Xiang Shaolong, “What does my beloved subject Xiang think of this, are you willing put a halt to this!”

By saying that, naturally it’s because he could tell that Xiang Shaolong has a higher chance of winning.

Anyone with some sense, on seeing Wang Jian's expression, will not feel optimistic for him.

Xiang Shaolong returned his sword to his sheath and replied respectfully, "General Wang's horse riding and archery skills are astounding and his swordsmanship extraordinary and I am very impressed. Premier Lu's suggestion is like the fresh water after a long drought and I am most willing to accept it."

King Zhuangxiang chortled and stood up as he announced, "From today onwards, both Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian will both be the Crown Prince's Grand Tutors and will both serve the prince as equals."

Cheers erupted thunderously.

The most grateful person is Wang Jian. The post of the Crown Prince's Grand Tutor is too important to him, otherwise there's no way he can use his abilities even though he is full of aspirations.

But the happiest person is Lu Buwei. This idea that Xiang Shaolong taught him is most beautiful indeed, winning him the cheers of almost everyone present and this sweet feeling is something he has never experienced before in Qin.

Zhu Ji is so excited that she clutched Xiao Pan's hand tightly and whispered in his ear, "Fresh water after a long drought, is there anyone in this world other than your Tutor who can speak so beautifully in this world?"

Xiao Pan's eyes gleamed as he looked at his only family and kept nodding his head.

Amidst the continuous cheers, Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian both rode towards the main platform and dismounted to express their gratitude.

Just as everyone was sending King Zhuangxiang off, Wang Jian said quietly, "Thank you!"

Xiang Shaolong replied in a low voice as well, "This is our secret, Brother Wang can just invite me for a drink!"

Wang Jiang was just getting worried that he will boast about this matter and now he is so grateful that he immediately agreed.

By now all the royalty and officials have clamored down the platforms to hurry and offer their congratulations to the both of them.

Xiang Shaolong took this opportunity to move to Wang He and thanked him sincerely for giving him this opportunity and this made Wang He immediately feel proud, as if he was really the one who helped Xiang Shaolong get a leg up.

Lu Buwei and him are already in agreement over this so naturally he won't blame him for being so nice to Wang He. Instead he turned to offer his congratulations to Wang Jian in order to gain his trust.

On seeing such a splendid ending, Kiang Zhuangxiang beamed as well.

Besides Lord Yangquan and a few of his hardcore followers who looked somber because they've failed to defeat Xiang Shaolong, everyone else was in a cheery and festive mood because they've witnessed such a magnificent duel.

They managed to pass a thunderstorm safely.

Book 6 Chapter 5 – Making A Strange Encounter

After the duel, King Zhuangxiang summoned Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian into the Palace to offer his encouragement. He also praised Lu Buwei in public, impressed with his wonderful suggestion.

That night Lu Buwei held a private feast at his residence and the only people invited were Xiang Shaolong, Wu Yingyuan and Meng Ao. On his side, besides Lu Buwei himself, there was only his trusted aide Tu Xian and a few respected houseguests. Li Si is still not qualified enough to be part of such high class and intimate gatherings.

During the feast Lu Buwei was in high spirits and kept encouraging Xiang Shaolong to drink more.

Meng Ao witnessed Xiang Shaolong's extraordinary swordsmanship and how he faced death heroically and was thoroughly impressed and changed his opinion of him.

Wu Yingyuan was even more ecstatic on seeing how his beloved son-in-law has made such a great contribution.

Wine was passed for several rounds as the singers and dancers have ended their entertainment.

Lu Buwei chortled and told Xiang Shaolong who was sitting

opposite him, “Recently the Qis have sent me 3 song courtesans who are all rare beauties and well versed in music, chess and dance. A beauty is a match with a hero, I will in turn offer them as gifts to Shaolong, Mister Wu and General Meng, please do not decline.”

Wu Yingyuan and Meng Ao were secretly thinking that the beauties Lu Buwei is giving out must be good and expressed their thanks happily.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that he already cannot handle his beautiful wives and pretty maids at home and he’s also not used to the thinking of the people during the warring states period where they regard women as tools or decorations so he hurriedly rejected, “Shaolong is appreciative of Premier’s kind intentions but the journey to Handan is like an arrow already pulled on the bow and must be fired. Shaolong does not wish to be distracted by beauties for now and I hope Premier will forgive me.”

Lu Buwei saw that he is not greedy for beauties at all and a sense of respect welled up in his heart. On top of that he was not conceited about his feat, so Lu Buwei said with a smile, “Then I will ask Mister Wu to keep her for you and Shaolong can enjoy yourself after you’ve captured Zhao Mu.”

There was uproar as everyone made fun of Wu Yingyuan, saying that he might not be able to hold himself back and use the beauty for himself instead and the atmosphere became festive.

Xiang Shaolong saw that there’s no way he could object so he can only accept the gift with a wry smile.

Meng Ao asked, “When does Shaolong plan to leave for Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Ji Yanran and wish that he could set off immediately. He took a glance at Lu Buwei’s houseguests and hesitated.

Lu Buwei knew what he was concerned about and said with a smile, “It’s all our own people in here, Shaolong can just speak your mind.”

Xiang Shaolong said in a low voice, “We’ll set off immediately as soon as Xiao Jun recovers.”

Lu Buwei nodded his head and said, “I will bring this matter up to his Majesty and when the time comes we’ll just find an excuse, maybe say that we want you to go somewhere on a mission, then Shaolong will be able to secretly go towards the Zhao border without anyone noticing.”

Right now he has full confidence in Xiang Shaolong and although he does not know how Xiang Shaolong intends to capture Zhao Mu alive, he truly believes that he will succeed.

Lu Buwei changed the subject and said, “Xiao Jun must be avenged, how does Shaolong plan to deal with that Qiu Risheng and Guo Xing?”

Wu Yingyuan seems a little worried about this as he asked, “If

this matter gets out of hand, will his Majesty be displeased?”

Lu Buwei replied with a laugh, “Don’t worry! I have brought this matter up to his Majesty earlier and he is also very unhappy with Qiu Risheng’s despicable methods so Shaolong can go ahead and do whatever you want. I will bear responsibility if anything happens.”

Xiang Shaolong was extremely furious that Jing Jun was almost killed and his gaze turned icy as he said coldly, “Shaolong knows what to do now.” After staying in this era for such a long time, he is long familiar that a lot of matters have to be settled through brute force, otherwise sooner or later he will be the one who will be in danger. If not for the fact that Jing Jun managed to escape this time, otherwise they won’t even know who has killed him. So he can’t be too bothered by allowing himself to become Lu Buwei’s fighter for once.

If he does not teach the other party a hard lesson, the same thing can happen to Tao Fang or Wu Yingyuan and by then it’ll be too late for regrets.

The feast continued amidst such festive atmosphere until both the hosts and guests have drunk their fill before they all went home.

On the way back Wu Yingyuan was feeling tipsy as he said with a sigh, “To have such a fine son-in-law like Shaolong, not only is it Tingfang’s good fortune but also the Wu family’s good luck. If not for Shaolong, how can we possibly have such lavish lives in Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong has developed deep feelings of his astute father-in-law. Almost right from the start, Wu Yingyuan has supported this son-in-law of his without asking for anything in return and even married his beloved daughter to him, so how can he not feel grateful.

Hot tears flowed out of Wu Yingyuan as he continued, “Once Shaolong captures Zhao Mu, you must most importantly ask his Majesty to build a grand cenotaph in Xianyang for Father. Once I think how he has gone with no remains left behind, I... hai!”

Xiang Shaolong was worried that his health will be affected after all the drinks so he hurriedly consoled him.

He felt a mix of emotions, it seems that he should build cenotaphs for Zhao Ni, Shu’er and Su Nu as well so that at least there’s something to pay his respects to.

Naturally that night at Hidden Dragon Abode, he was engaged in loving copulation with the ladies.

The next morning, Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo had rushed back after hearing news of Jing Jun’s injury and they even took with them 15 highly skilled swordsmen from the elite troops.

Jing Jun was in better spirits now and can sit up and talk.

After taking a look at his injuries, Teng Yi nodded his head and said, “They are out for Xiao Hun’s life indeed.”

Jing Jun said worriedly, “You must include me on your trip to Handan.”

Wu Zhuo replied, “Then you’d better have a good sleep!” He made eye contact with the other two before leaving the room.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi followed him out into the hall. Wu Zhuo said, “The only way is to repay violence with violence, otherwise the same thing will happen again sooner or later.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “And we must do it openly, try our best to amplify the matter and let everyone know that us Wu family is not one to be bullied.”

Teng Yi said, “No more delays then, I have not exercised my muscles for a long time.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Then why don’t we set off immediately. After teaching those idiots a lesson, we’ll still have enough time to enjoy a sumptuous lunch.”

The 3 of them stood up and leading those 15 excellent fighters, rode out of the Wu residence towards the Martial Arts School.

Along the way, the streets were filled with people, carriages and horses, making it extremely lively.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is riding through Xianyang on a horse and everything seemed interesting. Along the way he chatted and pointed at interesting things with the rest of the group, feeling very happy.

Teng Yi suddenly reined his horse to a stop and looked towards the direction of sounds where there was some commotion, only to see chaos on the pavement. There was a 'bang!' as a fruits and vegetables stall set up outside a provisions shop was knocked to the ground and everyone jumped out of the way.

Suddenly a woman with a long scarf covering her head and face scurried out of the crowd and dashed towards another passageway with five to six huge and ferocious looking men running after her.

Right at this time a mule cart rode over and that woman whose features cannot be seen clearly screamed in alarm. Just as she was about to be knocked down by the cart, she fortunately managed to step back in time but she tripped on something, lost her balance and fell.

The scarf covering her head fell and her long silky hair fell, touching the ground.

The few brutish men caught up with her and surrounded the woman.

The woman raised her pretty face and screamed, "Kill me! I will never go back."

Xiang Shaolong and everyone else's eyes brightened, they did not expect this woman to be so young and beautiful.

Teng Yi shouted as he jumped off his horse.

One of the men sniggered, "You dare to interfere in our matters, are you tired of living!"

Teng Yi stepped in between 2 of the men in one large stride.

The 2 men roared in anger as they raised their fists to punch.

Teng Yi lowered himself slightly as his iron fists extended out from his left and right. The 2 burly men immediately were thrown off upon impact with his fists, unable to get up again.

The other 4 men all pulled out their weapons.

Wu Zhuo gave a secret signal and the 15 warriors all leapt down their horses and stood in formation.

Teng Yi ignored those people and came to the young lady's side, extending his hand as he said, "Miss, get up!"

The young lady looked up at Teng Yi deeply, her pretty face filled with anguish as she shook her head and said, "You cannot win them, leave! Otherwise all of you will be implicated."

Xiang Shaolong who was still on his horse was secretly stunned. His men are all strong and one look others will know they are not easily bullied, then why does this pretty girl have no confidence in them at all? Where could the other party be from?

Teng Yi was touched that she can be so considerate of others even under such circumstances and he said with a smile, “I, Teng Yi, have never feared anyone. At the most I will lose my life!”

The young lady placed her hand in his huge palm and her delicate body trembled as Teng Yi pulled her up.

The burly men helped up the 2 men who fell on the ground as they eyed them hostilely. One of them suddenly saw Xiang Shaolong who was behind seated on a tall horse and exclaimed hoarsely, “Isn’t that Grand Tutor Xiang?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly commented to himself that he has not become such a prominent figure. His eyes swept across the crowd as he nudged his horse forward. The burly men’s attitude suddenly became very respectful as he asked, “What is this all about?”

The leader of the men said, “Your lowly one is called Zhang Lang, from Premier Lu’s residence. I was under Premier’s orders to send 2 Qi ladies to your residence but this lady slipped away along the way.”

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo exchanged a look and chortled, “So it’s just a misunderstanding. All right! Just take it that you have handed this Qi lady to me, all of you may return to report your

mission accomplished.”

The man said, “There’s one more, in the horse carriage behind...”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling hilarious as he said, “Then I’ll have to trouble you brothers to send her to my house.”

The men saw how polite he was and developed a liking to him as they bowed and left.

Xiang Shaolong moved his horse next to Teng Yi and that Qi lady and on seeing that beauty leaning on Teng Yi helplessly, he had an idea and said, “Shall we find a restaurant nearby to sit down and talk?”

Xiang Shaolong and his men split up into 4 tables and they ordered food and wine.

Naturally the Qi lady sat with Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo. After drinking a cup of hot tea, color started returning to her previously pale face and she looked even prettier. No wonder Lu Buwei praised their beauty.

Teng Yi remained silent but there was a strange expression in his eyes.

Xiang Shaolong asked gently, “How can I address Miss?”

The Qi lady took a peep at Teng Yi and seeing that he was looking straight ahead, felt a little disappointment as she lowered her head and answered quietly, “My name is Shanlan!”

Wu Zhuo asked, “Why do you still want to run away when you’ve already reached Xianyang? Martial law is very strict here, with 10 families forming a group and if any one family breaks the law, the other families will be punished as well and those who hide the truth and not make any reports will be executed. Who would dare to hide you?”

Shanlan’s eyes reddened, “I am prepared to die, so I don’t care that much.”

Teng Yi’s muscular body trembled as he lowered his head and stared at the steam rising up from his cup of hot tea.

Xiang Shaolong asked gently, “Now that Miss Shan knows that you are supposed to come to our residence, do you still want to run away?”

Shanlan was stunned for a moment before lowering her voice in reply, “I don’t know!”

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “Why not this! I will give you 2 choices, either we will send you back to Qi to be reunited with your family, or you will marry my brother Teng Yi.” And he tapped Teng Yi’s shoulder.

Teng Yi's body shook as he looked at Xiang Shaolong, his expression both embarrassed but there is unhidden gratitude as well.

Love always comes so unexpectedly.

Shanlan's sad situation and her pretty yet piteous face have greatly moved this strong man's already dead heart.

Xiang Shaolong is adept at interpreting others expression so how can he not be aware of Teng Yi's mind.

Shanlan stole another look at Teng Yi and her eyes reddened, and whispered her reply so softly, "I no longer have a home to return to."

Wu Zhuo slapped the table happily, "Then I shall have to congratulate Brother Teng."

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, "Shaolong! She's supposed to be..."

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him, "If you say this then you're not taking me as your Brother. Hai! I'm so happy I almost feel like crying now that Brother Teng has once again accepted a happy life!"

Wu Zhuo said with a laugh, "Guess today is not too suitable to

seek trouble with Qiu Risheng!”

Xiang Shaolong replied happily, “We’ll go back first and talk!”

He can’t help but heave a sigh of relief. He has settled the problem of the Qi lady and Teng Yi with a happy ending, what else can be more ideal than this?

Book 6 Chapter 6 – The Spring And Autumn Annals Of Lu

They have just arrived at the Wu residence when Tao Fang came up to them and said, “I was about to send someone to look for you, and luckily all of you came back.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled, “What can be so important?”

Tao Fang replied with a smile, “It is important matter indeed, but it’s something good. His Majesty has ordered you to enter the Palace immediately to see him.” He then pulled him aside and added with a low voice, “Shaolong, don’t blame me for being an old nag, but at the duel yesterday, the way the Empress looked at you was very strange, you must be careful!”

Xiang Shaolong knew the meaning behind his words and said reassuring, “I know what to do. Even if it will not implicate anyone, I would still not do such a dishonorable and foolish act.”

Tao Fang knows that he is a man of his word and is relieved.

Xiang Shaolong turned his horse around and after rejecting the offer from Wu Zhuo and the rest for escorts, he rode towards the Qin Palace.

The width of the streets of Xianyang is between those of Handan and Daliang, but only in comparison with the few larger streets in the capital of Zhao and Wei. On average, the streets of Xianyang

are a lot wider.

He has just turned into the street leading south when Xiang Shaolong had a feeling he was being watched.

It's a feeling that's very difficult to put into words.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled.

Maybe it's because he has meditated so frequently that his senses have become so sharpened. He's also feeling perplexed why would anyone spy on him.

The place is linked to the market at the south side with shops and residences mixed together. On both sides of the road a huge tree is planted at a space of about every 2 feet and the trees grew in lush abundance so it'll be easy for the secret attackers to hide themselves.

He swept the area with his eyes and noticed a few suspicious characters.

Two men were seated at a table next to the window at the 2nd floor of a restaurant and when they saw Xiang Shaolong looking up, they immediately lowered their eyes and pretended to chat.

Another person is a hawker with a stall selling assorted goods at the side of the road, surrounded by a group of people who seem to be buying something. They were haggling about the price but

Xiang Shaolong noticed that he was staring at the area where he stood and was so nervous that he could see the vein popping on his forehead.

Amongst the people who had their backs to him, two to three of them were stout looking men and most likely is part of his gang.

On the other side of the street opposite this masquerade hawker, 2 persons saw Xiang Shaolong riding over and hurriedly snuck behind a tree, obviously up to no good.

However Xiang Shaolong was thinking about something else.

It's not strange that someone will want to hatch a plot to kill him but the strange thing is how did that person manage to know his route and timetable so accurately.

The only explanation is that the other party knows that King Zhuangxiang had summoned him into the Palace, therefore they are able to set a death trap for him on this only route to the Palace.

And judging by the numbers, his enemy was not afraid that he would have escorts because when they made the plans they would not have expected him to travel alone.

He can't help but feel secretly startled once he thought of this.

By now he can almost be sure that the person who wants to kill him is Lord Yangquan because he is the only one who can be sure

of the King of Qin's every move through Lady Xiuli and he is the only one who has the guts and power to deal with him.

He'd actually turned to deal with him after he has dealt with Jing Jun?

The sound of a horse carriage was heard.

Four horse carriages carting hay came towards him, with a rider on each carriage. They were split into 2 carriages in each group and riding towards him close to the pedestrian path on the left and right sides of the road, leaving a few feet of space in between and enough for him to run straight across.

Just by looking at the time, place and way the horse carriages appeared, Xiang Shaolong knows that something is wrong.

At this point of life and death, he dare not delay and he held Jifeng's reins lightly as he pretended not to notice and rode towards the horse carriages and at the same time secretly drew out 2 steel needles from his waist and hid them in his palms.

Both sides got closer to each other.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking it hilarious. He clasped the horse's belly lightly with his thighs and Jifeng who has been his steed for quite some time already understands his needs and immediately increased its speed and in an instant was riding between the 4 carriages.

This move was totally beyond the expectations of the other party and the 4 men riding the carriages all cried out in unison and revealed a sinister look.

The hay was thrown into the sky and there was an archer hidden in each of the carriage of hay. They stood up from the hay, cocked their arrows and at the same time aimed it at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong roared and Jifeng dashed forward. At the same time he waved his hands and the needles flew towards the back.

Before the archers in the 2 front carriages had a chance to shoot, the flying needles were already embedded in their faces and they fell back into the haystack.

The other 2 blindly shot their arrows in their haste and lost their aim. The arrows flew past his back, crisscrossing each other.

Xiang Shaolong chortled and Jifeng ran full speed ahead and in an instant, disappeared far away into the long street and there's nothing his enemies can do.

Xiang Shaolong met King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji with her 'son' in the inner hall of the Imperial Palace and naturally Lu Buwei was there as well.

The hall was elegantly decorated and King Zhuangxiang sat alone at the head on a raised dais while Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong sat

on his left and Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan sat on the right, each of them with a table in front.

The palace maids came in and laid out the food and wine and retreated. The guards were standing guard outside, which makes this lunch has the atmosphere of a family gathering.

Xiao Pan's attitude was serious and did not sneak a peek at Xiang Shaolong at all.

Zhu Ji was also more reserved and although she's even more beautiful now and is not as forward like before.

The huge windows on both sides of the hall was wide open and they can see the curving corridors outside, the lush woods and flowers, serene and quiet without any human voices at all.

King Zhuangxiang said with a smile, "Premier told me this morning that Shaolong will be leaving in a few day's time to help me capture Zhao Mu so that I can vent my hatred. Both Empress Ji and I are very touched so we must invite Shaolong over immediately for a meal as a boost to your journey."

Xiang Shaolong felt a great liking towards King Zhuangxiang because not only is he gentle, but there is a sincerity about him that comes from the bottom of his heart.

Maybe because he was held hostage in Zhao for a long period of time and suffered humiliation there, he did not have the haughty

air of King Xiaocheng.

Just looking at how devoted he is towards Zhu Ji and his gratitude at Lu Buwei's help, combining forces with this great merchant to deal with his own countrymen, one can tell how much importance he places on relationships.

And there's another reason why Xiang Shaolong feels especially for him.

In this world, he is the only one who knows that the leader of the world's strongest state, only has 3 more years to live.

He hurriedly bowed his head and gave his thanks.

King Zhuangxiang suddenly said kindly, "My son has something to say?"

Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei's eyes turned towards Xiao Pan and the look in their eyes were filled with unending love like King Zhuangxiang as well.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing, all these 3 people treated Xiao Pan like their precious son, but he's actually a fake.

At the same time he was shocked. Xiao Pan must have heard the killer of his mother, Zhao Mu's name and hence revealed a strange look of alarm which was witnessed by King Zhuangxiang.

Xiao Pan looked at Xiang Shaolong and said with disappointment, “Grand Tutor has to leave without even having any chance to teach me anything.”

The 3 of them laughed.

Zhu Ji furrowed her pretty brows, “Will this be too much of a risk for Grand Tutor?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “The more dangerous it is, the more suited it is for me. Do not worry Empress Ji, I will be careful.”

Lu Buwei chuckled, “I am very confident of Shaolong and knows that he will certainly succeed.”

King Zhuangxiang loves Xiao Pan a lot and said to him with a smile, “I am extremely happy that my son respects and loves his tutor so much.” He turned towards Xiang Shaolong and added, “If Grand Tutor is free these few days, you can spend more time in the Palace to teach the Crown Prince. The way you blocked Wang Jian’s 3 arrows at the square yesterday, my son was so excited that he kept telling everyone about it!”

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but exchange a look with Xiao Pan and secretly exclaim that he’s formidable. By doing this now, if this lad becomes especially close towards him in future, no one will suspect that it’s due to any other hidden reasons. He agreed politely immediately.

King Zhuangxiang sighed and said, “I had a hard life in the past and was downtrodden in Handan, humiliated and looked down upon. I’ve never had the chance to study properly and have to live everyday in fear, wondering if I will survive the next day. That’s why the first thing I want to do for my son after his return to Xianyang is to find him good tutors, so that he...”

Zhu Ji pouted and stared at him, saying coquettishly, “Your Majesty got more than 10 people to teach the Crown Prince in turns at one go, I’m really worried that Zheng’er will be exhausted.”

King Zhuangxiang smiled, not at all unhappy that she has interrupted his words.

Lu Buwei chuckled, “Does Empress Ji wants to listen to my grand plan of tutoring Prince Zheng?”

The 4 of them looked towards him in surprise at the same time.

Lu Buwei looked at Xiao Pan with the eyes of a ‘benign father’ before turning to King Zhuangxiang and said, “As the saying goes, ask when in doubt, learn when unskilled. Learned scholars, military swordsmen, weren’t they all ignorant initially and made achievements through learning and practice. Since that is the case, all the more a leader will have to study.”

King Zhuangxiang was stunned, “Does Premier Lu think that the education plan I have arranged for my son is not enough? The people that I have invited to teach my son are all the best in their

own fields. For example Qin Qing's poetry, song and music are not only the best in Great Qin, but she's also admired by others in the 6 states and is on par with Wei's Learned Lady Ji. Could Premier have an even better candidate?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that Widow Qing's surname is Qin and he's also one of the Crown Prince's Grand Tutors. No wonder Emperor Qin in future, heh! Which means Xiao Pan, will build a 'Memorial of Qing Dais' in praise of this female tutor of his.

Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan looked at Lu Buwei curiously, waiting to see how he is going to reply King Zhuangxiang.

Lu Buwei said confidently, "As the Crown Prince, Prince Zheng of course need not fear no one will teach him. However going to extremes is not good as well and sometimes when there are too many different views, one may be at a loss as to how to proceed. So in view of this point, I have summoned the world's learned, capable, skilled and amazing people to gather and give their opinions on governing a country, from the principles of governing to farming and their conclusions will be written into a book which will cover every topic. When the book is completed, once the Crown Prince has it on hand, then there will be nothing he does not know.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, for this 'son' of his, Lu Buwei really went into a lot of trouble.

King Zhuangxiang chuckled, "To think that Premier can think of such an idea. If Premier needs any help, just let me know!"

Lunch passed amid such light-hearted and warm atmosphere.

After the meal King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji returned to their Palace to rest and Lu Buwei, as the Premier, is also a very busy man and does not have the time for long chats. Xiang Shaolong told him about the attack on his way here and he left hurriedly after listening to the account, leaving only Xiang Shaolong who led Xiao Pan to the square to practice his swordplay.

Xiao Pan is no longer the same boy and no matter where he goes there'll be a big group of imperial guards and palace maids accompanying him and the two of them could not even talk about what's in their hearts.

Before they started the sparring, Xiao Pan can't help but ask quietly, "Teacher! Can you not go to Handan? Without you, I will have nothing left."

Xiang Shaolong saw that even the guards nearest to them were about 5 feet away so he pretended to correct his swordplay and asked, "Did they treat you well?"

Xiao Pan's eyes reddened as he said, "Very well! I really treat them as my birth parents."

Xiang Shaolong reprimanded him, "This will be the last time you think of yourself as Xiao Pan. From this moment on, even when in front of me, you will be Ying Zheng."

Xiao Pan understood and nodded his head before asking again, “Can you not go?”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “Remember our gentleman’s agreement, Zhao Mu is mine, the King of Zhao is yours.”

As he finished his words, he slashed his sword across.

Xiao Pan jumped aside agilely and struck a pose.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked on seeing this.

This lad has something that he never had before, and that is great confidence, which made a great change to his manner.

Damn!

This is the giant who will unify the world and become China’s first Emperor in future.

Once he thought of this, a rush of uncontrollable feelings seem to well up from his heart.

Right at this time an attendant came to announce that Qin Qing is here.

Although Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to take a look at this Widow Qing whose fame is on par with Ji Yanran, to see how beautiful and delicate she is. However he has no excuse to do so and it's not something within courteous norms. Besides, Xiao Pan had to bath and change so he had to return to the Wu residence.

He had just stepped through the door when the guard came to report that Wang Jian has come to look for him and is now chatting with Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang at the main hall, so he hurried in.

Wang Jian was joyous when he saw Xiang Shaolong and came forward to hold his hand in greeting.

Xiang Shaolong saw that he was dressed in an ordinary warrior's outfit that exuded a strong military air and can't help but feel a sense of camaraderie as he replied earnestly, "Sorry to have made Brother Wang wait so long!"

Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang stood up and the former said, "Grand Tutor Wang is here to bid farewell to Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "Farewell?"

Wang Jian replied excitedly, "Yes! I am setting off to the northern frontier immediately to go to war with the Xiong Nus.*"

Xiang Shaolong felt uncomfortable and secretly thought that if

he is going to battlefield, he'll need the consent of King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei.

Ever since Shang Yang's reforms in Qin, the tribe's leadership power was wrestled away and they lost the right to succession. Governmental and noble ranks were granted based on military contributions. Any reassignment of more than 50 soldiers will require the approval of the King of Qin. This was an unprecedented move at that time. This made the central pillar of Qin power reach its peak.

All the great generals only hold one half of the token and without the King of Qin's other half of the token, it'll be difficult to reassign troops. Besides the military token, the King of Qin's written document stamped with his imperial seal is also needed before it is recognized.

Therefore it is a lot more difficult to rebel in Qin as compared to the other countries.

Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang knows that the 2 of them have things to say so they gave an excuse and left.

After the 2 of them sat down, Xiang Shaolong ordered the maids to serve scented tea as he wondered if Lu Buwei is so intolerant after all and deliberately transferred Wang Jian away so that he would not be able to fight with him for attention. Once he thought of this, he felt greatly apologetic.

Wang Jian asked quizzically, "Why do Brother Xiang suddenly

look so terrible?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed and said, “Brother Wang has just been promoted to the Crown Prince’s Grand Tutor and now you have been transferred away. I feel injustice for you. No! I must speak to his Majesty on Brother Wang’s behalf.”

Wang Jian is a man with both brains and brawn. He was stunned for a moment before he suddenly understood and he was touched, saying, “Only now do I know that Brother Xiang really cares for me. But you’ve misunderstood, I was the one who spoke about this mission to his Majesty. Hai! To tell you the truth, seniority and experience plays a huge part in the military. Without some personal connections, one can forget about thinking of leading an army into battle. This time they did not want Brother Xiang to get the position of Grand Tutor so they had no choice but to get me out to duel with Brother Xiang. Now my status is no longer the same. When I met his Majesty this morning, he asked me what wish do I have and I immediately said I would like to offer my services at the northern frontier. After discussion with Premier Lu, His Majesty asked me again the strategy I have in mind and he then gave me the token on the spot and let me be the main commander at the northern frontier. This has always been my dream and I did not expect it to come true. I am here to tell you the good news and to thank you as well.”

This time it is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to be stunned. For a long time, the Xiong Nus and the Hus have been trying to invade the borders of Qin, Zhao and Yan and the 3 states, in order to gain control of central plains, have always used the method of building long walls along the border to keep them at bay but there’s still nothing they can do to the strong nomadic groups that travel

around the high Mongolian plains.

Therefore every thinks that it is an arduous and thankless task to go into battle with Xiong Nus, and one may very well lose his life if he's unlucky.

The Xiong Nus are nomadic and have hard lives therefore they are especially predatory. Using the advantage of the speed of their cavalry, their strategy is to attack when the enemy is retreating and retreat when the enemy is attacking. They frequently encroach into Central Plains and attack and pillage the various states whose main concentration is on farming.

And Qin is exactly one of the states facing this problem.

When Li Mu offended the King of Zhao, he was reassigned to the northern border and everyone knows that it is a form of punishment. Therefore, how could he have expected that it was Wang Jian who volunteered and begged to be reassigned to the northern border?

Looking at how concerned Xiang Shaolong is, Wang Jian said with a smile, "I can't blame Brother Xiang for not understanding. Ever since I was young, my thinking has always been different from others."

Xiang Shaolong was relieved and now he became curious as he asked, "Why don't Brother Wang tell me about it?"

Wang Jian drank the scented tea in one gulp before replying seriously, “I have always admired King Wuling of Zhao*. If not for his great bravery in implementing the 2 reforms, the state of Zhao not only became one of the stronger states and he also changed the way of fighting battles in the world.”

Xiang Shaolong has long heard of this story and he nodded his head in agreement, “Is Brother Wang referring to his Hu uniform and horse archery?”

Wang Jiang became excited, “Exactly. At that time the clothes of the Zhaos had long sleeves, thick belts, wide collars and huge bottoms. Such long and huge robes is extremely inconvenient when horse riding or archery. Therefore King Wuling ignored the country’s senior officials old fashioned arguments about it being ‘against the people’s hearts that rules are changed’ and ordered the whole army to change into Hu uniform. The huge sleeves and long robes were changed into a refreshing look with smaller sleeves with short coats, belts and boots.”

On hearing this, Xiang Shaolong thought it was interesting as well and said with a laugh, “This reform affects their reputation and the change in society, and naturally there will be strong opposition to it.”

Wang Jian gave a cold snort, “Compared to dying for the country, what is this little reform?”

He continued, “Another more thorough reform is to abandon the method of using carriages as the main force of attacks and change to using cavalry as the main force of attacks. In a short time he

built up a huge and strong team of cavalry who not only swept the Xiong Nus but also Central Plains, becoming invincible and numerous generals gained fame. If not because of the appearance of that muddleheaded King Xiaocheng, we might not even win the battle of Changping even if we have Bai Qi, the unparalleled military genius with us."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened, "Therefore you want to go to the northern frontier to follow in King Wuling's footsteps and bring a whole new change."

Wang Jian smiled confidently, "Although I am experienced in battles, I've always been on the frontlines and never had the chance to lead an army. When will I ever have the chance if we're fighting the other states in the east and south. Therefore I volunteered so that I can have a taste of leading an army. At the same time I can practice my horse archery and find some Xiong Nus to sharpen my sword with."

He continued in a low voice, "At that time King Wuling swept a thousand miles across the land and he took over the territory of the Linhu people. Those Linhu who are good in horse archery also became Zhao's cavalry, which greatly increased their strength. I've always had this idea as well. This is called killing two birds with one stone. As long as we don't get rid of the Xiong Nus, how can we talk about unifying the world?"

Xiang Shaolong reached out and placed his hand on his shoulder and said with sincerity, "Brother Wang is indeed an extraordinary man to be able to think of so many advantages from a task that everyone regards as torturous. Your precious sword and arrows

will definitely lead the way when the time comes in future to unify the world.”

This is the first time Wang Jian met a person who did not say that he is an idiot. He raised his hand and grabbed his arm tightly and said with gratitude, “Brother Xiang is the extraordinary man instead, the only reason I have this day...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him, “If you mention that again, then you’re not treating me as your brother.”

Wang Jian’s eyes reddened as he said earnestly, “Brother Xiang, please do not think that I am regarding myself highly. The mission to conquer the north this time is fraught with danger and I might not even come back alive. I came here today.... Hai!”

Xiang Shaolong saw him hesitating and asked curiously, “If Brother Wang has anything to say, please go right ahead!”

Wang Jian blushed as he said, “Actually I have been impressed with Brother Xiang once I met you, I wonder if we can become sworn brothers. We will share weal and woe together in future, if there is any ounce of deceit, may I be destroyed by heaven and earth.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed joyously, “I should be the one who is not good enough. But I have 3 other loyal friends, why don’t we copy how Liu, Guan and Zhang sworn brotherhood at the peach garden and let our names go down in history as loyal brothers.”

Wang Jian was confused, “You’re talking about what Liu, Guang and Zhang about sworn brotherhood at what peach?”

This time it was Xiang Shaolong’s turn to feel greatly embarrassed.

Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei’s sworn brotherhood happened during the era of the Three Kingdoms so naturally Wang Jian has never heard of this.

He immediately gave some nonsensical answers and muddled his way through.

He found Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo and the four of them, together with a recovering Jing Jun, made the serious vow of brotherhood together at Jing Jun’s bedside.

A big feast followed it before Wang Jian left happily.

That night Xiang Shaolong was in a great mood and had fun with Wu Tingfang and the rest, throwing aside all his worries and his lovesickness for Ji Yanran for the time being.

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt as if he is at the happiest and proudest moment of his life.

As soon as he fetches Ji Yanran back to Xianyang and capture Zhao Mu, then he will have nothing more to ask for.

Book 6 Chapter 7 – Love At The Qin Palace

The next morning, Tu Xian's best advisor Xiao Yuetan came to look for Xiang Shaolong. The 2 of them sat and the small hall in the inner courtyard and Xiao Yuetan said, "It was the Premier who asked me to look for Grand Tutor, to see if there's anything I can be of help."

Xiang Shaolong had too much fun last night and drank a little too much as well so he replied with a heavy head, "There's no need for Mister to be so polite, just call me Shaolong. No matter what rank I hold, we're still friends who have been through thick and thin so we can speak as equals." At the same time he tried to figure out the reason he has come.

Xiao Yuetan saw that he did not put on any airs at all and was secretly overjoyed. After expressing his humbleness, he told him the reason for the visit, "It's to make it more convenient for Shaolong to work in Zhao. If you depend purely on trying to disguise yourself, not only is it troublesome but inappropriate as well. Therefore the Premier has ordered me to specially help Shaolong, Xiao Jun, Brother Teng and Brother Wu make 4 exquisite masks based on the shape of your faces. You'll just need to add some minor details like change the hairstyle and color and I guarantee that you'll be able to hide from Zhao Mu. Of course! Shaolong and the others will still have to work on your voices and mannerisms, otherwise you'll still be recognized."

Xiang Shaolong felt as if he has just woke up from a dream and asked happily, "Premier indeed thinks of everything, I wonder if you've brought the things here."

Xiao Yuetan proudly took down the little package he has carrying on his back and opened it, and indeed there are 4 masks inside.

He took out one of them to let Xiang Shaolong wear it and immediately Xiang Shaolong turned into a coarse looking man with a face full of beard.

Xiao Yuetan reached out with his fingers and started touching the area around his eyes and said with a smile, “The most unique thing about this design is that the connecting parts are mostly at where the hair is. For example the hole here which reveals your eyes, not only has it made your eyebrows thicker, but it also made the shape of your eyes rounder so even for those who knows you, they won’t be able to recognize you from the shape of your eyes. As for the rest of the connecting parts, just apply a layer of powdered oil and it’ll be seamless.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly took a copper mirror for a look and was extremely impressed.

Xiao Yuetan took out a chalk and made some markings on the mask before removing it for him, saying “The mask still need some refining, I’ll be able to hand it over within 3 days.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with astonishment, “Mister Xiao is indeed gifted in your art, you’re able to make such a well-fitted mask based only on your memory. What material is this?”

Naturally Xiao Yuetan was overjoyed that someone found him

impressive and he replied happily, “This is made from a precious beast called ‘leopard deer’ from the northwest. It’s a little larger than hunting dogs and extremely rare. I collected them at a high price and only managed to get 4 skins and now I’ve used them all up at one go.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that such a rare beast that he’s never even heard of before most likely became extinct because of Xiao Yuetan. After thanking him, he called for Teng Yi and the rest to let them try on the masks to see if any changes need to be made.

Teng Yi and the rest all expressed admiration for the masks and they became more excited about the trip to Handan.

Jing Jun’s physique is so good that it’s unbelievable. He was able to move freely in just a few days, but of course he still cannot turn somersaults.

When Xiao Yuetan removed the mask for Teng Yi, he asked in bewilderment, “Has Brother Teng encountered some joyous event, why have your whole countenance changed.”

For the first time Teng Yi blushed as he hemmed and hawed his way though. Neither does he dare to look at the others in the eyes.

After Xiao Yuetan wrapped everything up, he lowered his voice and said, “About the ambush on Shaolong yesterday on the streets, Premier has already sent someone to investigate. They should be from Weinan Martial Arts School, because 2 of their warriors passed away coincidentally yesterday and they carried out the

funeral secretly.”

Once he said that, everyone knows in their hearts that Tu Xian has bribed someone from the martial arts school, otherwise how else would he know such tightly guarded news.

Xiao Yuetan added, “But Premier would like to ask Shaolong to tolerate this for the time being, because he already has an even better plan which can get rid of Lord Yangquan and Qiu Risheng at one go, so he would not want to put them on their guard at this juncture.”

Jing Jun was furious, “They come and deal with us as and when they like, sooner or later someone will be killed by them!”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Lu Buwei is getting more and more formidable, no longer is he intent on just getting a moment’s revenge. This type of ruthlessness indeed makes one’s heart run cold and after stopping Jing Jun, he said, “Mister Xiao, please tell the Premier not to worry, we know what to do.”

Obviously Xiao Yuetan is on good terms with Jing Jun and he pulled him aside to explain and guarantee that they will not let Qiu Risheng and his men off before leaving the Wu residence.

They discussed the problem of security for the Wu family and came up with a plan. Xiang Shaolong told them, “All of you get ready, once we get the masks 3 days later, we’ll depart immediately.”

He turned towards Teng Yi and said with a laugh, “Brother Teng! Better thoroughly enjoy the next few precious days!”

Teng Yi said with a wry smile, “Even you’re making fun of me!”

At this point in time an attendant came and informed that the Empress has summoned Xiang Shaolong to enter the Palace immediately.

Xiang Shaolong obeyed the order with consternation and left the residence.

Naturally this time he brought along a huge entourage of Wu family warriors, not like the last time when he traveled alone.

After Zhu Ji ordered the maids and attendants to leave, only Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong was left in the huge pavilion in the imperial garden. Even the guards who are nearest to them are at least 10 feet away and they can only see, but not hear them.

With Xiao Pan around, naturally Xiang Shaolong is not worried that Zhu Ji would try to ‘entice’ him.

That would have been a huge headache for him.

Zhu Ji filled up the wine cup that was on the stone table for him and after trying to get him to drink, her pretty face blushed from the wine she’s drunk, making her look even more alluring.

This beauty indeed has the charisma to fall a city and her charm makes one think of the term beauties are a source of trouble, especially when Xiang Shaolong remembers what will befall her in future.

Zhu Ji's expression turned serious and she said earnestly, "I asked Shaolong here today with his Majesty's approval, to allow us mother and son to express our gratitude. Now I have no other wants, my only wish is to groom Zheng'er so that he can be a good ruler in future." Her gaze moved towards Xiao Pan, revealing a look of motherly love.

She added in a low voice, "Luckily this child has not disappointed me!"

Xiao Pan's eyes reddened slightly and moved closer to Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong understood.

This is very reasonable. Even though Zhu Ji is a natural flirt, but after staying in Handan for so many years where she can be used by anyone, she is long tired of such life.

Therefore she is especially treasures the new life with her husband and son, or at least this is what she is feeling for now.

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, "Shaolong understands what Empress Ji is thinking about."

Zhu Ji took a deep look at him before turning to look at the pretty garden scene surrounding them. She finally gave a satisfied sigh and said, “I know you understand me the most. Seeing you, is not only like seeing a friend, but it’s like seeing family and there’s no need to hide anything from you. If you encounter any problems, don’t be afraid to tell me. Some things will be easier if I speak to his Majesty instead of asking Premier to report on your behalf.”

Xiang Shaolong has no idea how sincere her words were, but with her current status, it’s indeed out of the norm that she would say something like that.

Zhi Ji tapped Xiao Pan’s shoulder and said, “Zheng’er! Grand Tutor Qin is here, go quickly!”

Xiao Pan stood up reluctantly and followed the attendant who was standing far away. Xiang Shaolong knows that the time for fleshly conquests is here and waited quietly.

Zhu Ji rolled her eyes at him and said, “I did not put on the airs of an Empress in front of you, why won’t you try to speak even a little more?”

Xiang Shaolong saw that there’s only the two of them here and replied with a relaxed laugh, “It’s beneficial for both Empress Ji and me to conduct ourselves as befitting to a ruler and his official.”

Zhu Ji smiled, “Between us, we need not spell out a lot of things,

but I'm really very grateful to you. Hai! If I had known, I should have given you my body while we were still in Handan, at least we'll leave a beautiful memory behind. Now in order to become a good Empress and mother, all personal desires will have to be placed aside. I hope Shaolong can understand my heart."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect that even after Zhu Ji became the Empress of Qin, she is still so direct with her choice of words. Obviously a leopard can never change its spots.

For a moment he could not think of a topic to talk about.

Zhu Ji pouted slightly, "Look at you! Became a mute again!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "What can I say? Should I express happiness or unhappiness."

Zhu Ji said offhandedly, "I think you're mostly happy, because you need not fear that I will implicate you."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling hilarious. Women are so strange. She's the one who tells you not to get involved with her, but when you really did not try to entice her, she'll feel unhappy instead, how contradictory.

Zhu Ji is aware that she has gone a little overboard so she sighed and her expression turned icy after that, "Shaolong's trip back to Handan this time, can you help me kill 2 people?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and looked at her as he replied, “Go ahead!”

Zhu Ji seemed to have turned into another person, her eyes filled with murderous intent as she uttered each word slowly, “The first one is another of Zhao Mu’s lackey Le Cheng, but don’t ask me why, I don’t even wish to think about it.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she must have been greatly humiliated by this person, otherwise her hatred would not have been so deep so he nodded, “I’ll definitely get this done for you!”

A little of the murderous look went out as Zhu Ji’s eyes revealed a look of gentleness and her pretty lips uttered, “But forget about it if it’s too dangerous, most important thing is for you to return safely. Without you, Zhu Ji will feel that I’ve lost a good confidante. Ever since I first saw you, I’ve felt that even if you do not become my lover, you will become my good friend.”

Xiang Shaolong is starting to be confused.

Are her words truly from the bottom of her heart, or just a way to pull him over to her side?

He has seen how she can charm Zhao Mu and Guo Kai silly so he’s very guarded.

But of course on the surface he pretended to be touched.

However he could not hide it from her and Zhu Ji pouted, “Did you think I was lying to you? Heaven above be my witness, if I, Zhu Ji speaks even a word of falsehood, I will not have a good end!”

Xiang Shaolong was startled and hurriedly said, “Lower your voice, it’ll be terrible if someone else hears this!”

Zhu Ji stared at him and said with a huff, “Coward! Do you believe me now!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head helplessly and sighed, “Who is the other person? Guo Kai?” Then he shook his head and added, “Of course it’s not him, otherwise Empress Ji would have forced me to kill him the other day!”

Zhu Ji was still fuming as she replied icily, “At least you know how to use your brains, of course it’s not Guo Kai. Amongst those hateful people, he can be considered one of the nicest to me.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious and asked, “Stop trying to be mysterious, tell me quickly!”

Zhu Ji covered her mouth and smiled as she said playfully, “Does it mean that no matter who is the person I say, you will follow my instructions to kill?”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted, “You still said that I was your confidante, why do you always want to see me embarrassed and in

a spot?”

Zhu Ji’s heart softened and she replied with a coquettish smile, “All right! I’ll not put you in a spot, the other person is... is...”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “Do you want me to beg you before you’ll tell me?”

Zhu Ji lowered her head and when she raised it again, tears flowed from the corner of her eyes as she said piteously, “When his Majesty and Premier Lu escaped from Handan and Zhao Mu found out about it, he sent Le Cheng and a big group of ferocious men who dashed into our house. They killed all the men servants while the women were all gang raped. That violent and horrible scene is still fresh in my mind even now. Even if I don’t think about it in the day, the terrible scene will be reenacted in my dreams. The person who gave the orders was Le Cheng, do you think he deserves to be killed?”

Hot blood rushed through Xiang Shaolong’s veins as an icy, murderous look gleamed in his eyes.

Zhu Ji lowered her head and continued, “The next day that fake son of mine and I was taken to Zhao Mu’s place and placed under house arrest. Those few days were the most disgusting in my life and at that time I made a blood vow that if I can escape in future, I’ll definitely avenge this.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded her, “You have yet to say who the other person is!”

Zhu Ji said lightly, “It’s Zhao Ya!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “What?”

Zhu Ji asked coldly, “Why? Can’t bear to strike now!”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why she was trying to convince him earlier. He was feeling very uncomfortable and asked in a low voice, “What has she actually done?”

Zhi Ji actually chuckled and laughed daintily. She said as she shook with mirth, “I was lying to you, I just detest that hateful look of yours when you were unmoved towards me, that’s why I used Zhao Ya to scare you.” Her pretty face turned frosty as she added, “But other than this, the other things were all true. If the situation permits, bring me Le Cheng’s head! Just take it that I’m begging you!”

Looking at her beautiful face filled with sad tears, Xiang Shaolong only feels as if his head is getting heavier. This woman is really difficult to deal with. It seems that Heaven sent her to this world so that she can toy around with men, no wonder even Zhao Mu cannot bear to kill her.

Zhu Ji lifted her sleeves to wipe her tears and said quietly, “Be careful! If it’s anyone else, I’ll definitely say that I can guarantee him wealth and riches. But I know that you’re an extraordinary man who holds no regard for fame at all, so I can only express my gratitude to you. But if you have any request, as long as you tell

me, I will definitely try my very best to do it for you.”

She suddenly smiled faintly, “For example the world’s most beautiful Widow Qing, does Shaolong want me to introduce you to her? I don’t believe that she can resist your charms.”

Xiang Shaolong stared at her without humor and he stood up and said, “If Empress Ji do not have any further instructions, then please excuse me for I have to return home to prepare for the trip to Handan.”

Zhu Ji looked at him forlornly and stood up as she said, “You’re so hard handed to keep using the Handan trip to put pressure. I have no choice but to let you go.”

She added with a smile, “But that is exactly what I like about you. Hai! It won’t be easy to find a chance like this in future where I can talk with you openly.”

Xiang Shaolong was touched on hearing this.

Zhu Ji has only become an Empress for a short time so she still retained her past characteristics. Earlier, it was only at the beginning that she looked confident but she subconsciously later reverted to her flirting ways.

No matter! There is now a huge chasm between them that cannot be crossed and regardless of how much they admire each other, they can only keep it in their hearts in future.

The 2 of them faced each other quietly for a moment before Xiang Shaolong bid farewell.

Book 6 Chapter 8 – Audacity

The attendant led Xiang Shaolong away from the Imperial Garden, walking along the corridors, passing through buildings and gardens towards the Outer Palace.

Along the way guards were posted everywhere, obviously security has been tightened since his last visit.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed, was the Qin Palace being prepared for some changes?

He thought of how Lord Yangquan first wounded Jing Jun, then found people to openly ambush him in the streets. His actions can be considered uncontrolled so it's not strange if he were to rebel. The only question is how many in the Qin military stands on his side!

Of course he's not worried.

History books have already stated that before Emperor Qin rejected Lu Buwei, he has always remained undefeated, and that will only happen 10 years later.

Just as he was lost in thoughts, Xiao Pan's voice was heard coming from his left, "Grand Tutor Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong turned towards the direction of the voice in surprise to see Xiao Pan running out from single log cabin with

bamboos planted outside, past the grass field, towards the corridor.

The attendants and guards hurriedly fell to their knees in fright.

Xiang Shaolong was still deciding if he's supposed to kneel since he is the Crown Prince's Grand Tutor when Xiao Pan cried out, "Grand Tutor, dispense with ceremony!" and at the same time made an eye at him.

Xiang Shaolong was sharp enough and walked to a corner with him and asked with his brows furrowed, "Aren't you supposed to be having lessons?"

Xiao Pan panted as he replied, "I know that Grand Tutor will pass by this area, so I've been keeping an eye out."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Is there anything you want to say?"

Xiao Pan was about to speak when a sweet but furious sounding lady's voice rose up from behind them, "Crown Prince!"

The 2 of them were feeling guilty and they were both startled as they turned to look at where the voice came from.

They saw an extremely beautiful and slender lady with her hair adorned with a sparrow pin, hair swaying as she walked and wearing a long white robe, seemingly glittering under the rays of sunlight. Her steps light, she seems to be floating on the lush green

grass as she walked towards them, her movements elegant, as if she's a beautiful goddess who has come down to earth. Especially when the wide sleeves at her side was fluttering as she walked, which emphasized even more strongly her gracefulness.

Even more startling was her facial features, which has a rare purity seldom seen in this era, like a carved statue. Her eyes were clear and bright, her cheekbones were a little too high but when coupled with her straight nose, it gives one the feeling of uncommon grace, an elegance that makes one's heart shudder, making others feel that she is a woman with her own mind, a determined beauty.

Her dainty brows were long and curved towards her temples, showing how dark and shiny her pupils were.

Her phoenix eyes and dainty brows has an air of classical beauty and this is the first time Xiang Shaolong has seen such allure and uniqueness.

Even with Xiang Shaolong's immovable attitude towards women now, he still can't help but feel his heart lurch.

Her pert bosom, slender waist, long legs, all gave her an air of dignity that is beyond any of the other women in this era. When compared to Ji Yanran they both have their winning ways and it's difficult to compare who is the better.

But at this point in time her pretty face was tight, cold as frost, her expression stern as she stared at Xiao Pan, "Ask if ignorant,

learn if unable to perform, listen to scholars if unable to learn, this has been the way since time memorial. Crown Prince, you are so easily distracted and has no heart in your studies, how will you rule the country and the people in future?”

Xiao Pan is after all still a child so naturally he hid behind Xiang Shaolong in fright, and it became a situation where it seems the 2 Grand Tutors were having a confrontation.

The attendants who were leading the way were so frightened they retreated to one side, afraid of being implicated.

The guards around them averted their eyes, pretending that they did not see anything at all.

Although Qin Qing was furious, her expression is a chilly calm, her breathing even, her hands behind her back. She lifted her head to look Xiang Shaolong who was half a head taller than her and asked gently, “This is the Grand Tutor Xiang that Crown Prince Zheng has been talking about all the time?”

Xiang Shaolong looked at her pure and regal expression and cleared his mind of his imagination before replying with a straight face, “It is indeed I, and I would appreciate Grand Tutor Qin kind advices.”

Qin Qing smiled slightly, “Grand Tutor Xiang is being too polite! Crown Prince! Aren’t you going to walk out, a man must dare to admit to his actions, and take responsibility.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “It’s not that serious, right?”

Qin Qing’s expression turned icy as she replied, “There is a big problem with Grand Tutor Xiang’s words. It is just a small matter to slip away from studies, but to cower on seeing someone, when he becomes the ruler in future and still has such a disposition, how can he handle the country’s affairs? If Grand Tutor Xiang only knows how to protect and abide with the Crown Prince, how can you answer to his Majesty who has bestowed such an important task of teaching the Crown Prince?”

Xiang Shaolong answered with a wry smile, “Don’t make it sound so serious, all right? Take it that I’m at fault, I’ll wave the white flag and surrender, all right?” He reached out and patted Xiao Pan who was still behind him and said, “Crown Prince Zheng! Come! Show Grand Tutor Qin how heroic and manly you are by daring to admit to your actions and impress her!”

Qin Qing was dumbfounded on hearing that. How can a senior official talk like that, as if playing a fool.

Xiao Pan walked out on hearing that and stood next to Xiang Shaolong, puffing his chest out and sucking his stomach in, posing like a great man but his tiny face was trying to contain his laughter and he looked totally hilarious.

Qin Qing’s eyes settled on Xiao Pan’s face and seeing how his little face was puffed red from trying to control his laughter, can’t help but chuckled although she knows she must not laugh. She turned her head aside and covered her face with her sleeve.

On seeing that, how can Xiao Pan control himself any longer and started clutching his stomach and chortled.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but laugh as well.

Laughter is the most contagious, especially in such a solemn environment, and the attendants and guards around them all were secretly smiling as well.

Qin Qing lowered her sleeve, revealing her face that was wiped of any trace of a smile and arched her delicate brows as she softly reprimanded, "Laughed enough?"

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were so stunned that they immediately looked serious and stood straight.

But once a can of laughter has been opened, it's difficult to control. Right now not only Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan's expressions looked strange, this pretty widow is not much better as she tried to look serious and chided, "No one since time memorial can become wise without studying. But not concentrating on one's studies is akin to not learning anything at all. Crown Prince Zheng should reflect on your behavior today. If you think that you cannot concentrate on your studies, Qin Qing can only resign from her post as Grand Tutor."

Xiao Pan hurriedly replied, "Grand Tutor Qin, Xiao Zheng will not dare to do so anymore, I guarantee there won't be a next time. Hai! What do I have to memorize again this time?"

Qin Qing is obviously a person who looks stern on the outside but softhearted on the inside. She sighed and said, "This time I only want you to earnestly reflect. All right! That's all for today."

She turned towards Xiang Shaolong and before she has a chance to speak, Xiang Shaolong has already bowed towards her suavely with respect, his movements especially splendid.

Qin Qing was dazed on seeing this and she lowered her head, avoiding his heated gaze and bowed slightly before turning around and left gracefully.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly glad.

At least he fulfilled a wish and saw this rare beauty who has not disappointed him. To him, this is enough.

The Xiang Shaolong now no longer has the mood to hunt for beauties, unlike when he 'just arrived'.

Xiang Shaolong returned to the Wu residence and his father-in-law Wu Yingyuan has just sent off a group of powerful men from the Qin court and was in high spirits.

These few days Wu Yingyuan has been active with his socializing strategy, continuously giving away song courtesans and fine horses to those Qins who hold influential positions in order to set a foundation for their intended long stay in Qin. Otherwise, even if

they have the support of the King of Qin and Lu Buwei and won't face any huge problems, but if people keep giving them small problems, it's still enough of a headache.

Wu Yingyuan is a businessman and is well aware that regardless of nationality or status, everyone is chasing after wealth and fame. Therefore he emphasized on this point and in addition to his subtle methods, slowly made his way through the various obstacles.

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and followed Wu Yingxiong back to the great hall in the main building and after sitting down, told him about Xiao Yuetan's exquisite masks and added, "Initially I only planned to disguise myself as a merchant to sneak back to Handan and capture Zhao Mu in a surprise attack and be done with this matter. But these makes have greatly increased my confidence and I decided to go all out and do something great."

Wu Yingyuan is intelligent and he said with a laugh, "Money is no problem. Heh! When it comes to comparing wealth, I'm afraid Premier Lu is still not our match." He lowered his voice and added, "Do you want me to get you a batch of courtesans for you to present as gifts." He then chuckled, "I'm so silly, they might reveal your background."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that no matter how shameless he is, he will not treat women as merchandise and give them away. He laughed, "I only need a herd of warhorses of the finest quality who will not reveal our backgrounds."

Wu Yingyuan was slightly taken aback, "You really intend to go all out?"

Xiang Shaolong was impressed that Wu Yingyuan can understand his intention from just this little bit of information and replied, “Father-in-law can really make inferences, I really intend to go all out and deal with King Xiaocheng and Zhao Mu in order to give vent to the anger that has been stuck in my chest.”

Wu Yingyuan breathed out a gush of cold air and said, “My good son-in-law, you are the bravest person I’ve ever known, but this time you’ve certainly placed your bet on the right thing. When the Wu family left Zhao we poisoned all the animals in our farms so that the Zhaos will face a shortage in the supply of warhorses. If you bring warhorses to trade with them, I guarantee that they will come to welcome you instead.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Not only am I going to do business with them, I even want them to allow me to set up a farm in place of the Wu family. Father-in-law is most familiar with this trade, what sort of background must we use so that the Zhaos will find most believable?”

Wu Yingyuan furrowed his brow and thought for a moment before he banged the table and cried out, “I’ve thought of something. At Xiashui in the state of Chu there is a person famous for breeding horses, called ‘Horse Fanatic’ Dong Zhuang. The reason I’ve thought of this person is because he was originally a Zhao but because his father Dong Ping offended some powerful person and the whole family escaped to the state of Chu. Dong Ping had actually become a minor official who rears horses but maybe because of his character, the Chus treated him marginally and after he lost his official post, he went to live quietly in the wilderness and concentrated on keeping horses. If Shaolong masquerades as

his descendent, firstly there won't be much problem with your accent, secondly no one has ever seen Dong Kuang and you can use your identity as a Chu to trick Zhao Mu into believing that you're a Chu spy sent to help him. I really cannot think of a more suitable person other than him to masquerade as."

Xiang Shaolong cried out happily, "This is really ideal. Can Father-in-law transfer 10 odd warhorses without any brandings so that I can pretend to be a generous herdsman?"

Wu Yingyuan grabbed his shoulder and chortled, "10 odd horses is not enough to claim generosity, you'll need at least a few hundred to a thousand, and they must be branded. Of course not with the character 'Wu' but with the character 'Dong', just let me take care of this matter."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brow, "This matter can only be made known to Lu Buwei, otherwise if the Qins find out about it, they may secretly give warning and that will be terrible."

Wu Yingyuan shook his head, "It's best that we keep this from Lu Buwei as well, then there won't be any accidents at all. Don't worry! We don't have to be so open and herd a few hundred warhorses out of Qin's borders, I'll just need a few days to settle everything. However we'll need to work on the route so that the Zhaos will really think that you are going to Handan from Chu."

Xiang Shaolong thought that all these are very exciting and interesting and after discussing the details, went back to his residence.

When he passed by Teng Yi's place, he suddenly heard the sounds of swords and was startled so he went in. After the maids pointed the way to him, he found Teng Yi at the small back garden and it turns out that this person and Shanlan were engaged in a lover's swordplay.

Teng Yi saw Xiang Shaolong and a sincere expression came onto his face. After instructing Shanlan to practice with his subordinate, he pulled Xiang Shaolong aside and said happily, "Last night was really splendid. All the misery and pain these past few months have been resolved. Now I only hope that Shanlan will be able to give me a son so that I can keep my Teng family line going so that I don't become the sinner responsible for destroying our Teng family line."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but laughed loudly and happily.

Teng Yi blushed and pretended to be furious, "If you laugh at me again, I'm going to get into a big fight with you."

Xiang Shaolong laughed even harder.

Teng Yi only shook his head.

The next day Xiang Shaolong led his pretty wives and maids, together with the almost recovered Jing Jun and Teng Yi, Wu Zhuo and the team of Wu family's most elite warriors and went back to that peaceful farm at the outskirts.

Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang were handling all the other arrangements for the trip to Zhao.

Xiang Shaolong concentrated on spending time with his wives and concubines and when there's free time he'll intensify the training of the Wu family's 'Special Task Force' together with Teng Yi and the rest. Of course he did not forget to tell them all the background information they need to know about their fake identities so that they will not slip up.

15 days later Tao Fang came to the farm and told them that everything is ready.

In the large hall of the farm's main residence, everyone gathered together to listen to the latest news about Handan.

Tao Fang said, "Handan is suddenly getting very lively. For some unknown reason, Lord Longyang from Wei and Han's most influential official, the Marquis of Pingshan, Han Chuang have all gone to Handan. There must be something going on and it seems that the special envoy from Qi will be going there shortly as well. The situation is extremely interesting."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi turned to look at each other, both thought of a very serious problem.

Tao Fang's experience came with age and he has already thought of what the problem is and said with a sigh, "If Chu sent an envoy to Handan over this secret which we still know nothing about, although it may not blow the cover off your fake identities, you

won't be able to pretend to Zhao Mu that you are the Chus he engaged to steal 'Lu Gong's Secret Manual'."

Teng Yi gave a cold laugh and using his finger in place of a sword, made an action of killing. It must be known that Chu is the furthest away from the state of Zhao and if they are fast enough, it's very possible that they can intercept the Chu envoy before he reaches Zhao.

Wu Zhuo said with a smile, "Leave this to me. In any case we need to send some people out to scout around first and to get into contact with Zhao Mu so that he can help smoothen our way to King Zhuangxiang and let the Zhaos open the city gates to welcome us."

He turned towards Tao Fang and added, "Is Zhao Mu back on good terms with that muddleheaded king already?"

Tao Fang sighed, "King Xiaocheng is honestly a muddleheaded ruler. News leaked out from the palace that that shameless Zhao Mu knelt outside the palace gates for only half a night and he allowed him to see him and in no time at all they were stuck together like glue again."

He turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, "Zhao Ya is a born slut, now she is back to her true colors and is wildly engaged with many handsome men and has gone back to her previous wild lifestyle."

Xiang Shaolong remained silent. Tao Fang deliberately talked

about this to make him give up. Hai! This slut really needs to be taught a good lesson before his hatred can be appeased. Once he thought of that, he secretly wondered if he still has feelings for her, otherwise why would he feel such hatred on hearing this news?

Tao Fang furrowed his brows in deep thought, “What are they planning?”

Jing Jun replied, “Of course they’re going to deal with us Qins.”

Teng Yi was momentarily stunned, “Xiao Jun you are addressing yourself as a Qin so soon.”

Jing Jun asked with embarrassment, “Is it inappropriate?”

Tao Fang laughed, “How can it be inappropriate, your Brother Teng was just not used to it.”

Teng Yi shook his head with a wry smile and did not speak further.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that people of this era does not regard the country as strongly as their clan. Their thinking is a little like those who work in a big company in the 21st century. If they feel that there are no prospects and that they are capable, it’s very normal for them to change to another company to work.

He asked Tao Fang, “Has Lu Buwei’s power in Qin improved

greatly?”

Tao Fang nodded his head in the affirmative and said calmly, “What Premier Lu lacks now is military contribution, but he dare not act rashly as he’s afraid that he will be at a losing end if the Qins refuse to cooperate, then whatever little advantages that he has gained through you would have gone down the drain.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing sardonically. He’s afraid it would be difficult for him to help in this aspect. Although during this warring states period, others will attack you even if you don’t attack them but to ask him to lead an army to attack and take over cities, kill and set fire, he can never have the heart to do such things.

They discussed the mission again and decided that Wu Zhuo will set off immediately the next day to stop the Chu envoy from reaching Zhao before they returned to their residences.

Before he could step through the door, he heard Zhao Qian’s voice in the hall lamenting, “Hai! My monthly cycle is here again!”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked still outside the door.

Wu Tingfang’s voice replied, “It’s getting on my nerves. I’m been taking tonics constantly but I’m still not pregnant.”

Xiang Shaolong started to feel uneasy. Could something radioactive caused harm to his ability in this area when he came on

the time machine? To the ladies, especially in this era where carrying on the family line is important, this will complete their happy family life but to him he does not think that it's really important at all.

The hall remained silent.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed, and walked in.

20 days later, after Jing Jun has fully recovered, all of them set off secretly immediately and left the Qin border and after traveling one huge round, entered Zhao through the state of Qi.

Xiang Shaolong's planning is even more detailed than the past. He first sent out an envoy to hand over the formal document requesting to call on the King of Zhao over to the border guards. In a short while the bell on the watch tower of the Zhao army rang and the drawbridge was lowered and a few hundred Zhao soldiers rode out uniformly to welcome them.

Teng Yi gave an order and the 300 Wu family's 'elite troops', who are now disguised as teams of herdsman, stood outside the army camp to await the arrival of the Zhaos.

The leader of the Zhao soldiers who led the troops is Zhai Bian, about 30 years old, short and stout with an intelligent face and warm personality. He chortled with laughter once he saw them, "Mister Dong's name is astounding indeed and now that I've seen you, you're even better than what your reputation expounds you to be."

After going through civilities, Xiang Shaolong, with the accompaniment of Teng Yi and Jing Jun, led him to view the 1000 handsome horses they brought with them.

As a warrior, Zhai Bian naturally knows his stuff and as he was viewing the horses, he exclaimed in surprise, "The quality of this batch of warhorses is even better than the horses the Wu family used to rear."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly finding this hilarious and after expressing their modesty, he asked his man to take out an especially tall and handsome horse to give to Zhai Bian.

Naturally Zhai Bian's attitude became even warmer and he hurriedly opened the city gates wide and invited the team in grandly, saying as they moved along, "His Majesty is extremely happy to learn that Mister Dong is coming afar from Chu, especially now that our country is in dire need of warhorses, Mister has really come at the right time."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng, Jing exchanged looks, knowing that Wu Zhuo has accomplished his mission and has made vital contact with Zhao Mu.

That night Zhai Bian set up a feast to welcome them and during the feast asked them about the situation in Chu. They answered him with the stories that they have earlier agreed upon and both the host and guests enjoyed themselves.

The next morning Zhai Bian sent a commander to lead them towards Handan. They traveled during the day and rested at night and 20 days later, Xiang Shaolong finally returned to this great city that once brought him great sadness.

Book 6 Chapter 9 – Return To Handan

Handan still looked as good.

Here to welcome them was their ‘old friend’ Bureaucrat Guo Kai, and also Wu Zhuo who has now changed his name to ‘Di Ying’.

After a round of civilities and polite talk, all of them, together with the thousand warhorses, rode grandly into this ancient city which is the center of the Zhao’s power.

Guo Kai rode next to Xiang Shaolong and said with a smile, “His Majesty is extremely impressed that Mister still thinks of your old country even though you’re in Chu. He has specially set up a feast to welcome Mister tonight.”

Xiang Shaolong was looking at the city scene with mixed feelings and on hearing that, he deepened his voice to make it sound hoarse, slowed his tempo and said, “I am really touched that his Majesty understands my intention. Hai! A person who has lost his country is like duckweed without roots. The pain is not something an outsider can understand.”

Guo Kai turned slightly towards him and said, “I heard from Mister Di from your residence that Mister Dong intends to come back display your capabilities but I don’t know if you’re aware of the situation?”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and he pretended to be obtuse yet sincere as he replied, “I only know how to rear horses and nothing

else so I hope that Bureaucrat Guo can give me some advices and I will never forget your kindness.”

Their strategy for this trip is to pretend to be stupid and ignorant to handle sly characters like Guo Kai.

Guo Kai chortled before he turned serious and said with a low voice, “I don’t know why but once I saw you, I feel very happy. I wouldn’t dare give advices but I will certainly try my best to help you fulfill your dreams.”

Xiang Shaolong put on a show of extreme gratitude and said, “With Bureaucrat looking after me like this, I am much relieved. I wonder if there’s anything I should take note of?”

Guo Kai replied very sincerely, “Over at his Majesty’s side, I will help you with the affairs. But there are 2 people in Handan that you must be on your guard against, otherwise not only will you find your dreams difficult to fulfill, you may even end up in trouble and meet the same fate as Master Wu.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be extremely startled as he stared and stammered his reply, “I have no enmity with anyone at all, why would anyone want to harm me?”

However he was secretly laughing in his heart.

Guo Kai obviously think of him as a ignorant, brash man with a simple mind, that’s why he used such a direct method to try and

pull him over to his side so that he will be faithful and allow himself to be used.

From this he can tell that the King of Zhao intends to use him to replace Master Wu, that's why Guo Kai thinks that he is of value and worthy to be bought over.

Guo Kai's bright and sleazy eyes first scanned the surroundings and saw that the Zhao soldiers who are leading the way in front and Wu Zhuo and the rest who were behind are a 'safe' distance away before he lowered his voice to say, "The first person you have to be wary of is Guo Zhong. This person will now allow the appearance of another Master Wu."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head to indicate his understanding.

Guo Kai's words are not unreasonable; this is called 'a mountain cannot have two tigers'. But if he, 'Dong Kuang' wants to have as much wealth and power as what Master Wu had, it would take at least a few generations to accomplish it. Therefore Guo Kai is trying to scare him.

Guo Kai continued mysteriously, "The other person you have to be careful of is the Marquis of Julu, Zhao Mu."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but exclaim hoarsely, "What?"

At that instant he understood that Guo Kai is unhappy to be under Zhao Mu and is looking for ways to topple him. But the way

Guo Kai is revealing his inner thoughts to an outsider like him is really too careless and he can't help but feel suspicious.

Right then they arrived at the guesthouse that will be used to house them and surprisingly it turns out to be the Hostage Residence which used to be Zhu Ji and the fake Ying Zheng's prison.

Guo Kai smiled and did not continue talking as he accompanied them into the residence.

Guo Kai went through another round of nice talks and after accepting this valuable gift of 1000 fine horses that the Zhaos find themselves unable to reject, he went back to the Palace to report his duty done.

All of them went to the inner hall to listen to Wu Zhuo's report.

Wu Zhuo exhaled as he said, "We were indeed lucky, the Chus really sent an envoy and luckily I manage to waylay him and got a lot of useful information."

Teng Yi replied with understanding, "Eldest Brother, it has been hard on you!"

Among these 5 sworn brothers, Wu Zhuo is the oldest so he became the Eldest Brother, followed by Teng Yi, Xiang Shaolong, Wang Jian and the youngest brother Jing Jun.

Wu Zhuo nodded his head and said, “It was indeed difficult. Although we set up traps when capturing the Chu envoy, we still lost 5 of our brothers and more than 10 others were injured, but this is something unavoidable.”

Xiang Shaolong can imagine the danger and intensity at that time and asked, “Have you found out why they are coming to Handan?”

Wu Zhuo replied, “4th Brother’s way of tiring them out through questioning is really effective. That Chu envoy called Bai Dingnian could not hold on beyond 3 days and totally surrendered. He revealed the truth, it turns out that this matter involves Lord Dongzhou.”

Everyone was excited.

Ever since King Wu created his empire 700 hundred years ago and used Duke Zhou’s feudal system model, maybe this can be described as a large family where generations after generations live together.

This big family is first led by a smart and hardworking founder and leading his few sons, worked hard together in adversity and creating a big patriarchal clan. The ruler and the various lords of differing surnames are usually connected through marriages.

The whole system of a feudal state is centralized around the family clan.

Just by deducing from this, one will know that it's only a matter of time that this empire will fall. The danger comes from 2 sides. Firstly the rule that the eldest son would succeed and once the successor is not the eldest, then there will be upheaval and [King You](#) of Zhou is the most obvious example.

Secondly, the original close relationships are slowly getting distant after a few generations and with the increase in population and the differences in the good and the bad, there will most certainly be some struggles or enmities formed and may even reach the state of a fight.

Once chaos ensued, no one will have the power to stop the natural turning of history's wheel. Once the royal family loses the power to control the lords, they will immediately fall into the situation where the country is divided into rival baronies.

And the invasion by others have forced King Ping of Zhou to move east and this provided such an opportunity.

The status between a ruler and his followers are initially forged by power and when this power disappears, the status becomes just an empty title and the Zhou family's power totally disintegrated.

But such a crack appeared slowly, and it's not a sudden break.

Before the 3 states were separated, there were still some old relations left between the lords and the Zhou family so they were not overly defiant.

That's why for 300 years after King Ping moved to the east, respect and deference are still generally accorded to the Zhou family.

After the 3 states were separated, there was still no situation where those not from the royal family oversteps his authority and tried to usurp the position. But the authority of the Zhou family was further weakened and their power reduced. However Lord Dongzhou is still the leader of the lords in name.

Now Lord Dongzhou is making use of everyone's fear towards Qin to launch a last fight and indeed this is something that cannot be brushed off easily.

Wu Zhuo continued, "The secret envoy Lord Dongzhou sent is called Ji Zhong. If he manages to get the alliance of the 6 states: Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei and Han, Qin will be faced with extremely dire situation and now it seems that chances of success is quite high."

Teng Yi looked at Xiang Shaolong and said, "We must try and sabotage this matter, otherwise it'll be difficult for Lu Buwei to keep his position as Premier."

Xiang Shaolong immediately felt his head getting heavier.

Teng Yi's words are very reasonable. After all Lu Buwei got his position as Premier because of King Zhuangxiang and it's not stable yet. And the Qins place the most emphasis on military contributions so if the 6 states join forces, they will certainly lose

this war and by then even King Zhuangxiang won't be able to protect Lu Buwei.

If Lu Buwei falls, the Wu family can forget about staying in Qin. The world may be huge but there will be no place where the Wu family can live in peace.

An originally simple matter has now become something complicated and troublesome.

Jing Jun finally found an opportunity to interrupt and said, "Isn't Yan and Zhao at war? Why would the Yans be involved this time as well?"

Teng Yi replied, "For these few centuries haven't the lords been fighting and making up again all the time?" He continued seriously, "Xiao Jun you'd better try to contain your impatience, don't go looking for your Zhao Zhi before the situation is cleared. Otherwise if you reveal your disguise, all of us can forget about leaving Handan alive."

Jing Jun looked crestfallen as he nodded his head in agreement but everyone can see how unwilling he felt.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "How's the situation like over at Zhao Mu's?"

There seems to be some remnants of fear as Wu Zhuo replied, "Luckily we caught the envoy sent by the Chus, otherwise we'll

definitely be greatly disadvantaged. It turns out that Zhao Mu is the 5th son of Chu's Lord Chunshen and this Chu envoy Bai Dingnian is sent by Lord Chunshen to make contact with Zhao Mu. He even brought with him Lord Chunshen's secret letter that he wrote personally and this saves me a lot of trouble trying to question him."

Teng Yi said with a laugh, "And of course Eldest Brother won't give it to that conniving thief without changing a single word on that letter!"

Wu Zhuo replied with a smile, "That's of course. The contents of the secret letter is simple, only telling Zhao Mu to trust Bai Dingnian and cooperate with him well. As for what to cooperate about, it was not written. Therefore I copied the seal on the letter and wrote another letter to give to Zhao Mu. Now it seems that he totally trusts us."

Xiang Shaolong had an idea as he asked, "Is that secret letter still around?"

Wu Zhuo replied, "How can I lose such a useful thing, I even kept that Chu envoy and he's being imprisoned in a secret place in Handan. Zhao Mu is in trouble this time."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and after the 4 brothers had some further discussion, he recollected his thoughts and went to the Zhao Palace for the feast.

Along the way Xiang Shaolong remembered the time he went to

the Zhao Palace for his duel with Lian Jin and feelings arose in him.

How everything in the world is so unpredictable, just like this.

Who would have thought at that time that on this day, 2 years later, he would come to see the King of Zhao in another identity and a totally different feeling?

Under the guidance of the Zhao soldiers, Xiang Shaolong and his 3 sworn brothers proudly rode past the Palace gates.

The imperial guards were posed to welcome them at the square in front of the main palace building and with the drums beating, it was a very lively atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest did not expect such a huge welcome and were all surprised. Now they know that the King of Zhao places much importance on their 'return'.

One of the military officers rode out on his horse and cried out loudly complimentary and welcoming phrases and surprisingly it's their old friend, that ungrateful Cheng Xu.

That fellow's army uniform has changed and it seems like he has been promoted a rank and has become the head of the imperial guards.

Xiang Shaolong followed civilities and after making some empty

polite talk, rode with him towards the Palace.

Cheng Xu said with a warm smile, “I don’t know why, although it’s the first time I’ve met you, I feel like we’re old friends. Oh! Mister feels like sometime I’m very familiar with but I can’t remember who that person is right now.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled and knows that although he has changed his looks, but his build remains the same and he might subconsciously reveal some loopholes through his mannerisms and actions, that’s why it stirred up Cheng Hu’s memories and feel of him.

He replied nonchalantly with his ‘low, hoarse and slow’ voice, “Officer Cheng need not think this is weird, I’ve often had this feeling as well, to see someone for the first time and yet feels we’ve already known each other for a long time.”

Cheng Xu seems enlightened and replied, “Seems like that’s the case!”

By now they have reached the square in front of the Jade Hall at the inner Palace and Cheng Xu dismounted first followed by Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi and the rest.

More than 10 imperial guards were lined up on each side of the Jade Hall, standing in attention with their halberds. That conniving thief Zhao Mu, with the accompaniment of Le Cheng and Guo Kai, walked down to welcome them.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest sighed in their hearts on seeing this. To think that even after they have given King Xiaocheng such a severe lesson, he still relies on Zhao Mu so much.

Zhao Mu started chuckling from afar as he said, “I am the Marquis of Julu, Zhao Mu! Mister Dong has arrived just in time, his majesty is getting anxious from the wait.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be terrified as he replied respectfully, “If I’ve made his Majesty anxious, how can I ever answer for it.”

Zhao Mu came forward, extended his hands to grasped his and said with a smile after making an eye signal at him, “His Majesty has personally seen the warhorses that you’ve sent and is very satisfied. With your help, us Great Zhao will certainly be able to show off our military prowess.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that Zhao Mu did not recognize him and was relieved as he answered happily, “As long as I can make his Majesty happy, then this trip is not a wasted one.” At the same time he exchanged a look with Guo Kai.

Zhao Mu personally introduced him to Le Cheng while Xiang Shaolong introduced them to Teng and Jing. After a round of polite greetings, all of them went towards the Zhao Palace in a relaxed mood.

They have just stepped pass the Palace doors when the imperial guards in the hall immediately snapped neatly into attention and

the band started a welcome melody.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest as well as Zhao Mu and his men knelt in front of the dais.

The King of Zhao chortled and left his dragon throne that was placed on the other end facing the main door and walked down the steps hurriedly to help Xiang Shaolong up and said warmly, "Mister Dong is my esteemed guest, there's no need to be subservient." He turned towards Teng Yi and the rest and said, "Everyone, please rise!"

Xiang Shaolong had just stood up when Jing Jun who was behind suddenly bawled and everyone, including Xiang Shaolong and his men were all stunned.

When everyone's eyes were centered on Jing Jun who has lowered his head and crying bitterly and lying on the ground, refusing to get up, that lad blubbered, "I lost myself, but to see that Young Master can now finally return to his homeland and fulfilled this wish that he has been thinking of for so many years, I'm so overcome that..." and he started crying again.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest were secretly impressed, they did not expect that Jing Jun would have the ability to cry on demand. If not for the fact that they all know in their hearts what is happening, they would really think that he is so touched that he can't help but cry.

Naturally the King of Zhao would not be suspicious at all as he

walked over to help Jing Jun up and after consoling him, he turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, “I am extremely touched that Mister Dong has such a loyal servant.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong has the time to take note of the surroundings inside the hall.

The Empress of Zhao Han Jing has also attended the feast and is seated on the right slightly behind King Xiaocheng and her eyes are boring into him. Luckily from her expression she seemed only curious and not because she has seen any loopholes.

On the bottom of both sides of the King of Zhao’s table there were another 4 tables. It’s meant to be a table for each person, which means there’s an empty table left. He wondered who is the person who is putting on such airs, to even have the audacity to be late at the King of Zhao’s feast?

He replied earnestly, “Although I have been overseas for a long period of time, but I have been constantly thinking of returning but because of Master Wu, I was afraid...”

The King of Zhao gave a cold snort and interrupted him, “Don’t mention this person again. Don’t worry! It’s great that Mister keeps old relations in mind. From today onwards, just help me rear horses well and I will not treat you badly.”

Xiang Shaolong and the rest hurriedly knelt and expressed their thanks and gratitude.

Just as they were about to be seated, the official at the door cried out, “Lady Ya arrives!”

Xiang Shaolong and the rest were all startled and they all turned to look towards the main door.

Other than a little more trace of weariness, Zhao Ya still looked radiant and outstanding, wearing a grand evening gown with blue flowers embroidered on a white base, like a colorful butterfly flying into the hall.

Xiang Shaolong thought of their old love and can't help but feel secretly sad.

When Zhao Ya's pretty eyes flitted over to where Xiang Shaolong was, her body obviously shivered a little and she held her step.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest were all secretly alarmed.

Zhao Ya is not like Zhao Mu or King Xiaocheng, she can feel what others cannot just based on her woman's sharp intuition towards love and intuition to a man whom she has been intimate with almost daily.

Luckily King Xiaocheng and Empress Jing both thought that this wanton woman has taken a liking to Xiang Shaolong, which accounted for her strange expression so they laughed and said, “Imperial Sister is late again, I must punish you by making you drink 3 cups of wine later. Aren't you coming over to meet Mister

Dong!”

Zhao Ya recollected her thoughts and after giving a suspicious look at Xiang Shaolong, her pretty eyes suddenly dimmed as she moved towards the King of Zhao and knelt in respect before standing up and turned towards Xiang Shaolong to pay her respects and said, “Zhao Ya pays her respects to Mister Dong.”

Xiang Shaolong and the rest heaved a sigh of relief and took the opportunity to be seated as well.

With Xiang Shaolong as the head, they took the 4 tables on the right. On the other side was Zhao Mu, Zhao Ya, Le Cheng and Guo Kai.

When the serving maids brought the dishes in, a group of 30 odd dancers ran in and started dancing with the accompaniment of drums.

Zhao Ya kept her pretty head lowered ever since she sat down, her expression sad. It looks as if her feelings have been roused and she was secretly wallowing in pity.

After the dance the host and guests offered toasts to one another.

However Zhao Mu would not let Zhao Ya off and reminded everyone of her punishment and forced her to down 3 cups of wine.

The slightly tipsy Zhao Ya began to loosen up and kept smiling coquettishly and flirting and although Xiang Shaolong was fuming on seeing this, but she did make the feast more lively and enjoyable. Once this beauty starts flirting, not a single man will be able to control his itch on seeing her. Especially now that she has reverted to her old wanton ways and was throwing looks at everyone there. Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo are better off but Jing Jun's head is already clouded as he kept on exchanging toasts with her.

After a while, the King of Zhao turned towards Xiang Shaolong and asked, "When does Mister intend to start your grand business here?"

Xiang Shaolong's hoarse voice said slowly, "I just made a trip here first, there's still a few war horses and stud horses who are being transported here now. There shall be no delay, I will go out the city tomorrow to explore and see if there are any suitable sites to set up a farm."

The King of Zhao said joyously, "That's the best!"

Zhao Ya threw a glance at Xiang Shaolong and said, "Is Mister's family arriving at the same time as well?"

Xiang Shaolong saw how immodest she was and was secretly displeased as he replied icily, "Once everything has been settled, I will send my men back to bring them here."

Le Cheng asked curiously, "The way that Mister Dong is moving your whole family over to our country, aren't you afraid that will

incur the Chu's wrath?"

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "My farm is situated at the borders of Chu and Wei and as long as I send 500 warhorses and 500 livestock to the Chus every year, they will never interfere in my affairs. I have long made arrangements for my trip here this time and they won't find out anything for the time being."

The King of Zhao chortled as he said, "Let's not talk business tonight and just talk about entertainment. Come! I'll let Mister see something good."

He clapped his hands and music started again.

While everyone opened their eyes wide, 4 dance courtesans flitted towards the tables and started another round of song and dance.

Not only did their beauty far surpass the dancers earlier, what is even more heart stopping is that their alluring bodies are each only clad in purple, red, bright yellow and light blue translucent gauze as they held long swords and danced. Their youthful and appealing bodies were exposed once in a while through the flimsy outfit as they danced, looking absolutely beautiful. Especially when their gentle bodies were paired with the steely swords, the 2 extremities increased their wildness.

Xiang Shaolong, who has not touched a woman since he started his journey, can't help but feel his lust ignite on seeing this.

After the courtesans retreated, Zhao Mu said with a smile, “These are the best among the 10 Yan beauties that the Yan gave to his Majesty, and they are also the welcome gifts that his Majesty is giving to Mister. Do you think they’re still acceptable?”

It is the norm for the powerful in this era to seal relationships by giving away beauties but it’s not appropriate for Xiang Shaolong to accept the gifts given his current situation so he said with a straight face, “I appreciate his Majesty’s kind intentions but there are a lot of things to look into right now regarding the opening of the farm and it’s really not good to have female distractions. I would ask that your Majesty retract your order.”

The King of Zhao was stunned for a moment before he replied, touched, “Mister is indeed an extraordinary man, no wonder you have the reputation of being a horse fanatic. Since that is the case, I will keep these 4 Yan ladies in the palace and will send them to your residence once everything has been settled.”

Zhao Ya eyed Xiang Shaolong with great interest as she asked, “I wonder if Mister has decided when to leave the city to explore?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she has gotten curious now that she saw how unmovable he can be over beauties and was secretly lamenting as he replied with furrowed brows, “I’ll leave before dawn tomorrow, and hope that General Le Cheng can arrange for the city gates to be opened.”

He guessed that now that Zhao Ya has returned to her old flirtatious and languid ways, there’s no way that she will try to wake up that early, which is why he deliberately mentioned that.

As expected, Zhao Ya revealed a look of disappointment and did not say anything.

The feast continued and although it was said that they shall not talk business, but because Xiang Shaolong is pretending to be an unrefined man who only knows husbandry, the topics always revolves around this area.

When the King of Zhao asked about the situation in Chu, Xiang Shaolong already has his answer prepared and answered them easily.

The host and guests drank to their heart's content.

After the feast Zhao Mu used the excuse of sending Xiang Shaolong home and shared the same carriage as him and took the opportunity to have a secret discussion.

This is the second danger after Zhao Ya.

The carriage went out of the Palace gates.

Zhao Mu's expression immediately turned stony as he asked icily, "Who thought of the idea to actually give 1000 fine warhorses to the Zhaos?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly fining this hilarious but replied

calmly, “Of course it’s Lord Chunshen’s idea.”

Zhao Mu’s expression turned dark as his gleaming eyes stared at Xiang Shaolong coldly as he asked, “Are you really that ‘horse fanatic’ Dong Kuang?”

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice, “Of course not. The real horse fanatic did have the intention of returning to Zhao and has long been killed by his Highness and had his possessions confiscated. These thousand warhorses are only part of his property.”

Zhao Mu commented with incomprehension, “I only asked you to send people here to get ‘Lu Gong’s Secret Manual’ from Guo Zhong, why have you come to Handan with so much fanfare instead. If something happens, even I may become implicated.”

Xiang Shaolong replied slowly, “This is Lord Chunshen’s ingenious plan. Since the incident with the Wu family, the state of Zhao is badly affected. They strong on the outside but is actually crumbling inside and this may become advantageous for Qin, Wei and Qi. His Highness has seen this coming so he changed his strategy and hopes that Master can take the place of the King of Zhao. In that way, Great Chu would be able to take control of Zhao without wasting even a single soldier.”

Zhao Mu’s body shook as a joyous look flashed though his eyes and he asked hoarsely, “Father really has such a plan?”

Ever since he arrived in Zhao, his power has been growing day by day but he has always felt himself in a dilemma.

Lord Chunshen's original plan was for him to control the Zhao King and use the Zhaos to keep a rein on the Qins and spoil the secret plan to unify the 3 states. But man is not without feeling and after staying in Zhao for more than 10 years, Zhao Mu can't help but feel a sense of belonging in Zhao. But this is just useless thinking on his side for he is still under the control of the Chus even from so far away. If he harbors any other thoughts, the Chus can expose his identity at any time and that would be a very bad feeling indeed.

But if he can grab the position of the King of Zhao, that would be an entirely different situation.

Man will always aim high, and this is exactly Zhao Mu's dream.

Xiang Shaolong saw his expression and knows that he has struck a chord in his heart so he added, "How would I dare to lie to Master. The warriors who came with me this time are all topnotch fighters, and there'll be a few thousand others will enter Zhao later on the pretext of sending the animals over. As long as we can get rid of influential generals like Lian Po and Li Mu, the Kingdom of Zhao will fall into your hands easily."

Zhao Mu replied happily, "So this is the case. Let me go back and think about how we should proceed with this plan."

He reached out and clasped his shoulder, coming to his ear and whispered, "If I can really become the ruler of Zhao, I'll certainly make it worthy for Mister." Both of them exchanged looks and

chortled at the same time.

Of course they are laughing for entirely different reasons.

After the returned to the grand ex-hostage residence, Teng Yi told Xiang Shaolong, “That slut is very interested in 3rd Brother, you’d better be careful.”

Jung Jun commented with envy, “3rd Brother can use another identity and tryst with her a few more times, wouldn’t that be thoroughly exciting?”

Before Xiang Shaolong has a chance to speak, Teng Yi reprimanded Jing Jun unhappily, “Your head is always filled with lustful thoughts, but doesn’t understand that lust can impede plans. That slut had a close relationship with your 3rd Brother in the past and if they have a physical relation again, she’ll definitely be able to burst Xiang Shaolong’s real identity just by gut feel. Just the scent alone won’t be able to escape her.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed and secretly on the alert. To tell the truth he is still quite interested in Zhao Ya’s body and won’t think of copulating with her as a undesirable task but he did not think of the possibility that Zhao Ya will be able to ‘sniff’ him out.

He said with a laugh, “Luckily I’m masquerading as a horse fanatic who only loves horses and not beauties, so it’s useless no matter how interested she is in me.”

After they discussed their plans for the next day, everyone went back to their rooms for the night.

After he went back to his room, Xiang Shaolong removed his mask and laid on the bed, his thoughts in a turmoil and unable to get to sleep.

The main reason is because of Zhao Ya.

This slut who has betrayed him twice obviously still has feelings for him, otherwise her memories of Xiang Shaolong would not have been ignited by a horse fanatic like him and made her interested.

An inexplicable sense of hatred welled up. Maybe it arose from her wanton behavior, or maybe it's purely the thought of revenge. Even he cannot tell the difference.

His looks after he put on the mask is certainly not handsome, the skin tone tanned from exposure to the sun but matched with the shape of his body it does exude a certain charisma right from the inside, especially his eyes whose shape has been changed still looked very energetic and captivating.

He then thought about the pretty and courageous Ji Yanran and with all these thoughts in his mind, all the more he could not get any sleep so he might as well get up and meditate according to the Mohist principles.

In a short while his body and spirit merged and when he opened his eyes the sky is slowly brightening.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly changed and after wearing his mask, went to the hall to meet up with Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo to leave together.

Jing Jun did not go with them because he had another task at hand.

Le Cheng sent a general called Xie Fa who led a troop of Zhao soldiers to be their guide and he was waiting for them in the main hall. After a round of civilities, everyone rode into the main street of Handan, where a new day is just beginning.

Hoof beats were heard behind them.

Everyone turned their heads around in surprise to see a team of horsemen coming after them and shockingly, it was Zhao Ya and 10 odd of her personal guards.

Xiang Shaolong exchanged looks with Teng and Wu but had no choice but to rein in their horses to wait.

No one expected Zhao Ya's 'interest' in Xiang Shaolong to be so huge.

The smiling Zhao Ya first sent off her personal guards, which includes Zhao Da and his men, before riding forward to Xiang

Shaolong and said with a beam, “Mister Dong is a guest from afar, how can you not have a companion?”

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was dressed in a tight fitting light blue horse riding wear with a short skirt and long pants and long boots, openly showing off her alluring curves. He felt a rush of feelings and was at a loss for words.

Zhao Ya rolled her eyes at him and asked, “Mister Dong does not welcome me?”

Xiang Shaolong replied slowly in his hoarse voice, “Lady, you think too much. I’ll only be too delighted to have Lady accompany me!”

Zhao Ya sent out a tinkling peal of laughter as she urged her horse forward and said, “Then follow me!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly and followed her on his horse.

They left the city via the east gate and galloped.

Looking at the wild forests changing from Spring to Summer, Xiang Shaolong was in a euphoric mood as he threw away all his troubles. At the same time he has made up his mind to do one huge job here and create chaos among the Zhaos and this time he will not hold himself back because of a soft heart.

Book 6 Chapter 10 – Meeting On A Narrow Road

Zhao Ya rode her horse exuberantly and the rest of them had to chase after her. After passing through the large plain outside the city, Zhao Ya left the official path and rode towards the rolling hills at the northeast.

The landscape began to change as the grass changed into strange rocks and stones as they traveled along waterfalls and dangerous cliffs, with clouds and fog surrounding them, creating an extremely beautiful scene.

After passing through a mountain, they came to a valley with cliff walls reaching into the clouds on both sides and the clear sky is just a line in the horizon.

Zhao Ya slowed down in front and just as Xiang Shaolong was about to chase up with her, Teng Yi came alongside him and said quietly, “Shaolong! If you talk to Zhao Ya with that earlier expression and tone, she’ll find out sooner or later.”

Xiang Shaolong was extremely startled and knows that Teng Yi can see things more clearly as a bystander. He turned back to look and saw that Wu Zhuo has engaged Xie Fa into talking about the surroundings and won’t be able to hear their conversation so he quickly asked for advice.

Teng Yi replied, “Dong Kuang is famed for being someone who only knows how to rear horses and is totally unrefined in other

areas, so you can do as you deem fit!”

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened and became quiet.

They reached the end of the valley and the scene in front was refreshing with the trees pointing towards the sky and the rays of sunlight filtering through the layers of thick green leaves with rainbow hues, so indescribably beautiful.

Streams were crisscrossing amongst the trees and rocks, the sounds of the water crisp and clear and it feels as if they’ve come to a place that is not of this earth, intoxicating their senses.

Zhao Ya seems very familiar with this place and led them to a small hilltop and they could immediately see their surroundings.

Xiang Shaolong reined his horse as he came alongside Zhao Ya and looked around. He realized that where they are standing is the center of a huge plain and with unique looking cliffs in the distance. The grounds were deep green with abundant water and grass with a fragrance in the air and he can’t help but chortle, “D.amn his grandmother, how does Lady know of such a splendid place?”

Zhao Ya heard such coarse language from him and her delicate brows frowned but she did not answer him.

Teng Yi and the rest came to their side as well and they all expressed their agreement. Xie Fa said, “This place is called Hidden

Army Valley and the only entrance is the line in here earlier. When our Great Zhao's King Wuling was at war with Rong Di in the past, he had once hidden his army in here and won the battle. Since then this place was named Hidden Army Valley. Does Mister Dong think this place suitable?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking to himself how would he know if it's suitable so he hurriedly made an eye at Wu Zhuo, the husbandry expert.

Wu Zhuo nodded his head slightly to indicate his agreement.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to look over the surroundings before he complimented with a sigh, "Ah! It's really damn f*cking good!"

Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo were secretly feeling hilarious but to Xie Fa and Lady Ya the words were jarring on their ears.

Xiang Shaolong controlled his urge to laugh and said, "Once I see something good, I can't control myself but exclaim the words f*cking a few times. This is such a wonderful place, isn't it even more f*cking good?"

Xie Fa was overjoyed, "So does this mean that Mister is going to choose this valley as your farm?"

At this time Zhao Ya looked towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong deliberately stared hard at her perky bosoms

before nodding, “Yup! I really like the looks of this place. From this day onwards, this Hidden Army Valley will be the place where I set up my first farm. Damn his grandmother! I didn’t expect to find a location so smoothly.”

Zhao Ya saw the way he behaved and talked was extremely uncouth and thought that this is the real him and was secretly unhappy. She said coldly, “Since Mister Dong has found the ideal farm, can we go back now?”

Xiang Shaolong deliberately looked at her sleazily and said, “I still have to inspect the water source, soil and grass here carefully. Damn, why is Lady in such a hurry to go back?”

Zhao Ya was even more annoyed to hear how rude and foul-mouthed he was and replied with irritation, “I have other appointments, how would I have time to accompany Mister longer?”

She was secretly thinking that she must have been blinded because ever since she returned to her residence last night, she kept thinking of this person and could not sleep, which is why she came looking for him as soon as day broke. But this is good too, this person may have Xiang Shaolong’s build, but his looks are a thousand miles apart so in this case, she can give up.

Ever since Xiang Shaolong, she no longer wishes to be entangled by feelings.

Xiang Shaolong thought he might as well go all the way and let

Zhao Ya give up all hope on him so he asked with a strange smile, “I wonder who is the person who can make Lady in such a hurry to return?”

Zhao Ya could not tolerate it any longer and said angrily, “That is my business and has nothing to do with you at all.” She pulled her horse’s reins and turned and galloped towards the plains.

Xie Fa was so shocked that he hurriedly sent half of his men to escort her back to the city.

Xiang Shaolong felt gleeful.

As long as he can hurt her, he’ll feel a sense of happiness.

Although she still has some feelings left for him, but if she had succeeded in harming him the last time, he would be a pile of bones by now so between them there is no more relation to speak of.

After he made a pretense of surveying the place, they went back to their residences at dusk.

Zhao Mu’s men are already waiting for him to invite him to the Marquis Residence for a feast.

After Xiang Shaolong bathed and changed, he went alone with them to the Marquis Residence for the feast.

Zhao Mu was overjoyed to see him come and as it's still early, he took him to the inner hall for a secret discussion. Before he started on the main point, he laughed and said, "I heard that you thoroughly infuriated Zhao Ya. Why? You're not interested in that slut at all? Now she is at a point where it's the easiest to hook up with."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing Zhao Mu and at the same time hating Zhao Ya for cheapening herself as he replied, "I was afraid she is King Xiaocheng's spy, how would I dare to dally with her?"

Zhao Mu was obviously very impressed with his sense of caution as he clapped his shoulder and said closely, "Who else would know better than me whether she's a spy? If you're interested in her, I can make arrangements for you."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting so he quickly changed the topic, "Has Marquis thought over that matter yet?"

Zhao Mu was immediately energetic and totally forgot about Zhao Ya as he said with a serious look, "Almost everyone in Handan now is my trusted aide, we just have to get rid of a few people and I will be able to sit on the King of Zhao's throne comfortably."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, "The first 2 to be killed should be Lian Po and Li Mu!"

Zhao Mu complimented him, “With a talent like you helping me, need I fear my great career will fail? But there are a lot of formidable fighters around these 2, I’m afraid it’ll be very difficult to strike.”

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, “If it’s easy, you would have struck long ago. Leave this matter to me, as long as I can obtain accurate information on them, I’ll certainly succeed with one strike. I heard that they are now not in Handan so it’s best if there’s a way to call them back, then I will ask my men to set up a trap and get rid of them cleanly.”

Zhao Mu looked at him with suspicion, “You’re really that confident? The 2 of them have a few thousand personal guards, they’re not easy to deal with.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “No one is better than me at the art of assassination, please be assured.”

How could Zhao Mu possibly believe his one sided talk so he said somberly, “We need to plan this in detail. You better set up the farm first and lay your foundation. With me speaking on your behalf to King Xiaocheng, things will certainly run smoothly.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly finding this funny. He said those words to let Zhao Mu understand for himself that this thing cannot be rushed and now that his goal is reached, of course he’s not so stupid as to keep pushing it so he nodded his head and said respectfully, “I will listen wholly to your orders, this is also his Highness’s instructions.”

Zhao Mu saw that he was so obedient and was secretly glad and said with a smile, “King Xiaocheng now has a very good impression of you but remember that you must hurry up on the farm. Ha! This move of yours really struck the Zhao’s fatal point because they are most anxious to have a savior like you now.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I have already chosen a place for the farm and will start on it immediately tomorrow.” Zhao Mu stood up and said, “Come! The others should have arrived, besides a few of the most influential people in Handan, I have also invited the envoys from the various states who came because of Lord Dongzhou’s matter. Make use of this opportunity to meet them!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has now become Zhao Mu’s trusted confidante, that’s why he is treating him so nicely so he stood up and followed him into the main building of the Marquis residence.

The two of them strolled past the corridors side by side and all the servants and maids knelt down to pay their respects on seeing them.

When they walked past the big garden which was right in the middle of the Marquis residence, a group of about 100 dance courtesans were practicing dancing. For a moment the mixture of fragrance, clothes, hair, and dainty voices can make one overwhelmed.

Xiang Shaolong has sharp eyes and was surprised to find that the

teacher who was directing their dance is actually Zhao Zhi and he can't help but looked at her in shock.

The training did not stop because Zhao Mu is passing by. Zhao Zhi obviously saw Zhao Mu but pretended not to notice him and kept on giving out orders to make the pretty dancers dance. The colorful costumes dazzle under the illumination of the lanterns.

Zhao Mu whispered in Xiang Shaolong's ears, "Taken a liking to her? That girl is called Zhao Zhi, her father is a learned scholar in Zhao and her Teacher is an expert in swordplay, there's nothing I can do to her too."

Xiang Shaolong just shrugged his shoulders and continued walking.

After passing the garden, they reached the long corridor that will lead them directly to the main building and it seems to be suddenly quite in comparison. A maid came towards them and on seeing Zhao Mu hurriedly moved aside and knelt down.

Right at this time, Xiang Shaolong instinctively felt alert and reflexively placed his right hand on the pommel of Blood Wave.

He was feeling perplexed and can't help but take a look at that maid only to see her hand reaching into her wide sleeve, her head lowered and her kneeling posture was very unique, giving one a strange feeling, as if she can spring up at any moment and execute several kinds of movement.

All these are just instinctive feelings. If not for the fact that Xiang Shaolong has been meditating according to the Mohist principle every night since his journey to Handan, his feelings would not have become so sharp.

Zhao Mu felt nothing amiss at all and continued walking.

Xiang Shaolong was in a dilemma. If this girl is here to assassinate Zhao Mu, then she is on the same side as him but now he has to protect Zhao Mu because not only does he have to capture him alive to bring to Qin, he has to make use of him in his plan to kill Le Cheng and to find out the plot involving the envoy sent by Lord Dongzhou. But if he causes this girl to be captured by Zhao Mu, how can he put his heart at ease.

But now is not the time to think further, for they are now only 10 steps away from the maid.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly moved from the outside to stand between Zhao Mu and the maid, hoping that this will make her retreat.

Zhao Mu became alert and looked at Xiang Shaolong.

The maid suddenly lifted her head to reveal a pretty yet strong face, her pretty eyes burning with hatred and at the same time her hands extended from inside the sleeves and as she flicked them, 2 beams of white flashed towards Zhao Mu like lightning.

Zhao Mu was caught unawares and thoroughly startled and before he had a chance to exclaim or dodge, Xiang Shaolong has already drawn out Blood Wave and waved it twice with lightning speed, accurately blocking the 2 flying daggers.

The female assassin apparently did not have a third dagger and with a sharp scream, dashed past them out of the corridor.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to give chase and suddenly a dark shadow appeared in front of his eyes and it turns out to be the whip from the female assassin's hand.

He took the opportunity to retreat towards Zhao Mu, as if protecting him but in fact he's trying to block the path of Zhao Mu who has already drawn his sword.

The female assassin knows that she has missed her chance and rolled into the bushes without stopping and disappeared into the night.

Zhao Mu nearly collided into Xiang Shaolong and hurriedly raised his hand to grab his shoulder to brake himself.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the 2 daggers which has fallen to the ground and the blades shone a faint blue reflection under the light and it's obvious that it has been dipped in poison.

Zhao Mu was still a little fearful as he said, "Luckily you are here this time, otherwise my life would be gone. Humph! All those

people are idiots, not even knowing that an assassin has snuck in.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling glad for now he can gain even more trust from Zhao Mu and on the other hand allow the female assassin to escape safely.

This is not the first time he saw this highly skilled female assassin.

At that time when he took Zhao Mu's carriage and left the Marquis residence, this female assassin mistook him for Zhao Mu and threw the poisonous snake into the carriage to assassinate him.

He wonders what is the great enmity between her and that thief Zhao Mu that she has to keep trying for his life and on both occasions she failed because of him.

But then again Zhao Mu has committed so much evil that it's inevitable that he has enemies all over the place.

The feast was held in the wide main hall of the Marquis residence and there were about 40 odd 'double seated' tables to seat 2 people each that filled the entire hall.

By now Xiang Shaolong already has some experience with the feasts given during this era. When he saw this he was shocked for never in his dreams did he imagine that tonight's feast would be so grand and with so many attendees.

When a ruler holds a feast for his officials and guests, it will definitely be 'single seated' where there's one person per table if there are less people and if there are grand feasts with over a hundred people, it will tables will be placed on the front and back rows with 'multiple seats' for 4 or more people.

As for the feasts held by most senior officials or influential people, they are mostly 'double seated'.

When the both of them arrived at the hall, there was still some time before the feast starts so only Zhao Mu's trusted aide Le Cheng and the cunning Guo Kai was around. These 2 are very close to Zhao Mu so they came earlier to help entertain the guests.

Zhao Mu made some small talk and disappeared, naturally he has gone to reprimand his men for their failure to protect the residence and it seems that someone will surely be in trouble.

Le Cheng and Guo Kai came up to Xiang Shaolong and started chatting with him warmly. They first asked about the chosen location for the farm before Le Cheng sighed and said, "I'm really in a difficult position this time. Everyone who thinks that they are someone in Handan are all fighting to attend tonight's feast but there's a limit to the seating. Hai..."

Guo Kai added with a wry smile, "I've met with the same problem as well and I can only push the responsibility to the Marquis and tell them to ask the Marquis directly why they are not on the list of invites."

Xiang Shaolong was extremely surprised for he thinks that he does not have the charisma to attract others that much so he asked with a furrowed brow, “Why are there so many people here for the feast tonight?”

Le Cheng asked quizzically, “Didn’t Marquis tell Mister? The Learned Lady whose reputation is on par with Qin’s Widow Qin, Ji Yanran is in Handan as a guest. His Marquis was not sure initially that he can invite her here but it turned out that she agreed without hesitation, that’s why everyone wants to come here to take a look at her glory.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and hot blood rushed in his veins and for a moment, he couldn’t speak.

Thank heavens! This rare beauty is finally here.

Guo Kai looked at him in surprise as he said, “Ha! I did not expect that Mister Dong is also another ‘fan of the Learned Lady’.”

Xiang Shaolong’s attention is now all on Ji Yanran so how can he possibly be interested in talking nonsense with them. He made up an excuse and went out to the gardens from the side door in order to calm his excited nerves.

When he thought of how he can be reunited with his ideal beauty, he felt as if he’s like a fairy floating amongst the clouds.

No matter what he must sleep with her tonight.

At the same time he was secretly puzzled. Why did she agree to attend the feast knowing very well that Zhao Mu is his greatest enemy?

Hurried footsteps sounded behind him.

Xiang Shaolong turned around suddenly in surprise and came face to face with a gorgeous beauty.

The beauty was startled and hurriedly took 2 steps back, her pretty face paled and her joy turned into disappointment as she lowered her head and said sadly, "Sorry! I mistook you for the wrong person."

From the faint light from the lantern a distance away, this person turned out to be the elder sister of the twin sisters who once slept with him, the Yue beauty Tian Zhen.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood. She must have walked past this place, saw his back view and recognized him as Xiang Shaolong but when she saw his disguise as Dong Kuang she was greatly disappointed.

From this he can see how deep and unforgettable is his impression on her. He felt sorry for her and said gently, "Never mind! What is your name?"

Tian Zhen's delicate body trembled as she covered her mouth and exclaimed, "You're really Master Xiang, I will remember your unforgettable voice even in my dreams."

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly covered in sweat, he did not expect that his identity would be revealed because he forgot to change his voice and he hurriedly replied in his coarse voice, "Miss, you are mistaken!"

Tian Zhen exclaimed with joy and fell into his arms, hugging him in a death grip as she said, "I will not forget you even if I died, we were so worried about you. We really have to thank the Gods that you are all right!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he cannot hide it from her so he carried her into the deep woods and kissed her thoroughly before whispering in her ears, "Now my real identity is still a big secret!"

Tian Zhen added obediently, "I understand, I will not reveal your identity even if I have to die."

Xiang Shaolong said even more seriously, "You cannot even tell your sister about this."

Tian Zhen hesitated for a moment before nodding her head dejectedly, "All right! But like me, she misses you terribly as well!"

Xiang Shaolong was a little at ease as he said quietly, "As long as you listen to me obediently, I'll definitely take both of you with me

and will not go back on my words.”

Tian Zhen was so touched that tears gathered in her eyes and she kissed him thoroughly, her alluring body pressing against his.

Xiang Shaolong's long suppressed lust was immediately flamed and he can only regret that this is not the appropriate time nor place. After being entangled for a while, the blushing Tian Zhen unwillingly walked back to the inner buildings after much persuasion from him.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and smiled wryly before going back to the main hall.

He had just taken 2 steps when a pair of man and woman walked into the garden from the side door he used earlier. They were in a secret discussion and surprisingly it was Zhao Mu and Zhao Ya.

He had an idea and hid himself amongst some bushes and listened quietly.

Zhao Ya's face was drawn tight as she said icily, “Don't speak further, no way am I going to accompany that kind of coarse and unrefined brute. You have so many beauties on your hand, why don't you give him some. For example your most beloved Tian sisters, won't they satisfy him even more?”

Zhao Mu reached out and wrapped his arms around her tiny waist as he said with a sinister smile, “Or have you not forgotten

Xiang Shaolong?”

Zhao Ya was stunned and replied angrily, “Don’t talk nonsense, who says I cannot forget him!”

Xiang Shaolong saw how intimate they were and heard Zhao Ya’s heartless words. Although he knows that she has no choice but to make such a stand, he still felt furious and thoughts of hatred and revenge surged in his head.

Zhao Mu extended his other hand and hugged her tightly, saying with a grin, “Naturally it’s best that you do not think of him. This time if the 6 states can successfully form an alliance, even Qin will not be able to escape her fate of being split up. By that time I want Xiang Shaolong to die without a burial place. I will whip his corpse even if he’s dead in order to appease the hatred in my heart.”

Zhao Ya replied icily, “Speak only if you really have that ability! Ai!”

Sounds of clothes rustling, obviously Zhao Mu was taking advantage of the close contact between their bodies to caress Zhao Ya’s sensitive spots.

Xiang Shaolong was livid on hearing this and secretly hated Zhao Ya for not knowing how to love herself and cheapening herself.

Her breathing quickened uncontrollably as she breathed, “Aren’t you going back to entertain the guests?”

Zhao Mu grinned lasciviously, “Don’t you want me to entertain you first?”

Zhao Ya’s dainty fists pounded weakly on his back as she cried out, “Let me go!”

Zhao Mu replied, “Promise me that you will accompany Dong Kuang, then I will release you!”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood, so it turns out that Zhao Mu is trying to use Zhao Ya to get into his good books and the reason is of course he has not only saved his life, but also executed his extraordinary alertness and swordsmanship. He now looks at him differently and treasures him even more.

Zhao Mu is judging others by his own yardstick so naturally he thinks that power, women and wealth will be able to pull him onto his side and Zhao Ya is the best present he can think of for now.

Zhao Ya asked in bewilderment, “Why are you placing so much importance on that Dong Kuang?”

Zhao Mu gave a dry cough as he replied, “It’s not I who places much importance on him, but it’s your Imperial Brother’s order that it’s important that we treat this person well, don’t you understand?”

On hearing that it’s the King of Zhao’s idea, Zhao Ya softened a

little as she said with a quiet voice, “Maybe he’s not interested in women? Otherwise why would he reject the courtesans that Imperial Brother bestowed on him last night.”

Zhao Mu sighed, “All real men are lecherous. I think his standards are just too high and therefore not interested in those courtesans at all! But how can we compare our Lady Ya to them!”

Zhao Ya said icily, “Go after Ji Yanran if his standards are high then, who am I to compare?”

Xiang Shaolong could sense the bitterness in her tone and knows that she is jealous of Ji Yanran and can’t help but form a plan for revenge.

Zhao Mu sighed, “Ji Yanran is famous for being a stony maiden without feelings, how can she be compared to the gentle and feeling Zhao Ya. Don’t say anymore, I heard that Dong Kuang came out for a breather, help me get him to return! Why are you so nervous? It’s not as if I want you to bed him tonight.”

Zhao Ya remained silent.

Xiang Shaolong knows that there’s no point eavesdropping any further so he slowly slipped away.

Xiang Shaolong sat in the pavilion, looking at the starry sky as he heard Zhao Ya’s approaching footsteps.

He has changed his mind about Zhao Ya now and has decided to toy with her as punishment for her.

Zhao Ya came up behind him and forced herself to suppress her hatred towards him and said congenially, “Why is Mister Dong all alone here, almost half the guests are already here!”

Xiang Shaolong replied in his hoarse voice, still looking at the sky as he said, “I’ve never liked crowds. Look! The sky is so enchanting, her relation to us is so close and it’s all due to the stars in her arms that we can plot our paths and know the time and seasons. After a person dies, he will return to the deepest part of her. It seems that she is protecting our lofty dreams, controlling the fate of everyone on this earth.”

Zhao Ya did not expect such an unrefined person to say such profound words and was momentarily stunned. She sat down on a rock behind him and for a moment was at a loss for words.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling melancholic as he sighed and added with a wry smile, shaking his head, “When I think that regardless of Mo Di or Kong Qiu, King Wu or Duke of Zhou, when they lifted their heads, they are seeing the same sky as well. How can we not feel the eternity of the sky when compared to man’s miniscule and short lives. A pity that most people still cannot forget about the fight for power, fighting tooth and nail for such shallow gains day and night. That’s why I’ve never liked fighting for power, only hoping to rear my precious horses in a carefree manner and just speak my mind! F*k that sky, I really love her a lot, that’s why I want to f*k her, the way I f*k my beloved woman.”

Although he cursed 3 times continuously, but this time Zhao Ya felt totally different on hearing it because he has given this 3 curse words a very profound feeling and meaning and it has become a totally different matter now.

Zhao Ya said in a quiet voice, “I have offended Mister today, my apologies.”

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders graciously as he stood up and turned around, his burning eyes staring into her pretty face as he said with a smile, “It doesn’t matter how Lady regards me, so how can there be a misunderstanding? Like this night sky, if you take only one look, maybe you’ll not notice anything but if you look closely, we will see more and more stars the darker the night and every star will have her own story. Without a beginning, there will not be an end.”

Zhao Ya has no defense against his stare so she lowered her head and said, “Mister’s words are indeed touching!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing for no one other than him knows how to touch this slut’s heart.

He stretched lazily and said, “All right! I should be returning to that mundane world. I only hope that time passes fast enough so that I can go home and sleep. Isn’t the world in our dreams even more beautiful?”

Zhao Ya had a longing expression, hoping that he will continue talking.

Suddenly, she felt that even if she has to sleep with him, it doesn't seem like a terrible task after all.

Besides, his masculine body made her think uncontrollably about Xiang Shaolong.

Would it be as intoxicating to bed him as it was with Xiang Shaolong?

She really wants to know the answer!

Book 6 Chapter 11 – Unstoppable Old Flame

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the hall together with Zhao Ya, the place is already a flurry of activity. Just scanning across the room, there were at least 50 odd people and most of them he knew from before, including Guo Zhong and his men, who were all split into 10 over groups either chatting or greeting one another.

Guo Kai saw them and first gave Xiang Shaolong a look full of hidden meaning before bringing him to where Zhao Mu was chatting with Guo Zhong and introduced him to this great merchant.

Zhao Ya is like honey surrounded by bees, with a group of men around her trying to pander to her, obviously she still has her charms.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Zhao Ya is really adaptable to be able to rebound so quickly from the blow he gave her. Hai! He'd better let her off, after all they did have a sincere relationship in the past.

Guo Zhong said warmly, "Mister Dong has come from afar, I must play host a little no matter what. I wonder if you're available tomorrow, and of course the Marquis and Scholar Guo will accompany as well."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, "Master Guo is so polite, I'll have to make time even if I don't have any!"

Guo Zhong was ecstatic and made an appointment with him.

Zhao Ya managed to extricate herself and came to Xiang Shaolong's side but before she has a chance to speak, someone laughed loudly as he walked over, "I've finally seen Lady today!"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head to see a handsome and majestic looking man about 30 years of age striding over.

This person has a strong walk with a long sword hanging from his waist and an extremely imposing air.

Once Zhao Ya saw him, her pretty eyes brightened and she ignored Xiang Shaolong as she said with a flirtatious smile, "It really makes me feel bad to hear Marquis Pingshan say this, it seems as if I am very difficult to meet."

So it turns out that this person is the envoy that the State of Han sent this time, the Marquis of Pingshan, Han Chuang, and it seems that he is quite a character.

Zhao Mu chortled, "Please stop your flirtations for a moment. Come Marquis Chuang, let me introduce to you the world famous horse fanatic Mister Dong Kuang."

Han Chuang's gaze settled on Xiang Shaolong's face, his expression aloof and after making do with some small talk, he

pulled Zhao Ya aside and started whispering affectionately with her.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling livid and hating himself for unable to forget this slut after all. Luckily the mask helped to conceal his real expression but he suddenly has less to talk about now.

Zhao Mu saw this and found an opportunity to pull him aside and said, “Just leave Zhao Ya to me, I’ll make sure you’ll have a chance to enjoy her. But I have a sincere warning for you, that woman is promiscuous so just have fun with her, don’t ever get serious.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that the misunderstanding is getting deeper so he hurriedly said, “Business is more important, I can live with or without such matters.”

How can Zhao Mu possibly believe him but before he has a chance to speak further, the official at the door reported, “Lord Longyang from the State of Wei arrives!”

The hall was immediately quiet, obviously everyone was waiting to see this person and most have not seen this pretty man who is famous for his good looks.

There was a strange gleam in Zhao Mu’s eyes as he stared at the entrance.

The sounds of trinkets were heard as Lord Longyang strolled into

the hall floatingly, dressed in colorful robes and accompanied by 4 to 5 swordsmen.

The hall immediately came abuzz with whisperings; the topic of conversation is naturally around this transgender male.

Zhao Mu tapped Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and went forward.

Guo Kai came to Xiang Shaolong's side and said with a low laugh, "Isn't it extremely amazing that there is such a character in the world?"

Le Cheng also came to his other side and shook his head as he sighed, "His Marquis will be kept quite busy."

Xiang Shaolong saw Zhao Mu and Lord Longyang chatting and laughing quietly and was secretly thinking it was eye opening and at the same time was on the alert. This Lord Longyang is especially interested and scrutinizing towards men and if he's not careful, 'he' may find some loopholes and that would be terrible.

Zhao Ya's voice rang up from behind him, "What's the matter? Look at the way all of you are staring, were you unable to resist the lure of the men?"

Xiang Shaolong could not repress the repulsion he felt towards the way she was behaving intimately with the Marquis of Pingshan earlier so he just gave a cold snort and left.

Zhao Ya ran after him and said with a coquettish smile, “Why does Mister Dong look unhappy? Have I offended you?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled. Only now was he able to confirm that he still had some feelings left for this wanton woman, that’s why he can’t help but feel jealous and lost control of himself. He hurriedly recollected himself as he stopped walking to look at her, saying with a smile, “Lady you think too much, you have not done anything to make me unhappy so why would you say that?” At the same time he thought that Zhao Ya could have deliberately made use of Han Chuang to test his intentions towards her.

Zhao Ya glared at him and asked, “Then why is it that Mister Dong is avoiding me when I’ve only said one sentence?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that there’s no way he can explain himself so he might as well not explain so he just replied nonchalantly, “I like to do whatever I like, and have never wasted my effort to think of the reason.”

Under his stare, a sense of familiarity and confusion rose in Zhao Ya’s heart and his natural manliness and intensity softened her heart as she sighed sadly and said, “You’re really unfathomable. One moment you’re gentler than anyone else and the next you’re cold and heartless, like now. It makes one wonder how to deal with you.”

Right then Xiang Shaolong saw Zhao Zhi accompanying Zhao Ba into the hall, joining Zhao Mu’s group. Zhao Mu waved him over to meet Lord Longyang. He smiled at Zhao Ya as he said, “There’s enough people here to take Lady’s attention, there’s no need to

waste your precious time on an unrefined person like me. Look! Marquis Pingshan is looking for you again.”

Zhao Ya glanced towards where he was looking. Han Chuang had just ended his polite talk with Lord Longyang and is walking towards her and she was secretly irritated with Han Chuang for coming at the wrong time.

After she lost Xiang Shaolong, she has felt extreme sadness and emptiness, that's why she returned to her old lascivious lifestyle, hoping to use other men to numb and cheapen herself so that it will reduce her guilt and the pain of missing Xiang Shaolong.

But no one could replace Xiang Shaolong.

When this Han Chuang first arrived in Zhao, she was embroiled in a heated relationship with him and spent a short and happy time together. But she can't help but feel that this person cannot replace Xiang Shaolong so she slowly cooled off, needing another new and fresh excitement.

That's why when she met Dong Kuang whose physique 'closely resembles' Xiang Shaolong, it seems that she has found a new life. Although she was irritated by his unrefined behavior and words this morning, she cannot deny that it gives her another feeling of excitement too. When Xiang Shaolong spoke such intoxicating words to her at the garden earlier, making her remember the heady time she once spent with Xiang Shaolong, her attention has already moved to this person.

The more Xiang Shaolong shows his manliness and imposing aura, the more she feels that this man is the personification of Xiang Shaolong and the more she is falling for him. Under such circumstances, Han Chuang has instead turned into an irritating obstacle.

As she was thinking, Han Chuang has already reached her.

Xiang Shaolong smiled suavely and bid his leave, walking towards Zhao Mu and Lord Longyang's group.

Zhao Zhi and Lord Longyang looked towards Xiang Shaolong at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong deliberately changed his style of walking, making it a swagger as he raised his hands in greeting and said in a coarse voice, "Dong Kuang pays his greetings to Lord Longyang!"

A look of surprise flashed past Lord Longyang's 'pretty eyes' as he replied, "I've long heard of Mister's great name, it's really fortunate that we get to meet today!"

Zhao Zhi's pretty eyes were wide open, staring intently at him.

Zhao Mu chortled as he introduced Zhao Ba and a few senior officials of Zhao to Xiang Shaolong.

Lord Longyang 'smiled coquettishly', "Mister is indeed a great man of our times, no wonder you're making us girls all stare at

you!”

Zhao Zhi’s pretty face blushed before she realized that she has behaved irregularly because this person closely resembles Xiang Shaolong. She lowered her pretty face and stared angrily at Lord Longyang.

Xiang Shaolong felt his goose pimples rising under the eyes of Lord Longyang and prayed that he has not taken a liking to him.

Zhao Ba chortled as he said, “Lord Longyanf and Mister Dong are both expert swordsmen, why don’t we find a day to exchange pointers at my school. Wouldn’t that be a grand event in the martial arts realm?”

Lord Longyang’s glittery eyes surveyed the hall before he said with a smile, “If we can manage to invite our Learned Lady Ji to the school as well, maybe everyone here will go there to partake in the atmosphere. Now that would really be a grand event!”

Everyone laughed together with him.

Zhao Zhi can’t help but to steal another look at Xiang Shaolong, her expression strange.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, he guessed that Jing Jun could have leaked some news, otherwise Zhao Zhi’s expression wouldn’t have looked so strange.

Right at this time, the door official deliberately raised his voice as he sang out, “Miss Ji Yanran arrives!”

The noisy atmosphere in the hall immediately ceased and everyone, men and women, all looked towards the main door.

Xiang Shaolong’s heart began beating faster.

Will this pretty lady whom he has not seen for so long still look as wonderful?

end of Book 6

Book 7 Chapter 1 – So Near And Yet So Far

As everyone in the hall waited expectantly, Ji Yanran flitted in and accompanying her is the current expert of astronomy, his old friend Zou Yan.

Ji Yanran has lost some weight but it has not affected her beauty at all. Besides, her freshness and purity is something that no one can win against.

Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi are all outstanding beauties but when compared to her, they immediately paled in comparison.

There's a little more sadness in Ji Yanran's pretty eyes, and who knows if it may be because she misses him.

Zou Yan on the other hand looks energetic as he accompanied Ji Yanran into the main hall.

Xiang Shaolong was afraid that Ji Yanran would recognize his build so he hurriedly hid behind Zhao Ba and Zhao Zhi.

Zhao Mu who was dumbfounded on seeing her finally regained his senses and stepped forward, saying loudly, "Welcome, Learned Lady Ji and Mister Zou, for coming."

Everyone can't help but lean nearer towards the entrance, to take a look at this beauty famed for her looks and intellect.

Xiang Shaolong was instead pushed out of the way.

Zhao Zhi's voice rang next to his ear, "Mister Dong!"

At this time Zhao Mu was introducing Ji Yanran and Zou Yan to the guests one by one and Xiang Shaolong was startled as he turned around to look at Zhao Zhi who was behind him. He saw that her pretty eyes were gleaming as she stared deeply at him so he hurriedly smiled and asked, "Miss Zhao has something to say?"

Zhao Zhi replied gently, "Mister looks really like someone I know!" Xiang Shaolong was relieved and knows that Jing Jun has only leaked a little news, he did not reveal everything at all so he pretended to look interested and asked, "Would that be Miss Zhao's lover?"

His words are obviously teasing as he knows that Zhao Zhi will definitely not be able to take it and he'll thank his lucky stars if she will henceforth ignore him. However, Zhao Zhi's pretty face blushed instead as she lowered her head with shyness. She suddenly shook her head and walked away.

Ji Yanran's laughter could be heard tinkling from the crowd over there. However Xiang Shaolong is breaking out in cold sweat. What is this all about? Isn't Zhao Zhi in love with Jing Jun? Then why does she look as if she has feelings for him, and wouldn't that make him Jing Jun's rival in love? If she doesn't like Jing Jun, why is she returning his letters?

Just as he was feeling numb, it was now Zhao Ya's turn to look

for him.

Zhao Ya had an obviously jealous expression yet she pretended to be nonchalant and said, “Everyone is in a hurry to get to know Ji Yanran but why is Mister hiding here?”

Xiang Shaolong’s hatred towards her was still strong so he deliberately made fun of her, going near her ear and whispering in a coarse voice, “I am naturally astoundingly attractive to women, if I let Ji Yanran get close to me, she will definitely not be able to retrain her feelings so it’s better that I stay away.”

Zhao Ya was stunned on hearing it. To think that there is such a thick-skinned man in the world who will boast of his charm towards women, especially when the recipient of his speech is a woman like her, isn’t he insinuating that she is also offering herself because she could not resist his lure?

She almost wanted to leave in anger but her pretty legs won’t listen to her, insisting on staying put. Even though he insulted her, she seems to feel a masochistic joy in it.

Looking at how uncertain and sad her pretty face looked, Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of accomplishment and added on, “I’m even more afraid of bedding women, because once those women had a taste of my prowess and the joy, I guarantee that they will not be able to leave me. Hai! That would really be a headache.”

Zhao Ya was absolutely flabbergasted. There’s not a single person whom she has just met would dare to say such shameless and dirty

words to her. But of all things this person has said something, which she felt, is so moving to the core ever since she met Xiang Shaolong.

She was absolutely confused and unconsciously said, “But all men wants to get Learned Lady Ji’s heart and body, why is Mister the only exception?”

Xiang Shaolong found it very interesting to make fun of her and replied with a smile, “People say that talent can arouse jealousy, I think that this sounds very reasonable. If I manage to get Learned Lady Ji and she in turn refuses to let go of me, we’ll certainly incur the jealousy of others. Won’t it bring unnecessary trouble that will be disadvantageous to my grand plan of setting up the family business here. That’s why I can only suppress my lust. Hai! To tell you the truth, back in Chu, I must have a woman with me every night!”

Zhao Ya blushed on hearing that but at the same time felt a ridiculous sense of wild excitement. She lowered her head and said, “Has Mister always been so direct in your talks with women whom you’ve just met?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly finding this funny as he replied, “I’ve always spoken from my heart towards women. You can excuse yourself if you don’t like to listen, I’ve always been like that.”

Zhao Ya’s sense of self-respect could not tolerate this any further and she replied angrily, “Mister does not respect how a girl feels at all, who would be able to tolerate such talk.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that the attention of everyone else were all centered on Ji Yanran and no one took notice of them at all so he chortled, “Women are like horses, once you know of their likings, you can tame them into obedient creatures. Hei! Horses that I have taken a liking to, every single one of them will ultimately surrender to my whip.”

These words are even more obvious. Zhao Ya could not take it any longer and replied angrily, “Mister is too overbearing towards women, treating humans as beasts and taming them, don’t you care about other’s feelings at all?” But in her heart she was confused, unable to determine what kind of a person is this horse fanatic. At one moment he seems to be a gentleman who does not chase after women, the next moment he’s suddenly like a sex maniac.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that he’s made her suffered enough and said nonchalantly, “To me, horses have better morality than humans. Once they have regarded someone as master, they will not keep changing their minds.”

Zhao Ya was stunned, for these words seemed to have stirred the pain in her heart.

Xiang Shaolong realized that Zhao Zhi was peeping at him talking to Zhao Ya from amongst the crowd so he winked at her mischievously, making her so furious that she hurriedly turned her head away.

Zhao Ya noticed it and she asked with furrowed brows, “What has Mister spoken to Zhao Zhi about?”

Xiang Shaolong was thinking that it was none of her business, since he did not even ask her what did she and Marquis Pingshan spoke about. He went near her ears and said, “She is a wild horse, and Lady is another horse.”

This time Zhao Ya has finally reached the end of her patience and she suddenly looked livid and was about to reprimand him when Zhao Mu’s voice could be heard saying, “Mister Dong Kuang has gone over that side, Miss Ji would like to get to know tonight’s star!”

Everyone turned around to look towards the two of them.

Xiang Shaolong cast a meaningful eye at Zhao Ya before leaving with a smile, secretly feeling smug that he has finally vented his anger. It’s best that from now on Zhao Ya will lose her interest in him, which would save him a lot of unnecessary trouble.

Hai!

If she could just cultivate herself by staying at home and repent, maybe he’ll be softhearted and forgive her, but now it’s a totally different matter. He finally managed to squeeze past the crowd to reach Zhao Mu’s side.

Ji Yanran’s pretty eyes landed on him and a strange gleam

suddenly darted past but when she noticed that it's not Xiang Shaolong, her eyes dimmed again. The changes in her expression were obvious.

Xiang Shaolong forced the feelings of excitement and heat down as he paid his respects, "Dong Kuang pays his respect to Miss Ji and Mister Zou."

Ji Yanran regained her senses and returned his bow with a smile, "I've long heard of Mister's name. Yanran is also a horse lover, I must seek Mister's advice if the opportunity arises."

Xiang Shaolong feels the regrettable feeling of her being so near and yet so far! He secretly thought that if he doesn't make use of this rare opportunity to secretly make her understand, he'll need to spend a lot more trouble in future. If she could not find him, or received news that he has gone to Qin and thus make her way there, they would have missed the chance to meet.

He immediately nodded his head and replied, "How can I live up to Miss's praise. I've heard of Miss Ji's excellent horse named Jifeng, and wonder if you can me see it and it would be an eye opener for me."

Ji Yanran and Zou Yan were equally startled.

Ji Yanran was immediately energized as her pretty eyes stared at him unwaveringly as she said, "If Mister is free, why don't you come over to my place tomorrow morning and I can learn from your expertise."

Everyone around them threw looks of envy at Xiang Shaolong. They did not expect that this person would be able to have the chance to interact with this rare beauty in close proximity because of his skills in rearing horses.

Lord Longyang's dainty voice interrupted, "A few of my horses seemed to have fallen ill, can Mister Dong come and take a look as well."

This sentence caused him to receive another kind of envious looks.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking this is a headache and secretly lamenting but he replied with perfunctory, "Your highness have traveled a long way here, the horses are just tired! They'll be fine after resting for a while."

Once he said that, every is clear that Xiang Shaolong has no interest in men at all.

Lord Longyang whined, "My horses and I have rested for more than a month, besides they only fell ill recently. Aren't you a horse lover? How can you just watch them die?"

Zhao Mu was afraid that he'll offend Lord Longyang so he moved the conversation along by saying, "Mister Dong is not like that at all. I'll find some time tomorrow to accompany Mister Dong to pay a visit to Lord Longyang."

He then said to Ji Yanran, “I would like to see this marvelous steed that can make Mister Dong pine over it as well.”

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran secretly cursed but there’s nothing they can do to him.

The latter said with resign, “Yanran will of course welcome you, your Highness. Please come with Mister Dong!”

Zhao Ya’s feelings are entirely different.

Never in her dreams would she expect Ji Yanran to proactively invite this nonsensical weirdo. Could it be that he really has the natural attraction towards women? Indeed she herself has been caught in a flutter, not knowing whether she should like him or hate him.

Zhao Mu said, “The feast should begin, Miss Ji please be seated.”

Ji Yanran can’t help but cast a meaningful look towards Zou Yan.

How can that wily old fox Zou Yan not understand so he said with a smile, “Since Yanran and Mister Dong are both horse lovers and this is such a rare chance today, why don’t I exchange seats with Mister Dong.”

This time even Zhao Mu’s jealousy was aroused but everyone

knows that Ji Yanran have always taken interest in weird and rare people which has nothing to do with romantic feelings at all so no one would think that these 2 would have any secret relationship at all.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the excitement he felt and replied happily, "This is more than what I can ask for. I'm just afraid that I am too ill-learned and Miss Ji would be offended."

Ji Yanran gave a sweet smile which stunned everyone before saying gently, "It is I who should feel favored." She dare not look at Xiang Shaolong any longer and turned to follow Zhao Mu's attendant towards a table on the left. The aqua and white colored gown together with the jet black and shiny hairstyle attracted the gaze of everyone.

Zhao Ya wished that she could give Xiang Shaolong a few stabs. He just said that he will not go near Ji Yanran and yet now he's showing off that he could be next to her. Suddenly, she was startled to realize that she has successfully forgotten about Xiang Shaolong. In her heart now there is only this hateful, yet lovable, unfathomable wild man.

After Xiang Shaolong was seated, he realized that it's still difficult to talk. Firstly the 2 of them were about 5 feet apart but also because pretty maids were behind both of them trying to serve them so no matter how much they have to say to each other, there is no chance to.

Sitting opposite them were Zhao Mu and Zhao Ya, the latter deliberately trying not to look at Xiang Shaolong and the

atmosphere was embarrassing.

Zhao Mu thought that Zhao Ya was unhappy that he forced her to be close to Xiang Shaolong, that's why she was furious and did not think much of it.

The few hundred tables were fully seated and the atmosphere was lively.

Zou Yan was seated together with Guo Kai and they were laughing and talking.

After Ji Yanran was seated, she felt that she has no opportunity to speak with Xiang Shaolong at all because she is the star of the feast and everyone is trying to show themselves off in front of her and she had to entertain all of them.

2 pairs of eyes constantly flitted to where Xiang Shaolong was. One pair belonged to Lord Longyang who was seated on the table next to the main table, and the other belonged to Zhao Zhi, who was seated together with Zhao Ba at the table 5 tables down, opposite from Zhao Mu.

The Marquis of Pingshan, Han Chuang, who held no regard for Xiang Shaolong initially, was now staring at him with hatred when he saw that he actually had the honor of sitting together with Ji Yanran.

At this time someone asked Ji Yanran, "I wonder what is the

thing that can move Miss Ji's heart in this world?"

Everyone felt this to be very interesting so they all looked steadily at Ji Yanran, waiting to see how she'll respond.

Ji Yanran's pretty eyes turned around as she replied with a smile, "This is a very difficult question to answer! There will be different answers at the different stages of life. Maybe when Yanran's beauty is gone, the thing that I would want most is my youth, which will never come back!"

Everyone knows she's deliberately avoiding the question and they all expressed their displeasure, forcing her to give an answer.

How can Xiang Shaolong bear to let his love be bullied so he chortled and said, "Miss Ji has already answered this question. Something that is unobtainable will always be pined for."

Everyone became quiet and as they mulled over it, felt that the reply was reasonable.

For example, everyone would like to become the ruler of a country, and precisely because they know that there's no way they can get it, it becomes more of a lure for them.

Guo Zhong said with admiration, "I did not expect that Mister Dong would have other skills besides the art of rearing horses." Everyone laughed.

Lord Longyang said coquettishly, “I wonder what thing will attract Mister Dong?” The Marquis of Pingshan interrupted, “Of course it’s that treasured horse which he’ll never get that can travel a thousand miles in a day!”

Immediately laughter roared in the hall and the atmosphere was lively.

Xiang Shaolong knows that now is a good opportunity for him to portray himself in an unrefined yet open image in front of these administrators of Zhao so he said loudly, “Not at all! Not at all! Just having one or two rare horses is of no help at all to the overall situation, what I want is 10,000 warhorses that can give my King victory.”

All the Zhaos seated nodded their head in agreement.

Zhao Ya can’t help but ask, “But what is the impossible thing that can make Mister Dong pine for it?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed roughly and continued talking in his trademark hoarse voice, staring at Zhao Ya as he replied, “I’ve always lacked imagination, and I will never waste my effort thinking about things that I know for sure that I cannot get. But! Hei! Some things that can be obtained and yet still out of reach can make my heart itch so much that I have sleepless nights.”

All the men there understood the underlying meaning and smiled.

Zhao Ya saw that he was staring at her as he spoke and felt both anger and joy. She lowered her head and avoided his gaze.

Ji Yanran who was next to him thought about the thing that she could almost have as well and her pretty face blushed unconsciously. She secretly took a look at him, wishing that she can throw herself immediately into his arms.

At this time an attendant suddenly walked in towards Zhao Mu and quietly reported something to him. Zhao Mu revealed a look of surprise and looked at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong was just feeling puzzled when Zhao Mu stood up and announced, "Tonight we have another esteemed just who has just arrived and he is the most popular guest of Chu's Lord Chunshen, Mister Li Yuan."

Once Xiang Shaolong heard that, he was startled and cold sweat broke out.

Book 7 Chapter 2 – Guest From Afar

Under everyone's gaze, Li Yuan, who was dressed in grand robes and looks about 25 or 26 years old, stepped into the hall suavely under the accompaniment of Zhao Mu's attendant.

Undeniably he is a very good looking man, fresh but with character. He has broad shoulders, slender waist, long legs, standing straight and tall with a long sword hanging from his waist, giving one the impression that he's well versed in both scholarly pursuits and martial arts.

His eyes were alert and lively; obviously this is an intelligent person and not someone to be belittled.

Xiang Shaolong's heart started pounding.

He has so many things to worry about that he's not even sure himself.

The worst thing is that he may be able to tell from just one look that he is not the horse fanatic Dong Kuang, by then he can forget about leaving the Marquis residence alive.

Secondly is his relationship with Zhao Mu. If Li Yuan is the person sent by Chu's Lord Chunshen to secretly liaise with Zhao Mu, then Zhao Mu will immediately realize the trap that Xiang Shaolong has set for him.

Besides, if Li Yuan knows that the Chu envoy still has not reached Handan, he'll definitely guess that something happened along the way and this will arouse his and Zhao Mu's suspicion.

Any one of these problems is enough to make their whole group perish.

Hai! How did someone like this end up appearing out of nowhere?

Li Yuan stepped into the hall, listening as Zhao Mu spoke to him and at the same time suavely acknowledging the guests seated on both sides with a slight smile.

Xiang Shaolong wished that Li Yuan would never finish his walk.

Ji Yanran is was alert and had long noticed that his expression seemed strange so she said with a smile, "Mister Dong! The State of Chu is really filled with talents. Not only has it produced a horse expert like you, there's also the extraordinary Mister Li Yuan who is famed for his intellect and swordsmanship. His younger sister Li Yanyan is the latest beloved concubine of the King of Chu and I heard that she's now pregnant. If she can bear a son, he will become the Crown Prince of Chu, so now everyone thinks that his future is limitless."

Xiang Shaolong understood that it's because of the maids behind hindering them, she deliberately used such a method to drop hints on Li Yuan's background. She went to Chu before arriving in Handan, so naturally she knows about the latest news from Chu.

But he felt that when she mentioned Li Yuan's name, her expression looked a little unnatural.

When Li Yuan saw Ji Yanran, his eyes immediately brightened and he came to their table and politely greeting Xiang Shaolong, "How do you do, Mister Dong! We may both be from Chu, but I did not expect that we only have the chance to meet here in Handan, which is a thousand miles away."

Xiang Shaolong was slightly relieved that the most urgent problem is solved so he rose and returned the greeting.

Zhao Mu suddenly made a strange look at him, then looked at Li Yuan with a flash of murderous intent in his eyes.

Li Yuan was not too concerned about Xiang Shaolong as his gaze turned towards Ji Yanran, immediately filled with a captivating light as he said, "Miss Ji left without a word, giving me much grief."

He lowered his voice so that other than Zhao Mu and Xiang Shaolong, other guests still thought that he was making polite talk.

Another load was off Xiang Shaolong's mind as he realized that this Li Yuan is actually harassing Ji Yanran and it seems that they were once together in Chu, otherwise Li Yuan would not have spoken with such jealousy. It seems that this Li Yuan is a born romantic, otherwise why would he run after her through mountains and lakes all the way from Chu. Once he thought of

this, he feels troubled again. Ever since Zhao Ya betrayed him, he no longer has the blind faith he used to have towards women. This Li Yuan is an outstanding person and so passionate about love, how would he know if he would be able to snatch Ji Yanran away from his hands. If this really turns out to be the case, the blow to him will be even harder than the one Zhao Ya gave him.

After Ji Yanran stole a peek at Xiang Shaolong, she replied with a smile, “Mister Li, you’re too harsh with your words, how can Yanran bear it.”

Zhao Mu said with a smile, “So you two are old acquaintances, now that everyone is in Handan, why worry that there’ll be no time to catch up. Why don’t Mister Li join my table and enjoy the performances by the song and dance courtesans.”

Li Yuan smiled suavely and after giving Ji Yanran a meaningful look, followed Zhao Mu and seated himself between Zhao Mu and Zhao Ya.

Ji Yanran seems to have been moved that Li Yuan ran after her all the way to Handan. She lowered her pretty face, her eyes looking lost.

Xiang Shaolong started feeling even more uncomfortable.

The music started, a group of over a hundred song and dance courtesans came to the middle of the hall and started singing and dancing with their colorful outfit flitting in the air, giving both auditory and sensory entertainment.

“Hey!”

Xiang Shaolong was slightly startled, only to see Ji Yanran looking at him deeply with the corner of her eyes, filled with her love and longing.

At this time the dancers have blocked the view from the direction of Li Yuan, Zhao Mu and Zhao Ya and everyone else were concentrating on enjoying the performance. The music also helped to cover their conversation so that others can't hear them. It is indeed a good opportunity to talk secrets.

Xiang Shaolong revealed a slightly unnatural smile.

Ji Yanran rolled her eyes at him and said, “Can you not show me such a lack of confidence? You don't know how much I've been missing you!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that this is called ‘once bitten, twice shy’. He asked quietly, “Where are you staying?”

Ji Yanran quickly told him and added, “Don't look for me, let me look for you. Lord Longyang has always suspected that there's something going on between us so there's still people watching me even here.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is smart beyond others and has excellent ways of accomplishing things so he's not worried that she

will slip up. He nodded his head in agreement.

Ji Yanran suddenly stopped talking and recollected herself.

Xiang Shaolong was alert and immediately pretended to be totally engrossed with the performance.

It turned out that the dancers have now gathered to the middle of the hall into a small circle inside a larger circle, curving and flexing their bodies into various attractive poses, so the line of sight between Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Mu is now unblocked.

Zhao Ya is obviously quite interested in Li Yuan, constantly trying to make him talk. Xiang Shaolong was secretly livid on seeing it but even he does not know why he still has such feelings of jealousy towards her.

Li Yuan conversed with her politely but most of the time he was looking at Ji Yanran.

The Marquis of Pingshan, Han Chuang is obviously interested in Ji Yanran as well, looking at her intensely from time to time, as if he wants to eat her up.

All of those who had thought of wooing this world famous Learned Lady felt inept once they saw the appearance of Li Yuan and gave up the idea of wooing her. Besides, Ji Yanran seems a little interested in him as well. If not for Li Yuan's unique status and his extremely excellent swordsmanship, maybe someone

would have wanted to kill him long ago.

Right until the end of the feast, the two of them could not find another opportunity to speak.

Ji Yanran left first with Zou Yan and was resolute in her rejection of Li Yuan's offer to accompany her. Of course she's making use of this to illustrate her stand towards Xiang Shaolong, which makes Xiang Shaolong and others who are interested in her extremely happy.

After Li Yuan left dejectedly, Xiang Shaolong was thinking of slipping off but was dragged by Zhao Mu to accompany him on sending off the guests at the main door.

Before Guo Zhong left, he reminded him about the feast at his house the next night.

When it came to Zhao Ba and Zhao Zhi's turn, the latter took a deep look at him before leaving with Zhao Ba whereas Lord Longyang's flirtatious look as he left gave him goose pimples.

In the end only Zhao Mu, Zhao Ya, Guo Kai, Le Cheng, Han Chuang and Xiang Shaolong were left.

It seems that Han Chuang is waiting for Zhao Ya and Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel furious, deliberately choosing to ignore Zhao Ya whose pretty eyes kept flitting over to him.

Han Chuang told Zhao Mu excitedly, “Besides the State of Yan, everyone else is here.”

Although what he said seems to be without any head or tail, Xiang Shaolong knows clearly what he meant and also knows that he has mistaken Li Yuan to be the representative from Chu who has come to discuss how to attack Qin in the meeting held by Lord Dongzhou.

The situation is actually very interesting.

Amongst the 6 states, the ones who place the most importance in joining forces are naturally the states of Han, Zhao and Wei who are at the forefront of strong Qin.

Qi is also very anxious over the plan to join forces against Qin, because if the 3 states fall, the next target would undeniably be Qi, before the Chus.

Now that Han Chuang thinks that even Chu has sent an envoy over, of course he'll be ecstatic over it.

As for Yan, it is still recovering from the attacks launched by Lian Bo of Zhao, and their position has fallen greatly in the eyes of the other states so it doesn't matter if they come or not.

Zhao Mu gave a cold snort, “I'm afraid Li Yuan's trip here has got nothing to do with the secret meeting.”

Han Chuang laughed, “He is now the most popular person with the King of Chu and I heard that his sister’s beauty can take down a country. The King of Chu has no son yet so if she manage to give birth to a Crown Prince, Li Yuan will become the uncle of the future King. Therefore if he can help put in a few good words, do we need to worry that the King of Chu won’t take part in the grand scheme this time.”

An icy cold look flashed past Zhao Mu’s eyes again, even the scar on his face looks a lot deeper.

Xiang Shaolong could see everything clearly as a bystander and knows that Zhao Mu is filled with unhappiness and hatred towards Li Yuan.

Guo Kai said with a smile, “Is Lady tired? Let Marquis Pingshan send you back!”

Han Chuang said to Zhao Ya politely, “I wonder if I can have the honor?”

Guo Kai and Le Cheng both understood his meaning and smiled. Han Chuang’s question is akin to asking Zhao Ya if he could have the pleasure of her company again tonight.

Zhao Ya seemed a little embarrassed and looked towards Xiang Shaolong.

Whereas Xiang Shaolong looked towards the square outside the

door, where 4 horse carriages and numerous Zhao soldiers were respectfully waiting.

Zhao Mu remembered that he had promised Xiang Shaolong to help him with Zhao Ya and even if tonight is not the night, but if he allows Han Chuang to 'take away' Zhao Ya in front of him today, it'll be a loss of face as well. So he said, "Marquis Pingshan please return early to rest, I have to enter the Palace with Lady later to meet his Majesty."

Han Chuang has no choice but to leave.

Zhao Mu told Guo Kai and Le Cheng, "I still have some things to discuss with Mister Dong, both of you can leave first!"

Guo Kai made an eye at Xiang Shaolong behind Zhao Mu's back, asking him to be careful before leaving with Le Cheng, laughing and chatting as they walked.

Only Zhao Mu, Zhao Ya and Xiang Shaolong was left and the atmosphere was a little awkward.

Zhao Mu told Zhao Ya, "After I finish a few words with Mister Dong, he'll accompany you back to your residence!"

Zhao Ya's pretty face changed as she pouted, "Don't I know how to go back on my own?" After which she stared angrily at Zhao Mu and Xiang Shaolong before she stepped out of the door, into her carriage and left, leaving behind Zhao Mu and Xiang Shaolong

looking at each other, both suffering a great loss of face.

Zhao Mu smiled wryly, “Some women are like a wild horse that can never be tamed, very difficult to ride on.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed, “Only such women are challenging enough.”

Zhao Mu pulled him away and they walked along the corridor that's leading towards the inner residence. Although it's now deep into the night and very quiet, the Marquis residence is still brightly lit, and looks as if it's still day.

They only sat down when they reached the inner hall where Zhao Mu had shared with him the Yue beauties, the sisters Tian Zhen and Tian Feng, in the past.

After the maids served them tea, they retreated.

Zhao Mu seemed troubled and said after a moment of silence, “You should know the relation between my father and Li Yuan, right!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting that he is now impersonating as Lord Chunshen's trusted aide, who is here to help Zhao Mu dream about being King so of course he can't say that he has no idea. But the only thing he knows is that Li Yuan's sister is called Li Yanyan, and he could only remember her name because the two words in her name is the same as Ji Yanran,

otherwise he would have forgotten even her name as well.

He went on bravely, “Is Marquis referring to Lady Yanyan’s matter? I have always been doing work for his Highness, so I have never met Li Yuan. All these were told by his Highness personally.”

Unexpectedly Zhao Mu actually nodded his head and sighed, “It’s exactly this matter. Don’t think that Li Yuan looks good and nice, but his level of manipulation, even all the thousand odd men and guests under my father’s residence cannot hold a candle to him. And don’t think that he only came here because he was chasing after Learned Lady Ji and have the mistaken impression that he is a hopeless romantic. I’m sure there is a reason behind this. No one else is more manipulative or ambitious than him. Humph! Seems that Father did not reveal to him the secret about me, luckily so!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that the danger is not over and if he lets Zhao Mu ask him a few more questions, his identity will immediately be revealed. So taking the hint from what was said, he added, “I really have no idea why his Highness would trust Li Yuan so much?”

Naturally these words would not let any cat out of the bag.

Zhao Mu gave a cold snort, “Father is what you’ll call ‘an intelligent man will ultimately make a mistake due to too many responsibilities’, and the bottom line is all about women. That’s right! You just came from Chu, did Li Yanyan give birth to a boy or girl?”

Xiang Shaolong now has some vague understanding but is unable to describe the whole thing so he can only say, “I only heard she was about to give birth.”

A dangerous cloud loomed over Zhao Mu’s face as he said angrily, “I did not expect Li Yuan to actually use the same devious trick as Lu Buwei. Father refused to believe my words. If Li Yuan gains power in future, how could he possibly agree to let Father control court affairs. This time Father is really letting the wolf into the house.”

If Xiang Shaolong still does not understand, then he’s better off staying at home. Zhao Mu talked about women hindering matters, and said that Li Yuan is copying Lu Buwei’s plan and Lord Chunshen letting the wolf in. With these clues, he can make an accurate guess as to what is happening. He hurriedly sighed as well and said, “And who knows if this Li Yanyan is really Li Yuan’s sister.”

Zhao Mu replied, “That seems to be the truth. Besides when Father was on close terms with Li Yanyan, Li Yuan has no chance to meet Li Yanyan at all and Father had sent people to check on their relationship as siblings as well.” He looked at him suspiciously and added, “You should be knowing all these!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing, so it turns out that the child in Li Yanyan’s stomach does not belong to Li Yuan, but to Lord Chunshen. Da.mn! How could he have known that the situation is so full of twists.

He replied calmly, “How could I not know. It’s just that the person in charge of the investigation is called He Quan, and this person is only good at bootlicking. He’s quite slipshod when it comes to other matters so I was afraid that he’ll be tricked by Li Yuan.”

All these are just nonsense he made up, but the aim is to gain Zhao Mu’s trust. There’s even the name of a person, so Zhao Mu would certainly believe him.

This evil fiend was indeed taken in and said sternly, “That is not where the problem lies. There should be no doubt that they are siblings. I didn’t expect Father to be so careless.”

This time Xiang Shaolong is really enlightened and have figured out the relationship between Li Yuan, his sister and Lord Chunshen.

This Li Yuan is really formidable. He first offered his sister to Lord Chunshen and after she became pregnant, let Lord Chunshen gave this beauty who is pregnant with his child to the King of Chu who is without a son. Then the child that will be born will have a bigger chance of becoming the Crown Prince. They are re-enacting the plan of Lu Buwei giving Zhu Ji to King Zhuangxiang.

After he got this clear, Xiang Shaolong was relieved and said, “Now that Li Yuan has offered himself here, this is a great chance to get rid of him. By then Li Yanyan won’t be able to escape from his Highness’s clutches.”

Zhao Mu said seriously, “This can never be done, otherwise it will create an avalanche of problems and even I will not be able to extricate myself. Besides his swordsmanship is excellent and extremely cunning. The family warriors accompanying him this time are all highly skilled. If something goes wrong and your man gets captured by him, even I will not be able to save you.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled icily, “Do not worry, I will wait until he leaves the border of Zhao before I strike.”

Zhao Mu saw how much effort he is making and clasped his shoulder joyfully, saying with a frosty smile, “One need not necessarily use swords to kill, let me mull over this matter. That’s right! Do you really understand the nature of horses, otherwise you may reveal your shortcomings tomorrow in front of Learned Lady Ji. Hai! This is the first time I’ve met such a beauty, a pity...”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Marquis please do not worry, how can I pretend to be a horse fanatic if I know nothing about horses?”

Zhao Mu replied, “I’m afraid Zhao Ya is not possible tonight, why don’t I send you a few other beauties!”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Forget about it for tonight, we still have to go to Learned Lady Ji’s place early tomorrow morning. Are we going separately?”

Once Zhao Mu remembered that he can see Ji Yanran again tomorrow, he was immediately energized and said, “I’ll pick you up to go together.” He added with gratitude, “All thanks to you for

today.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he was referring to the female assassin and after saying a few humble words, bid his farewell.

Zhao Mu sent him right to the main door and only turned back into his residence when he saw him going up the carriage and riding out under the accompaniment of his family warriors.

Book 7 Chapter 3 – The Night Is Painfully Short

The horse carriage trotted past the quiet streets of Handan, illuminated by the lanterns in the dark night.

As the carriage bumped around, Xiang Shaolong's thoughts were bumpy as well.

Right until this point in time, he has yet to think of any good way to capture Zhao Mu alive and cut down Le Cheng's head before escaping from Handan safely.

There was just an assassination attempt on Zhao Mu tonight so he'll definitely be extra careful in future and security will definitely be tightened. Under such circumstances, it won't be easy to kill him, much less capture him alive.

Now that the envoys from the 6 states are arriving one by one, the Zhaos, in order to keep this a secret and to prevent Qin spies from infiltrating the city, have now stepped up the defenses of the city by ten, or even a hundred times. Even sending someone to slip out of the city is a dangerous mission because they are now keeping detailed records of the people coming to and from the city.

Besides, his time here is limited. If the Zhaos realize that his promise of a large batch of warhorses arriving in Handan is not materializing, his situation would be far from optimistic.

Luckily a few hundred warhorses will be arriving in a few days' time and hopefully that will ease some of the wait for the Zhaos.

Being with Zhao Mu is an extremely dangerous affair; just one word spoken wrongly and he can be defeated or humiliated.

As for his personal relationships, everything is in a bigger mess.

Firstly no one can guarantee that Ji Yanran's heart will remain unchanged. With the lesson from Zhao Ya, his confidence in himself with regards to such matters is no longer the same as before.

As for his entangled relationship with Zhao Ya, he is even more bothered about it. Sometimes he finds her pitiful but most of the time he finds her hateful.

Hai! Forget it!

Just forget about her.

She is indeed a flirtatious woman, falling for every person she sees.

If that Li Yuan were to hook his finger at her, she would throw herself into his arms too.

Once he thought about this, the fire of revenge burned in him

again, making him even more confused.

Zhao Zhi has obviously seen through something. A person's heart is unfathomable and if she wants to betray them, their outcome will be tragic. To be able to die in battle would be a good ending, for what they fear most is to be captured alive, for that will be a fate worse than death.

He finally returned to his residence that used to be the Hostage Residence.

Xiang Shaolong left the carriage and walked into the house.

Teng Yi, Wu Zhuo and Jing Jun were all waiting for his return and followed him straight into the house with high walls, which was used to put the fake Ying Zheng in house arrest.

The 3 of them saw that he didn't look happy but none dared to ask any questions, only following him into the secret room then used for discussion.

After the 4 of them were seated, Xiang Shaolong turned his icy face towards Jing Jun and said, "Xiao Jun! What exactly have you revealed to Zhao Ya? Do not try to hide anything."

Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo's expressions both changed.

In this dangerous place where enemies are everywhere, they are like walking on thin ice, one wrong step and their lives would

immediately be in danger, not to mention if their background has been leaked.

Jing Jun was startled and lowered his head, asking in fear, “Third Brother has seen Zhao Zhi?”

Xiang Shaolong did not reveal that Zhao Zhi did not expose him directly in case Jing Jun tried to deny anything, but just nodded his head.

Teng Yi banged the table and cursed, “You’re an ignorant fool who knows not the consequences. Do you want everyone to perish because of your stupidity. We have already warned you long ago.”

Jing Jun smiled wryly, “That warning came too late, I’ve already told her long ago that we will be returning in the near future.”

Wu Zhuo asked lividly, “Don’t you know that Zhao Zhi is a Zhao? If her love for her country is more than her love for you, what would be the consequences.”

Jing Jun replied dejectedly, “She doesn’t love me at all, she only loves Third Brother.”

All three were stunned.

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, “Don’t sprout nonsense in order to wriggle yourself out of this.”

Jing Jun said miserably, “She only regards me as a mischievous little brother. She’s willing to talk to me only because she wants to know more about Third Brother.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “What did she write in her last letter to you?”

Jing Jun replied haltingly in shame, “She asked when we’ll be coming to Handan and if we to be received. Ai! It’s not that I have not thought of the problem that she’s a Zhao, it’s just that she told me she has a deep enmity with Zhao Mu, that’s why I believe she will not betray us.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. On the surface Zhao Zhi and Zhao Mu seemed to interact harmoniously, even training his courtesans for him. He can’t tell anything out of the ordinary at all.

Why would she have a deep enmity?

Wu Zhuo asked, “What enmity does she has with Zhao Mu?”

Jing Jun shook his head, at a loss, “She refused to tell.”

Teng Yi hesitated, “Maybe it has something to do with a woman’s chastity.”

Wu Zhuo asked, “Who else is there in Zhao Zhi’s family?”

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo both revealed a look of attentiveness. This question is the key to everything. If Zhao Zhi has a large family in Zhao, why would she sacrifice her whole clan because of a man. At least she cannot leave behind her birth father. But if she wants her father to leave together with her, she will never get his approval.

Jing Jun replied, “She seems to live with only her Father, I... I don’t know anything at all.”

Teng Yi was flabbergasted and sighed, “You’re really messing things up.” Jing Jun joined because of him, so it makes him feel he needs to be responsible for everything that Jing Jun does.

Wu Zhuo asked, “Didn’t you send her a reply? What did you write in the letter?”

Amongst all three, Wu Zhuo is the calmest now and all his questions are pin pointed on the most crucial aspects.

Jing Jun is after all still a child so he sobbed out his reply, “I told her we will appear in Handan in disguise, and will find a chance to make contact with her after we arrive.”

Xiang Shaolong can’t bear to see him thus so he patted his shoulder in consolation, “The situation is not that bad. Although she seems to have recognized me, firstly she’s still not too sure, and secondly she did not call my bluff. There’s still a chance to turn the situation around. But I really do not understand, since

you know that she only regards you as a younger brother, why do you still want to become entangled with her?”

Jing Jun choked, “I don’t understand too. But if she becomes your woman, Xiao Jun would never have an ounce of unhappiness.”

Teng Yi said calmly, “We must not let our fate be under the control of a woman’s hand. Xiao Jun, show me the way, I will kill her personally to prevent any unforeseen problems.”

Jing Jun’s body trembled violently, his eyes wide opened in shock.

Wu Zhuo nodded his head, “This seems like the only solution.”

Among the four, two has already agreed to silence her. Jing Jun was so startled that he forgot to cry but only looked pleadingly at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong thought secretly to himself that if they want to keep this a secret, they’ll have to kill Tian Zhen as well and how can he bring himself to do it? He said calmly, “By doing this we will see the harm first before we see the benefits. Zhao Zhi spoke to me many times tonight and was taking special notice of me and others may have seen this happening. If she gets killed tonight immediately after seeing me once, someone will eventually pin it down to me.”

Wu Zhuo said icily, “Then the other way is to turn her into your woman, so we will be able to totally control her and at the same time check her background.”

Xiang Shaolong took a look at Jing Jun and saw that he was keeping silent with his head lowered and felt pity for him. He said with a sigh, “Xiao Jun is my good brother, how can I take his love away?”

Jing Jun said with gratitude, “With Third Brother’s such words, Xiao Jun can deeply feel the brotherly love we share. The truth is Third Brother has already let me enjoyed wealth and fame but I have yet the chance to repay you. This time it is I who have made the mistake and almost implicated everyone.”

He suddenly knelt down and kowtowed to Xiang Shaolong, “Thried Brother please do whatever you have to towards Zhao Zhi, I will sincerely accede to anything.”

At this point all three knew that Jing Jun is truly in love with Zhao Zhi. In order to preserve her life, he’d rather give up his right. Seen from another point of view, it also means he’s automatically giving up in order to fulfill Zhao Zhi’s love towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a wry smile, “Although I have a liking for this beauty Zhao Zhi, I’ve never regarded it as a relationship between a man a and woman, so it’s difficult for me to switch my mindset so quickly. Besides, it seems a little like I’m snatching my own good brother’s woman.”

Teng Yi said seriously, “Everyone knows that Shaolong is doing this for everyone’s safety so there’s no need for any doubt. If there’s a problem, we’ll have no choice but to be heartless for it’s better than sitting and waiting to be killed.”

Jing Jun exclaimed, “Third Brother! I’ll bring you there immediately!”

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming on and tried to delay by revealing, “I’ve made contact with Ji Yanran!”

Everyone was overjoyed and pressed for news.

Xiang Shaolong told them everything that has happened during the feast. The three of them furrowed their brows deeply on hearing it. Now that there is a sudden appearance of Li Yuan, it will only bring more hindrance than help to their mission and has made the situation even more complicated.

Just as they were feeling troubled, there was a knock on the door.

Wu Zhuo revealed a look of unhappiness. Who dares to interrupt them while they are in secret discussion. Jing Jun was about to open the door when the alert Teng Yi grabbed him, afraid that others will see his swollen eyes from crying and opened the door himself instead.

The leader of the elite troops Wu Guo said at the door, “A guest

who refused to reveal his identity is here to look for Master and is now waiting in the hall.”

He then described this person’s dressing and looks.

Everyone thought that this person could be a girl in disguise after hearing the description and they looked at one another. Could it be that Zhao Zhi has found her way here.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and said, “I’ll take a look!”

Xiang Shaolong stepped into the hall and on seeing the person dashed forward happily.

The beauty who was wrapped from head to toe in a huge robe ran forward without a care into his arms, her dainty body trembling from excitement and joy.

It turns out to be the famous Learned Lady Ji Yanran.

As Xiang Shaolong felt the youthful, fiery and alluring body in his arms, all the worries and fears tonight were thrown immediately into the back of his mind.

He lifted her hood, letting her thick luscious hair fall down like waterfall as he uttered, “I didn’t expect Yanran to come looking for me tonight, Xiang Shaolong is startled by such feelings.”

Ji Yanran ignored the dumbfounded Wu Guo standing next to them and used all her might to hug his solid neck as she replied, “Yanran cannot wait a moment longer. Every day felt like an entire year during this half year as I suffered the pangs of missing you. If not for the fact that I could still talk about you with Mister Zou, I would not be able to tolerate it.”

A beauty’s generosity is immeasurable. Xiang Shaolong carried her up by her waist and told Wu Guo, “Let them know who has arrived!” and walked towards his bedroom.

Ji Yanran’s pretty face immediately burned a fiery red right to her ears and although she buried her embarrassed face into his neck, the frantic beating of her heart could not hide the mix of shyness and happiness that she really felt.

But she did not make any show of objection, her dainty body so soft that other than panting hard, she could say nothing else.

Although Xiang Shaolong is not a person who is usually in such urgent need for lust, firstly he really misses this pretty and loyal beauty a lot, not to mention that she’s extremely alluring. Most importantly he now has the intention of striking while the iron is hot, to quickly possess this beauty’s body first. This is to prevent any potential problems from arising, like giving the scheming Li Yuan the chance to take advantage or if he were to use some devious methods to snatch Yanran away.

He originally had a good impression of Li Yuan, but after finding out how he and Lord Chunshen made use of his sister Li Yanyan, his impression totally changed.

The distance from the hall back to the bedroom felt as long as a whole century.

The two of them were so nervous that none spoke a single word.

After they closed the room door, Xiang Shaolong sat with her on the bed, using his strong arms to surround her so that her alluring body is sticking close to him with no space in between at all.

Xiang Shaolong kissed her slender neck and tiny ears gently, even boldly nibbling at her tender earlobes.

Ji Yanran totally melted under his ministrations, her mouth giving out alluring and soul-catching moans as her beautiful body rubbed against him.

Xiang Shaolong proceeded to caress her fragrant lips. Ji Yanran could take this no more and her fair arms entangled themselves around him as she reacted passionately.

All the suffering that came with missing him has been redeemed at this instant with the most alluring sweetness.

At this point in time both of them totally forgot about themselves, their senses in disarray as they tangled passionately. Under Xiang Shaolong's teasing, Ji Yanran's flames of desire were fanned to a peak.

Xiang Shaolong was forceful and audacious, caressing every spot, exciting her so much that her dainty body trembled and her blood surged.

She can only hear her beloved saying gently in her ears, “Yanran! Xiang Shaolong is very grateful for your love, you’re so good to me.”

Ji Yanran responded with a whimper, which quickly turned into moans. This man’s hand has already slipped into her clothes expertly, caressing at will the forbidden places that no one has ever invaded before.

Then the clothes on her body were slowly removed piece by piece.

Ji Yanran’s lids were half closed, allowing Xiang Shaolong to do as he please. Sometimes she will unintentionally block him, but it was just a symbolic show of resistance and has no actual effect at all.

Under the light from the burning red candles, her fair, flawless and beautiful body was finally revealed totally under the eyes and hands of Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong had to choose this time to nibble her earlobes and ask, “Will this be all right?”

Ji Yanran languidly opened her eyes that was filled with passion

and rolled her eyes at him before nodding her head, her heart filled with willingness. She closed her eyes again. Such alluring attraction is enough to make Xiang Shaolong increase the activities on her dainty body.

After the gloriously naked body was lying flat on the bed, Xiang Shaolong stood up, admiring this beautiful body that all normal men in the world wants to possess and at the same time removing his own clothes.

Ji Yanran suddenly turned over on the bed, lifting her pretty face with much shyness as she peeked at him with lovelorn eyes and a slight smile.

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Heaven is so unfair. Yanran has seen my body long ago, but I had to wait a painful 6 months before I have the chance to even the score.”

Ji Yanran pouted, “I only treated your injuries. The most embarrassing parts were all take care of wholly by your Princess Qian. It’s not like how you’re facing me right now at all!”

Xiang Shaolong revealed his perfectly muscular and alluring male body and said with a smile, “Has Learned Lady Ji finally regained her ability to talk?”

Ji Yanran objected, “You only know how to tease me.” She really wanted to turn her head around so that she won’t see this man embarrassing her but her eyes just won’t listen to her and they couldn’t move away from Xiang Shaolong’s masculine body and

neither do they not want to see him.

Xiang Shaolong knelt next to the bed, lowered his head to look at her and at the same time his hands caressed her fair back and pert bottom, saying with a sigh, “Heavens! This work of Heaven is really a very moving piece.”

Ji Yanran moaned in response to his interesting and alluring words of love as she pouted, “Xiang Lang! I still have to go back before the day breaks!”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a laugh, “Then aren’t you going to turn yourself around?”

This time, Ji Yanran did not obey him submissively, instead she wished that she could burrow into the bed and hide herself.

Xiang Shaolong sat on the bed and gently flipped her over.

Ji Yanran’s eyes were tightly closed, her cheeks red. Her radiance was glaring, and extremely adorable.

Xiang Shaolong pressed down on her, their bodies touching without any gap in between at all and immediately this couple’s temperature was raised continuously.

In the warm bedroom, rolling around under the blankets, Ji Yanran’s virgin passion was ignited and she welcomed and entwined herself around Xiang Shaolong without a care.

It was only now that Xiang Shaolong was totally assured of Ji Yanran's love as he got what everyone has admired and coveted, which is Ji Yanran's precious virginity.

After the tumultuous affair, Ji Yanran's limbs were still tightly entwined around his body, her eyes closed tight and pure bliss written all over her face.

Xiang Shaolong can feel how deeply in love this beauty is with him and how much she trusts him and he can't help but feel guilty that he had ever doubted her.

Xiang Shaolong pressed his face against hers and asked gently, "Happy?"

Ji Yanran hugged him with all her might, opened her pretty eyes which showed the satisfaction and sweetness after a tumultuous night as she sighed, "I did not expect that there will be such alluring experience between a man and a woman. Yanran feels as if my life before this has been lived in vain."

Such alluring words filled with so much love is more effective than any aphrodisiac and it immediately caused another storm.

At this point in time both of them were in perfect harmony, with no hindrance at all.

Xiang Shaolong can clearly feel his intense love for her, that's

why he was nervous and troubled over Li Yuan's appearance.

Ji Yanran suddenly kissed him and asked, "Are you afraid that I have fallen for that Li Yuan?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in embarrassment.

Ji Yanran replied tenderly, "You think too lowly of Yanran. I've seen countless handsome men but none other than you can make my heart beat faster. Xiang Shaolong can get Ji Yanran's heart, is not totally because he is more good looking than others, but because of his generosity, spirit, extraordinary intelligence and a heroic aura that is irresistible to others." She lowered her head and continued quietly, "And now there's the addition of the love and entanglement, the joy between a man and a woman."

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to start round three with her but sadly the night is painfully short and with the urgent crows of the cockerel, he helped her with her robes and at the same time continued with his entanglements.

The big house that Ji Yanran is residing in is the residence of Handan's famous scholar Liu Huasheng, which is only 2 streets away from Xiang Shaolong's residence. Xiang Shaolong accompanied her back, choosing side streets and alleys to avoid the patrolling city guards.

Ji Yanran slipped back into the house from the back garden. Xiang Shaolong still wanted to kiss and caress her, and only released her after this beauty was suitably blushing. Only the both

of them can experience the feelings of entanglement between them.

As he walked back, Xiang Shaolong was filled with the intoxicating feeling of sweetness and warmth.

Suddenly, all the worries and danger became inconsequential matters.

Book 7 Chapter 4 – Love And Hatred

With the strong will trained from the days in the Special Task Force, Xiang Shaolong forced himself up from bed and went to the hall to see Zhao Mu.

Zhao Mu's attitude was warm as he said, "Come! Let's have a good talk."

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be dismayed, "Shouldn't we be heading to Learned Lady Ji's place immediately?"

Zhao Mu forced a smile, "This morning she sent to inform me that she's feeling a little unwell so the appointment to see the horse will have to be postponed. Hai! A woman's heart is most unfathomable, especially such a rare and haughty beauty."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing and thinking what could be so unfathomable? Ji Yanran was just following his instructions to cancel the appointment to avoid any embarrassment when they meet. It's just that he did not expect Zhao Mu to come and inform him personally.

After asking the servants to leave, Xiang Shaolong sat down next to him and asked, "Did Marquis have a good sleep last night?"

Zhao Mu sighed, "I almost even didn't close my eyes. Too many things happened during the feast and even when I told myself not to think about it, my brain refuses to obey." He continued in a quiet voice, "This time Li Yuan has brought with him a huge group

of people. Those that can be considered experts are already more than 30 and they are all famous Chu swordsmen that he recently recruited to be his family warriors. Usually he keeps a very low profile in Chu in order to avoid raising Father's suspicions but he's revealing his true self once he arrived here."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Marquis, do not worry. I am confident that he will not be able to return to our Great Chu alive."

Zhao Mu was visibly touched as he looked at him and said, "Father has indeed chosen the right person to come. What is your real identity? Why have I never heard anyone mention you before."

Xiang Shaolong already has a script long prepared so he replied calmly, "My real name is Wang Zhuo, a hunter from the Xiutu Tribe. His Highness came to hunt near where I lived once and met with a pack of wolves and I saved him. Ever since then his Highness has specially groomed me and allowed my clan to enjoy wealth and riches. He is my benefactor. His Highness wants me to help you accomplish the plan of becoming the King of Zhao, therefore he has never taken me back to the residence. My trip to Handan this time is to work together with Marquis and to act when there's a chance. Won't the world belong to your Huang family sooner or later? My men are all from the Xiutu Tribe and absolutely trustworthy, so Marquis can put your mind at ease."

Zhao Mu's heart was fluttering on hearing this, thinking to himself that his Father really knows how to use people. This Wang Zhuo is not only intelligent but bold as well, not to mention his excellent swordsmanship. With this person's help and with Le

Cheng's coordination, the position of Zhao Ruler will certainly belong to him. The biggest obstacles will be the two fellows Lian Po and Li Mu.

Zhao Mu said, "I've been thinking the whole night and finally thought of a workable plan, but now the time is not yet ripe. I will discuss with you again at a later date. As that muddleheaded King Xiaocheng has very high expectations of you, you'd better show some results as soon as possible."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing that the most important part was his last sentence. He stood up and said, "Thank you for the reminder. I will immediately bring my men to the new farm outside the city to discuss how we can set up the place."

Zhao Mu's original intention was to look for him to pay a perfunctory visit to Lord Longyang, who was interested in Xiang Shaolong, so as to avoid incurring the displeasure of this powerful man from Wei. On hearing this he had no choice but to stand up as well and said, "Don't forget about Guo Zhong's feast tonight, you must come back before dusk."

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged a reply and sent him off before setting off with Wu Zhuo and the rest towards the outskirts of the city.

Wu Zhuo, Jing Jun and most of the others stayed at the Hidden Army Valley where the new farm will be, setting up tents, chopping down trees, repairing bridges and roads, pretending to be preparing for everything. Actually, they are just establishing a foothold, so that not everyone will be captured if anything

happens and at the same time to prevent Jing Jun from losing patience and looking for Zhao Zhi on his own.

Before dusk, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and 30 odd highly skilled men from the Elite team rushed back to Handan.

They had just arrived at the city gates when the official on guard duty told him, “His Majesty has orders that Mister Dong enter the Palace immediately to see him.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged looks, both feeling that something is not right for the King of Zhao would not summon him for no reason.

After they exchanged a few words, Xiang Shaolong went to the Palace to see King Xiaocheng under the escort of the Zhao soldiers.

Cheng Xu personally brought him to Wenying Hall, the place where King Xiaocheng usually work in and the person accompanying him turns out to be Guo Kai and not Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Xiaocheng’s expression remained normal and put his mind at ease. After paying his respects, he sat down at his lower left, facing Guo Kai.

Cheng Xu went to stand behind King Xiaocheng.

Guo Kai gave him a look, indicating that he is taking care of him.

After asking a few questions about the farm, King Xiaocheng sighed and said, “About the farm, it’s best that Mister Dong slow down the progress for the moment and try your best not to reveal anything.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and replied, “Your subordinate will certainly obey your orders, but I wonder what is the reason?”

King Xiaocheng smiled wryly, “It is a must to establish the farm, it’s just that there’s a sudden setback. Let Mister Guo relate this to you!”

Guo Kai gave a dry cough before speaking with his weird voice, “It’s all that Li Yuan’s fault. Who knows how he managed to find out that Mister Dong trip this time is to return to your home country. When he met his Majesty this morning, he said that although you are a Zhao, you’re still a subject of Chu and if we allow Mister to stay in Zhao, it will have negative impacts on both country’s relations.”

Xiang Shaolong is so angry his lungs are almost bursting. This Li Yuan is obviously jealous to see Ji Yanran seated on the same table as him last night and talking to him so closely, therefore he’s deliberately spoiling his plans. Without a doubt, he must have said other bad things about him as well. Luckily King Xiaocheng is really in need of him, otherwise he may very well bind him up immediately and send him back to Chu.

King Xiaocheng said seriously, “Of course I will not take his

comments to heart, it's just that the situation now is very delicate. His sister is the beloved concubine of the King of Chu and when the time comes for the powers to unite, if he says anything to the King of Chu and advises him not to send troops to deal with the Qins, then our 'alliance' this time will fail. That's why at this point of time we have no choice but to condescend to him."

Guo Kai added with a laugh, "Once Li Yanyan gives birth, there'll be no use even if Li Yuan talks to the King of Chu."

Xiang Shaolong laughed together with them.

Of course he knows that Guo Kai is inferring that the King of Chu is someone who will never make a woman give birth to a boy, so Li Yanyan will be no exception. But he knows that the real person who did it this time is Lord Chunshen and not the King of Chu, so there's at least a 50 percent chance that it will be a boy. Guo Kai's assumption may not be accurate. But of course he cannot be blamed, for who would have expected such a twist in this.

Xiang Shaolong had a thought and asked, "Should I keep away for a while?"

King Xiaocheng replied, "You must not, for it would mean that I would have to act according to Li Yuan's likings. I told him at that time that Mister Dong has not decided whether to stay or leave, and managed to drag this matter for now. That's why now I'm asking Mister to keep a low profile for the time being and only start on the foundations after Li Yuan has left."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly overjoyed but pretended to be helpless as he replied, “In that case I’ll have to send someone out to stop the delivery of the horses which are now on their way here. But I’m afraid the earlier batch would have already arrived at the border.”

King Xiaocheng replied, “If it has arrived then so be it! We do need to increase our number of warhorses, as for the rest we’ll just do according to your plan.”

Xiang Shaolong was just worrying that he has no excuse to send people back to Qin to report, so he hurriedly agreed.

King Xiaocheng was silent for a moment before he asked with some hesitation, “Last night the Marquis of Julu asked Mister to stay behind after the feast, what did he say to you?”

Xiang Shaolong quietly shuddered as he secretly thought this exciting. He did not expect that King Xiaocheng would actually be suspicious of his ‘lover’, and of course that conniving devil Guo Kai must have been stirring things up so he pretended to be surprised and exclaimed, “Is there a problem with Marquis?”

Guo Kai reminded him, “You have yet to reply to his Majesty’s question?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be frightened and after expressing his apology, replied, “The Marquis of Julu opened his heart to me and said he’ll take care of me so that I can work my full potential. He also said, hai...”

King Xiaocheng furrowed his brows, “Even if it involves bad things about me, Mister Dong please go ahead and repeat without fear.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “It’s not really bad things, the Marquis only said that if he were to put in a few good words for me in front of your Majesty, I’ll definitely enjoy riches and wealth. Ai! I am just a boorish man and my only wish is to rear my horses in peace and to contribute some small effort to my beloved country! Not to mention riches and wealth, even life and death is of no consequence to me.”

When King Xiaocheng heard how Zhao Mu tried to bribe him, he gave a cold snort. But when Xiang Shaolong ‘bared his soul’ in the end, he looked touched and kept nodding his head, expressing his admiration.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “The Marquis even wanted to make me stay at his residence and help me find a courtesan to spend the night with, but I thought that business is more important and adamantly refused.”

Guo Kai said, “His Majesty is very impressed with Mister’s devotion to work, but for the next few days you’d better just go around enjoying yourself. We have a few famous official brothels in Handan, why don’t I bring you there to join in the liveliness tomorrow!”

After some idle talk, King Xiaocheng instructed him not to reveal

the contents of their conversation to Zhao Mu before Guo Kai accompanied Xiang Shaolong out of Wenying Hall.

As he walked on the familiar corridors past the buildings, Xiang Shaolong's feelings can't help but well up as he thought of the tragic Lady Ni. He didn't even concentrate on Guo Kai's continuous babbling next to him.

Guo Kai saw that he looked distracted and thought that he was unhappy about Li Yuan so he consoled him, "Mister Dong, don't be affected by people like Li Yuan. That's right! Don't you have to attend Guo Zhong's feast tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong was startled awake, secretly reprimanding himself for having mood swings at this point in time as he exclaimed, "Aren't you going as well?"

Guo Kai smiled, "I've already rejected the invitation. Ever since the arrival of the important officials from the eastern states, I've been so busy that I can't breath. Just the writing of the proposal for his Majesty is enough to make me lose sleep for a few days."

Xiang Shaolong was about to reply when a group of horsemen surrounding a horse carriage slow rode towards them from the road on the left.

A lewd look appeared on Guo Kai's face as he said quietly, "Lady Ya is here!"

Xiang Shaolong had already recognized Zhao Da and his men and has already stopped to let the group past first.

Zhao Da and the rest all paid their respects to Guo Kai.

Just as the horse carriage was about to turn into the square, the curtains of the carriage was raised, revealing a pale and tired looking Zhao Ya who is obviously lacking sleep. When she saw Xiang Shaolong, she did not reveal any look of surprise, as if she already knows that he is in the Palace. She cried out daintily, “Stop the carriage!”

The carriage and her men stopped.

Zhao Ya’s pretty eyes, which were still alluring, first landed on Guo Kai’s face as she said with a smile, “How are you, Official Guo!”

Guo Kai was captivated as he replied, “How can I be good when I have not played the zither or chess with Lady for such a long time?”

Xiang Shaolong was livid on hearing it and wished that he could give Zhao Ya a tight slap for she is really not showing any self-respect at all.

Zhao Ya saw Guo Kai flirting so outrageously with her in front of this horse fanatic and replied with embarrassment, “Mister Guo must be joking.” Her eyes turned towards Xiang Shaolong’s face

and asked gently, “Is Mister Dong going to the Guo residence. If you don’t mind, why don’t you go together with Zhao Ya!”

Xiang Shaolong replied icily, “Thank you Lady for your kind invitation, but I feel like walking alone so that I can think about some matters.”

Guo Kai thought that he was still troubled over Li Yuan’s matter so he didn’t feel anything out of norm. Zhao Ya guessed that he was taking revenge on her because she had rejected him so rudely last night. She was secretly cursing this person for being so stubborn, which is so much like Xiang Shaolong.

Her heart softened as she said lightly, “In that case I will not force Mister.”

The horse carriage slowly rode towards the gates of the Palace.

Xiang Shaolong rejected Guo Kai’s suggestion of taking the same carriage, saying “I love riding horses, and can only feel safe and satisfied on a horse’s back. Mister, please ask your guards not to follow me, let me stroll around on my own and at the same time think about some matters.”

Guo Kai asked with doubt, “It’s the first time you’ve been to Handan, how would you know how to go to the Guo residence?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled, for he knows that it’s easiest to let the cat out of the bag with inconsequential details

such as this so he replied offhandedly, "Please do not worry, I have already asked for directions."

He jumped up his horse and left, waving his hand.

Once he left the Palace gates, Xiang Shaolong allowed his horse to stretch its legs and in a short moment, he has already caught up with Zhao Ya's carriage.

Lady Ya heard the sounds of the horse's hooves and saw him riding majestically towards her. Her pretty eyes can't help but light up, but a cloud quickly came over them again.

Ever since Xiang Shaolong left Zhao, she has felt pain that was never felt before with guilt and regret biting her heart and soul like poisonous snakes. In order to forget this man who has taken her heart, her actions became even more brazen than before but Xiang Shaolong has always been in a deep corner of her heart, a position that cannot be replaced. During this time she got close with Han Chuang, thinking that she can successfully forget about Xiang Shaolong but the appearance of this Dong Kuang has ignited a wondrous excitement and memory, making her lose interest in Han Chuang.

Xiang Shaolong deliberately refused to look at her and in an instant has left her far behind.

The houses in Handan are all lighted up by now and as it's right after dinnertime, there's not much people and carriages on the streets. Everywhere was quiet and peaceful.

Xiang Shaolong thought of his beloved wives and maids in faraway Qin and felt warmth in his heart. He wished that he could capture Zhao Mu alive immediately, kill Le Cheng and return home.

While traveling up the hilly road leading to Guo Zhong's residence, he heard the sound of hooves behind him and on turning back for a look, it turned out to be Zhao Zhi coming after him.

Once Xiang Shaolong saw that it's her, he remembered Jing Jing as well as Teng Yi and Wu Zhuo's suggestion and immediately felt a headache coming on as he slowed down.

Zhao Zhi was next to him in an instant and rode together with him, looking at him deep in the eyes and said, "Mister Dong seems to be very familiar with the streets of Handan!"

Once she said that, Xiang Shaolong immediately know that she has been following him for a distance, only choosing to catch up with him now. He was secretly lamenting as he replied, "Before I came, someone has already pointed the way here to me. Is Miss Zhi going to the Guo Residence for the feast as well?"

Zhao Zhi did not answer him but just stared at him and said, "I'm afraid Mister is deliberately lowering your voice and making it sound hoarse!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting. If she is sure that he is

Xiang Shaolong, a mere fake mask won't be enough to trick her. This time he has no choice but to use love to get what he wants. He sighed and executed his special move, pressing his hand on the horse's back, jumped up into the air and just as Zhao Zhi was gasping in surprise, he landed neatly behind her. His hands went forward, tightly hugging her tiny waist that has not an ounce of extra fat, pressed his face against hers and said, "Miss Zhi's words are really strange. Why would I deliberately make my voice sound like that?"

Zhao Zhi was greatly embarrassed and she struggled hard for a while but under such a situation this would only serve to increase the contact between them. She exclaimed in surprised anger, "What are you doing?"

Xiang Shaolong chortled as his hand reached out and grabbed her chin to turn her pretty face, giving a fierce kiss on her dainty and wet lips.

Zhao Zhi moaned, as if lost in his manliness and flirtation, but was suddenly conscious as she elbowed him hard on his vulnerable armpit.

Xiang Shaolong groaned as he flipped over the horse's butt. Although it was indeed painful, it was not as bad as he exaggerated, for he just wanted to give her an opportunity to soothe her ego.

Zhao Zhi was so frightened that she turned her horse around and rode back to where Xiang Shaolong was lying. She jumped down the horse, knelt next to him and cried out, "Dong Kuang! Are you alright!"

Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes, his arms reached out and hugged her close to his body again before turning around, pressing her down on the grass at the side of the road.

Zhao Zhi's body went weak with his hug yet she is unwilling to be taken advantaged of by him. Most importantly she is still not sure if he is Xiang Shaolong, so if she allows herself to be kissed again, then won't she be betraying the man she secretly loves. Hot tears ran down her eyes as she cried out, "If you molest me again, I'll kill myself!"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so protective of her chastity and formed a newfound respect for her. However he knows that if he were to leave her now, the situation would be even more embarrassing and before knowing if she has found out the truth, he cannot reveal his real identity. Therefore he can only press her down hard and asked gently, "Do Miss Zhi hate me?"

Zhao Zhi feels as if her body has no intention of rejecting him at all and was feeling both angry and troubled. She closed her pretty eyes, allowing the tears to flow freely as she said weakly, "Let me go quickly, if someone passes by and sees us, I'll be finished."

Xiang Shaolong lowered his head, kissing away one of her teardrops before hugging her into a standing position and said, "Miss is too alluring, please forgive me for being unable to control myself."

Zhao Zhi seems shattered as her tears flowed like the river,

shaking her head piteously and saying, “You’re just making fun of me. Why do you still want to lie to me, I know that you are him.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed and still continued talking gently in his hoarse voice, “I’ll come to your house tonight to look for you, all right?”

Zhao Zhi snapped her dark eyes opened in joy and nodded her head vigorously.

Xiang Shaolong used his sleeve to wipe away her remaining tears and felt a little guilty as he said, “Come! We’ll be late if we don’t start moving.”

Zhao Zhi struggled out of his embrace and said quietly with her head lowered, “Zhao Zhi will wait for you at home tonight.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Aren’t you going?”

Zhao Zhi smiled and pouted, “You’ve made me look like a mess, how can I go and face others.”

She jumped up her horse’s back and rode out a few steps, her head turned around and hands waving, a sweet smile on her lips. The look of love on a young girl’s face made Xiang Shaolong’s heart skip a few beat faster.

Until she disappeared from sight, Xiang Shaolong recollected his thoughts and went towards the Guo residence to attend the feast.

Guo Fu's feast tonight has a lot less guests. Besides Zhao Mu, Le Cheng, Han Chuang and Zhao Ba, there's Li Yuan whom Xiang Shaolong does not wish to see at all and adding him and Zhao Ya, there's only 7 people. Guo Zhong's 2 sons did not attend, for maybe they are working elsewhere.

Guo Zhong is not as warm to him as last night, instead focusing his attentions especially on Li Yuan, as if he is the main guest.

Xiang Shaolong is already used to seeing how capricious people can be and knows that Guo Zhong is deliberately treating him coldly so that he could get into the good books of Li Yuan, who can possibly become Chu's most powerful man.

Li Yuan maintained his politeness towards this love rival but Xiang Shaolong can clearly feel the hatred from him.

That's understandable, for he witnessed last night during the dance performance how Ji Yanran was talking closely with him. With his intelligence and understanding of Ji Yanran, it's not difficult for him to see that this rare beauty has an interest in him.

After some idle talk, Zhao Mu made an excuse and pulled him aside, asking in a low voice, "Why did his Majesty summon you?"

Xiang Shaolong was waiting for this question and replied, "They asked me what have you told me last night. Of course I won't reveal the truth so I only said that we were discussing about matters concerning the setting up of the farm. Marquis! It's not I

who is overly worried, but that muddleheaded ruler King Xiaocheng seems to be suspicious of you, I think Guo Kai must have secretly betrayed you!”

A frightening icy glare shot past Zhao Mu’s eyes as he said with a cold snort, “I will show them my prowess at a later time!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has already forced Zhao Mu up the path of rebellion. Right at this time Zhai Ba walked over and they hurriedly changed the topic to more idle talk.

Zhao Mu said with a smile, “Your pretty disciple is not accompanying you to tonight’s feast?”

Zhao Ba replied, “She should be coming, I’ve just sent someone to look for her.”

The sounds of accessories clanging were heard as Zhao Ya floated over.

Guo Zhong expressed his apology to Li Yuan, Le Cheng and Han Chuang before going to receive her.

Zhao Ya’s eyes first landed on Xiang Shaolong before moving to where Han Chuang and Li Yuan stood. She hesitated for a moment before walking towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong deliberately refused to look at her, his eyes turned to look at other places.

The layout this time was the same as the one Ji Yanran used during her feast in Daliang, with a big round table in the middle of the hall with 10 seats.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly counting in his heart, even if they included Zhao Zhi, there's still an extra seat, so he wonders which esteemed guest has yet to arrive.

A fragrance wafted close and after Zhao Ya greeted the various people, she commented to Xiang Shaolong just as he turned his head back, "Mister Dong's horse is really fast, you arrived so much earlier than me."

Xiang Shaolong smiled suavely, as a form of reply.

Just at this time, someone arrived.

Under the accompaniment of 2 maids, a pretty young girl who has taken much care to dress up walked in gracefully. Zhao Mu and the rest all looked surprised, obviously no one knows who she is.

Guo Zhong personally unveiled this mystery. The merchant chuckled and said, "Xier'er! Come and greet our important guests." He then told everyone, "This is my youngest daughter Xiu'er!"

Zhao Mu exclaimed in surprise, "So it's Master Guo's treasured daughter. Why have you kept her away for so long, only giving us the pleasure of seeing her today."

Xiang Shaolong had a thought, and guessed that Guo Zhong has the intention of marrying his daughter to Li Yuan so that if Zhao falls into trouble in future, they can hide in Chu, who would not be at the forefront of Qin's attack and continue with his trade.

A great merchant like Guo Zhong whose trade is in making steel and weapons will be welcome in any country but with the protection of a powerful official like Li Yuan, things will run a lot smoother for him.

With the situation now, besides the 3 states, Chu is the furthest away from the invading Qins. Qi is near 3 states, so they face the danger of close proximity, and as for Yan, after the defeat by Tian Dan, have become weak. Only the state of Chu, which is at the far north, is still strong and still safe for the time being. As long as the 3 states are still around, the Chus need not worry that the Qins would risk engaging in war with another state.

The Wu family has successfully migrated to Qin, so Guo Zhong, as an astute businessman, would naturally have to plan for himself.

At this time Guo Xiu'er daintily walked to where everyone was and paid her respects.

This young lady who is not older than 16 is slim and attractive with an egg-shaped face with delicate features. Her pretty eyes look as if they could talk and as clear as autumn's water, which added to her allure. The corners of her mouth curved up slightly in

a shy smile, her face radiant. Her beauty is almost comparable to Wu Tingfang. Everyone was attracted, including Li Yuan.

Guo Zhong saw what was happening and was extremely pleased so he waved and said, “Xiu’er, come quickly and greet Mister Li.”

Guo Xiu’er’s pretty eyes saw Li Yuan and they immediately lighted up but her head lowered shyly as she moved towards them.

Everyone immediately had the feeling that they have been disregarded while Zhao Ya’s expression looked unnatural.

Zhao Mu gave a sideways look towards Li Yuan, a flash of murderous intent flashing past which he quickly covered up but it did not escape Xiang Shaolong’s sharp eyes.

Zhao Ya can feel her heart inclining towards this Dong Kuang whose crudity and gentleness cannot be deciphered. She moved nearer to him and said, “Would Mister be free to come to my place to take a look at the horses I keep, so that Zhao Ya can seek your advice on rearing horses.”

Zhao Mu thought that she has finally decided to obey him and get close to this ‘Wang Zhuo’ so he said with a smile, “It’s rare that Lady has given her invitation, so let me accept on his behalf.”

There’s no way Xiang Shaolong can make Zhao Mu lose face in public so he had no choice but to nod his head.

Zhao Ya saw how hesitant he was in agreeing so she rolled her eyes at him but did not talk about the date or time.

The gong sounded and it's time to be seated for the feast.

Book 7 Chapter 5 – Mad With Envy And Hatred

Either deliberately or coincidentally, Xiang Shaolong's seat was placed next to Zhao Ya, and on the other side of Zhao Ya was Han Chuang, Guo Xiu'er, Li Yuan, Guo Zhong while on Xiang Shaolong's right there were Zhao Ba, Le Cheng and Zhao Mu. Zhao Zhi's seat has been taken away.

Now everyone knows that the real main lead is Li Yuan, who is seated between Guo Zhong and his daughter. This person is a good talker and in no time at all, Guo Xiu'er was constantly covering her mouth and laughing lightly very amicably. It seems that as soon as Li Yuan is willing to nod his head, Guo Xiu'er will belong to him.

Han Chuang is obviously very interested in this outstanding and pretty young girl but because he has to regard the State of Han's foreign relations, he dare not pit himself against Li Yuan. He concentrated on having a private conversation with Zhao Ya whereas Zhao Ya was deliberating ignoring the horse fanatic as she talked to Han Chuang in an intimate manner, constantly letting out tinkling laughs, which brought much gaiety to the feast.

In order to create more opportunities between Li Yuan and his beloved daughter, Guo Zhong, after making small talk with everyone at the table, turned to face Zhao Mu and Le Cheng who were seated on his left and engaged them in small talk, the topic of conversation always about the officials and wealthy in Handan.

Zhao Ba and Guo Zhong were personal friends so he joined this circle of conversation as well. Although Xiang Shaolong pretended

to be interested and listening intently, it was obvious that Guo Zhong was disregarding him.

Xiang Shaolong knows very well that Guo Zhong has changed so quickly because Li Yuan has influenced him and from this he can see that this great merchant is feeling pessimistic about the situation in Zhao and is already having thoughts of leaving.

This thinking naturally cannot be hidden from the King of Zhao and Guo Kai, that's why the latter had reminded him to be careful of Guo Zhong.

With the Wu family gone, the State of Zhao seems to be coming to the end of her days and weakening immediately.

What is Zhao Ya's future plan?

At this time the maids came forward to pour wine for everyone.

Li Yuan turned away from Guo Xiu'er to look at Xiang Shaolong and said, "Brother Dong has traveled such a long and arduous journey to come here and I wonder for what reason?"

Everyone could hear that his tone was filled with antagonism so they all stopped talking to see how Xiang Shaolong would respond.

For the first time Guo Xiu'er raised her pretty face and eyed this burly and boorish looking man who is even bigger sized than Li Yuan.

Xiang Shaolong was calm and composed as he narrowed his eyes to look at him, replying offhandedly in his hoarse voice, "What Brother Li loves is beauties, what I love is handsome horses. Brother Li will go wherever the beauty goes while I will go to wherever there are fertile land and water. If Brother Li were to think about your own attitude, you will understand my attitude even more." His reply was just appropriate.

Guo Xiu'er thought that the beauty Xiang Shaolong is talking about refers to her and was so shy that she lowered her pretty face.

The others all did not expect that this boor's argument would be so formidable and were all secretly surprised and at the same time feel a little embarrassed for Li Yuan.

Only Zhao Mu was secretly happy, for he cannot offend Li Yuan so it's most appropriate that Xiang Shaolong does it for him.

Li Yuan's expression changed slightly as a murderous look flashed past his eyes and he said coldly, "Is Brother Dong implying that the water and land in Chu cannot be compared to here?" He had just spoken the words when he realized that he has been caught off balance, for everyone at the table are Zhaos with the exception of Han Chuang, so how can he say such words.

Indeed Le Cheng, Zhao Ba and Zhao Mu, who has long since regarded himself as a Zhao all furrowed their brows.

Xiang Shaolong saw that just a few words could force Li Yuan to

stumble and was secretly overjoyed and continued nonchalantly as if he could not see Li Yuan's anger, saying "Brother Li thinks too far ahead, I'm just making an example. Actually all land has their advantages and disadvantages. The weather down south is temperate and easy to rear horses but the horses reared there may look handsome but are not strong and stout enough and cannot tolerate harsh winds, rain and snow; it's difficult to rear horses in the north but the horses reared there can take hardships and there are less chances of horse plague happening there. That's why the horses of the Xiong Nus are the most famous, precisely because of the cold and hard climate that resulted in the rich quantity of excellent horses."

Everyone was impressed and did not expect Xiang Shaolong to have such insight. He also managed to insinuate with sarcasm that Chu, which is in the south, are engrossed in merrymaking and doesn't strive for improvement at all whereas the states in the north, including the formidable Qin, may be engaged in wars year after year but this has made them groom many a talent and their reputation is higher than the once powerful Chus.

This is indeed a fact. Ever since the tiny Yue successfully attacked Chu, their pride has taken a beating. Adding on to this is their constant failures in their strategies that made their situation go on a downturn.

The first time the 6 states joined forces to attack Qin, it is King Huai of Chu who takes the lead but in practice only Han and Zhao are taking part in the war. The 2 states were greatly defeated by the Qins at Xiuyu, which was within the Han borders while Qi turned around and attacked Zhao and Wei, creating internal strife. Hence Qin took the opportunity to eliminate Ba and Shu, thus

increasing their territory twofold, making it close to the size of Wujun and Qianzhong in Chu. Thus the nightmare of the Chus began, letting them taste the bitter outcome of being just 'onlookers'.

All along, the Qins are most worried about Qi and Chu joining forces, therefore the Qins ceded some territory to cajole King Huai of Chu to break his friendship with the Qis. However, they went back on their words once they got what they wanted, greatly defeating the Chu army at Danyang, where 80,000 people were killed and took over Hanzhong in Chu. They then proceeded to take over Zhaoling, making them totally lose control over the northwest areas of Yingdu.

This is not the only insensible act committed by King Huai of Chu. Just as he has agreed to work with Qi again, he was again enticed by the Qins and once again changed his mind suddenly, even to the extent of having a marriage agreement with the Qins.

Qi, Wei and Han were furious and sent their troops to attack Chu for going back on the treaty and King Huai was so astounded that he ordered the Crown Prince to go to Qin to ask for Qin reinforcements. The 3 states then had no choice but to retreat. Later the Qins found an excuse to attack Chu and using coercion and persuasion, managed to trick this brainless King into Qin and imprisoned him. He failed in escaping and ended up dying of illness in Qin.

When his son King Qingxiang of Chu ascended the throne, he tried to seek revenge and after being threatened by the Qins, he was immediately scared shitless. Not only did he beg for

reconciliation, he even asked for a marriage agreement with the Qins. Like his father, he added another muddled event in their history.

Therefore Xiang Shaolong's words hinted at how the Chus have destroyed their own country because of the people and not because of wars. The most impressive part was that he was insinuating that although Li Yuan looks able, he is in fact a useless man and cannot survive any setback.

Zhao Ya and Guo Xiu'er, eyed both of them with their sharp woman's intuition and they could feel that Li Yuan is like the good looking horses of the south whereas this Dong Kuang is an excellent horse from the north that can withstand hardship. The impression of Li Yuan dropped by a few notches in their hearts.

Guo Zhong looked at Xiang Shaolong in surprise as he reconsidered if it is really most appropriate to hide from Qin in Chu.

Xiang Shaolong argued from an irrefutable point, proving the Chu's fatal weaknesses are indecisiveness, irresoluteness and fear of hardship, each point of his argument drawing blood.

Li Yuan's face alternated between turning red and pale but he was speechless.

What can he say when on the surface, the other party is talking about horses?

Guo Zhong chortled as he tried to smooth things over and said, “Mister Dong’s words are always about horses, a horse fanatic indeed. Come! Let’s drink a toast.”

Everyone raised their cup with the exception of Li Yuan, who was stony faced and did not follow suit, giving others the impression that he was being petty.

After Zhao Ba finished his drink, he raised his cup again, which has just been filled by the maid. He raised his cup towards Li Yuan and Han Chuang and said, “To the cooperation between Han, Chu and Zhao, let us drink a toast!”

Li Yuan seems to have thought of something and his expression returned to normal, looking calm and suave as he raised his cup and drank with a smile. Only then did the tense atmosphere relax a little.

Han Chuang said, “I heard that the King of Qi placed much importance in this meeting in Handan and the Premier Tian Dan is rushing here personally. He’ll be here within these 2 days.”

Zhao Mu and Le Cheng already knew about this long ago but for the rest it’s the first time they’ve heard of it and they were all excited.

Tian Dan can be considered the real ruler of Qi, without the title and his reputation is comparable to Prince Xinling of Wei.

8 years after the death of King Huai of Chu, the State of Chu was getting weaker while the State of Qi is shining bright, stable enough to fight Qin as an equal. Right at this time, the Qis fell into the Qin's trap and accepted King Zhaoxiang of Qin's suggestion to regard the King of Qin as the Emperor of the West while the Qis will be the Emperor of the East. Meaning that Qin and Qi will split the world equally.

Although 2 days after declaring himself Emperor, the King of Qi was persuaded by his officials to rescind the title of Emperor, but it did nothing to quell his ambition. He subsequently invaded towards the north and south, first destroying Song, then swallowing up a few small states, taking over lots of land but the country's resources were greatly depleted as well due to the invasions, giving Qin, Chu, the 3 states as well as Yan the opportunity to invade Qi. The Yan general Yue Yi invaded Linzi* and within 5 years took over 70 odd cities, leaving only Ju and Jimo.

*Linzi – Capital of Qi

Tian Dan is a person who rose up in fame during such difficult times. He was a distant relative of the King of Qi and was initially a minor official in the Palace. Before the Yan army invaded the city, he told his clansmen to saw off the ends of the carriage axles so that when escaping, the carriages will not break down due to the constant knocking against each other and thus successfully escaped. Just this trick of his has revealed his potential of being wise and calm in the face of adversity.

When the Yans attacked Jimo, everyone supported him to be the

Commander and right at that time King Zhao of Yan had just passed away and the new King of Yan fell into Tian Dan's scheme, replacing Yue Yi with a useless general. Once this person came, Tian Dan easily swept the Yans out of their borders, and his most famous maneuver was using the Fiery Cow Formation to greatly defeat the Yan army.

Although Tian Dan's fame spread because of this, the State of Qi fell into difficulties, barely surviving until now.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to continue listening when Zhao Ya who was next to him took over the wine bottle from the serving maid and topped up Xiang Shaolong's empty cup with the fragrant wine, her eyes bright as she said softly with a smile, "Mister Dong! If there is anywhere Zhao Ya has offended you, please accept this cup of wine as apology!"

Han Chuang was still talking and did not take notice. Only Li Yuan's eyes flashed a strange glint as he started thinking.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly furious. This woman is really fickle. She was just being all over Han Chuang earlier and now that she was moved by his words, she's trying to get into his good books. However, he has not reached the stage where he would be so ill mannered as embarrass her publicly so he raised his cup and said without feelings, "Lady thinks too much, how could you have offended me! Let me drink a toast to Lady!"

Zhao Ya's pretty eyes looked at him deeply as she raised her cup to drink.

Only now did Han Chuang notice that the secret undercurrent between the 2 of them and a look of unhappiness flashed past his face. If they are in Han, with his position, he'll definitely teach Xiang Shaolong a good lesson but now he can only seethe in his heart.

Li Yuan chortled and said, "Lady! I have yet to offer you a toast today." He raised his cup and offered her a toast from afar.

Although Zhao Ya's good impression of him has been slightly reduced, she still has a slight liking for him. This person's attitude was cold to her last night and yet now he is making the first move to flirt with her and she can't help but feel pleasantly alarmed as she raised her cup in bewilderment and drank.

Xiang Shaolong knows that Li Yuan is making use of Zhao Ya to give him a blow but he still felt fury rising from his heart, hating Li Yuan and at the same time angry with Zhao Ya for her lack of self respect. Of course on the surface he did not reveal any of his feelings at all.

Li Yuan is not willing to let the matter pass so he continued his flirtation with Zhao Ya, "Lady is such a good drinker. Why don't we find a night and I'll drink with Lady, let's see who will get drunk first."

Once he said that, among the 9 of them seated at the table, 4 of them had an uneasy expression on their faces.

The ones who look most affected was Guo Zhong and Guo Xiu'er, for they both felt that he is not showing them respect by publicly flirting with this beauty who is famed for her wantonness.

Han Chuang transferred his jealousy towards Xiang Shaolong to this newly appeared love rival.

Zhao Mu's expression was also very unnatural, staring at Zhao Ya angrily, wanting her to say something to reject him.

Zhao Ya did not expect the other party to be so bold as to openly invite her for a night of tryst during the feast. Reject? But she can't bear to. Accept? This man who seems even more charismatic than Li Yuan would look down on her. Her intelligent eyes rolled and she replied, "Since Mister Li is in such high spirits, Zhao Ya will find a day to throw a feast at my residence. Mister must not say that you are not free when the time comes!"

Her pretty eyes then surveyed everyone else as she continued with laughter, "All of you will come and bear witness as to which of us will become drunk first."

Li Yuan was slightly taken aback, for he did not expect this slut to actually reject his advances and can't help but seriously take a look at her for the first time.

Ever since his heart and mind has been taken over by Ji Yanran, he rarely pays any attention to other women. Now that he's looking in detail, he realizes that Zhao Ya is like a fresh flower that has bloomed, with indescribable charm and style and extremely

alluring. Such mature beauty is of another description altogether. And on the surface she may look like a flirt and extremely radiant but there's an underlying grace and elegance that no one will dare to belittle. He can't help but feel tempted and only now did he understand why Han Chuang would be so enamored with her.

Li Yuan smiled suavely, "Once the date is set, please send someone to inform me."

Right at this time Zhao Ba interrupted them and everyone started talking about other topics.

Zhao Ya leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and asked quietly, "Satisfied?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling smug, knowing that this wanton woman has once again surrendered to his alternate identity but before he had a chance to talk, Guo Xiu'er stood up and said with a wooden expression, "Sorry! Xiu'er feels a little unwell and would like to go back to my room to rest."

A look of unhappiness showed on Li Yuan's face but he did not say anything.

Everyone knows that this rich young missy is throwing her tantrum at Li Yuan.

Guo Zhong said helplessly, "Help Miss back to her room!"

Immediately the maid came forward to escort this pretty girl out of the hall.

The atmosphere is once again awkward. Without Guo Xiu'er, the feast has lost some of the festivity. Luckily, there is still Zhao Ya to hold the fort.

Zhao Ba had a drink too much and he suddenly felt like talking. He made Xiang Shaolong talk with him about what he feels about swordplay, saying "People learning swordplay nowadays, many of them are anxious for quick results, having only the style but lacking the coordination stability and foundation. They don't even place much importance in training the strength around their waist. They are strong with their arms but weak in their wrists, not knowing that the combination of waist, arms, wrists and foundation are essential in exhibiting the essence of swordplay. Knowing how to make use of strength is the most important requirement."

Li Yuan was proud and obviously holds no regard for this highly respected swordsman of Zhao as he said nonchalantly, "I think it's useless to have only brute strength, otherwise Xiao Weimou won't be killed by Xiang Shaolong!"

The name 'Xiang Shaolong' is now a taboo topic for everyone in the city and with the exception of Han Chuang, everyone else was taken aback.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed to hear his name being mentioned. He glanced quickly towards Zhao Ya only to see her expression darken as she fell into a daze.

Han Chuang said arrogantly, “A pity he escaped to Qin, otherwise I definitely want to try how formidable his swordplay can be.”

Zhao Mu replied through gritted teeth, “Won’t you have the chance once we attack Xianyang in future?”

Zhao Ba was unhappy with Li Yuan’s interruption but he could not win the argument so he said solemnly, “Mister Li is famous in Chu for your swordsmanship. I wonder if you can find a day to come to my school so that it can be an eye-opener for me.”

Li Yuan’s eyes flashed as he nodded his head, “Every time I go someplace, I like to find the most famous swordsman of that place to exchange pointers. Headmaster Zhao’s suggestion is precisely what I would have wanted.”

This time even Le Cheng was annoyed by this person’s arrogance and said to Zhao Ba with a laugh, “Mister Li is so valiant. Headmaster, please set a date and time so that we can admire Mister Li’s excellent swordplay.”

Zhao Ba was obviously secretly livid as he said, “I am getting a little impatient, why not do it tomorrow! We shall see what time is most convenient for Mister Li.”

Li Yuan replied smugly, “Not tomorrow, for I’ve made a date with Miss Ji Yanran to tour Handan. Why don’t we change it to noon the day after!”

Everyone was taken aback and all of them looked both envious and jealous.

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank and turned cold. Why did Ji Yanran agree to accept this person's invitation? He must get an explanation from her.

Zhao Ya's expression was wooden. Naturally she would not feel good to have her thunder stolen by Ji Yanran.

The atmosphere of the feast is now broken beyond repair and Zhao Ba was the first to give an excuse to leave, followed by Zhao Ya.

Han Chuang stood up and said, "Let me accompany Lady Ya back!"

Zhao Ya was troubled and creased her brows as she replied with a shake of her head, "I appreciate Marquis Pingshan's kind intentions, but Zhao Ya's head is feeling a little heavy and would like to have some peace alone."

A look of unhappiness flashed past Han Chuang's face as he said icily, "Whatever Lady wishes then!"

Zhao Mu stood up and said, "Let's leave together! I'm in the mood for talk, so who is willing to share my carriage." He gave Xiang Shaolong a look.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly nodded his head and said, "I'm the only person who came alone, let me accompany Marquis then!"

Zhao Ya looked at Xiang Shaolong with puzzlement, feeling dubious about their relationship.

Everyone bid their farewells and left the Guo residence separately.

Inside the carriage, Zhao Mu said, "I did not expect Mister to have such a sharp tongue, even the glib tongued Li Yuan couldn't fend you off. I wonder if you're confident of winning the sword in his hand. From what I know this person is truly skilled."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Confidence is besides the point. It's just that only wooden swords are used to exchange pointers in the dueling ring, not as if there's a fight for life and death at all..."

Zhao Mu interrupted him, "I just want to put him down a peg or two, not kill him. That fellow is too detestable, if I capture him, I'll definitely f*ck him until he feels that death would be a better choice."

Goose pimples rose immediately on Xiang Shaolong's skin as he gave a cold shiver.

Book 7 Chapter 6 – Sisters In Trouble

After returning, Teng Yi said quietly to him, “Yanran is waiting for you at the inner hall.” Xiang Shaolong was just about to look for her and quickened his steps on hearing that.

Teng Yi ran after him and asked, “Why did the King of Zhao summon you?” Xiang Shaolong was embarrassed and stopped to tell him briefly what happened and laughed, “We’re considered lucky, there should be no problem if we stay in Handan for 1 to 2 more months.” Teng Yi gave him a push and said, “Go in quickly! You’re really lucky in love.” Xiang Shaolong did not expect this burly man to suddenly utter such a phrase. Obviously Shanlan has changed him a lot. He replied with a smile and walked towards his bedroom.

He had just closed the door when the great beauty Ji Yanran ran into his arm with a gush of fragrance, her passion so fiery that he almost melted.

Women who have just started eating the forbidden fruit will be especially clingy and Learned Lady Ji is no exception. After the joining, they started talking, limbs entwined.

Before Xiang Shaolong had a chance to ask her about Li Yuan, this beauty admitted it first, “Xiang Lang, please don’t blame Yanran. I’ve agreed to go with Li Yuan tomorrow to Lake Feng at the south of the city to admire the red leaves. Hai! This lovelorn person is really sincere, to run after me all the way from Chu and kept on pleading with me. Yanran had no choice but to entertain him a little. I will then find a chance to clarify with him my stand

and tell him to give up on me.”

Xiang Shaolong remained silent on hearing how Ji Yanran is still treating Li Yuan so nicely. Ji Yanran pouted a little, “Are you unhappy? It’s just a normal outing! If you’re still worried, I’ll ask Mister Zou to come along.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed and said, “From my observation and information obtained, this person’s interior is not as good as his exterior but if I say this at this point of time, it would seem that I lack graciousness.”

Ji Yanran disengaged herself from his arms and sat up on the bed, revealing her perfect upper body to his eyes as she said unhappily, “Do you think I am a person who would see you as someone carrying tales? I already belong to you while in Daliang, so why should you be afraid to speak your mind.”

Xiang Shaolong pulled her back into his arms, flipped her over and pressed down on her, telling her how he made use of Li Yanyan to take part in the evil scheme set up by Lord Chunshen, and also what happened at the feast tonight.

When Yanran heard how Li Yuan was pressurizing the King of Zhao to deal with her ‘Xiang Shaolong’, and how he publicly announced during the feast about his appointment with her, her expression changed and she said, “I did not expect him to be such a shallow and conniving person, Yanran must really be blind.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “This person may have had a hard time

suppressing himself in Chu so now that he's in Zhao, he would reveal the real him when he's not afraid that others will know."

Ji Yanran breathed out a gush of cold air as she said, "Luckily Xiang Lang has reminded Yanran, so I won't be taken in by him. Hai! When can Xiang Lang take me to Xianyang? It's really torturous being so secretive. Mister Zou is also very envious of Qin and hopes that he can go there quickly."

Xiang Shaolong sighed, "Who wouldn't want to leave this godforsaken place, it's just that now we still have to wait for the right time."

Ji Yanran sat up unwillingly and said, "I have to go. This time you don't have to send me off, it'll be difficult to argue if someone bumps into us." Then added with a smile, "Why don't we put on another show, the title of the act will be called 'The Horse Fanatic gets Ji Yanran'. If we can infuriate that Li Yuan to death, won't it be fun? Then we don't have to be so secretive and scared all the time. I can even openly move in to stay with you."

Xiang Shaolong sat up, hooking his arm around her pretty neck and tasted the lipstick on her pink lips again as he said, "It's 'The Horse Fanatic having sole possession of Beauty Ji', or maybe 'Fanatic Dong flirts with pretty Yanran'. This is a very tempting thought, but if it incurs the jealousy of Lord Longyang, then it'll be really terrible."

Ji Yanran replied with a smile, "This Lord Longyang likes to think that he's smart. If we do it just right, seemingly having feelings at times, moving along in steadily, it will instead quell his

doubts and it will even make him think that I have nothing to do with that Xiang Shaolong, otherwise why would I have fallen for another man. She added with a sweet smile, “The terms Xiang Lang uses are the best in the world.”

After being on cloud nine, Xiang Shaolong thought over it and found it reasonable and was greatly energized. If he can eliminate Lord Longyang’s suspicions of Ji Yanran, it’ll be easier for their mission in future. Otherwise if they let this man-woman find out about their affair, his identity may be revealed immediately. Because there’s no way for him to hide if they decide to look at his false face in detail.

To the Zhaos, it’s better to let him get Ji Yanran than to let Li Yuan have the advantage. The 2 of them were so excited they started their entanglements again before discussing the details.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Zhao Zhi, and it was only after much persuasion that Ji Yanran reluctantly left him quietly.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to take a nap after Ji Yanran left and Teng Yi woke him up at midnight.

This guesthouse originally had a housekeeper and a group of servants but they have been transferred to work at the outer residence to stop them from being a hindrance.

While he was washing up, Teng Yi said from behind him, “A few suspicious looking men started hiding around the front of the street and back alley an hour ago. I wonder who they could be.

Really feel like going out to teach them a lesson.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “It’s easy to teach them a lesson. We just have to inform Zhao Mu tomorrow. That conniving thief will certainly have his ways to find out who they are.”

Teng Yi said, “Be careful when you go out. I think I’d better go with you, at least I can take care of you.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “I’m just going for a rendezvous, why would I need to be taken care of.”

Teng Yi no longer insisted and changed the topic, “When do you intend to make contact with the 2 groups belonging to Pu Bu and Zhao Da?”

Xiang Shaolong wore his mask and said, “We can only decide on this at a later date, and we must not let them know that Dong Kuang is Xiang Shaolong. A person’s heart is unfathomable, who knows if any one of them would betray us?”

Teng Yi heaved a sigh of relief and said, “I’m relieved to know that you can think it this way.”

Xiang Shaolong gave him a strong hug around the shoulders and after he helped him with wearing his full gear, he climbed over the wall and left the residence, turning into the dark streets.

Although it’s late in the night, there are still carriages and people

on the streets as well as patrolling guards. The cities of this era are huge and not as densely populated so general security is still good.

Keeping alert along the way, he reached his destination an hour later. He's still worried about being followed so he deliberately hid on a tree, waiting until he was sure no one was following before jumping down and walking into the bamboo forest next to Zhao Zhi's house.

It was an ordinary house, only slightly bigger than the average home. What's special is that there's a small river on the left while this bamboo forest is on the other side, separating this house from the nearby houses. This bamboo forest is also the path that one must go past in order to reach the house.

Xiang Shaolong cast aside his remorse towards Jing Jun, consoling himself by thinking that small details should not be haggled over if one wants to accomplish big things before walking out of the bamboo forest.

The deep barks of dogs were heard, then they were silent. Obviously Zhao Zhi had stopped them.

Zhao Zhi's residence is split into the front, middle and back, with a small courtyard at the back planted with flowers and trees. The surroundings have a quiet elegance.

The rooms at the back were joined with the garden so he only have to climb the wall into the back courtyard and will easily reach Zhao Zhi's bedroom.

Right at this time, the lamp in one of the rooms was lighted, and then extinguished again. It continued for 3 times before it remained lit.

Xiang Shaolong knows that this is Zhao Zhi's signal, and excitement welled in his heart from having an illicit affair. Zhao Zhi wins in being matured enough, a unique character and style that can intoxicate a person. The deepest impression she gives is that although she is not past 20, she has an air of weariness as if she has been through a lot. It seems that she must have had a sad past.

Xiang Shaolong knows that there's not much time left. A moment of night is worth a thousand taels of gold. He moved swiftly, climbing over the wall into the house and entering through the window.

It turned out to be a small study, simply and comfortably decorated. Zhao Zhi was wearing a pale maroon long dress, lounging on a rectangular bed, the table next to her filled with fine wine and snacks, looking at him climbing in through the window with a smile.

Xiang Shaolong was about to smile in return when an alarm suddenly went off in his heart but before he had the time to react, something is already pressing down on his waist from the back.

The reason why he did not have a proper feel is because it's separated by the belt that was filled with flying needles tied around

his waist.

A low but melodious female voice behind him said, “Don’t move, unless you can move faster than the specially made mechanical strong bow.”

Xiang Shaolong felt the voice sounded familiar but he could not remember who this person threatening him from the back could be.

Zhao Zhi jumped up excitedly and exclaimed with a dainty smile, “Everyone keeps saying how formidable Xiang Shaolong is, but he still falls into us sisters’ trap.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing dryly, this is the second time he got cheated by a woman. Maybe this is a man’s greatest weakness, always putting their guards down when faced with a pretty woman.

But he was feeling puzzled. If Zhao Zhi wants to deal with him, she just has to run out to the streets and start shouting and he’ll be done for, so why would she go through so much trouble to deal with him privately.

Or could it be she still has feelings for that dead Lian Jin? She won’t feel happy unless she kills him personally? He pretended to be surprised and said, “What is Miss Zhi talking about? Who is Xiang Shaolong?”

Zhao Zhi exclaimed angrily, “Still denying! Haven’t you already admitted while on the road to the Guo Residence?”

Xiang Shaolong deliberately antagonized her, “Who told you that I am Xiang Shaolong?”

Thinking back, Zhao Zhi realized that indeed he has not admitted to it but at that time his mannerisms and the way he talked is exactly like Xiang Shaolong. Now that he is denying it, it’s obvious he’s making a fool of her.

The lady behind him, who could either be Zhao Zhi’s younger or older sister, said in a low voice, “If you’re not Xiang Shaolong, then my only choice is to silence you immediately so that our secret will not be leaked.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart shook, he finally recognized that this lady behind him is the female assassin who tried to assassinate Zhao Mu twice, the first time was a mistaken attack on the carriage and the other time happened the night before, which was thwarted by him.

What he couldn’t figure out earlier suddenly became clear. No wonder the female assassin could sneak into the Marquis Residence, all because of Zhao Zhi who helped with the spying.

He sighed and said, “Then I’m dead for sure, because I don’t even know who Xiang Shaolong is. I thought it’s because Miss Zhi had taken a special liking to me...”

The lady behind said fiercely, “If you say one more time that you’re not Xiang Shaolong, I’ll retaliate immediately!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly sniggering and thinking it’ll be a miracle if she can shoot past those steel needles and said with a cold snort, “I, Horse Fanatic Dong Kuang, never likes to be threatened and neither am I afraid of death. If I am not Xiang Shaolong, I am not so why should I pretend to be. If you don’t believe me you can come and scrutinize my face to see if I have done anything to it?”

This is called making a calculated bet, betting that never in their dreams would they imagine that in this world, there will be such a leather mask made so delicately by Xiao Yuetan and this mask has a natural stickiness that will stick so perfectly onto skin that not a gap can be found such that even facial expressions can be shown. If one doesn’t know how, it won’t be easy to remove the mask at all.

Zhao Zhi was momentarily stunned and came forward, extending her hand to touch his face.

Zhao Zhi touched and grabbed for a while before her expression changed thoroughly as she exclaimed, “Heavens! You’re really not him!” Xiang Shaolong replied, “I may not be Xiang Shaolong, but please don’t shoot, otherwise it will be a lose-lose situation.” The 2 women were equally stunned and knew that something is not right.

Fast as lightning, Xiang Shaolong escaped from between the women and came to Zhao Zhi’s back, his hand pulling out the dagger at his waist smoothly and placed it across Zhao Zhi’s neck

while his other hand was wrapped around her alluring waist, taking control of the situation.

That lady raised her strong bow, aiming at them but she dare not shoot.

Xiang Shaolong pulled Zhao Zhi along as he backed up to the wall before he steadied his nerves to weigh this female assassin whose swordsmanship and stratagems are both astounding.

She is a little shorter than Zhao Zhi, looks about 70-80% similar to her, but is more fair and delicate looking. Her eyes are sharp, with a hardness and viciousness that Zhao Zhi lacks. She is a little older, her body graceful and packed with power and now she looks like a female leopard that's about to find someone to bite.

Xiang Shaolong asked with a smile, "How do I address this elder sister here?"

Zhao Zhi ignored the sharp knife pointed at her throat and cried out piteously, "Eldest Sister release the arrow quickly, otherwise not only won't we be able to take revenge, living will become even worse than dying."

Xiang Shaolong was relieved for he knows that Zhao Zhi really believe that he is that horse fanatic Dong Kuang so he hurriedly said, "We can talk things over slowly. I can swear not to reveal your secret. I'm a man of my words and will never go back on my promises."

The 2 of them can't help but look at each other. Since this person is not Xiang Shaolong, there's no reason for him to let them off. This is too illogical.

Xiang Shaolong did not give them a chance to speak. He first made a very deadly vow in Dong Kuang's name before saying, "Elder sister, put down your bow and arrow and I'll release your sister."

The pretty female assassin replied resentfully, "Who is your Elder sister?" But her hands naturally loosened the hold on the strong bow, throwing the bow and arrow aside, so coolly that it seems a little irrational.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking that this beautiful tigress is quite straightforward so he kept the dagger that was placed on Zhao Zhi's pretty neck.

Right at this time, he saw this woman give an eye signal to Zhao Zhi and knows that something is not right so he hurriedly move to the side and just happened to avoid Zhao Zhi's elbow.

That lady let out a high pitched whistle and at the same time pulled out the long sword from her back and launched an attack towards him.

Xiang Shaolong was furious. He was kindhearted enough to make a deadly vow not to reveal their secret because he did not want to silence them but not only did they not appreciate it, they are trying to silence him in turn. Blood Wave came out of its sheath lightning

fast.

There was a strange sound coming from the door and he turned his head around to take a glance and secretly cursed. It turned out to be a large yellow dog, running through the door in an alarming speed, revealing its white teeth, the nostrils flaring and a thunderous growl from deep within its throat, jumping towards him. He suddenly realized that her whistle earlier was to summon this ferocious dog to help her.

Luckily in the past, one of the modules he was trained in was how to deal with aggressive dogs and although he has never put it to the real test, he had trained and fought with the military dogs that were even more muscular than this yellow dog. He swept his sword across to block the coming stab from the other party, lowered his body and kicked sideways, aiming right at the lower jaw of the ferocious dog that was in midair jumping towards him.

The beast howled as it was kicked aside and tumbled to the ground, unable to get up for the time being.

Zhao Zhi managed to grab a sword from somewhere and coordinated her attack with her sister, one attacking from the left and the other from the front and for a moment swords were flashing everywhere.

Xiang Shaolong knows that this 2 ladies are formidable but he has long since familiarized himself with the 3 killer moves of the Mohist addendum so his swordplay is not as unskilled as in the past. Since the ferocious dog has not pounced again, he took the chance to dash to the side of the elder sister and using all his

tactics, slashed his sword down from the top.

The elder sister was shocked. It turned out that Xiang Shaolong's move was excellent and wondrous, for it can keep on changing in such a narrow space, making one totally clueless as to what is happening. She gritted her teeth and attacked the onslaught, not caring about the enemy's sword at all as she aimed lightning fast towards Xiang Shaolong's heart, absolutely having the intention of dying together.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly admiring her character and this is just what he wanted as well. He had crossed swords with her before and knows that the style of her swordplay is fast and ever changing and if someone unskilled fights with her, that person may be dead even before he gets to touch her sword. This is also a woman's distinctive way of using the sword so that they need not match their strength against men who are stronger by nature.

He immediately changed his move and swept his sword across to block. 'Clang!' The sound reverberated sharply, the pretty assassin's sword was blocked by Xiang Shaolong's sword.

Since she wants to launch an attack against another attack, she will have to use all her might and there is no room for retreat and this instead gave Xiang Shaolong the chance to use all his strength to fight with her.

Besides Xiao Weimou and Teng Yi, Xiang Shaolong's waist and arm strength can be considered unbeatable. Now matter how formidable she is, she is still a woman and restricted by her nature. As the swords struck at each other, the vibration caused her wrists

to go numb and she retreated in astonishment.

Xiang Shaolong thought that he would be able to disarm her but who would have expected her to tolerate the effects, although barely. She gave a cold snort as she rolled towards the ground.

Zhao Zhi did not expect this horse fanatic to have such shocking swordsmanship and just as she was about to run up to help out, her retreating sister happened to knock into her and both of them tumbled back.

Right at this time that yellow dog came back again and was about to pounce on Xiang Shaolong. Zhao Zhi cried out in alarm, “Dahuang! No!”

By this time Xiang Shaolong is already holding the bow in his right hand and an arrow in his left hand, aiming towards the top agilely towards that Dahuang.

This dog is very smart and well trained by the 2 ladies. Once it saw the arrow pointing at itself, it gave a low moan and hid behind the 2 ladies.

Xiang Shaolong held the bow with his right hand and the sword with his left hand, pointing it at the 2 terrified ladies and asked with a smile, “What is elder sister’s name, so that I know how to address you.”

The 2 ladies were still feeling unsettled and cowered at the corner

of the wall, not daring to move at all. In such a narrow space and short distance, it is ridiculous to think that one can fend off the light arrow shot by the strong bow.

The elder sister is very stubborn, her lips were drawn tight and she did not answer him. Instead it was Zhao Zhi who blurted out, “Her name is Tian Rou!”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “Shouldn’t her surname be Zhao?” Zhao Zhi realized that she has slipped up and her face turned pale.

Xiang Shaolong and that Tian Rou looked at each other. He thought that since her surname is Tian, maybe she is related to Tian Dan. Zhao Mu has all along been in cahoots with Tian Dan, otherwise he wouldn’t be in secret contact with Xiao Weimou. Once he thought of this, he had a slight idea of what’s happening so he pretended to be furious as he stared widely and said, “I actually had the intention of letting both of you go, but a pity that your surname is Tian and I hate people with this surname. Now I can only abandon all thoughts of taking pity on beauties and send you back to where you came from before you were born. You should be grateful to me for giving you an easy death.”

Zhao Zhi looked at the bow and arrow he held in his hand and trembled, “Why do you hate those with the surname Tian so much.”

Tian Rou hissed angrily, “Zhizhi! Don’t talk to him, let him kill if he wants to!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling perplexed, could it be that there's only these 2 sisters in this house. Otherwise with such a commotion going on, not a single person has appeared. And where has Zhao Zhi's 'father' whom she live with hidden himself? Once he thought of this, he saw the ears of the yellow dog which Zhao Zhi was holding on to perk up as its eyes shot to attention. He secretly understood and shouted, "Don't come in, otherwise I'll shoot immediately."

The 2 ladies were shocked. They did not expect that he'd actually detect their help who is stealthily nearing them soundlessly and suddenly a sense of weakness and helplessness welled up in them as they felt that there's no way they can deal with this person.

Xiang Shaolong looked at Zhao Zhi and said, "Since you are already at death's door, there's no need for me to hide anything from you. The reason why I hate people with the surname Tian, is because one of them is called Tian Dan!"

The 2 ladies were momentarily stunned as they stared at him. Xiang Shaolong moved forward slowly, his arrow moving up and down so that the 2 ladies have no idea the targeted area he has chosen.

A very tempting thought occurred to him. He just have to shoot Tian Rou, then use his flying needles to deal with the person outside the door and Zhao Zhi. He is 100% sure that he can swiftly deal with all 3 of them and that will settle everything and there'll be no need to trouble himself over them anymore.

A old sounding voice outside the door shouted, “Hero please have mercy, Tian Dan is also the enemy of my 2 Missies, we’re all on the same side.”

Tian Rou and Zhao Zhi cried out in unison, “Uncle Zheng!”

Xiang Shaolong said with a frosty laugh, “How do I know if this is true? I deliberately told you this so that I can force myself to harden my heart and silence you. Otherwise if you leak this out, and Zhao Mu, who is in cahoots with Tian Dan, finds out, I’ll be dead. Or maybe you still do not know that Tian Dan will be coming to Handan within these few days and this is the only chance for me to take revenge. I will not allow anyone to thwart me.”

The 2 ladies were visibly moved, obviously they do not know that Tan Dan is coming to Zhao. Tian Rou’s eyes opened widely as she stared at him, “Aren’t you with Zhao Mu?”

Xiang Shaolong shouted, “Shut up! Who would be this conniving thief’s partner! I’m just pretending and gaining his trust so that I can deal with Tian Dan. Hai! I’ve never killed women, I’ll have no choice but to start tonight.”

That Uncle Zheng who was outside the door cried out in alarm, “Hero do not be rash, the death of my 2 Missies’ family were caused by Tian Dan and Zhao Mu. This is absolutely true, if there’s any deceit in this, then may I die without a burial place with thousands of arrows piercing my heart.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be deep in thought and said,

“There’s no doubt that both of you has a deep enmity with Zhao Mu, but one of them is in Qi while the other is in Zhao, so how did they become your enemies?”

Zhao Zhi cannot control her tears as she cried piteously, “My family was harmed by Tian Dan and forced to escape to Handan but who would have expected that the conniving thief Zhao Mu would actually capture all 183 people in my clan and ordered men to send us back to Tian Dan, where they were all tortured to death by him. Would you believe if I say this?”

Tian Rou said angrily, “Don’t beg him.” Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “Although there’s a ‘Rou’* in your name, you’re not gentle at all.”

(Note: Rou, meaning gentle)

Tian Rou was so furious that she couldn’t speak. Xiang Shaolong added, “Why are the 3 of you left then?”

Uncle Zheng’s voice drifted in, “The 2 Missies and I were late by a few days, that’s why we escaped the calamity. For the past 7 years, we’ve been constantly thinking of revenge, Hero, please believe us.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved, and feeling a little guilty that he wanted to kill them earlier. Living in this warring era where lives are cheap, it’s really easy to become influenced.

Xiang Shaolong released the trigger and the arrow shot between the 2 ladies faces with a whoosh, into the wall.

The 2 ladies were dumbfounded; they did not expect him to shoot at this moment. If the target is any one of them, they certainly won't be able to avoid it.

Xiang Shaolong threw the strong bow aside and kept his sword in the sheath as he said with a smile, "I am not interested in interfering in your matters, but I ask that you do not come and spoil my plans. Your real enemy is Tian Dan and not Zhao Mu and now that Zhao Mu is on the alert, to strike again would only be giving yourselves up for capture. Think about it! Such pretty girls like the both of you, if you fall into the hands of the evil, you will face a humiliation even worse than death. This is my advice, farewell!"

Under the amazed stare of the both of them, Xiang Shaolong strode towards the door and came face to face with that Uncle Zheng before leaving leisurely.

Book 7 Chapter 7 – Glib-Tongued

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the guesthouse, it's about 2 more hours to dawn. After telling Teng Yi what happened, he stretched and yawned.

Teng Yi sighed with admiration, "You've done this beautifully, Zhao Zhi no longer suspects that you are Xiang Shaolong. But from what I see this little lass has no ill intentions towards the real you, she just wants to coerce you to deal with Zhao Mu."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "Her intentions are so good that she has to use that strong bow to aim at my back."

Teng Yi replied, "You spoiled that Miss's grand plan of assassination twice and that Tian Rou is so competitive so naturally she'll want to put you down a little."

Xiang Shaolong remembered that he was teasing Zhao Zhi while on the way to the Guo residence, the way she halfheartedly rejected him indeed reflected her interest in him. Now that she has 'mistakenly' think that the person who took advantage of her is 'Dong Kuang' and not 'Xiang Shaolong', how would she feel?

He remembered when she 'realized' that Xiang Shaolong is actually Dong Kuang, the look of disappointment on her face is something that cannot be faked.

Teng Yi said with a smile, "Since you're under imperial orders not to work hard, we don't have to pretend so why don't all of us

go and have a good sleep. Who cares what will happen?”

Xiang Shaolong thought that sounded right, so he returned to his bedroom to have a good sleep. By the time Wu Guo came to wake him up, it was already past lunch and the sun is almost setting.

This is the first time in so many days that he's slept so soundly. Wu Guo said, “Second Master is waiting in the hall for Third Master for dinner!”

Xiang Shaolong got up energetically and after washing up went to meet Teng Yi. The 2 of them had a hearty meal.

Wu Guo said from the side, “Lady Ya sent someone here with a message, asking Third Master to go to her residence tomorrow night for a feast. She will send someone to pick you up and hopes that you will be able to go over to her place earlier.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that she promised Li Yuan a feast last night. At that time he thought that she did not mean it, so he did not expect her to really be serious about it. He said with a wry smile, “Look why we are here in Handan, almost every night I have to go and socialize with those people.”

Teng Yi said with a laugh, “It's not difficult to deal with Teng Yi, but dealing with those women is enough to make you suffer.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I really want to give Zhao Ya a good f*ck to ease the hatred in my heart but this way she will surely be able

to recognize me. Like what you've said, once she uses her nose to sniff, there's no way I can hide. Besides this expert in man is so familiar with my body."

Teng Yi shook his head and said, "I too, feel sad for your situation... oh!" His expression changed and he said, "It's not totally hopeless. While I was feeling bored yesterday, I took a walk at the back garden and there is a kind of plant there. If we take the sap out and smear a little on the body, it will emit a smell very similar to that of a human body. It smells quite good, and a lot more natural than the fragrances women use to suffuse their clothes. This will solve the problem of scent. If there's not special marks on your body like moles or birthmarks, you may be able to make your way through the act if you extinguish the lights and do her in the dark."

Wu Guo who was at the side can't help but interjected, "Third Master's thing is certainly bigger than the average person, Zhao Ya will know once it goes in."

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong wrapped their arms around their stomachs and bowled over in laughter.

Xiang Shaolong said breathlessly, "You're such a bootlicker. But I was just saying it for fun, not that I really want to do her, nor is it worth taking such a huge risk. Hai! To treat her like an object just to expend my lust is not really very appropriate after all."

Teng Yi tried to control his laughter as he added, "But there's no harm applying a little of the sap of that 'love plant', so there'll be no problem even if you get a little closer with Zhao Ya. I'll go and

prepare it immediately.”

Wu Guo was dumbfounded, “To think that it has such a nice name.”

Ever since Teng Yi had Shan Lan, he became a lot happier and easygoing. He extended his hand to pat his shoulder and sighed, “Now you’ve learnt something, this kind of love sap has slight aphrodisiac properties and women all like the smell of it. Young men from the villages around Jing Jun’s age all like to apply some on their body when they go on dates with ladies. But it has to be mixed with rice water, otherwise it will cause the whole body to break out in rashes. Do you want to try?”

Wu Guo replied excitedly, “I must find a beauty to test this on once we get back to Xianyang.” Xiang Shaolong asked, “Are there any other matters?”

Wu Zhuo answered, “Headmaster Zhao of the Martial Arts School has sent someone over with an invitation, saying that the Sword Meet tomorrow has been postponed to noon the day after and asked that Third Master must attend.”

Xiang Shaolong told Teng Yi, “The other conniving devil Li Yuan is too detestable, maybe I will teach him a good lesson.”

At this time someone came in to announce, “Lord Longyang is here to see Third Master and is waiting at the outer hall right now.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and asked Teng Yi with a dry look, “Are there any sap called ‘Demon Riddance’ to make him run to the other end of earth once he smells it.”

Teng Yi guffawed, “This is the first time that I will not envy Third Brother’s luck in love!”

On seeing the outstanding horse fanatic Dong Kuang striding out, Lord Longyang stood up gracefully with a pose that ‘he’ thinks is the most beautiful and even greeted him in the way a lady should greet.

Xiang Shaolong has no idea whether to laugh or cry and was secretly lamenting to himself but he pretended to smile and welcome him, “Lord is showing me such favor by coming here personally.”

Lord Longyang’s expressive eyes flitted towards him as he replied with a slow smile, “I came today to look for Mister Dong because something is troubling me and I won’t feel happy until I say it.”

Today he’s gone back to dressing as a man but his clothes and accessories are still very colorful. If he’s a real woman, Xiang Shaolong would certainly compliment her for her grace but now his heart is palpitating. If the things that he won’t feel happy unless he says it are lovey-dovey words, heaven knows how he should deal with that.

After the both of them were seated, Lord Longyang said seriously, “I think that Mister Dong’s decision to return to Zhao is

really too rash.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, but also secretly relieved as he asked in bewilderment, “Why would you say that?”

Lord Longyang saw that there’s no one around so he continued gently, “I admire Mister Dong’s talent, that’s why I’m speaking my mind with no restraints. The state of Zhao is now like a well that is almost drying up, so no matter how strong Mister is, how perfect and ample is your tools for filling and fixing the well, if you try to protect this well faithfully, ultimately you cannot escape the fate of the well drying and you dying.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled. All along he has little regard for this high ranking fellow who got his position from using his male charms to entice the King of Wei but now that he has heard his expressive analogy and how he has illustrated the state of Zhao straight to the point, he can’t help but see him in a different light. He pretended to be surprised and said, “The Zhaos have recently gained a huge victory over the Yans, so how can they be a well that’s almost drying?”

Lord Longyang said with a smile, “A dying person will have times when there’s a surge of energy before they pass on, and the sun is the most beautiful right before dusk. And this is because Zhao still has 2 famous generals to hold the fort. Once these 2 are gone, do you think Zhao can produce any elixir to prolong her life?”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Are you referring to Lian Po and Li Mu?”

Lord Longyang replied, “Exactly these two. Lian Po is getting old, he can still defend but will have problems attacking. Recently there are rumors about his incapability in attacking Yan. King Xiaocheng has all along been suspicious of him so now there’s talk in Handan about changing generals, no one knows if history of exchanging Lian Po with Zhao Gua will repeat itself.”

Without giving him time to interrupt, Lord Longyang continued smoothly, “As for Li Mu he is loyal and straightforward but doesn’t know how to flatter others and not glib enough. If he is under an able ruler, he will become a formidable general who can conquer the world. Pity he is under King Xiaocheng, a person who is overly suspicious and only craves stories of success. With the Marquis of Julu at the side navigating his thoughts, he will not come to a good end. A pity that he is not afraid of death and is stoutly loyal, refusing to leave, otherwise everyone in Great Wei, from the ruler to the officials, will all welcome him with open arms.”

Once he said that Xiang Shaolong knew immediately that the Weis must have made contact with these 2 famous generals. Li Mu has rejected, but he wondered what is Lian Po’s reply. This Lord Longyang is indeed formidable, if he is able to remove the 2 huge military pillars of Zhao with just some words, won’t the state of Zhao be under the mercy of the Weis?

Lord Longyang saw that he was engrossed and thought that he has shaken his stand and tried to entice him further by saying, “Mister Dong may be wondering why am I so bold as to criticize the Zhaos in their capital. Firstly I do not hold them in regard at all and I bet they won’t dare to do anything to me. Most importantly I really admire Mister Dong very much and does not wish to see your hard work go down the drain in future, or even ending up as a

slave from a defeated country. Besides, the Qins and the Zhaos have deep enmity and will never let them off. A good bird will choose a good tree to nest in, so if Mister is willing to come and work for Great Wei, I guarantee that the houses and gifts offered will be something that the Zhaos cannot give. At least we won't be chasing Mister away in panic just because of a few words by the lackey of Lord Chunshen, Li Yuan, who has no power at all."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking him formidable, knowing that Lord Longyang has spies around the King of Zhao, that's why he knows how to grab the best opportunity to cut in and persuade him to work for Wei instead.

He can't help but admire his father-in-law, Wu Yingyuan's foresight to give him this horse fanatic identity. Now all the various states place much emphasis on battles on horses and him as Dong Kuang is the dream talent of all the other states.

He pretended to be moved and said, "Your words are indeed thought-provoking, I will consider them carefully and I still have to explain to my clansmen. But for now..."

Lord Longyang saw that he did not reject immediately and looked ecstatic. He cast a flirting look at him and said, "I understand the problems faced by men, Mister Dong need not worry. It's best that you can find out the situation in Zhao, so that you will know that I have not lied."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but admire his skills of persuasion. Just a few words and he has revealed all the problems of Zhao. He sighed in reply, "If I am not a Zhao, I would have agreed

immediately.”

Lord Longyang said gently, “To King Xiaocheng, other than the Zhao family, who else does he consider a Zhao? If it’s not Zhao Mu or Zhao Ya, anyone else who loses favor like the Wu family, would have been torn to pieces by him long ago. He does not treasure a talent at all and Xiang Shaolong is the best example. If Mister has not given them a thousand high quality warhorses, in less than a year, the Zhaos will not have any useful horses left.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that this person is really vicious. By pulling him away, it’s akin to breaking the legs of the Zhaos.

Lord Longyang lowered his voice and said, “I heard that Zhao Ba had acceded to the request of that conceited Li Yuan and will be holding a Sword Exchange Meeting the day after at noon. If Mister will just nod your head, I can order someone to take him down a peg or two on that day, let’s see if he still dares to be so arrogant.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled. Every time they talk about Li Yuan, Lord Longyang seems to be very angry. With the looks and build of Li Yuan, it’s impossible that Lord Longyang won’t take a liking to him. It seems that maybe Li Yuan has once rejected him with harsh words, that’s why his love has turned into hatred.

Or maybe he does not like the kind of gentle and pretty faced men like Li Yuan, but likes rough and stout men like him... heh! What are his thoughts leading him to?

Surprisingly, Lord Longyang stood up and said before he left, “Mister, please think it over carefully and let me know once you have an answer. We’ll then discuss the details and I’ll make sure Mister will leave happily.”

Xiang Shaolong was confused by his terms of address* and hurriedly sent him off. He only turned back with a wry smile after seeing him go up the carriage and left under the accompaniment of 10 over followers.

(Note: Lord Longyang was addressing himself as ‘I’ in 2 ways, interchanging between the position of a Lord (Ben Jun) and the position of a lady (Nu Jia). I just used ‘I’ because I can’t think of any English terms that can indicate ‘I’ to be spoken by a lady or an official.)

No matter what, he will never dare to belittle this she-male.

After Lord Longyang left, Xiang Shaolong enjoyed the free time and took a leisurely walk alone in the garden of the residence, thinking back about the intoxicating time when he snuck in here and first met Zhu Ji.

No matter what kind of a person Zhu Ji is, he can really feel her liking for him, and this is something that cannot be faked.

Suddenly, he felt a little melancholy and lost as well as loneliness. In fact he should feel even more satisfaction than anyone else. As a modern person, to come to this strange yet familiar warring states era, his life is at least an era richer than

anyone else from any era.

Because he has experienced one more era.

After spending a few difficult years here, even the way he thinks, the words he uses are now similar to the way of the people in this era.

Last night, his thoughts of silencing others and to kill the girls, is exactly what Wu Zhuo and Teng Yi would have thought the most appropriate thing to do.

Luckily he turned himself back in time, otherwise he would feel guilty for the rest of his life. Once he thought of this, he can't help but feel a cold relief for himself.

By now it's deep into autumn and the weather is turning cold. The garden is filled with fallen leaves and in the darkening dusk, it gives a feeling of stern desolation.

Sometimes feasts are not that bad. During those senseless socialization and mundane festivities, one can easily numb and forget oneself.

Unconsciously, his thoughts turned strongly to his pretty wives and maids at faraway Qin, thinking of how they are pining for his return everyday and can't help but feel a sense of loss.

He can't help but randomly recited one of Li Bai's poems,

“Leaving me, yesterday cannot be asked to stay; Troubling me, today’s day is filled with worries.”

Applause could be heard from behind.

Xiang Shaolong was startled and turned around suddenly to see Teng Yi accompanied by Ji Yanran who was elaborately dressed up and looking as pretty as the moon, both staring at him with wide open eyes.

A strange gleam flashed past this beauty’s eyes as her pretty mouth mumbled and repeated these 2 verses from the famed ancient poetry.

Xiang Shaolong was embarrassed and went forward to say, “Yanran, how can you hide from other people’s eyes by coming here like this to see me?”

Teng Yi replied, “Yanran is now on the way to the Palace to attend the King of Zhao’s feast and can’t help coming in to visit you when she passed by the guesthouse. She has no intention of hiding from anyone at all. Hei! Those 2 verses of poetry you recited earlier were excellent. All right! You two have a good talk!” He then made himself scarce.

Ji Yanran smiled enticingly as she threw herself in his arms and sighed with admiration, “Today Li Yuan showed me the poetry he wrote and Yanran is already very astounded and greatly admires his talent, but compared to the 2 verses you said earlier, Li Yuan’s verses were as uninteresting as a child’s toy. Who can make

references as captivating as you? Yanran admits defeat.”

Xiang Shaolong blushed, luckily Ji Yanran couldn't see it as he hugged her tightly and said, “Don't praise me, this is called beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Ji Yanran trembled as she left his arms, looking intently into his eyes and said, “Heavens! The words you spout at random are always so exciting and unique. I still remember your words ‘Absolute power will only result in absolute disintegration’, this phrase exactly describes the problem of all the states at this time, even Master Han Fei could not come up with such an extraordinary phrase.”

After saying all these she can't help but kiss him passionately, almost melting him.

After they parted, Ji Yanran said in a haze, “Xiang Lang! Compose a poetry for me! I'll add melody to it and make it into a famous song for centuries to come.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing ironically, there's no poems that he can recite from the start to the end, so what can he use to deal with this lady. Besides, using other people's works as his own is like plagiarist. It's all right if he just recites it, but if it really goes down in history, won't he have stolen other people's creative rights first, so he replied with a wry smile, “Everything in this world will fade away like smoke, so what if it becomes famous for centuries?”

Ji Yanran sighed delicately as she collapsed on his body, pouting happily, “Shaolong! You’re really the cause of my downfall, what else can Yanran think of tonight besides you? But yet I cannot be with you. I don’t care, from tomorrow onwards, you will have to pursue me openly so that I can officially surrender to you. This is one thing that you cannot allow to fade away like smoke.”

She continued with a sigh, “Fade away like smoke! How pitiful and yet beautiful it sounds, only you are capable of suddenly spouting such a natural yet excellent verse.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, for this is making matters worse. If in future she keeps on forcing him to compose poems and verses, won’t he become the pirate of the literacy world.

Ji Yanran said sorrowfully, “Yanran has to leave, Mister Zou is waiting for me in the horse carriage. Why not this! Once you’ve composed a poem, I’ll compose the melody and only sing it for you. I know Yanran’s husband does not hanker for fame or fortune. Hai! Fame and fortune are indeed troublesome, if no one knows who is Ji Yanran, then I’ll be able to be with you all the time.”

She smiled slightly and added, “Don’t move!”

She kissed him lightly before flitting away, not forgetting to turn back again to smile at him, making Xiang Shaolong totally lose his senses.

When he returned to the inner residence, Teng Yi said, “Only

now do I understand why Learned Lady Ji will fall into your hands. Those 2 verses are really incomparable works, touching the hearts even more so than the ‘Book of Poems’. I’m sure you’re very familiar with those poems.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that besides the verses ‘Elegant and noble ladies, are the pursuit of gentlemen’, he knows nothing about the ‘Book of Poems’, so he can only mumble a reply.

Teng Yi said, “That muddleheaded King Xiaocheng is really hopeless. If you are really the horse fanatic Dong Kuang, you should try to slip away immediately. Look at how much he fears Li Yuan. His feast for Yanran tonight, he has invited almost everyone with some status, except for you.”

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened, no wonder Lord Longyang left in a hurry, so he was rushing to the Zhao Palace for the feast. He replied with a smile, “It’s rare to have free time like this, why don’t we go and take a walk to the official brothel here and drink to our hearts content.”

Teng Yi said seriously, “Most of the ladies in the official brothels are pitiful girls, can Third Brother bear to disregard them in the name of fun?”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Su Nu and a sense of guilt washed over him as he said, “Second Brother has reprimanded me rightly!”

Teng Yi nodded his head, “You’re indeed a rare man, to be able to accept another person’s idea so willingly. Come! We’ll just go out

for a stroll and sightseeing, that is also another kind of enjoyment.”

The 2 of them left the residence. After they left the guesthouse, they strolled towards the liveliest area in the city of Handan.

The pedestrians on the roads were few, and it looks a little desolate, a vast difference from before they left Handan.

What happened to the Wu family was a great blow to the Zhaos, and this capital of the Zhaos directly reflected this truth.

The fear the Zhaos have of the Qins is understandable, the massacre of Changping has scared them out of their wits.

Guo Zhong has a huge family and business here, so he cannot just pack up and leave but for ordinary citizens they could not be bothered with that much. They just have to find an excuse to slip out of the city and they will be able to escape to another village or another state.

Such migration is a positive function towards the unification of China, slowly weakening the concept of ‘state’, which will be beneficial to the aspect of unification.

Now the 7 states are fighting for power, and it seems a little like royalty with different surnames struggling for power.

Teng Yi’s words startled him from his thoughts as he heard him

say, "Someone is following us."

Xiang Shaolong was alert but did not turn around. He asked quietly, "How many people?" Teng Yi said calmly, "At least 7 to 8 people, quite highly skilled."

Shaolong thought hard, "I'm afraid it's the people who were watching us outside the residence last night. Who in Handan would do this?"

Teng Yi smiled, "Won't all these be clear if we catch one of them and grill him?"

Xiang Shaolong understood and followed him into a quiet and isolated little lane with trees on both sides and a stone bridge in front. After passing the river, a scattering of houses could be seen on the opposite bank.

Before they could reach the bridge, hurried footsteps were heard from behind and someone shouted, "Dong Kuang, stop!"

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi looked at each other and smiled as they stopped and turned around nonchalantly.

20 odd burly looking swordsmen surrounded them in a fan shape and some went by the back via the woods to circle them, placing them in the center of the circle.

Xiang Shaolong took a clear look and recognized none of them.

He had a thought and shouted, “If Li Yuan is that capable he can kill me himself, why did you send nobodies like you to come and die?”

The swordsmen were all alarmed, it seems that Xiang Shaolong was right and he has uncovered their identities.

Before those people had a chance to retort, the two of them took this opportunity while their opponents were still stunned to pull their swords out and attacked. The sounds of swords clanking rang out.

Those people did not expect their opponent to suddenly start the fight without a warning and hurriedly drew out their swords to block the attack.

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort as he used all his strength to execute his killer moves. The first of the enemy who reached him had his long sword knocked aside followed by an immediate kick on his stomach and that person screamed as he fell back, curved up like a prawn.

On Teng Yi’s side, the crisp sound of metals clanking was heard and the sounds of weapons dropping to the ground and groans rang out, obviously someone has taken a huge beating.

Although Xiang Shaolong’s first attack was successful, he did not slow down as all these people are experienced, good fighters and although they lost the advantage of being the first to attack, none of them retreated. Two long swords were aiming towards him

from his left and right side as swift as the wind.

Xiang Shaolong continued while he still had the upper hand and moved to the right towards the especially stout looking man and swept his sword across to block. 'Clang!', that stout looking man met his sword head on fiercely without fear.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that it's an excellent fight as he executed the 'Attacking instead of defending' stance from one of the 3 killer moves in the Mohist addendum as he slashed fiercely towards his opponent's sword. That person is indeed skilled as he moved back and avoided the attack.

The long sword from the left aimed towards his chest.

Xiang Shaolong made a fake move as he avoided his opponent's vicious attack. If he were to release his flying needles now, his enemies will certainly be unable to escape but he must stop such an enticing thought because unless he can kill all his enemies and remove all evidence, otherwise the Zhaos may find out that he's Xiang Shaolong based on this.

Just as this thought was flashing past his mind, a long sword came alarming close towards his back. With a backhand slash of his sword, Xiang Shaolong chopped heavily on the sword near the handle. This person cannot be compared to the earlier stout looking man and Blood Wave chipped off a part of the long sword and the sword fell to the ground as the man lost his grip.

Xiang Shaolong knocked into him hard in order to avoid that

stout man's sword attack again and elbowed that person's chest hard.

The sounds of bones cracking were heard as fresh blood spurted from his enemy's nose and mouth as he stumbled, knocking another enemy who was coming up from the side.

‘Clang!’

Xiang Shaolong blocked the sword attack from the stout looking man, suddenly stooped down and gave a quick sweep with his leg.

That stout looking man did not expect such a weird move at all and gave out a cry as his legs flew out from under him and he turned a somersault in the air before falling heavily on the ground.

Right at this time more long swords came attacking again. This group of people are indeed fearless, and it took quite some effort fending them off.

If he did not have Teng Yi with him, then he can't be so sure of winning if he's alone.

There's no need for him to further injure that stout looking man so he executed the defense stance of the Mohist swordplay, forcing the 3 men at bay.

At this time Teng Yi gave a snort and knocked into his back, obviously he has taken some beating.

Xiang Shaolong took time off to turn around for a look and saw that 3 of their enemies are already on the ground but there were another 5 or 6 charging towards them like rabid tigers, viciously attacking Teng Yi, who shouted “Go into the woods!”

His swept his enemies away with his sword and just as he gave a flying kick to one of them, another one slashed him on the shoulder. Although it was not a deep wound, but blood still flowed profusely, dyeing his shirt red.

Teng Yi roared as he knocked off the weapon of one of the enemies and his iron fist crushed into that person’s face and he fainted immediately.

The danger has lessened slightly as the both of them fought a bloody path out into the woods.

Those people had fear struck in them after some of their men were killed and no one dared to run after them. They whistled and helped up the injured and ran towards the other side of the bridge.

Teng Yi was about to give chase when Xiang Shaolong pulled him back and said with a smile, “Let them leave! Even if we catch them it’ll be a wasted effort, for in the end won’t we still be unable to touch Li Yuan?”

Teng Yi exclaimed, “You’re injured!”

Xiang Shaolong took a look at the wound on his left thigh as well and said with a smile, “Just a little more serious than yours, it’s nothing! But this batch of swordsmen are indeed formidable, no wonder Li Yuan is so arrogant.”

Teng Yi chortled, “We really think too lightly of our enemies.”

Xiang Shaolong wrapped his arms around his shoulder as both of them went back laughing and joking. But in his heart he was thinking of how terrible Li Yuan’s expression would be when he see his men coming back injured.

Book 7 Chapter 8 – Affections Of A Pretty Girl

After Xiang Shaolong bandaged the wound on his shoulder, he might as well not wear his top and just wrapped a cape around and started practicing his writing on the table in the study.

Coming to this era, the first thing he has to overcome is the language, the accent and the way they habitually speak and the terms used. Either because he is especially talented, or maybe because he has no other choice, but he was able to handle such things within about half a year.

But as for writing? Until now, which has already been a few years, his words is still illegible. The ancient calligraphy of this era is really baffling him, and the problem is compounded by having to write on bamboo slips or cloth.

Luckily he regarded practicing calligraphy as an interest and since there's no Wu Tingfang or anyone else harassing him, he can take the opportunity of this free time to practice.

Just as he was totally immersed in the world of brush and ink, Wu Guo came in to report, "Miss Zhao Zhi is looking for Third master."

Xiang Shaolong guessed long ago that she will look for him so he replied, "Let her come in!"

Wu Guo's gaze landed on his table filled with his crooked and clumsy words, which looked like a child's handwriting and asked hesitantly, "Do you want me to help you tidy up the things here first before asking her in."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is seriously trying to remind him tactfully that others must never see this splendid handwriting of his so he said with a laugh, "I deliberately wrote it so awfully so that others will know that Dong Kuang is unrefined. My real handwriting is extremely outstanding and you'll surely compliment them once you see it!"

Wu Guo slapped his forehead and said, "Third Master really thinks things thoroughly, otherwise even those who has never held a brush won't have their words end up looking like this." He hesitated, "But is Third Master being a little too exaggerated?"

Xiang Shaolong was extremely flummoxed for this Wu Guo is indeed being quite funny and he reprimanded him with a laugh, "Go and invite the lady in quickly! It's not nice to make people wait that long."

Wu Guo knows that he is an easygoing person who never puts on airs and treats everyone well regardless of rank, and he is already used to joking around with him so he bowed and left after hearing that.

In a short while Wu Guo led Zhao Zhi and came up behind him. Xiang Shaolong's back is still facing the door, as he looked at the garden outside the window illuminated by the moon. He instructed Wu Guo to leave and close the door behind him before

telling Zhao Zhi, “Come! Sit opposite me.”

He concentrated on his writing while Zhao Zhi went to the other side of his table and sat down delicately, her pair of pretty eyes landed on his snaky and crooked words and exclaimed “Ah!”

Xiang Shaolong waved his brush with a smile, “That’s just how an unrefined person’s handwriting looks like! Hope Miss Zhao won’t find it a joke. Oh! I should be addressing you as Miss Tian instead.”

Zhao Zhi lowered her pretty face, not really daring to look at him directly yet she rolled her eyes at him in rebuke as she said, “You’re really muddleheaded, who said my family name is Tian?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded, “Didn’t you tell me so yourself? Why have you forgotten about it so fast. Don’t be forgetting about me tomorrow as well!”

Zhao Zhi narrowed her eyes at him before lifting up the brush and wrote a word ‘Shan’, the character delicate and straight, a great world of difference when compared to the characters that Xiang Shaolong has written.

Xiang Shaolong said with embarrassment, “So it was I who have heard wrongly! But something came out of this mistake as well.” Suddenly his body shook, as if he suddenly remembered something important.

Zhao Zhi mistook his meaning and said sadly, “You finally realize that my Father is the philosopher Shan Qin from the state of Qi. He wholeheartedly wanted to help his Majesty run the country well, but that conniving thief Tian Dan thought that Father wanted to reduce his power so he just randomly made up some proof of rebellion, causing our whole family to escape to Handan in the middle of the night. We thought that Zhao Mu would take us in on account of our longstanding friendship, but who would have known...”

But what Xiang Shaolong thought of was Shan Lan, who is married to Teng Yi. Naturally Teng Yi will know about her background clearly and there’s no need for him to ask Zhao Zhi directly in case he leaked out the secret.

Xiang Shaolong asked, “What is Zhao Ba’s relationship with you?”

Zhao Zhi wiped away the tears from the corner of her eyes and replied, “None at all, it’s just that he is Uncle Zhao Zheng’s good friend. Uncle Zhao Zheng used to be a scholar of Zhao, when he was young he followed his mother and came to our house as a servant, and until now he still regards himself as one. If he had not taken my sister and me in, I don’t know what our outcome would be. I’ve long regarded him as my father, so please still treat me as Zhao Zhi.”

Xiang Shaolong might as well continue his questioning so he asked, “Why did Miss help Zhao Mu train his dance courtesans?”

Zhao Zhi replied, “My Teacher has a deep friendship with Guo

Zhong and Guo Zhong wants to find someone to teach his dance courtesans the sword dance, so Teacher recommended me. Zhao Mu saw that I did quite a good job teaching so he wanted me to train the dance courtesans in his residence as well. We thought that it'll be a good chance for revenge, but once again you saved him."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Your elder sister is very highly skilled, did Zhao Ba coach her?"

Zhao Zhi shook her head, "Ever since young, Elder Sister has been the closed door disciple of Grand Master Cao Qiudao, who is also known as Sword Saint but gave himself the name of Mister Wang You. I stayed behind with Uncle Zheng while she snuck back to Qi to train under Master Cao. She tried unsuccessfully to assassinate Tian Dan twice and was forced to hide here recently. Now that Tian Dan has come to Zhao, it is indeed Heaven's gift of a splendid opportunity."

(Wang You = meaning forgetting sorrows)

Xiang Shaolong asked in bewilderment, "Why is Miss so cooperative this time, answering all my questions with nothing held back at all?"

Zhao Zhi's pretty face turned slightly red as she replied, "Because I'm grateful to you. You actually repaid malice with kindness, you're really a good person!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed as he leaned back against the chair and

stretched lazily, immediately revealing his muscular and solid chest muscles as well as the bandages around his shoulder.

Zhao Zhi exclaimed in alarm, “You’re injured!” Then she turned her head away and blushed, “You don’t like to wear clothes at home?”

Xiang Shaolong replied nonchalantly, “Miss is unaccustomed to facing an unrefined person like me!”

Zhao Zhi turned her head back as if she has set her mind on something and looked at him shyly as she replied, “No! Mister’s intellect and skills are way better than others, my sister and I are both very impressed by you.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “Don’t speak on your sister’s behalf, I don’t believe she will ever be impressed by anyone.”

Zhao Zhi revealed a look of surprise as she nodded her head, “You’re really good to be able to see through her character. Indeed she did not say she was impressed with you, but I know that in her heart she is now looking at you from a different light, it’s just that she’s being stubborn and refuses to admit it! She did not object to me coming to look for you as well.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled, “Don’t you have to accompany your Master to attend the King of Zhao’s feast? Why do you still have time to come and look for me?”

Zhao Zhi replied, “Precisely because everyone has gone to the Palace, that’s why I sneaked here. That Ji Yanran’s allure is really formidable, everyone is falling head over heels over her. If she is willing to play a tune or sing a song, I think that’ll be a greater knockout.”

Xiang Shaolong was thinking of the good show that is being played right now at the Palace, secretly thinking that if this unrefined man were to woo her publicly and in fact succeed, definitely everyone’s spectacles will fall off their noses, if spectacles were to exist in this ancient era in the first place.

Zhao Zhi saw him smiling strangely and can’t help but ask, “What are you thinking about? Hey! Why were you not included in tonight’s feast?” I still have not asked you what is the great enmity between you and Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong waved his hands and smiled wryly, “Which of your questions do you want replied first?”

Zhao Zhi’s eyes landed in his gleaming chest muscles uncontrollably again and she hurriedly averted her eyes in shock as she said with a sigh, “You’re like a mystery, so unfathomable that one can never guess your intentions but if you’re Xiang Shaolong, everything would seem reasonable.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “I know who Xiang Shaolong is now, just that I did not expect Miss Zhi is also his woman. This person is really a womanizer.”

Zhao Zhi's pretty face turned even redder as she rolled her eyes at him and said, "Not only do I not have a relationship with him, he was initially my enemy as well. Hai!"

Xiang Shaolong asked in bewilderment, "Why did Miss Zhi sigh?" Zhao Zhi replied honestly, "I don't know either, I just feel a little vexed."

Xiang Shaolong said nonchalantly, "Since you are not his woman, then don't think about him. Since that I have already hugged and kissed you, why don't Miss Zhi just follow me!"

Zhao Zhi was astounded, then her whole face immediately burned as she exclaimed 'Ah!' and shook her head violently, saying, "No! No! Ai! Sorry!"

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "I am unrefined and does not know how to flatter women. Initially I thought that Miss Zhi was interested in me, but it turned out to be a misunderstanding. There's nothing to be sorry about, forget it if you do not want to be with me."

Zhao Zhi lowered her head, her expression a little uneasy as she pulled on the corners of her clothes and asked quietly, "You're really not angry with me over this?"

Xiang Shaolong chortled, "D.amn! How can I be such a person. But since you're not my woman, which means you're an outsider. My Father taught me that I must never tell the truth to an outsider, so you can forget about me telling you anything."

Zhao Zhi was thoroughly confused by him so she exclaimed with helpless anger, “Forget it if you don’t want to tell me! I’m leaving.”

Xiang Shaolong once again lifted his brush to write and replied absentmindedly, “Miss Zhi, please! I won’t send you off!”

Zhao Zhi seems to be rooted to the spot and looked at him with interest, “You’re angry!”

Xiang Shaolong deliberately refused to look at her, “Is there cause for celebration after being rejected by a woman? If Miss Zhi still refuses to leave, maybe I will forcefully cart you off to the bedroom, by then you will have no choice even if you’re unwilling.”

Zhao Zhi stood up in fright as she pouted, “You! How can you be so unreasonable, I came here meekly to apologize and discuss things with you yet this is how you treat others.”

Xiang Shaolong’s brush stopped moving as he lifted his head to look at this beauty who is prettier than a flower and eyed her up and down with narrowed eyes, saying “I am a normal man, you’re a lass so sweet that juice is oozing out, this is a quiet room where there’s no one else, so tell me how should I be treating you?”

Zhao Zhi could not tolerate the look in his eyes and fumed, “If you continue like this, I’m really going to leave!”

Xiang Shaolong put his brush down and smiled, “I understand Miss’s intentions now, no wonder people say that no matter how willing a woman is in her heart, her mouth will always say no.”

Zhao Zhi left her seat in shock and moved next to the door before saying with a sigh of relief, “If you continue treating me like this, Zhao Zhi will hate you to the core.”

Xiang Shaolong turned around and said suavely, “Hate is love, hmm! Who was the one who taught me this famous saying. I did not expect that I, Dong Kuang, would finally succeed. Hai! I couldn’t even find a woman to hate me in the past.”

Zhao Zhi pouted, “Other than horses, what else do you know?”

Xiang Shaolong collected his thoughts and mulled over it before answering, “Actually I have no interest in anything else other than horses, but after hugging Miss that night, I realized that a woman’s body is so soft and alluring, heh!”

Zhao Zhi finally could take it no longer and stamped her feet angrily before saying furiously, “I hate you to the core!” before pushing the door and escaping.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the closing door and sighed.

He deliberately made Zhao Zhi angry and leave, otherwise she may find out his secret. Especially when Jing Jun comes back, this lad will surely let the cat out of the bag when he sees her.

Even if there's nothing wrong with Jing Jun's expression, but Zhao Zhi has seen him many times and it'll be easy for her to tell that he is just wearing a mask as his build and movements will reveal the loopholes.

She is not like Tian Zhen, whose only wish is to be with him. If her sister ask her to make use of feelings to threaten him in order to accomplish their dream, that would be terrible.

But if the 2 sisters were to risk assassinating Tian Dan, it would also be a cause for headache. However, for the time being, he can't think of any plans that can fulfill both ends.

Once he thought about this, he stood up to look for Teng Yi to find out the relationship between Shan Lan and them.

When Xiang Shaolong woke up the next day, he's still very free. He was secretly finding this ironic. From being a popular person who was all the rage, he has now become an idle man and disregarded. He did not expect Li Yuan to have such influence. If he is the real Dong Kuang, it'll be strange if he is not harboring thoughts of leaving by now.

After he spoke to Teng Yi, he has indeed confirmed that Shan Lan is Zhao Zhi's 2nd sister. The Qis saw that she was pretty so she was kept in the official brothel and given training there so that she can be given away as a gift.

After lunch, Zhao Mu was on the way to the Palace to see King

Xiaocheng and came into the guesthouse to see them.

In the quiet inner hall, Xiang Shaolong told him about the ambush. Zhao Mu was silent for a moment before saying, “It must be Li Yuan who ordered this, there’s no reason for anyone else to deal with you.”

Xiang Shaolong had already guessed this is the case, but he just wants Zhao Mu to say it out himself.

Zhao Mu continued, “Li Yuan is head over heels over Ji Yanran and it was even worse when Learned Lady Ji was seated at the same table with you the other day and both of you were conversing pleasantly. That stirred up his jealousy and he deliberately pressured King Xiaocheng to cast you aside. This matter concerns the relations between the 2 states, and it had to happen at such a critical time so it’s difficult for me to put in my views. Hai! Learned Lady Ji came to look for you again yesterday. Don’t talk about Li Yuan being overly jealous, but all the men in Handan who thinks that they are qualified to pursue her are all green-eyed as well.”

He sighed again and said, “This beauty is really an excellent treasure. Her song last night, everyone at the feast was bowled over and that Li Yuan even wept. If one can keep her for himself, tell me what more can a man want?”

Xiang Shaolong remained quiet. Zhao Mu can’t help but ask, “Why did she come and look for you yesterday?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to smile wryly and asked, “If I say that she has taken a liking to me, would you believe me?” Zhao Mu chuckled, “Of course not.”

Xiang Shaolong continued dejectedly, “I wish that she came to look for me because she could not control her feelings, but a pity she only came to seek my advice because her horse fell sick.”

Zhao Mu was secretly thinking that this sounds more logical and said with relief, “I have to go. Bring more men with you when you go out these few days, don’t let Li Yuan have another chance again. Our plan can only proceed after the collaboration between the 6 states have settled down so don’t do anything for now.”

Xiang Shaolong accompanied him to the main door.

Zhao Mu appeared to be in a good mood as he said with a laugh, “I wonder if Learned Lady Ji’s heart has stirred, she seems especially alluring recently. What I did not expect was that she’d even be willing to attend Lady Ya’s feast tonight. Her behavior is extremely different from when she was in Daliang, where she hid herself at home and refused to come out. Now everyone in Handan is rubbing his hands, hoping to win a beauty back. This is even more appealing than winning a great war.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “Then won’t the house be filled to the brim tonight?”

Zhao Mu chuckled, “Filled to the brim? This description is really interesting. The phrases you used may be better than Su Qin and

Zhang Yi, these 2 famed debaters. Those words you said the other day forced Li Yuan to become speechless and everyone changed their opinion of you. Even that slutty Zhao Ya's heart was stirred. Just put in a little more effort and you may even be able to go straight to her bedroom tonight? Hei! The allure of this slut on the bed is something you will know only after you try it."

Xiang Shaolong felt like covering his ears so that he did not have to listen. Luckily by now they have reached the square outside the main building, only to see more than a hundred of the Marquis Residence's house warriors, and it was the first time Pu Bu and the rest appeared there as well.

Zhao Mu gave a cold snort, "One day I will capture that female assassin and when the time comes, I'll make sure that living will be worse than death for her. This group of people are the personal guards I recently transferred over and are absolutely loyal but if they fail in their jobs, I will sentence all of them to death like the last batch of idiots."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled, for this person's cruel nature makes one turn cold. Everyone, including himself, is just a tool that he can discard at will. If he becomes the ruler, the officials and the people will be in for a lot of suffering.

But this time, this is to his advantage. At least it allows Pu Bu and his men to be closer to him.

Shortly after Zhao Mu left, the horse carriage Mady Ya sent to pick him up arrived, and the person who drove it is Zhao Da.

He trust Zhao Da even more than he trusts Pu Bu and his men so he invited him into the hall and asked with a smile, “Zhao Da, don’t you recognize me anymore?”

Zhao Da was astounded and looked towards him, exclaiming hoarsely, “Master Xiang!” before hurriedly kneeling down.

The two of them felt like they’ve been parted for a long time Zhao Da was so overcome by emotions that he was weeping as he said, “We have been waiting for Master Xiang to return and actually wanted to slip away to Xianyang to look for you but we can’t bear to leave Lady behind.”

After Xiang Shaolong made him sit down, he said, “This time, my identity must not be revealed, otherwise it will bring everyone down, therefore you must hide this even from your brothers.”

Zhao Da replied, “Master Xiang, do not worry. Even if I am to be chopped to pieces, I will never reveal anything about you. Master Xiang trusts me so much...” When he said this, his eyes turned red and he could not continue his words.

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Once this matter is accomplished, all of you will come back with me to Xianyang! Handan is not a place for you to stay too long in.”

Zhao Da was initially overjoyed but his expression immediately dimmed a little as he suddenly knelt down as if he has made up his mind on something and choked, “Master Xiang please forgive

Lady! You're the only one who has a place in her heart even now, she..."

Xiang Shaolong helped him up and was visibly moved as he said, "I understand your loyalty, but many things cannot be forced, let's just see how things progress! That's right! Did Han Chuang spend the night at Lady's place these few days?"

Zhao Da's expression started to look a little unnatural as he replied, "Lady did not see Marquis Han recently, but Mister Li Yuan from Chu did come once and Lady invited him to her building for a talk and he stayed there for more than 2 hours. Master Xiang! Lady is doing this only because she's trying to make use of others to forget about you, all this time we've never seen her smile truly."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly livid. Li Yuan is not interested in Zhao Ya at all but just making use of her to take revenge on Ji Yanran for treating him differently from others and this Zhao Ya has no self-respect for herself as well.

Zhao Ya exclaimed in panic, "Master Xiang! I am telling the truth."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a straight face, "It's very dangerous to try and stand on 2 boats at the same time. Zhao Da, from today onwards, you better put your whole heart and mind into following me. Zhao Ya is fickle and I cannot put everyone's lives in her hands. If she betrays us again, this time there's no chance of us turning things around again."

Zhao Da was so startled that he knelt down and begged for forgiveness.

Xiang Shaolong pulled him up again and after talking and advising him, he went over to Teng Yi's room to apply the medicinal sap from the 'Love Plant' before following Zhao Da back to Lady Ya's residence.

Along the way, he felt more hatred the more he thought things over. Now, besides Zhao Mu, the person he hates most is that despicable and venomous Li Yuan.

He can't help but blame Zhao Ya for being a born slut again and for having weak willpower. Since she has expressed her interest in this horse fanatic, how can she continuously flirt with other men and he can't help but put his guard up against her.

The best way to deal with those 2 people, is naturally through his goddess Ji Yanran. Once he thought of this, his whole being was filled with energy.

Book 7 Chapter 9 – Despicable Fiend

Xiang Shaolong arrived at Zhao Ya's main hall, which he first came when newly arrived. Those decorations and trinkets were still placed on the shelves like before, but his state of mind has changed totally.

Why didn't she invite him to that quiet and elegant little building at the garden, allowing Li Yuan that favor but treating him so shabbily. If that's the case she might as well not ask him to come so early.

Character aside, Li Yuan is indeed the dream man in a woman's bedchamber and even Ji Yanran was once impressed by his poetic skills. A pity he is of such character.

Just as he was deep in thought, Lady Ya arrived. Her ladies-in-waiting took their leave after paying their respects.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly wondering why Xiaozhao and the rest of the maids were missing. Lady Ya came to sit down next to him and said, "Mister Dong is so nice to agree to come earlier, your presence brings glamour to my humble abode."

Xiang Shaolong looked towards her. This mature beauty is glowing, a look of flirtatiousness between her eyes, her body soft and dainty and extremely alluring.

The more beautiful and enchanting she is, the angrier he felt, guessing that she must have enjoyed Li Yuan's care, that's why she

has returned to her flirtatious behavior.

He said roughly, “Lady’s residence is even better than the residences of those Princes and Marquis, so how can I bring more glamour.”

Zhao Ya’s dainty brows frowned on hearing this. How can there be anyone who takes such polite talk to be the truth and although she felt a little displeased she did not flare up so easily like she did in the past. Of course this is because right now her heart is still filled with Li Yuan’s loving so she did not take it to heart as she replied, “How is the progress of your farm at the Hidden Army Valley?”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback. An astute person like him, on seeing Zhao ya’s mannerisms, already knows that Li Yuan has successfully obtained her heart, to the point that she has temporarily forgotten about ‘Xiang Shaolong’. That’s why she has regained her lost sophistication.

This should be something worth being happy about, at least Zhao Ya won’t be harassing him now that her heart is with someone else. However, he still feels very unpleasant, and wants to hurt her and see her upset.

He suppressed this urge and asked with a smile, “Let’s not talk about business today. Why does Lady want me to come earlier?” This time it was Zhao Ya’s turn to become speechless.

Of course she’s doing this because she has a slight interest in this

horse fanatic, but right now Li Yuan has suddenly barged into the picture and taken her heart, at least for now, so she no longer has the earlier feelings of lust.

She sent someone to pick up Xiang Shaolong earlier because deep in her heart she thirsts to be with him. This Dong Kuang has an unusual aura of being rough and at the same time filled with philosophical thoughts, overbearing yet gentle and when combined, gave her a refreshing yet exciting feel. When with him, she never knows what he will say next or if he will do anything surprising. And his attitude towards her blows hot and cold, as if he doesn't care about her but yet as if he is very interested in her. In short, with him around, she has no time to think of anything else.

This is a feeling that Li Yuan is unable to give her.

While she was enjoying herself with Li Yuan, she can't help but pretend that he is Xiang Shaolong but with this unrefined man who bears a little resemblance to Xiang Shaolong, can make her forget everything instead.

What would it be like to be intimate with him?

Once she thought of this, she shocked even herself and secretly reprimanded herself. Why is it that after seeing him, her original strong memory of Li Yuan immediately faded?

Xiang Shaolong saw her hesitant look and his fury soared and he stood up immediately. Zhao Ya was startled and lifted her head to

look at him quizzically.

Xiang Shaolong said in a serious tone, “Has Lady fallen for that fellow Li Yuan, that’s why you’ve become so cold towards me?”

Zhao ya’s delicate body trembled as she exclaimed, “Ah! No!” By now she cannot guess at all how the other person managed to say out what is in her heart so accurately.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “That’s all right, but if what Li Yuan stole was my precious horse, then I will never let him off.” He stretched lazily and with a laugh, said, “I better take a walk around the streets, I’ll come back later to join in the feast so that we need not sit in awkward silence wondering what we should talk about.”

Zhao Ya was totally lost as she stood up and pouted, “Mister Dong! Can’t you show me some consideration? Am I incomparable to a horse in your mind?” Once she said that, she knows she has made a freudian slip because won’t that mean that she is regarding herself as his horse? Xiang Shaolong looked at her nonchalantly but was secretly gloating. He turned around and started walking towards the door and said offhandedly, “That fellow kept pitting himself against me. Fine! Then let me do something and snatch Ji Yanran over, that will give him a taste of having his beloved taken by others.”

Zhao Ya wanted to run after him but stopped when she heard the 3 words Ji Yanran.

But she dare not laugh at him, because his words revealed a great

confidence, making one feel that once he says something, he'll definitely accomplish it.

By the time Xiang Shaolong disappeared outside the door, she was still thinking about the 4 words 'beloved taken by others.

Hai! The fresh and interesting terms he used can be comparable to Xiang Shaolong. Suddenly, she knows why Li Yuan still cannot totally replace Xiang Shaolong.

Once she thought of this, her mood dimmed and she refuses to think further.

Walking alone at the streets of Handan, Xiang Shaolong thought of the wars that will occur after Xiaopan ascend the throne and can't help but feel melancholy.

This vast land, after hundreds of years of war has finally come to a point in history that they must rejoin after being separated for so long and him as an 'outsider' had a hand in this change. If he did not come here, does it mean all these would not have happened? No matter how intelligent he is compared to others, this is one question that can give him a headache just thinking about it.

"Brother Dong!" He heard the call and was first at a loss for he momentarily forgot that he is supposed to be Dong Kuang. He turned around after recollecting his thoughts.

It turned out to be the Marquis of Pingshan, Han Chuang with 7

to 8 personal guards whom one can tell at a glance that they are highly skilled. All of them looked energetic and were stoutly built. Although they were not as tall as Xiang Shaolong, they still looked imposing.

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, “I thought I was the only one who loves a stroll, I did not expect Marquis of Pingshan to enjoy this too.”

Han Chuang’s expression was serious and he did not reply immediately. Only when he came up next to him did he grab his arm warmly and said as they walked along, “Come! My guesthouse is just around the corner, we’ll speak at my place.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised by the sudden warmth for he did not expect his attitude to suddenly turn 180 degrees from his original frosty behavior.

He can’t help but follow him back to the guesthouse and even after he sat down in the hall, the 10 over swordsmen still stood around them and did not leave, making the atmosphere extremely serious. It seems like secret society bosses out for negotiation.

Han Chuang dispensed with the usual polite talk or serving drinks and said solemnly, “Damn that Li Yuan, not giving both of us any face at all. He publicly shaved off my eyebrow, how extremely hateful.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood. So he has been sending people to keep an eye on Zhao Ya and saw that Li Yuan has gone to

look for her and stayed for a length of time which is sufficient for them to do a lot of things before leaving. He was therefore livid and is now regarding him, the other love rival, to be on his side as well. However, it can be said that Han Chuang felt that regardless of looks, status or power, he surpasses Xiang Shaolong so he does not regard him as a strong foe but as for Li Yuan, it's another matter.

From this he can see that Han Chuang is serious about Zhao Ya, to the extent that he'll like to bring her back to Han so that he can enjoy her freely at home but his dream is not shattered by Li Yuan.

He could not find anything to say in response in such short notice. Han Chuang's eyes gleamed fiercely as he said, "Why is it that Brother Dong slipped out so quickly?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that he must be on his way to look for Zhao Ya to ask for an explanation when he saw him walking out, therefore he changed his mind and went after him to drag him home.

He gave a cold snort and said, "What I cannot stand the most is being treated coldly and rudely. If I don't leave, what else can I do there, damn his grandmother!"

Han Chuang shared the same thoughts and snorted, "I, the Marquis of Pingshan, has seen many people in my life, but I've never seen such a conceited fellow. Who does he think he is? It's all because of his sister's connection. I really don't understand why Lord Chunshen thinks so highly of him. If Li Yanyan can't give birth to a son, let's see how smug he can be."

Until now Xiang Shaolong has no idea why he was pulled here. A person like him with such a high status, there's really no need for him to find someone like him just to pour out his complaints.

Han Chuang's expression looks clouded as he said angrily, "In order not to offend the Chus and affect the grand plan for cooperation, I am already controlling myself not to fight with him over Learned Lady Ji, but he won't even let off Zhao Ya. No wonder ever since he came, that slut Zhao Ya started ignoring me."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand how deeply Han Chuang is mesmerized by Zhao Ya so he sighed, "There are many beauties in the world, why don't Marquis just ignore her. That's why I prefer rearing horses. If you treat a horse well, they will treat you well without any other thoughts, unlike women and conniving people who are hard to keep."

Han Chuang was silent for a moment before he actually laughed and slapped his shoulder, saying, "It's really interested talking to you, but I must get back at him. Li Yuan was such a brag, I'd like to see how formidable his sword skills are."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and exclaimed, "Marquis, you're not thinking of personally dueling tomorrow?"

The corners of Han Chuang's lips curved up into a sinister smile, his eyes turning icy as he lowered his voice and said, "Why would I do such a silly thing. I've already made preparations, even if Li Yuan is taught a lesson, he won't be able to know that I was behind

it.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that people like him who use underhand methods will never reveal all the details, and seeing that he is willing to tell what his plans are, it's obvious that he's already regarding him as one of them. He pretended to pander to him and said, “People who offend you are really fools.”

Han Chuang suddenly leaned back against the chair and said feebly, “We have long given up on the Chus. All along, the three of us have been fighting hard against Qin and they are always tripping us up from the back. Who can guarantee that Li Yuan won't inform the Qins of our intention to cooperate and by that time if the Qins decide to strike first, the first to be attacked will be my country. Hai! I really do not understand why the King of Zhao would pander to him so much?”

He looked at him and asked, “Does Brother Dong know why King Xiaocheng has suddenly become so cold towards you and did not even invite you to the feast last night?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to look angry and nodded his head, “Isn't it all because of that fellow Li Yuan!”

Han Chuang actually slapped his back like they're old friends and said, “If this place is not for you, there will always be other places who will welcome you. Our doors will always be opened to welcome Mister Dong. If you want to deal with Li Yuan, I can be your back-up.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing, for this is his aim in trying to pull him to his side, which is to make use of him to deal with Li Yuan. He pretended to be grateful and said, "I will remember Marquis's words."

Han Chuang sulked, "I think Yanran will ultimately fall into his hands. If we can snatch this beauty from his hands, it will make him feel even worse than killing him."

Xiang Shaolong sighed, "Learned Lady Ji is not that easy to win, I don't think that Li Yuan will succeed."

Han Chuang smiled sinisterly, "If you want to make a woman yield, there are a lot of ways. For example letting her try a little aphrodisiac, that will make sure she throws herself at you. It's definitely not easy to find a chance to be along with Ji Yanran but she seems to be impressed with Brother Dong's skills with rearing horses, so maybe... heh! Do you understand my meaning!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly livid, thinking that he is really despicable for this would not only harm Ji Yanran but also himself. Of course! That is only if he is the real Dong Kuang.

A learned lady like Ji Yanran who has the respect and admiration of everyone in the world, if anyone were to do such a beastly thing to her, then won't he end up being the enemy of everyone? It'll be a surprise if Han Chuang is willing to take him in at that time.

Just looking at the plan of making use of him to kill others, he can see how evil hearted this Han Chuang is.

Now he's beginning to understand why the 6 states will ultimately be destroyed by Qin. With a person like Han Chuang in an important official position, representing his country to come to Handan to have the secret discussion to deal with Qin, instead of tending to business, he is spending his efforts on his jealousy.

For now he has seen that the 4 states Han, Wei, Zhao and Chu are all filled with manipulative people and cannot be used by great men like Li Mu, Lian Po and Lord Xinling. He wonders how the situation is like in Yan and Qi.

Han Chuang gave a hand signal and someone immediately sent in a small bottle. Han Chuang stuffed it into Xiang Shaolong's hands and said with the most sincere expression, "I am counting on Mister to help me get my back at him. Women are very strange, no matter how fiercely they protect their chastity, but once you get her body, most will become very meek towards you. Ji Yanran is a woman so she is no exception either! Heh! I'm really envious of Brother Dong!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing but he asked about the instructions to use the thing and stuffed the small bottle into his clothes and said, "I still have to see what the situation is like. Hai! I'm really not that interested in women. How can women be compared to horses?"

Han Chuang persuaded him again and after saying a lot of good words, went with him to Lady Ya's residence for the feast.

Xiang Shaolong waited for Han Chuang to enter the residence first. He strolled outside for a while and strutted into the residence slightly later.

The square outside the main building was filled with carriages. After Zhao Da brought him into the residence, he said quietly, "After you left just now, Lady sat there looking very miserable for a long time. She even refused to see Guo Kai when he came. Master Dong is indeed good."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he still has not given up hope that he will reconcile with Zhao Ya but how can spilt milk be recollected.

The feast is being held at an elegant looking square room in the side of the main building. The layout is the same as what the Guo family used the other night, a huge round table placed at the center of the hall with more than 10 seats around it.

All those who attended the feast at the Guo family were here, including that pretty Miss Guo.

Xiang Shaolong thought that after that night, Guo Xiu'er would refuse to see Li Yuan but now it seems that she's behaving as if nothing is wrong.

Besides these people, there are 4 more persons.

The first is of course Ji Yanran, as well as Zhao Zhi and Guo Kai and a 40 odd year old man who was dressed splendidly with an

imposing aura. However his eyes kept flitting around, giving one the feeling that he is someone who likes to plot.

It was not yet time to start the feast so the 8 folding doors at the side of the hall were all opened and they could all see the huge garden outside filled with flowers and trees, with a dozen odd lanterns hanging from the branches, illuminating the whole garden into a colorful array, giving it a dreamy feel.

Xiang Shaolong was the last guest to arrive and most of the people are already in the garden admiring the lanterns leaving only Zhao Mu, Guo Zhong, Le Cheng, Zhao Ba and that anonymous man talking in the hall.

Zhao Mu saw Xiang Shaolong and chortled, “Why is Mister Dong late, I must punish you later and make you drink up 3 cups of wine. Come! Meet Mister Ji Zhong.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled, so this is the special envoy representing Lord Dongzhou to unify the 6 states to deal with Qin, and he hurriedly rushed over.

Ji Zhong places a lot of importance on protocol so Xiang Shaolong had to pay his respects according to court customs and after some polite words, Ji Zhong may seem courteous and respectful but it was obvious that he pays no heed at all to someone who rears horses. He turned back to the topic they were discussing earlier, talking about how useless King Zhuangxiang of Qin is to place such importance on Lu Buwei, and about how Qin will

definitely suffer from internal strife.

Xiang Shaolong is not in the mood to listen to him at all and after excusing himself, he walked towards the garden. He had just stepped into the garden when 3 pairs of pretty eyes flitted towards him.

Ji Yanran's pretty eyes can't help but light up on seeing him; Zhao Ya turned her head away after staring at him angrily, obviously still upset; Zhao Zhi has been waiting for his appearance all along and her pretty face beamed as she said happily, "Mister Dong come quickly, we were just discussing a very interesting question!"

Xiang Shaolong looked over and saw that everyone was gathered around the stone bridge at the center of the garden, a clear stream flowing windingly below it and towards a lotus pond a slight distance away where a strange rock was placed right in the middle and the whole layout looked extremely interesting. From this one can see that besides being a slut, Zhao Ya is also a woman that has aspirations.

Ji Yanran was leaning over the bridge in a relaxed manner while Li Yuan who was next to her was pointing at the various fishes swimming beneath, trying to get into her good books.

Guo Xiu'er and Zhao Zhi were the most familiar, sitting together on a large, smooth rock a short distance away and they looked like they were admiring this pretty garden filled with lanterns. The former is eyeing him right now.

Han Chuang and Guo Kai were accompanying Zhao Ya and standing on the middle of the bridge, behind Ji Yanran and Li Yuan.

Xiang Shaolong walked towards the stone bridge and first greeted Guo xiu'er and Zhao Zhi. Zhao Zhi forced herself to return the greeting while Guo Xiu'er gave him an additional sweet smile.

Although Xiang Shaolong's heart was stirred, he knows that he must never touch this girl for after all the Wu family and the Guo family are arch enemies.

When he stepped up to the stone bridge, Ji Yanran ignored Li Yuan and turned around, saying with a smile, "Mister Dong! We were just discussing about the meaning of life and death, I wonder what your thoughts on this are?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that this pretty lady loves a discussion, from ruling a country to things like this, whether life has any meaning. And this is an era where everyone is fighting for a chance to speak and where ideologies are expanding like an explosion.

The mood for such idle discussions are mostly found in the noble and scholarly circles, just like Confucius and his peers not too long ago who loved to talk about life and philosophy all day long. A pity that he's not too knowledgeable in this area so although he knows that Ji Yanran is giving him a chance to show off so that he can smoothly start his pursuit of her, there is nothing he could do. He replied with a wry smile, "I'm just an unrefined man, how would I

understand such profound ideologies?”

Ji Yanran thought that he was pretending to be modest before expounding his ideas but before she had a chance to reply, Li Yuan interrupted, “A pity that Mister Zou is not here, otherwise he will certainly give a very remarkable view. Heh! Why don’t we seek Mister Dong’s advice on rearing horses!”

Anyone with a brain would know that he was putting Xiang Shaolong down, implying that besides horses, he knows nothing else. And in this era, rearing horses is considered a lowly occupation so he was deliberately jabbing at Xiang Shaolong’s status.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly furious but he was even more worried that he’ll press on to ask questions about horses. Although he had crammed some knowledge in this area, his expertise is still very limited. He pretended to be nonchalant and said, “I’m sure you’ve come out with a conclusion after discussing for so long, why not enlighten me on this.”

Guo Kai, the conniving Confucian scholar said, “I still believe in Confucius’s words ‘if you cannot serve men, how can you serve spirits’, so I might as well not think about anything beyond life and death.”

Zhao Ya was apparently in high spirits as she laughed, “Scholar Guo is really wily, only knowing how to avoid and refusing to face this most important lesson in life.”

Li Yuan said proudly, “Whatever we do, there must be a goal so why do we only choose to ignore the question of our existence. Since heaven has given us precious life, we should burn brightly and warmly just like the colorful lanterns hanging high on the trees, only then will our lives not be lived in vain.”

Xiang Shaolong has to admit that there is some truth and imagination behind this person’s words. He looked at the ladies around, Zhao Ya’s eyes revealed a look of intoxication, Ji Yanran was concentrating very hard on his words too while Zhao Zhi and Guo Xiu’er paused in their private talk to listen intently.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this doesn’t look well so after searching through his mind, he said, “What Brother Li said is just an attitude towards life, but it’s not a conclusion about the meaning of life and death.” Guo Kai and Han Chuang both revealed a look of surprise for they did not expect this unrefined man’s mind and observation skills would be so intricate.

Li Yuan chortled and said, “Well said Mister Dong, but just like what Zhuang Zi said, ‘when man take what is small and try to fill up what is great, they will end up confused and will not achieve their end’. As long as we’re being restricted within life and death, we can never find the answer about life and death, just like the snake in summer will not know what is the snow and ice of winter. So the only thing we can do is to have an attitude to achieve something so that we will not waste our short lives.’ He spoke flowingly, melodiously and with such feelings that he really has the charisma of a debater that will stun others into admiration. No wonder even Ji Yanran is looking at him differently. For the moment Xiang Shaolong was speechless.

Li Yuan saw his expression and was secretly laughing. There's no way he will let him off so he pretended to be humble and sought his opinion, "And what is Mister Dong's attitude towards life?"

Of course Xiang Shaolong can randomly find some words to say but if he wants make it sound even more impressively than this person, there's no way he could even if he wanted to.

Han Chuang is now on the same side as him so he helped ease the situation by saying, "Tonight's discussion is really unique and interesting, why don't we pause for now and continue during the feast!" Zhao Ya said unhappily, "It was such an exciting discussion yet you're in such a hurry to start the feast. Zhao Ya still wants to hear more of Mister Li's excellent theories!"

Ji Yanran said gently, "We haven't given Mister Dong the chance to speak?"

Looking at Ji Yanran's expectant eyes, he remembered his mission to pursue her publicly so how can he make himself look so useless? Just as he was lamenting, he suddenly had an idea and remembered that he once heard of a story in his era, and maybe he can use it to reflect the situation now. He walked to the bridge and came next to Ji Yanran. He first looked deeply into her eyes before revealing his white and perfect teeth to Zhao Ya in a slight smile before he turned around and placed both his hands on the side of the bridge, lifting his head to look at the night sky. The moon up in the sky was pure and bright, round and so far away.

Everyone knows that he has something to say but they have no idea what kind of insight he could give that can be better than Li

Yuan's so they all breathed steadily and quietly, getting ready to concentrate on his words.

The corners of Li Yuan's mouth curved up into a slight sniggering smile.

Ji Yanran closed her beautiful eyes, she is confident that Xiang Shaolong will certainly say something philosophical that will make one contemplate over. To her, nothing is more interesting than contemplating over life's questions and this is also the reason why she became good friends with Zou Yan. She fell in love with Xiang Shaolong because his words are refreshing and exceptional, different from the others.

Xiang Shaolong's hoarse voice said slowly, "A tourist was walking in the desert, when suddenly a pack of hungry wolves appeared behind him, running after him so that they could feast on him."

Everyone was alarmed but at the same time they felt a great interest for they did not expect him to suddenly tell a story. Just like how Zhuang Zi likes to use fables to portray his thoughts.

Xiang Shaolong's voice reverberated through the quiet night, giving it an inexplicable feeling of mystery and power, especially when the topic is about the unfathomable question of life and death.

He continued in a very slow tempo, "He was startled and started running madly, fighting on for his life."

Guo Xiu'er exclaimed 'Ah' and said, "How can he run faster than hungry wolves in the desert, he will certainly die!"

The rest of them smiled on hearing that but did not say anything because they all want to continue listening, even Li Yuan was no exception. But when he saw how pretty Ji Yanran looked with her eyes closed, looking so obedient and concentrated, he can't help but feel jealousy burn in him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "No need to panic! Just as the hungry wolves were about to catch up with him, he saw a well in front which he has no idea how deep it could be and jumped in without a thought."

Zhao Ya heaved a sigh of relief and asked, "The well is certainly filled with water, right?"

Xiang Shaolong looked at the little stream below him and shook his head, "Not only is it dry, there's also a lot of poisonous snakes and on seeing that there's food being delivered right to their door, they all raised their heads and hissed, waiting in anticipation."

This time it was Ji Yanran's turn to exclaim 'ah!' as she opened her pretty eyes and turned her dainty body around to look at him and ask, "What should he do? Why don't he turn back and fight with the hungry wolves for poisonous snakes are more frightening than wolves." Han Chuang laughed, "Women are all afraid of snakes and Miss Ji is no exception."

Xiang Shaolong looked at Ji Yanran and said gently, “In his panic, he started grabbing around for something that might save his life and unexpectedly, heaven is fulfilling his wish and he grabbed a small tree that was growing horizontally between the well so he was suspended in midair.” Everyone remained quiet for they knew there will be more to the story.

Zhao Ya’s eyes lit up for in this instance, her heart only sees this man who is even more special and unfathomable than Li Yuan.

Xianf Shaolong continued, “Therefore the hungry wolves are above and the poisonous snakes are below. Although that person is in a dire situation where he can neither advance nor retreat but at the moment at least, he is safe.”

Everyone started to have some understanding. What Xiang Shaolong said is the reflection of life for when between life and death, who would not be in the situation whereby he cannot advance or retreat?

He continued, “Just as he was heaving a sigh of relief, he heard a strange noise. He turned towards where the noise was coming from in fear and was shocked to see a large number of rats chewing on the roots of the tree with their sharp teeth. This life saving tree has not much time left.” Guo Xiu’er and Zhao Zhi both cried out at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong looked deeply into Ji Yanran’s eyes, as if he’s telling this story only to her, “Just at this instant between life and death, he saw in front of his eyes on a leaf, a drop of honey. Therefore he forgot about the hungry wolves above, the poisonous

snakes below and the small tree that was almost gnawed in half by the rats but closed his eyes and extended his tongue, totally concentrated on tasting that drop of honey.”

The bridge was so still that there was no noise at all except for the faint rush of the stream flowing past.

Xiang Shaolong stretched lazily and said, “And to me, that drop of honey is the meaning to life!”

No one spoke for even people like Guo Kai and Han Chuang who only knows how to hanker after wealth and fame, had their worries stirred up and they could relate with him.

Li Yuan saw that everyone was touched by Xiang Shaolong’s extremely deep thoughts on this matter and was feeling upset so he broke the silence and asked, “Where did this fable come from?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, “The horses told me!” He then chortled and said, “I’m hungry!”

Book 7 Chapter 10 – A Drop Of Honey

Ji Yanran personally lifted the wine flask and stood up, coming to kneel in front of Xiang Shaolong. There's no need for her to pretend, for the look of admiration is naturally revealed in her eyes as she said gently, "Yanran have just heard the most moving fable in my entire life and there's no way I can repay you, except to make use of this fine wine to thank Mister Dong." With a graceful and breath-stopping pose, she poured the wine into Xiang Shaolong's cup.

Everyone was astounded.

Zhao Mu said in bewilderment, "What kind of fabulous fable did Mister Dong said, to make our Learned Lady Ji bow down and serve him wine personally?"

Ji Zhong revealed a look of surprise.

Li Yuan's face darkened, a look of hatred and jealousy in his eyes that he cannot hide.

Zhao Ya looked intoxicated as she repeated the story.

Those who have not heard were all impressed.

Ji Yanran went back to her seat and lifted her cup, "Ji Yanran offers Mister Dong a toast."

Although Han Chuang is secretly feeling extremely jealous, he was also happy that the hateful Li Yuan has been given a blow so he joined in and said, “Let everyone have a toast!”

Everyone toasted one another and although Li Yuan was extremely unwilling, he had no choice but force himself to drink this bitter wine.

Xiang Shaolong looked closely at the ladies. Ji Yanran obviously cannot hide the overflowing love that he has incited whereas Zhao Ya kept making eyes at him, trying to convey her thoughts with her eyes. Even Zhao Zhi who was still angry with him changed her attitude towards him, sneaking peeks at him frequently. Most surprisingly is that Guo Xiu'er was also looking at him with admiration. He was secretly counting his lucky stars. If not for the fact that he can make use of other people's intellect, he'll certainly make a fool of himself tonight, and it definitely won't be this outcome, where he stuck 4 birds with a stone.

Ji Zhong said, “I didn't expect Mister Dong to have heard such impressive and moving fable, this is really incredible.” He turned to Li Yuan and said, “Mister Li has such intelligence, you'll definitely have your views about this.”

His words are meant to put down Xiang Shaolong subtly while obviously complimenting Li Yuan and from this one can see that this person will stoop to all means just to achieve his goals. To him, Li Yuan, who can influence the King of Chu, is naturally more important than Xiang Shaolong.

Han Chuang chortled and interrupted, “That was a fable that

Mister Dong inferred from the horses, but I do have another view. If everyone in our 6 states forget ourselves in that drop of honey which can only offer us an instant of sweetness and join forces to deal with the Qins who are like the tigers and wolves, we will definitely be able to extricate ourselves from danger.”

These words are obviously meant for the Chus, because time and again they have betrayed the other united states just because the Qins gave them some benefits and in the end they lost their own troops as well.

Zhao Mu and the rest were secretly gloating as they look at Li Yuan’s expression change slightly.

With Ji Yanran around, Li Yuan refuses to make himself look bad so he quickly smoothened his expression and changed the topic.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the more one talks, the more likely mistakes are made so he buried himself with food and drinks. He ignored Li Yuan who was trying to get on Ji Yanran’s good grace, and once in a while would engage Zhao Ya and the other ladies, behaving like a suave flirt. If not for the fact that he was put down earlier by Xiang Shaolong, he’ll definitely be a woman’s ideal lover.

However Ji Yanran is not in the mood to bother about him, constantly looking at Xiang Shaolong instead, wishing that she can throw herself into his arms immediately.

The hostess, Zhao Ya, who was seated next to Li Yuan, was forced

to down 3 cups of wine and her pretty face started turning an alluring red. She gave a flirtatious laugh and asked, “Have you not forced enough drinks on me today yet?”

Everyone was startled and looked at the two of them.

Zhao Ya knew that she has let the cat out of the bag and quickly lowered her head.

Li Yuan was feeling extremely embarrassed. He came to look for Zhao Ya secretly today partly because he wanted to put Xiang Shaolong down but the main reason is that he is feeling lusty. Although Zhao Ya does not have Ji Yanran’s unique grace, she is still a rare beauty and it’s a waste to give up this chance. He just did not expect Zhao Ya to leak out this information during the feast.

He coughed dryly and said, “Didn’t we agree last night we’ll have a wager on who can hold their drinks better?”

Zhao Ya took a glance at Xiang Shaolong only to see him staring at the fine wine in his cup, as if he doesn’t mind at all. She felt a little relieved but at the same time felt a tinge of regret, hating herself for being unable to withstand Li Yuan’s lure.

Besides Xiang Shaolong, Li Yuan is the only man after him who could make her heart flutter and he even said he can take her away from this sad place to go to faraway Chu. But she has no idea why, this horse fanatic with the strange ideas in front of her, the way he moves and speaks, a person with a mixture of intelligence,

coarseness and rashness, is make her feel more excitement than the more handsome Li Yuan. She is struggling, caught between the desire to fight back and to give in, feeling both pain and happiness.

Ji Yanran took a look at Xiang Shaolong and told Li Yuan indifferently, “This is what’s called, famous men since ancient times have too much love to share!”

Li Yuan was secretly cursing himself and before he had the chance to explain, Zhao Ya lifted her pretty face and said with a smile, Miss Yanran is mistaken. Mister Li only came to discuss poems with Zhao Ya, and only drank a little wine to liven the mood!”

Obviously Guo Xiu’er has an interest in poetry so she asked Xiang Shaolong, who is now a great philosopher in her heart, “What does Mister Dong think about poems?”

Once she said that, everyone’s attention turned towards Xiang Shaolong.

Guo Zhong was secretly feeling alarmed, has his beloved daughter taken a liking to this unrefined man? Zhao Zhi remembered Xiang Shaolong’s horrible handwriting and was secretly sighing.

Ji Yanran and Zhao Ya were energized as they waited excitedly for this person to say something marvelous.

The odes passed down since ancient times, after many modifications by Confucius and his disciples, totaled more than 300.

These odes, in this era, have a very practical value, especially amongst the nobility. It has become a part of life and if one cannot recite some odes during social activities, he will be looked down upon. There's even a form of welcome address that uses purely odes that is called 'Composing a Poem' and the poem used in reply is called 'Reply Poem'. Therefore those who are not familiar with odes will embarrass themselves easily, like the saying 'One who does not learn odes, will have no words to reply'.

Xiang Shaolong is considered lucky but his luck has apparently run out by now. He's finally come face to face with this unsolvable problem.

Odes are not only a decorative façade and a tool to express one's upbringing and cultivation but 'discussing odes' is also a popular activity of this era. For example the ode 'Charming smile, enchanting eyes, plain background for colors' can generally mean a beautiful woman but can also mean the application of make-up *. Zigong therefore asked Confucius and he later added, "A painting will have to be done on a plain white background.' Because of this he gained Confucius's admiration, saying that he is qualified enough to discuss odes.

(*ode from the analects of Confucius)

Therefore, discussion of odes is a very common affair during feasts so Guo Xiu'er was not deliberately making things difficult

for this man who has garnered her interest.

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to cry for help but he said calmly, “I am after all an unrefined person, how can I be qualified to talk about insights?” Guo Xiu’er did not expect this exceptional man to give her such a disappointing answer so she lowered her pretty head and spoke no more.

Ji Yanran had a look of bewilderment.

To her, having Xiang Shaolong woo her openly is a very interesting game for it can allow her to understand more about her beloved ability. She did not expect him to reveal his sharp wit only to shrink back again, and now she cannot admire his talent. She did not expect Xiang Shaolong to be even worse than a simpleton in this aspect.

Ji Zhong revealed a look of despise and he is even surer that Xiang Shaolong must have stolen the fable earlier from someone else and used it as his own.

Guo Kai and Han Chuang revealed a look of surprise, for Dong Kuang’s father and grandfather used to be court officials, so how can Dong Kuang know nothing about poems at all? Whereas Zhao Mu guessed that he did not want to show off under such circumstances so he chortled and asked Zhao Ya, “I wonder what is the topic that Mister Li and Lady discussed today?”

Li Yuan saw that Xiang Shaolong had been embarrassed and was secretly ecstatic as he replied, “I was discussing with lady the

relationship between poems and joy. As the saying goes ‘The mind thrive with the Odes, Propriety is established through rites, The ending is accomplished through music’ so I gave Lady the music I composed for her input and luckily she did not make fun of it.”

Most interactions between the nobility and the officials cannot escape from poetry and music so Li Yuan is making use of this to show Ji Yanran that there is nothing else going on between him and Zhao Ya.

Zhao Zhi who has been silent all this while spoke up, “Mister Dong seems to hold no regards for music and poems at all!”

Xiang Shaolong almost felt like strangling her. Naturally she was secretly being sarcastic to him for his rude behavior towards her last night and at the same time jealous that Ji Yanran has expressed a liking for him so she was trying to put him down.

Li Yuan was overjoyed on hearing this and said with a laugh, “At least Mister Dong is happy being with horses, so of course he need not bother about anything else.”

Ji Zhong has always been aware of his own status and he had no choice but to be seated together at the same feast with a unrefined horse trader so he was already feeling unhappy. However he is a very deep person who will not reveal his thoughts. This time he made use of the opportunity to pander to Li Yuan and said, “Mister Dong is famed for rearing horses while Mister Li is well versed in poetry and music, so to each his own.”

Xiang Shaolong had no intention of being a busybody but once he heard that, fury just rose up within him and he said, “Please forgive an unrefined person like me for not understanding, among the 7 states, the Qins can be considered the worse in terms of popularity of philosophical discussions and importance of rites and music, but why is it they are the only one who can be the biggest threat to our 6 states?”

Once he said that, everyone’s expression changed, and they were speechless. Because this is a fact that cannot be debated.

Xiang Shaolong said icily, “Some people may look down on horse traders like me, and deride me for not understanding odes, but I can make the country and home strong with my horses and fight against external enemies. The Qins are strong because they place more importance in military contributions, all other matters are put aside.”

Everyone knows that he is angry and they just listened quietly.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “As a part of life, poetry and music is good in molding a person’s temperament and beautifying things. But with such a situation now, the more important thing is a rich country and strong soldiers. Food and clothing is more basic than honor or disgrace. If one cannot even protect the country, why bother talking about poetry and songs. In the past King Goujian of Yue slept on sticks and ate gall and persevered, so he was finally able to take revenge. After I came to Handan, I find that everyone is engrossed in eating, drinking and having fun. With such environment, no matter how much you support poetry and music, sooner or later you will become slaves of a fallen country.”

The one who felt the worse was Zhao Zhi, to be reprimanded in her face by him so she lowered her pretty face quietly.

Li Yuan and Han Chuang's expression became uneasy for they are indeed more engrossed in play and had totally ignored the grand plan of dealing with the Qins.

Zhao Mu remembered that 'he' grew up in the wilderness mountainous areas so he did not feel at all bewildered, even secretly thinking that when he becomes the King of Zhao in future, he must give more important duties to this practical person.

The feelings of the other 3 ladies were not as direct for in this world where men are leaders, it is naturally the duty of men to protect the country. Instead they find him to be extraordinary for it seems that everyone else is intoxicated but he is the only sober person.

Ji Zhong smiled coldly and said, "Who will know who the last one standing is until the very end?"

Xiang Shaolong is already feeling very irritated with this person that Lord Dongzhou had sent. He eyes flashed icily as he stared at him and said, "People say that a normal person will only think of today's matters, a fool will only remember yesterday's matters and only the intelligent will have a open mind and think about tomorrow, or even possible events that will happen one year or ten years later and start making plans today. If one has to wait until a winner is found which by then will be too late for regrets, he might

as well go home now and hug his woman and get as much sleep as possible.”

Ji zhong’s expression changed as he said angrily, “What does Mister Dong mean by those words? Who does not plan for the future, or are you the only intelligent one?”

Zhao Ya tried to play the peacemaker but Xiang Shaolong raised his hand to stop her. He smiled calmly and said, “Mister Ji thinks too much. I am only stating facts, so please do not think that I was pinpointing at anyone. I am a straightforward person and now I’m sharing weal and woe with everyone here so I hope I can offer my help to protect the country and her peoples. But look what kind of reception I received. Anyone with eyes will know who will be the last one standing. This is not a time for argument, but a time to cast aside our preconceptions for only by knowing oneself and one’s enemy, will we be able to stand a chance at fighting Qin.”

Guo Kai and Le Cheng exchanged looks, finally understanding the reason for his anger, for he is blaming the King of Zhao for ignoring him because of Li Yuan.

Zhao Ba exclaimed “Excellent!” and turned towards Ji Zhong, saying “Horse Fanatic Dong is a straight forward person who speaks his mind and I like that. Mister Ji please do not blame him, his words are a reprimand for everyone at this table, including me. But his lecture does indeed set a person thinking.”

How can Li Yuan be appeased, so he said with an icy smile, “Since that’s the case, Mister Dong can jolly well not attend such a merry making feast, so why is he saying one thing, but doing another

thing altogether?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled slightly and replied, “Mister Li is mistaken. A feast is a normal social activity, and the Qins have never banned feasts. I’m just making use of the topic being discussed to point out that some people are abandoning and ignoring the most important matters and only cares about having fun, or because of their own selfish gains, are doing things that will only harm others but benefit themselves.”

He stared at him, lifted his arms and tugged at his collar, pulling down his top to reveal his bandaged shoulders and asked nonchalantly, “Can Mister Li tell me, who caused these sword injuries?”

Ji Yanran exclaimed ‘Ah’ and looked towards Li Yuan.

Li Yuan was caught off guard and was stunned, unable to speak.

It was only now that the others understand that these two person’s enmity is so deep to the extent that weapons are now being used.

Xiang Shaolong rearranged his clothes and said with a smile, “Naturally Mister Li would not know who did this and anyway I can’t be bothered with such lowdown people who use despicable means. I just want to prove to everyone here that I am not shooting people down without a reason.”

Xiang Shaolong's words were meant to establish his image of a straightforward and open person and at the same time attacking Li Yuan so that this person would not dare to strike him again. Otherwise it'll be a big problem if he wants to distance himself from the attack.

Li Yuan's expression now looked as horrendous as anyone can imagine.

Zhao Mu said, "Mister Dong can relate your attack in detail to General Le, he'll definitely help to give you justice."

Xiang Shaolong guffawed in reply, "Such insignificant matters, why talk about it. Come, let me offer a toast to Mister Ji and Mister Li to thank them for listening to the complaints of an uncouth man like me."

Everyone lifted their cups so Ji and Li had no choice but to lift their cups and drink up as well.

They had just put down their cups when Zhao Zhi offered a toast to Xiang Shaolong, "I was ignorant and caused Mister Dong to be so angry, let me make use of this wine to offer my apologies."

Zhao Zhi has always been known for being stubborn and for those who know her well, this is the first time they see her being so meek.

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile after he drank up, "It's my

fault, how can it be blamed on Miss Zhi.”

Ji Yanran’s eyes were exceptionally bright as she offered a toast to him, “Not only are Mister Dong’s words surprising, but thought provoking as well. You will definitely have a great future.”

What followed were toasts being offered to one another and the atmosphere returned to normal, at least it seems so on the surface.

Li Yuan was constantly disadvantaged tonight and Xiang Shaolong gained all the upper hand so he was anxiously talking to Ji Yanran who was sitting beside him, hoping to get back into her good grace. A pity that Ji Yanran now knows that he is so despicable as to send men to ambush Xiang Shaolong and she wished she could kill him instead. Therefore she only gave him a few polite but icy replies.

Han Chuang who was seated beside Xiang Shaolong tapped him twice under the table to express his admiration. Zhao Mu gave him a look, to show that he is satisfied with his performance.

Guo Kai looks like he’s deep in thought, obviously because Xiang Shaolong is not as simple as he thought, so he’s now reevaluating him. Zhao Ya became quiet.

She too did not expect Li Yuian to have such deep enmity with this Dong Kuang to the extent that he’d send killers. She is an intelligent person so she guessed that this is because of jealousy, and he came to pander to her maybe because he had the intention of getting back at Dong Kuang. Although up to this point of time

she has nothing to do with Dong Kuang at all, she was being made used of by Li Yuan. Once she thought of that, she can't help but feel a little regret.

She saw Xiang Shaolong stand up and looked at him in surprise.

Xiang Shaolong bowed suavely and said, "I thank Lady for this unique lantern feast, but I am used to sleeping early so I'll have to make a move first."

Everyone tried to make him stay, of course with the exception of Ji Zhong and Li Yuan.

Xiang Shaolong bowed again and retreated out of his seat.

Zhao Ba stood up and said, "The sword discussion meeting tomorrow, Brother Dong please remember to come on time."

Xiang Shaolong looked at Ji Yanran who was looking at him with a heated expression and asked, "Will Miss be gracing the sword discussion meeting with your presence?"

Ji yanran replied gently, "Since Mister Dong will be attending, how can Yanran not be there."

Once she said this, Li Yuan was immediately fuming while the other men all looked astonished.

Xiang Shaolong bid his farewell to them one by one and when it came to Guo Xiu'er's turn, this dainty lady exclaimed, "Xiu'er wants to go tomorrow to learn more as well."

Xiang Shaolong and Guo Zhong's brows both furrowed deeply at the same time on hearing that.

As for Zhao Zhi, he deliberately tried not to look directly at her but just bowed hurriedly and turned towards the main door.

The sounds of clothes and trinkets rustling were heard coming after him and Zhao Ya rushed up to his side and said, "Let me send you off!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he won't be able to reject her so he said graciously, "Lady is too polite!"

Zhao Ya accompanied him quietly along the long corridors in the residence. Since she is not talking, naturally Xiang Shaolong would not start a conversation as well.

Zhao Ya suddenly tugged at his sleeve gently and stopped walking.

Xiang Shaolong halted in surprise and lowered his head to look at her.

Zhao Ya looked extremely lost, her pretty eyes alluringly sad as she lifted her pretty face to look closely at his face.

Xiang Shaolong felt goose bumps rising under such scrutiny so he asked in puzzlement, “Lady, what’s wrong!” Zhao Ya shook her head slightly and said dejectedly, “I can’t help but keep thinking of you as another person, only when I look closer did I realize that I was wrong.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled and he took the opportunity to change the topic and said coldly, “I don’t think I have much similarity with Li Yuan! But luckily this is so.”

Zhao Ya still held on to his sleeve as she lowered her head dejectedly and said, “Mister Dong please do not laugh at me, Zhao Ya is just that pitiful girl who is constantly looking for that drop of honey! Why is Mister always treating me so cruelly?”

Xiang Shaolong’s fury rose as he secretly thought that since she has found him, that drop of honey, then why is she so hard hearted as to betray him. He replied with a laugh, “Your two drops of honey are in the great hall, please forgive me for not being able to stay.” With a wave of his hand he dislodged her hold and walked away.

Zhao Ya looked as he disappeared behind the door and felt as if the world has suddenly lost its color. Right at this time, she knows that after Xiang Shaolong, this is the first time she has really fallen for another man but immediately she was grumbling in her heart, ‘Who cares who you are? Am I, Zhao Ya, one who can be rejected by you so easily.’”

She stomped her feet and returned to the hall.

Xiang Shaolong walked out of the residence and the night breeze blew in his face and he was immediately energized.

He was really furious earlier. Those idiots from the 6 states only know how to fight amongst themselves but have no idea that big trouble is almost upon them.

At the same time he was in a dilemma. Although he is now the enemy of the 6 states, yet he still has some feelings for Handan, making him worry about the fate of this ancient city.

Then he thought of his own problem. What had seemed so easy originally, has not become extremely complicated. With the situation now, if he wants to capture Zhao Mu alive and send him back to Xianyang is quite impossible. And if he has to kill Le Cheng, this general who wields the military power of Handan, that would be even more difficult than ascending heaven. The strong confidence he had when he first came is starting to waver.

An extra day in Handan will mean an extra day of danger. The biggest problem is of course because the important officials and famed generals of the other 5 states are concentrated here, the security and vigilance in Handan has risen greatly. Capturing Zhao Mu is not difficult, but to send him away will be fraught with difficulties.

Once he thought of this, he can't help but heave a great sigh.

Sounds of hoof beats was heard coming nearer, and slowing down as it neared.

Xiang Shaolong had already guessed who has come after him so he said without even turning his head, “How do you do, Miss Zhi!”

Zhao zhi’s crisp voice immediately replied, “How did you know it was me?”

Xiang Shaolong turned his head sideways to look at the gallant Zhao Zhi astride her horse and said with a smile, “Other than Zhao Zhi, who else would dare to come and meet my bad temper alone.”

Zhao Zhi was originally looking down and staring at him but when she heard that she lifted her pretty face to look at the night sky above the streets of Handan and said with a pout, “Wrong guess! Zhao Zhi has no time to bother with people like you.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she has already surrendered half her heart to him but she just cannot admit to it. However his heart can only contain Ji Yanran now, besides Zhao Zhi is Jing Jun’s beloved so there’s no way he can snatch someone’s love away. There’s really no way he can do this to his own brother. How awkward would it be between him and Jing Jun in future then? The way he forced her to leave last night, he didn’t feel too good about it either.

The Zhao Zhi at this instant is especially alluring.

He chortled and asked, “Then why do you have the leisure to accompany me on my night tour of Handan?”

Right at this time a group of soldiers rode over in the quiet street, reminding them of the war which has not stopped in hundreds of years and which can still start at any time. Those patrol soldiers saw Zhao Zhi and greeted her respectfully.

Zhao Zhi nudged her horse forward to walk alongside Xiang Shaolong and said nonchalantly, “Don’t you think you’ve offended everyone tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Why does it matter, didn’t your people Meng Ke said ‘They may be thousands of people against me, but I will go forward’.

*Meng Ke - Mencius

Zhao Zhi looked down in surprise, “Why would Meng Ke be ours?”

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to slap himself. Up to this point of time he still regarded himself as an outsider so he said with embarrassment, “No real meaning to that, just a slip of the tongue!”

Zhao Zhi stared at him with unsure suspicion and surprise and took some time before she uttered softly, “Get up my horse!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Where to?”

Zhao Zhi asked icily, “Afraid?”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Sharing a horse like that, Miss Zhi should be the one who is afraid.”

Zhao Zhi replied evilly, “You didn’t seem to be that considerate for others that night? Are you a man or not, get up the horse quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she was being sarcastic about that night when he jumped up her horse and took advantage of her so he shook his head and said with a wry laugh, “Your mouth is truly formidable. But since you’ve had experienced it before and knows that I am not a gentleman who can keep his hands to himself, with such a warm and soft body, my disobedient hands will enjoy themselves on Miss Zhi’s alluring body!”

Zhao Zhi’s pretty face tightened as her long, pretty eyes stared at him fiercely, “Who cares what you want to do, get up the horse quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, “My god!”. When a woman obviously knows that you have the intention of taking advantage of her, and yet insist on giving you the chance no matter how fierce she looks on the outside, what can this be other than she is secretly in love. This is indeed extremely alluring, and enough to make his head ache terribly.

Now it's as if he is riding on a tiger, unable to advance or retreat. He sighed and said, "It's so late! Can we talk about this tomorrow? I'd better go home and sleep!"

Zhao Zhi was so furious her face turned pale and she whipped her horse forward to block his way. With her hands on her hip, she pouted angrily and said, "I didn't expect you to be such a wishy-washy person. If you don't come up, I'll harass you the whole night so you won't be able to get a good sleep!"

When a woman gets angry, they are the most unreasonable. Xiang Shaolong stopped walking and said with a sigh, "Doesn't Miss already has someone you like? The way you are giving me such a bargain, I'm afraid it's a little... heh! A little 'that thing'!"

Zhao Zhi's delicate body shook on hearing this as her pretty face suddenly turned dark. It took a while before she gritted her teeth and uttered, "I do not belong to anyone. Dong Kuang! Are you coming up or not?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, it seems that Zhao Zhi has given her heart from 'that Xiang Shaolong' to 'this Xiang Shaolong'. It seems that this time the tables have turned on him. His hands turned up in a helpless pose, he hardened his heart and said, "You asked for it!" Before he finished his words, he has already leapt up the horse behind her back.

Zhao Zhi exclaimed softly and her long legs lightly clasped the horse's belly and the handsome steed started running. Xiang Shaolong's hands went forward and held her narrow belly which does not have an extra ounce of fat, his body at the same time

pressed against her back and shoulder. This feeling of excitement immediately stirred Xiang Shaolong's lust.

However Zhao Zhi looked as if she felt nothing at all, her face still looked icy as she concentrated on riding, turning left and right on the quite streets of the ancient city, towards an unknown destination.

Xiang Shaolong leaned his head forward and inhaled deeply near her neck, then leaned into her face and said, "Miss's body is so fragrant!"

Zhao Zhi's expression looked wooden but made no show of any unhappiness of rejection. Of course it does not mean she approved or encouraged it, but just pursed her lips, as if she's made up her mind not to talk.

Xiang Shaolong became more outrageous as he moved his lips along her smooth face and said resolutely, "If you don't talk, I am going to take advantage of you."

Zhao Zhi said icily, "Aren't you already doing that?"

Even saints have a temper. Xiang Shaolong's 'temper' rose, as one of his hand rubbed her belly while the other moved up towards her twin peaks, slowly advancing threateningly.

Her muscles are full and supple, giving him much enjoyment.

Zhao Zhi's pretty face started to turn red as her delicate body trembled a little yet she continued to grit her teeth, not making any objections at all.

Xiang Shaolong's lust may be burning but Jing Jun's presence seems to be blocking between them like a ghost. He sighed dejectedly and gave up the grand plan of invading her chest as his hands returned to her belly. He even left her face and sat straight. The bamboo forest appeared in front, it turned out that Zhao Zhi is bringing him to her home.

Zhao Zhi reined her horse silently when she saw the bamboo forest, looking at the dim light that is flickering in her home up ahead as she made fun of him and said, "So Mister Dong is actually a gentleman?"

Xiang Shaolong was exasperated as he pulled her back hard. Zhao Zhi exclaimed softly as she fell into his arms.

In the darkness of the bamboo forest, they can't see each other at all but could smell each other. The excitement of their bodies touching was instead heightened because of this 'darkroom' surrounding.

Zhao Zhi leaned her head languidly against his broad chest, so nervous that her lips can't help but pant quickly. Xiang Shaolong only have to shift his head down slightly and he would be able to enjoy her fragrant lips and he is sure that she will not resist at all.

Such a thought is indeed enticing. Xiang Shaolong's reason was

swinging dangerously over the side of collapse when he sighed and said, “Aren’t you that Xiang Shaolong’s little lover? The way you and I... heh...”

Zhao Zhi’s reply still sounded cold, “I’ve not fallen in love with you, so why does it matter?” Xiang Shaolong exclaimed hoarsely, “Miss Zhi seems to be unaware that you are in my arms, yet you can say such words.”

Zhao Zhi argued back, “I’m not as strong as you, you forced me into your arms, so what could I do?”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled, “Then why are you stopping your horse here? I didn’t force you to do that!”

Zhao Zhi is indeed stubborn as she said nonchalantly, “I’ll stop where I want to and do what I want to, it’s none of your business.”

Xiang Shaolong was so angry that he almost fell off the horse. He extended his hand and moved to caress her rounded thighs as he praised, “Miss Zhi’s legs are firm and supple.”

Zhao Zhi did not say a word and allowed his molestations.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth and thought that since he’s made a head start, he might as well continue. He has always been a flirt and with a beauty right in front of him, how can he have the resolution to resist. He was about to move his hands and invade the top and bottom at the same time when the sounds of dogs

barking could be heard right ahead, accompanied with the sounds of light footsteps.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly retracted the hands that was caressing her chest and thighs whereas Zhao Zhi exhaled softly as she sat straight and rode the horse forward.

Both of them did not speak at all, but that soul tearing feeling is still so strong that it can melt any man or woman.

Book 7 Chapter 11 – Unable To Enjoy

In Zhao Zhi's elegant little house, Xiang Shaolong leaned on the couch in a relaxed manner while the 2 sisters Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi sat opposite him. The former was staring at him fiercely while the latter still maintained her icy look but her head was lowered in deep thought.

Shan Rou said stiffly, "I asked my sister to invite you here because I hope we can cooperate and deal with Tian Dan!"

Xiang Shaolong already knew he'd meet with this problem so he said, "If you are planning to assassinate him in Handan, forget about getting me to do such a foolish thing with you. Even if you succeed you will not be able to escape."

Shan Rou's pretty face turned icy as she replied, "You're the fool. We've already found out that Tian Dan has arrived at the outskirts of the city at dusk today, but he has yet to enter the city. The person escorting him is the famous general of Qi named Dan Chu, and they have an army of about 10,000. Therefore the only chance to kill him is when he is traveling light with minimal men into the city. The few men near that conniving thief, specially those 2 brothers called Liu Zhongfu and Liu Zhongshi, are not only excellent fighters but can tear lions and tigers apart alive. Look!"

She pulled down her collar to reveal almost half of her ample and fair bosom, but on it there is a sword scar that can shock anyone who sees it.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so bold. His eyes feasted on her ample bosom for a long time before he nodded and said, “You’re considered lucky to be alive.”

Shan Rou readjusted her clothes, her eyes gleaming as she said, “Isn’t Tian Dan your great enemy? No one knows more about Tian Dan’s affairs other than me. I was once a maid at his residence, so now you understand the benefit of working together with us!”

Xiang Shaolong has no wish to entangle himself with them any further so he sighed, “Actually there’s nothing between Tian Dan and me at all, it’s just that I did not want to hurt the both of you that night, that’s why I followed your story and said that.”

Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi were both dumbfounded.

An icy look came over Shan Rou’s eyes and just as Xiang Shaolong was secretly exclaiming, she has already swiftly pulled out a dagger and leapt towards him like a tigress, the dagger aiming towards his chest.

Xiang Shaolong is extremely experienced in unarmed combat so with a fake move, not only did he grab the wrist of the hand that was holding the dagger, he also threw her over to the other side of the table and pressed down on her like a tiger.

Shan Rou kept struggling and even tried to bite him.

Xiang Shaolong lifted his head and pressed her arms down

firmly, his thighs tightened around her pretty legs and at the same time looked warningly at Zhao Zhi, only to see her looking lost and dumbfounded as she watched her sister cursing and struggling under Xiang Shaolong's body.

Xiang Shaolong put his mind at ease as he started to enjoy the feeling of this body violently running against his, but at the same time he has no idea how to wrap up this horrible situation.

Shan Rou may be a lot stronger than the average woman but how can she fight against Xiang Shaolong, a muscular man of that physique. She struggled a little longer before she toned down, her chest heaving as she stared at Xiang Shaolong with hatred, giving her another air of allure.

Zhao Zhi was still seated at the same place, not moving nor making any noise.

Xiang Shaolong lowered his head to look at this feisty beauty and asked with a smile, "I acted with kind intentions, why is Miss treating me like this?"

Shao Rou cursed, "Liar!"

Xiang Shaolong finally understood that she wanted to kill him in anger because she was lied to, and also disappointed that they no longer have his assistance. From this it can be seen that she actually regards him very highly.

He can clearly hear her heart beating, feel her pulse moving in her energetic body, and smell the faint fragrance from her dainty body. He shook his head and asked with a wry smile, “Still don’t want to release the dagger?”

Shan Rou stared at him angrily for a moment before the corners of her mouth curved disdainfully as she relaxed her hand and let the weapon drop.

The tense atmosphere relaxed and Xiang Shaolong immediately felt the strong sense of their bodies so close together. Earlier Zhao Zhi had already ignited his lust so how can he control himself now. Immediately his body reacted in the most primitive way for a man.

Shan Rou was originally staring at him but suddenly she blushed and her lids closed a little, obviously she has fully felt his manhood pressing down.

Xiang Shaolong was extremely embarrassed and he said quietly, “If you promise not to attack me again, I’ll release you immediately.”

Shan Rou managed to utter her agreement. The look of a stirred beauty, appearing on the face of this strong and feisty woman, lures one to more imagination.

Xiang Shaolong threw her dagger towards the corner of the room first before squatting up slowly. He moved towards the wall and leaned there.

Shan Rou was still lying flat, as if she's lost the ability to get up. Her clothes are now in disarray and split open at the bottom, revealing her snowy white and long thighs.

Xiang Shaolong looked towards Zhao Zhi. This pretty younger sister turned her face away, not looking at him.

Shan Rou jumped up with the agility of a cat and without looking at Xiang Shaolong, uttered a single word through her gritted teeth, "Scram!"

Xiang Shaolong was unaffected and said with a smile, "If Miss Rou chases me away, you will definitely regret it for the rest of your life."

Shan Rou went to sit next to her sister as her eyes stared roundly at him, "Who do you think you are, just looking at a liar like you is enough to irritate anyone."

Xiang Shaolong sighed and asked, "Do the two of you love your parents who have met with such misfortune?"

Shan Rou said angrily, "Isn't that an obvious answer?"

She may be rude but ultimately she was willing to answer the question, so her asking Xiang Shaolong to scram was only said in pique.

Xiang Shaolong tried his best to answer calmly, "To be able to

exact revenge but not doing it, can be considered unfilial. But knowing very well that to take revenge is akin to sending yourself to death, causing great grief to departed parents, is also another form of not being filial. Under such circumstances, although living in shame, it's also a way of controlling oneself and repaying your parents."

Shan Rou was slightly shaken as she answered quietly, "We don't need you to reprimand us, go back and enjoy your riches!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, knowing that this woman really has some feelings for him, that's why she was so furious to find out she was lied to and now her words are filled with reproach.

Zhao Zhi looked towards him and said icily, "Now that everything is made clear, us sisters and you have nothing to do with each other. Mister Dong, please go home and enjoy your sleep! Even if we die, it's none of your business."

Her tone of voice was the same as her sister's. A feeling of pity welled up in Xiang Shaolong's heart as he asked gently, "Don't you want to see Shan Lan again?"

Both women trembled suddenly, staring at him incredulously.

Shan Rou exclaimed sharply, "What did you say?"

Xiang Shaolong stood up and went towards this pair of pretty

sisters and knelt down on one knee, leaning his head forward to look at the 2 pretty faces and said earnestly, “Please trust me! Shan Lan is now at a very safe place, and has found a good man, waiting for you to meet her.”

The icy look on Zhao Zhi’s pretty face melted as she uttered, “You’re not lying to us again! How could she have escaped the calamity?”

Xiang Shaolong used Dong Kuang’s name and made a vicious vow.

The 2 girls exchanged look then hugged each other tightly, looking both dejected and overjoyed at the same time.

After the 2 women had settled down a little, Xiang Shaolong said, “I am not one who is bothered about wealth and riches. As for Tian Dan’s matter, because I personally have no enmity with him, it’s difficult for me to plan to kill him, not to mention that it’s a very unwise thing to do. With the situation now, you can kill him but will not be able to escape, and with the chance of success being so slim, why don’t you live well for now and think of another way to deal with him?”

Shan Rou turned her pretty face away to look outside the window. Although she looked as if she’s not listening, but with her character, as long as she’s not saying anything bad, it means that she is already tempted.

Zhao Zhi pleaded with him, “Where is Sister Lan now? How did

you meet her. She... she married into your family?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "Does Miss Zhi want me to lie to you again?"

Zhao Zhi stared at him angrily and pouted, "How I wish I could stab you too!"

Xiang Shaolong grinned, "Why don't you just punch me!"

Shan Rou turned back again and said with her emotions controlled, "What would make you help us assassinate Tian Dan?" Xiang Shaolong felt his head aching, what he said earlier seemed to be spoken in vain as he slapped his forehead and uttered, "Heavens! So you were not listening to me at all."

Zhao Zhi asked through gritted teeth, "If both of us sisters offer ourselves to you at the same time, will you change your mind?"

Shao Rou's delicate body trembled but she did not say anything, only chewing her lip as she lowered her pretty face, for the first time revealing a look of shyness.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to give such an outrageous suggestion and stared speechlessly at Zhao Zhi, who was looking at him unwaveringly. His eyes can't help but travel past the 2 ladies' delicate bodies, only to feel his throat go dry. He coughed and said, "Miss Zhi must be joking. It's not that I do not wish to help, but I have my own reasons which cannot be revealed and I cannot be distracted by other matters."

Zhao Zhi said gently, “Why not this! If there is really no opportunity, my sister and I will definitely not force you to do on a death mission with us but if there is a chance that we can succeed alive, will you help us fulfill this dream of 7 years? Since we’ve already become your woman, naturally we will not be totally unrelated to you.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at Shan Rou, then looked at Zhao Zhi and was secretly lamenting, worried that if he uses strong words to reject them, he’ll certainly hurt their pride. He sighed and said, “Hai! I am really moved by your sincerity and willingness to sacrifice but I cannot take advantage of others when they are in peril and obtain your precious bodies at this time. Why not this! Look at the situation first before making another plan! Oh, why have I not seen that Uncle Zheng of yours?”

Shan Rou saw that he has changed his mind so her expression warmed greatly. This Dong Kuang’s status is special, smart and an excellent fighter with a lot of men under him. If he helps, there’s no need to worry that things will not succeed.

Zhao Zhi replied, “His health is not so good, so other than fishing for news, we have no wish for him to worry himself over other matters.”

Xiang Shaolong stretched lazily and yawned, “It’s late! I should be going back to sleep too.” The 2 ladies stood up together with him.

Suddenly the 3 of them felt awkward over the ambiguous relationship between each of them.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that he'd better escape as soon as possible and exclaimed, "No need to see me off!" and walked towards the door.

The 2 ladies exchanged looks and Zhao Zhi accompanied him to the main door and said, "Will you use my horse?"

Xiang Shaolong remembered her round and firm thighs, her supple breasts and almost wanted to embrace her and have some intimacy with her which he is sure she would not object. However he is not inclined to consider love matters again, and also because of Jing Jun, he forced down this strong urge and said, "No need, it's not too far away."

He walked towards the bamboo forest but Zhao Zhi still followed behind him so he said in puzzlement, "Miss Zhi please go back! No need to send me off."

Zhao Zhi did not say a single word until they went into the darkness of the bamboo forest before she said quietly, "You don't have to go back."

Xiang Shaolong's heart 'danced' with joy. By saying that, Zhao Zhi is expressing her wish to offer her precious chastity to him and for a proud person like her, these are difficult words to express.

But he does not have the luck to enjoy this no matter how much he wants to.

He sighed and hardened his heart to reply, “There’s no need for Miss to do this. If you truly like me, there’s nothing more I can ask for but since Miss’s heart is already with another person and it’s not as if you’ve truly fallen for a boorish man like me, then why must you cheapen yourself like this? I’m helping both of you not because I’m expecting rewards!”

Zhao Zhi pounded his back twice hard with her fists and pouted angrily, “I hate you to death!” before turning back and walking away.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and smiled wryly. He was stoned for a moment before collecting his thoughts and made his way home.

Once he thought of the Sword Meet tomorrow, he became excited again.

The road in front is still foggy but he is confident that he will solve everything.

Although he knows the fate of some of the people in this era, however he has no idea what his own future would be.

No matter what, in this great era of the ancient warring states, life is truly more exciting than what he could have experienced in

the 21st century.

end of book 7

Book 8 Chapter 1 – Zhaos' Resident

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the residence, Teng Yi who had been waiting for a while said, “Yanran is waiting in your room now.”

Once he heard this, he furrowed his brows, and said worriedly, “Both Li Yuan and Lord Longyang will send someone to watch over her movement, by coming here so rashly looking for me, sooner or later she will be found out.”

Teng Yi smiled, “I’ve already asked her this question. She said she’s used to being constantly watched, so she’s already trained two substitutes. This way she can temporarily get away from the people who obsessively pestered her to do things she likes to do. Unless someone dares to charge in her room, otherwise there is no way to know which one is the fake one, so she told me not to worry.”

Then he continued, quietly whispering, “Third Brother, you’re unbelievable. I can see that she’s so in love with you that she can’t even control herself. With a pretty girl like her falling for you, aren’t you going to thoroughly enjoy this world’s greatest pleasure?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel Ji Yanran’s astonishing charm, that even this man of iron will could barely escape her charming attraction. Grinning, he was about to quickly return to his room so that he could transfer the lust stirred-up by Zhao Zhi and her sister on Ji Yanran’s beautiful body when Teng Yi stopped him in the hallway towards his room.

Surprised, he turned towards Teng Yi, who looked at him with a determined expression, “I want to kill Tian Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled, suddenly remembering the tragic ending of Teng Yi’s family, which in reality, indirectly came about due to Xiao Weimou’s orders given by the mastermind Tian Dan. And now, Teng Yi’s beloved wife, Shan Lan’s whole family’s massacre was also due to Tian Dan. No matter what, it’s hard for Teng Yi to take this lying down. Xiang Shaolong can’t help but feel a headache when thinking about this.

Everyone knew that Tian Dan was one of the Warring States’ period most fearful figures, not that different from Prince Xinling, and killing him is harder than ascending the Heaven. Besides they’re already busy with their own affairs and are in no condition to complicate themselves further.

Teng Yi placed his hand on Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and solemnly said, “I know Third Brother is currently in a difficult position, we’ll just wait for the opportunity to come up! I’m not one who will act rashly without weighing the consequences.”

Xiang Shaolong breathed a sigh of relief, “Second Brother’s problem is also my problem. Even if I have to cut myself in half, I won’t quibble over it at all.

Teng Yi was moved and patted Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder before he turned around and left.

Xiang Shaolong fastened his steps, quickly arriving at the inner chamber. Ji Yanran, scented with a sweet smell, threw herself into his embrace and kissed him passionately.

As he was about to remove the face mask, Ji Yanran blushed, “Don’t! I want you to take me as Dong Kuang. Your display tonight made me thoroughly enchanted. Hai! Having to wait until now to be intimate with you, I already felt like I had gone through a bitter suffering.”

At that moment, Xiang Shaolong was also burning with desire, his hands wasting no time in moving hurriedly over her arousing body, as he said with a smile, “When can Learned Lady Ji publicly surrender to Old Dong?”

Ji Yanran blushed as if she is drunk with wine, and gasped for breath, “Anytime is fine. Yanran really can’t bear a moment of separation with husband anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud, “No separation between men and woman can have two explanations, which is the one that Learned Lady Ji refers to?”

Under the ministrations of his wanton hands, Ji Yanran trembled and panted, “Either explanation is fine, I’ll leave it all for Master Dong to decide.”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her lips deeply and at the same time, roughly embracing her and moving towards the bed. Sitting at the edge of the bed, he let her snuggle in his embrace, still not letting

go of her small lips. His empty left hand slipped through her front garment, wandering over her tender breast, fondling, rubbing and pinching.

Ji Yanran's passion burst out suddenly.

Xiang Shaolong is after all a veteran in this and would not hurry towards the climax. He released her scorching hot lips and said with a smile, "I, Dong Kuang, probably am the only lucky person in the whole wide world who can confirm that Yanran is not made of stone at all, but even more bold and unrestrained compared to other beautiful girls."

Ji Yanran reluctantly opened her eyes, "You can tease me however you like. Ai! I can't believe that you don't even need to a handsome face to become the jinx of all women. Tonight, I saw Zhao Ya, Zhao Zhi and that Guo Xiu'er, were almost moved to tears by the touchingly sad parable. That was one splendid and vivid story! Even Li Yuan was crazily jealous of you."

Xiang Shaolong felt ashamed deep inside and suddenly remembered something, "Have you crossed swords with Li Yuan?"

Ji Yanran suddenly sobered up from her euphoric state, slightly nodded, "Yanran's really muddled, I forgot everything when I saw you. Xiang Lang needs to be very careful with this person. His sword skill is quick, strange and elegant, not only wonderful to watch but also deadly. Although none of us emerged the winner, I already know that I'm not his equal and that he was giving in to me. Therefore his swordsmanship can only be described as unfathomable. From what I see... oh!"

The more Xiang Shaolong heard, the more alarmed he felt. Last time, he only won by a narrow margin with Ji Yanran. He could not gain the upper hand even if he tried with all his might, not to mention about giving in to her. From this comparison, Li Yuan's sword skill must be even better than his was before. Luckily after he found Mohist Swordplay's Addendum, his sword skill advanced by leaps and bounds, otherwise, he could only admit defeat now.

Even though Ji Yanran did not finish her words, her underlying meaning is that Xiang Shaolong couldn't possibly beat Li Yuan, but she just couldn't bear to say it out loud! He was secretly breaking out in cold sweat. This Li Yuan, regardless of literature or sword skills, has the conditions to make Ji Yanran admire him.

It's just that he already had a head start, plus he was borrowing the 21st century's knowledge, that's the why he could win him. Otherwise, in the battle for love to win Ji Yanran's hand, he could only be the loser nursing his grievance.

Ji Yanran saw that he was speechless and thought that his pride was hurt, so she said apologetically, "One never knows who the ultimate winner will be in a contest between the highly skilled, but I still don't wish for you to fight with him, not because I believe that Xiang Lang would undoubtedly lose, but because I don't wish you to take this risk. Oh! What is the worth of an ordinary person's bravery? To be able to win on the battlefield is the true hero."

This was what's called digging oneself deeper into the hole. Xiang Shaolong knows that in Ji Yanran's eyes he doesn't look promising when compared. He smiled bitterly, "Love is like a battlefield. Li

Yuan failed in winning through literature, so he will try winning by sword so as to humiliate me in front of you. Everyone knows that Learned Lady Ji is looking for a husband who is unparalleled in both literature and sword skills. Li Yuan is trying to prove that he is this ideal person.”

Ji Yanran smiled, “Love is like a battlefield, how well said. Now, besides you, I have no interest towards others anymore. Do you think Ji Yanran is a woman that constantly changes her heart like a loose woman?”

Xiang Shaolong joyfully said, “Of course you’re not like that, but you’re our loosed woman shared by both me and ‘Horse Fanatic’ Dong, so it’s impossible to not be lascivious, is Learned Lady Ji going to disagree?”

Ji Yanran’s face turned red, raised an eye at him, leaned closer to his ear, “Then Yanran can only accept fate, for a married woman must obey her husband. Since my husband wants me to serve 2 men, I have no choice but be lascivious. Yanran can only resign oneself to adversity.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud, embraced her and lied down on the bed all at once. Sure enough, Ji Yanran lost whatever restrain she had, becoming his dedicated promiscuous woman.

After two breaks, this beautiful woman cuddled in his embrace like a sheep, the corners of her mouth curved up with a satisfied smile, listening to Xiang Shaolong whispering sweet nothings in her ears, words that she will never tire of.

As a 20th century person, Xiang Shaolong does not have the behavior of men during this era who considers women as slaves. He understood the reasoning that women need love and care, so all women that have been intimate with him enjoys a happiness that is hard to find in this era.

Listening to his words like ‘You’re my soul, you’re my life’ and other words like that, Ji Yanran was so happy that she kissed him to show her gratefulness.

Xiang Shaolong was definitely in love with this enchantingly beautiful woman.

After another hot kiss, Ji Yanran heaved a sigh, “If I can quickly become pregnant with Xiang Lang’s own flesh and blood, Yanran will feel satisfied and fulfilled.”

Xiang Shaolong at once felt cold sweat running down his body, secretly thinking that this is a big problem, and could only hum and haw as a reply.

As Ji Yanran was intoxicated with hope and joy, she didn’t notice his dissent expression. Recalling something, she asked, “What is your relationship with Zhao Ya? Why does Li Yuan think that getting her could hurt you?”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the love hate relationship he had with Zhao Ya, and smiled wryly, “Li Yuan probably saw me paying attention to her frequently and thought that I am interested in her.

But in actual fact it's another thing altogether and I have already told you everything about what happened in the past."

Ji Yanran replied, "I naturally understands husband's intention and knows that you are the type that considers old relationship, so you still feel a bit of love left towards Zhao Ya. She really doesn't know how to cherish herself, letting herself fall to this state, but this type of woman on the contrary can really attract men. I think both Li Yuan and Han Chuang are captivated by her already."

All of a sudden, she grabbed his shoulder and seriously said, "You need to pay attention to Zhao Zhi. I saw that Li Yuan and Han Chuang are also interested in her. Men like them, if they want to win a woman, they will resort to despicable methods."

Xiang Shaolong knew that she is very observant, so he was shocked once he heard this. If that really happens, Jing Jun won't be able to take such a blow.

Ji Yanran bashfully looked down at her own breast, biting her lips, "Is it alright if Xiang Shaolong or Dong Kuang come love me again?"

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help laughing, "We'll just do it together, alright? Seems like I don't even need to teach you to become a slut."

Ji Yanran was too embarrassed and pouted and at once the room was imbued with lust, indescribable loving and touching.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong slept till the sun passed the 2nd pole before forced himself to wake up, patting the bed beside him only to find it empty. Shocked, he sobered up before he realized that she had left.

Getting off the bed, he saw on Ji Yanran's bedside the note that she wrote in her delicate and pretty handwriting, mainly to say that she couldn't bear to wake him and so she left by herself. There were unavoidably words describing how unbearable it is to be separated, hoping that one day she can forever enjoy those sweet and charming words till sunlight.

Xiang Shaolong kneaded his backbone, remembering last night's preposterous activity and felt both joy and shock.

What's joyful was the boundless aftertaste. What's shocking was that he himself was so exhausted that he didn't even know when she left.

Last night, before the loving with Ji Yanran, he was already entangled with Zhao Zhi and her sister once, even though they did not complete the act, but his lust was continuously stirred up and that makes it easier for a person to be exhausted.

While washing and dressing, Han Chuang arrived looking for him.

Xiang Shaolong received him in the outer hall. After sitting, Han Chuang struck the table and laughed, "Brother Dong's performance last night was incredible. Who knows you might be

able to receive Learned Lady Ji's favor without the aphrodisiac. If you succeed, would you mind a sharing the cup with me, so I can have a taste of her flavor?"

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to kill this pervert with a punch but on the outside he perfunctorily said, "Marquis, you're making fun of me, Learned Lady Ji was only interested in me briefly, it doesn't even count as having a chance with her."

Not waiting for the other party to have a chance to speak, he asked "After I left, how did Li Yuan react?"

Han Chuang replied with pleasure, "That fellow's expression was very interesting, continuously rolling his eyes, seems like he hates you to the bone. As soon as Brother Dong left, Zhao Zhi, that beautiful girl, hurriedly took leave, did she come looking for Brother Dong?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly blamed Zhao Zhi and remembered that they encountered several Zhao soldiers so he had no choice but to admit the encounter. He showed a worried expression, "Don't think that I got lucky or something. I did get chased by her, but only to get a lashing from her, she even nearly pulled out her sword and struck me. But I detest getting entangled with women or children, so I grudgingly endured her anger. Oh! Don't mention it anymore."

Han Chuang breathed a sigh of relief once he listened to what happened, "Can't believe that there are so many top-of-the-line beautiful women here in Handan, that Guo Xiu'er is not too bad either, it'll be a pity if she's taken by Li Yuan."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, no wonder Han has weakened to this state, all because the Han's government is controlled by men like the marquis, who only indulged in drinks and women. He said, "For the Sword Discussion gathering, has Marquis arranged a lesson to teach Li Yuan?"

Han Chuang said excitedly, "It's funny when we think about it, this time it can be said that we three countries are uniting to deal with the heartless Chu people. It turned out that Zhao Mu, Lord Longyang and me all coincidentally want to send our best swordsman to pass themselves off as one of Zhao Ba's men to teach Li Yuan a lesson. Let's see how this kid can avoid the misfortune of being disgraced in the field."

Xiang Shaolong remembered the pillow talk he had with Ji Yanran last night about her evaluation of Li Yuan's high level sword skill. He was secretly sighing, thinking that the result might be different from what Han Chuang originally wished for when Wu Guo arrived to report that Zhao Ya has come to look for him.

Xiang Shaolong naturally felt very embarrassed. Han Chuang's face suddenly became stiff as he said, "It seems like even Zhao Ya is also interested in you. Hey! That flirtatious woman is really very enticing, I better leave first then."

Xiang Shaolong of course wished he could scam quickly, but if he did that, Han Chuang would hold a grudge. He smiled, "Marquis, please remain, so we can give the Lady a pleasant surprise." Then he asked Wu Guo to invite Zhao Ya in.

Han Chuang naturally had no intention to leave, so he didn't argue. Then, he pulled up a polite expression. From this, it could be seen how infatuated he was with Zhao Ya.

Following Wu Guo, Zhao Ya, came in filled with a smile, causing Xiang Shaolong to be so confused. Could it be that when he left her last night, his scowl made her more in love with him instead?

The two of them stood up, welcoming her.

Zhao Ya, on seeing Han Chuang, felt slightly stunned, displaying a flash of unhappiness before resuming her smile and said, "So Marquis has also come here."

Han Chuang smiled, "If I know that Lady is also coming, we could have come together, so we can have more time together."

Xiang Shaolong knew immediately that both of them were together again last night. He felt so angry that he wanted to give Zhao Ya two tight slaps except that that besides thinking about it, he couldn't do anything else.

Zhao Ya couldn't believe that Han Chuang could expose their intimate relationship in front of Horse Fanatic Dong. She felt embarrassed and ashamed, and furious at the same time. Last night, she let Han Chuang remain because it was an inexplicable subconscious thought to exact revenge on Dong Kuang for his attitude. After she woke up this morning, she regretted her actions, and now being exposed in front Xiang Shaolong by Han Chuang, it is indeed extremely embarrassing and she bowed her

head.

Xiang Shaolong reluctantly forced a smile, “Since that is the case, why don’t I let Lady and Marquis use this place for more happy reunions.”

Han Chuang saw that he has made his stance clear that he wants to withdraw from the fight and was grateful. He smiled, “Brother Dong please don’t do this, Lady came this time specially to visit, at the very most I can only be considered as company.”

Zhao Ya returned to her normal attitude, surreptitiously glanced at Xiang Shaolong, “I don’t have any particular business too. I was only passing by and was afraid that Mister Dong doesn’t know the way to the Zhaos’ Martial Arts School, so I thought that we might go together.”

She then ruthlessly glared at Han Chuang, her tone icy cold, “Marquis, if you don’t have any other business, please don’t let us hold you back! Zhao Ya has some questions regarding breeding horse that I would like to consult with Mister Dong.”

Han Chuang couldn’t believe that after last night’s coupling like they were man, this woman could suddenly change her tone and be so heartless, not leaving any leeway. Feeling furious inside, he respectfully replied, “So Lady can change into a different person in the daytime. Since that is the case, Marquis can only look for you at night then.”

Ignoring Xiang Shaolong’s persuasion to stay, he flicked his

sleeves and left.

Leaving the two of them, the atmosphere turned unbearably awkward.

Zhao Ya was so angry, her face paled. After sitting down and drinking a cup of hot tea, she still couldn't say a word.

Xiang Shaolong intentionally stayed silent and leisurely savored the hot tea.

After awhile, Zhao Ya couldn't endure it anymore and said, "Is Mister Dong irritated that Zhao Ya is not more self-respecting?"

Xiang Shaolong leisurely sipped a gulp of tea again, his eyes glinting sharp radiance, observing her. Slowly he said, "Lady's too sensitive. It's all Lady's personal business who you want to accompany at night. I don't have any right to ask any question, even more so to say the right to be angry at Lady."

Zhao Ya frowned and said worriedly, "It's all because of you. Last night, all I can think about is accompanying you, but instead I got your heartless treatment. My heart felt cold and bitter, so..."

Xiang Shaolong became indefinably angry and interrupted her, "Your word is odd, Lady. You were still fooling around with Li Yuan during the day, is that what you meant by wholeheartedly wanting to accompany me? Even though I don't consider myself to be a prude, I still wouldn't be so shameless as to get myself

entangled in this.”

These few sentences implied a great insult towards Zhao Ya. However, not only is she not angry, but her eyes became slightly red as she said, “Zhao Ya knows she’s wrong, if Mister Dong doesn’t resent me, Zhao Ya will observe the constraints as a woman should be in future. Can Mister Dong understand Zhao Ya’s feelings?”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so meek and subservient. A pleased feeling flitted through his heart as he sneered, “Lady is too serious. How could I have the right to detest you. Even if I do, I also won’t believe empty words.”

Suddenly he stood up and blandly said, “Lady clearly knows that Li Yuan is using Lady to hurt me, yet you still can’t help but throw yourself into his embrace so who can guarantee that this situation won’t be happening again? If I like someone, I definitely wouldn’t be turning towards Li Yuan, Zhao Mu and Han Chuang, flitting from one to another. Lady, please go back! I have many businesses to attend to.”

His sarcastic words were driven straight into Zhao Ya’s heart. She finally could not tolerate it any further and stood up angrily, saying intensely, “Dong Kuang, you’re great! Have you humiliated Zhao Ya enough! Are you the only man in the whole world? I want to see what kind of end you will have.” She turned around and stalked off, not even turning her head once.

Xiang Shaolong was delighted, but also blamed himself allowing his feeling to take control. Under current circumstances, offending

this slut with the most influence in Handan brings only harm but not advantage. However, he couldn't care too much now.

After finding Teng Yi and talking to him for a while, he then made his way to the Zhao Martial Arts School.

The Zhao Martial Arts School was located in the east of Handan, occupying a wide ground. They not only have several connecting compounds to form the main building, but there's also a practice courtyard, shooting range and horse tracks that were specially set up to train warriors. Only after careful selection, the talented ones will be recommended to the Zhao military. So Zhao Ba is undoubtedly the state of Zhao's head army instructor, holding an exalted position and real power.

The Sword Discussion gathering will be held in the training ground in front of the main residence.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived, it so happened that the warriors in the school were split into 3 pairs, practicing using wooden swords and long spears with the sharp points wrapped up. On one side, there were more than 200 seated warriors and on the other side, there was a big stand where seats were set up.

Xiang Shaolong was briefly late. Lord Longyang, Zhao Mu, Le Cheng, Guo Kai, Han Chuang, Guo Zhong, Guo Xiu'er and the others had arrived. However, he did not see Zhao Ya, whom he angered earlier and Li Yuan and Ji Yanran still hadn't appeared as well.

In addition, there were several military officers and dozens of warriors who look like house warriors who were chatting in groups; no one paid any attention to the show on the training ground.

Zhao Ba were talking to Zhao Mu and Guo Zhong when he saw Xiang Shaolong and welcomed him with pleasure, “In any occasion that Mister Dong attends, there won’t be any awkward silences, come! Let me introduce you our school’s 4 main instructors.”

He led Xiang Shaolong towards the stand where Zhao Zhi and the 4 instructors were standing.

Zhao Zhi saw Xiang Shaolong and she pouted disdainfully before purposefully walking away to search for Guo Xiu’er to talk. On seeing that girl’s anger, Xiang Shaolong started to feel apologetic.

When those 4 instructors saw Xiang Shaolong, they all revealed a look of concentration as they sized him up.

Zhao Ba smiled at them and said, “This is the person that I’ve mentioned to you often, Mister Dong Kuang.”

Those four promptly greeted him.

After Xiang Shaolong said a few polite words, Zhao Ba introduced the biggest and tallest one amongst them, a man only slightly shorter than Xiang Shaolong by an inch and said, “Dai Feng is our school’s number one instructor. His sword skill within the Zhao

border is well-known. This time we will let him test the boastful lad, let's see how awesome he can be.”

This Dai Feng's figure was stout, with a thick waist, around 30 years of age. His bearing was calm and composed. The other three was a little bit nervous, far different from his cold demeanor.

Xiang Shaolong saw that his sword was hanging on his right waist and his left hand was also more powerful and sturdy than his right hand, apparently he's used to using his left hand to deal with his enemies. From the right-handed swordsman's perspective, the left-handed sword is the hardest to defend, whereas for the left-handed swordsman, he is used to fighting with right-handed swordsmen. Just from this point, the left-handed swordsman already has the advantage.

The other three were Huang Yan, Cheng Heng and Lu Zhirong. All were very polite towards Xiang Shaolong.

Cheng Heng whispered, “I heard that Mister Dong was ambushed by Li Yuan's underlings, Dai Feng will help you extract your revenge from him.”

Xiang Shaolong speculated that these people must have thought that his sword skill was average, but this is a good thing, so he thanked him at once.

At this time, Li Yuan arrived, and surprisingly accompanied by Zhao Ya, following behind him were ten odd of his family warriors. The burly one who left a big impression on Xiang

Shaolong when they ambushed him was shockingly amongst them.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly furious. Li Yuan seemed totally unconcerned that he'll be exposed and it clearly shows that he holds no regards for him at all, knowing that Xiang Shaolong can't do anything to him.

Zhao Ya was very affectionate with Li Yuan. Han Chuang, who was chatting with Zhao Zhi and Guo Xiu'er, on seeing this, changed his expression.

After Zhao Ba excused himself from Xiang Shaolong, he led Dai Feng and the other instructors to welcome them.

Li Yuan was wearing a martial art uniform, fitted with shoulder armors, wrist band, breast shield and sleeveless leather garment. He looked very awe-inspiring and insufferably arrogant.

Zhao Zhi and the other girls stared blankly at him.

Even though Xiang Shaolong saw that this turn of event was not too encouraging, he's helpless to do anything about it.

Zhao Mu came beside him and whispered, "Let's see how long this kid can stay arrogant?"

Xiang Shaolong replied in a deep voice, "Who have you prepared to deal with him?"

Zhao Mu proudly said, “I will send out a swordsman, named Luo Xiang. With him alone, it will be more than enough to handle Li Yuan. We also have Lord Longyang’s household’s number one swordsman, Jiao Xu and Han Chuang’s follower, Han’s famous swordsman, Fu Jianyin, to give Li Yuan a lesson.” Then, he pointed them out one by one, all of them are brave and ferocious young men.

Xiang Shaolong didn’t feel as optimistic as him, if that fellow or his underlings wins, all of them would lose face instead. Even he would find it hard to walk with pride beside Ji Yanran. When he thought about this, he couldn’t help but feel a bit regretful that he didn’t invite Teng Yi to come together.

Li Yuan harbored a smile, exchanged greetings with the people that Zhao Ba introduced one by one, looking as if he is assured of success.

His group of house warriors all stared at Xiang Shaolong, looking as if they would like to stir up trouble.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and knew that Li Yuan’s main target today is him. Even if they’re only using wooden swords, if they intended to play viciously, they can still cripple their opponent anytime. Naturally that is Li Yuan’s intention towards him.

Zhao Mu also came to this realization, and said furiously, “Would your attackers be amongst those people?”

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort, not saying anything at all.

Zhao Mu said angrily, “I’ve never seen anyone more arrogant than him before.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered, “Anger and impatience will hinder the bigger plan. It’s not worthwhile to fight with him over personal feelings, the real issue is more important.”

Zhao Mu looked at him with admiration and nodded in agreement.

Both of them saw Zhao Ya laughing happily beside Li Yuan and their tempers rose. Zhao Mu cursed quietly, “B.itch”.

Li Yuan continuously paid attention to Xiang Shaolong, even deliberately teasing Zhao Ya, seemingly to demonstrate his might.

Zhao Mu was about to lead Xiang Shaolong towards the stand to sit when Li Yuan walked out of the crowd, strode over and greeted them, staring at Xiang Shaolong, saying “Brother Dong has an outstanding sword skill, would you be interested to try a set with my men?”

He purposely raised his voice, to let others hear his deliberately humiliating challenge.

All of them immediately quieted down, watching Xiang Shaolong's reaction.

At this time, Zhao Ya came up behind Li Yuan with his swordsmen, all stared at him disdainfully.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't stand Zhao Ya's deliberate contemptuous look and forced himself to calm down. He stared at the strong and tall swordsman behind Li Yuan who previously ambushed him and smiled, "May I know the name of this brother here?"

When he saw Li Yuan nodding his head, that swordsman shouted loudly, "I am Lou Wuxin, would you deign to grant me an instruction?"

Xiang Shaolong blandly replied, "At present, this place is full of expert swordsmen. When will someone who only knows how to breed horses get a turn here, it's better to hide one's inadequacy silently than to show one's incompetence."

Li Yuan and the others heard this proverb for the first time "it's better to hide one's inadequacy silently than to show one's incompetence" and they briefly pondered over it before they understood it. All of them laughed mockingly.

Zhao Ya derisively interrupted, "Mister Dong, it's very rare that

you know where you stand.”

Xiang Shaolong's eyes flashed briefly and gave Zhao Ya a cold glance. This pretty girl's heart palpitated with terror, unable to continue with her words. She's not a timid person, but because for that instant, this Dong Kuang's expression was like Xiang Shaolong, giving her a weird feeling.

Lou Wuxin saw this and shouted fiercely, “Who dares to be rude to Lady?”

Zhao Mu's countenance changed, as he was about to rebuke him when Li Yuan took the chance to shout, “Wuxin, move back. Who told you it's your place to say anything in here?”

Lou Wuxin took a step back without saying a word but both of his eyes still burned with murderous glare towards Xiang Shaolong, seemingly unable to accept his failure in murdering him that day.

Li Yuan gave a hypocritical smile, “My warrior is just so straightforward, Mister Dong, please don't hold it to your heart.”

Everyone could tell that on the surface he seemed to be rebuking his man, but was in fact, secretly commending him.

For a short while, a heavy sense of hostility loomed in the air.

Zhao Ba came over at this time between these two people filled with animosity and mediated, “Why don't everyone go up the

stand for a cup of hot tea. How does that sound?”

Li Yuan gently said to Zhao Ya beside him, “Lady, please go up to the stand first, I haven’t exchanged a greeting with Mister Guo yet!”

Li Yuan apologized and walked towards Zhao Zhi and Guo Xiu’er, who were standing beside Guo Zhong.

Zhao Mu exchanged eyes with Zhao Ba before pulling Xiang Shaolong up towards the stand.

Han Chuang waved them over to sit beside him, and said with a cold snort, “This kid has become more and more ridiculous, I really want to see his face after a crushing defeat.”

Xiang Shaolong had already calmed down, but on seeing Zhao Zhi, either intentionally or unintentionally, chatting and laughing Li Yuan in the distance, gave him additional worry.

Beside Ji Yanran, all the invited guests had arrived.

Suddenly, hoof beats could be heard.

From the tall gate, this peerless woman, who is famed throughout the world for her literature and sword skills, wearing a snowy white martial art uniform, galloped in.

Li Yuan hurriedly left Guo Xiu'er and Zhao Zhi, coming forward to welcome her.

Without waiting for Li Yuan to come and lead her horse, Ji Yanran gracefully jumped off the horse and walked past Li Yuan without even stopping towards the stand.

Li Yuan chased after her, eagerly flattering her, which she replied noncommittally. When she got up the stand, she smiled and greeted everyone before walking straight towards Xiang Shaolong and smiled, "So Mister Dong already arrived, causing Yanran to make a trip for nothing!"

Once the words were out, Li Yuan who was beside them paled suddenly, both eyes staring venomously at him.

Han Chuang was in joy, stood up hurriedly to give up the seat. Ji Yanran didn't decline and happily sat beside Xiang Shaolong. Zhao Ya, who was looking from the other side, suddenly had an unnatural expression as well.

Xiang Shaolong felt exalted.

This time, the crowd went up the stand one after another, filling up the hundred or more seats in the stand, Zhao Zhi and Guo Xiu'er followed Guo Zhong to Li Yuan's side.

Li Yuan resentfully returned back to Zhao Ya's side.

Zhao Ba clapped twice, getting everyone's attention and smiled, "Everyone, please watch and give comments for our school's swordsman performance first."

With a command, the school's swordsmen who had been waiting for awhile came out to the field, their left hand holding a shield and right hand holding a sword, arranging themselves in a formation. Under the sound of the beating drums, the demonstrated the various forms of attacks and simulated a fight, immediately receiving applauses.

But everyone knew that the real performance was yet to be performed.

Book 8 Chapter 2 – Duel At The School

Next was riding and archery performance, all were brilliant and pleasing to watch. It could be seen that Zhao Ba took painstaking care to train all of his swordsmen.

Xiang Shaolong thought that it's a pity, if it wasn't because Zhao had a muddleheaded king like Xiaocheng, it would have a bright prospect.

Ji Yanran leaned near his ear and said intimately, "I don't care anymore, from today onwards, I will follow you."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, "Isn't it too quick? Did you see that Lord Longyang is staring at us?"

Ji Yanran chuckled, "He's not suspicious of us, but just jealous of Yanran, everyone knew that neither man nor woman fellow loves unrefined and straightforward men like Mister Dong. If you speak vulgarity with him, he'll be really excited!"

Xiang Shaolong gave a wry smile, shook his head, "Let me chase after you for another two to three days! Otherwise if a beautiful woman like you can be subdued by a man with just two or three tricks, it could really damage your Learned Lady reputation."

Ji Yanran pouted, "Whatever suits you then! But I want you to accompany me every night."

Xiang Shaolong joyfully replied, “Of course, it’s all that I wish for!”

Suddenly, applause could be heard non-stop, the school’s swordsmen returned successively to the seats opposite the stand, leaving only Zhao Ba standing in the center of the field.

Everyone stopped talking and looked at the owner of the training school.

The applause swiftly stopped.

Zhao Ba raised his voice, “Our training school was able to invite the famous master swordsman, Mister Li Yuan, to give us instructions on our swordsmen’s performance, it is indeed our honor. We hope that Mister Li Yuan won’t be stingy in giving us his advice.”

Guo Zhong chuckled and interrupted, “This time it’s all about exchanging pointers, everyone should control the force exerted, I don’t wish to watch any heart-stopping scenes like bones or flesh torn today.”

He and Zhao Ba are close friends, naturally he could tell that Zhao Ba was really furious about Li Yuan’s arrogance, so he made use of his status to advice both parties.

Li Yuan smiled, “Mister Guo, you can relax, I only came here with the intention of having fun, besides, there are also four

beauties here! Mister Guo, relax.”

Once he said that, all of the school’s swordsmen were burning with anger. During this period, martial arts was blooming, everyone regarded martial arts and sword skills as a prestigious and important matter, but he instead said that he only considered it as a game, meaning that he holds no regards for his opponents.

Zhao Mu leaned his head toward Ji Yanran and enquired her intention, “Miss Ji, don’t you think that Mister Li Yuan’s words are a bit unwarranted?”

On the other side, Han Chuang snorted, “Mister Li is too arrogant.”

Ji Yanran smiled, “But his abilities are truly extraordinary, he wasn’t lying.”

Those two people didn’t expect that after she had publicly shown her liking towards the Horse Fanatic, she would still defend Li Yuan and were both momentarily rendered speechless.

Xiang Shaolong knew about Ji Yanran’s independent thinking, she wasn’t going to change her mind because of other people. Unless he could win Li Yuan publicly, otherwise in her heart, he, Xiang Shaolong, will never be on par with Li Yuan in this aspect.

Therefore, for this beauty that always had strict criteria for her husband, this will always be a form of regret.

While he's pondering, that school's first instructor had already entered the field and raising his hands in greeting towards Li Yuan, said, "I am Dai Feng, please grant me your instruction, Mister Li."

Li Yuan sized up Dai Feng and blandly replied, "Dong Luzi, come down and have some fun with Brother Dai Feng!"

The crowd's uproar rose from all directions, no one could believe that Li Yuan only sent his man to accept his challenge, obviously showing that Dai Feng is not qualified to challenge him yet.

Everyone from the school, from Zhao Ba all the way down, were all indignant.

Zhao Mu whispered towards Xiang Shaolong, "Oh no! If Dai Feng lost, Zhao Ba probably wouldn't be able to hold back his anger and will personally challenge Li Yuan."

While Ji Yanran whispered in Xiang Shaolong's ear, "This Dong Luzi and Lou Wuxin are Li Yuan's most reputable and great swordsmen. They are very famous in Chu."

Le Cheng who was sitting behind leaned forward and said, "I also heard about this Dong Luzi, allegedly he's from the Chu Mohist and had traveled to Lie looking for teachers and visiting friends, can't believe that he's become Li Yuan's man."

At this time, 20 odd year old man who is tall and thin like a pole,

with a pale face and no moustache, walked down the stand from the seats on Li Yuan's side towards Dai Feng and said gently and politely, "Brother Dai, please give direction!"

After Dai Feng returned the greeting, the youngsters brought out the wooden swords and helped both swordsmen wear the armors that protected their head, chest and vital spot at the lower body, as swords are merciless and may cause accidental injury. But this is only effective if the fighters control their force. To an expert swordsman, even if it's only a wooden sword, it still has the capability to kill and no armor can stand against it.

Two swords met in the air, testing the opponent's arm strength, then retreating back, demonstrating the sect's stance.

Applauses were suddenly heard, then stopped.

The crowd all held their breath in silence, looking on in concentration.

Dai Feng stepped in his battle stance, probing and moving towards the opponent, waving the wooden sword energetically, displaying impressive strength.

In contrast, Dong Luzi held his sword and stood erect, immovable like a mountain, only staring coldly at Dai Feng.

Dai Feng retreated two steps back and suddenly roared as he moved forward as quickly as lightning, the sword blade slashed swiftly up into the air, emitting a whistling noise as it sliced thru the air with an unbelievable strength.

Han Chuang and the rest started cheering him on. The warrior school's swordsmen were even more excited, giving out thunderous support. On the contrary, on Li Yuan's side, everyone sneered, showing extreme confidence.

This time, Zhao Zhi, who was sitting on the other side of Li Yuan, started to feel regretful. She was purposely being affectionate with Li Yuan, partly because she was indeed charmed by Li Yuan, but mainly because she was trying to anger Xiang Shaolong. But ultimately, she still belongs to the school and naturally she won't want her own side to lose, but because she was sitting beside Li Yuan, she's too embarrassed to cheer loudly and is now in a dilemma.

Li Yuan clearly understood her troubles so while everyone's attention was still on the field, he quietly stretched his hand over and held her slender fingers which she had placed on her thigh, leaning near her ear and spoke softly, "On Miss's account, Li Yuan definitely won't hurt anyone from your school."

Zhao Zhi's tender body trembled and in her confused state of mind she actually allowed him to freely hold her hand.

Zhao Ya noticed their odd behavior and got closer to them, saying with a slight pout, "Mister Li, you are so caring!"

Li Yuan who has often frequented brothels, was secretly happy as he said with a smile, "Didn't Lady like my playboy style?"

Zhao Ya shot him a condescending look and sat straight; her heart was again filled with Dong Kuang's unparalleled heroic spirit and couldn't help but sigh. She secretly pondered why when she saw Li Yuan fooling around with other women, she didn't care much about it, but when she saw Ji Yanran only sitting beside Dong Kuang, her heart felt very uncomfortable.

There was a sound "Dong!", Dong Luzi lifted his sword to parry, at the same time moved diagonally, avoiding Dai Feng's second attack which came one after another.

Zhao Mu, Han Chuang, Le Cheng and the others are all expert swordsmen. With one look, it was easy to know that not only was Dong Luzi's arm strength not inferior to Dai Feng's, he's also a very good strategist, deliberately not fighting head on so that he can erode Dai Feng's strength.

As expected, Dong Luzi followed by putting a defensive stance, under his opponent's chain of relentless attacks, repeatedly dodged. On the surface, it seemed like Dai Feng has the upper hand but in reality, Dong Luzi was in no danger at all, only waiting for the opportunity to counterattack.

A round of supports could be heard from all corners, cheering for Dai Feng.

Zhao Zhi suddenly came out her daze and wanted to pull her hand back but did not expect that Li Yuan would hold her hand tightly and not let go. He even placed the back of his hand on top of her thigh and spoke in her ear, "Do Miss Zhi dislike me?"

Zhao Zhi developed a sense of guilt for betraying Xiang Shaolong and Dong Kuang and looked down, "Other people can see us, you know?"

Li Yuan loftily replied, “A true man stands upright in the world, why should he be afraid of others’ gossip, as long as you don’t dislike Li Yuan, I can assume responsibility for everything.”

This person is very good with words, and also understood how to flatter women. Even Ji Yanran nearly fell in love with him. Zhao Zhi’s does not have much experience about men-women relationship, furthermore, she was angry about Dong Kuang’s heartlessness, so her heart was momentarily confused, thus allowing him to take advantage of her.

Li Yuan knew that they are in public and thus he cannot go overboard so he was secretly thinking of bringing her back to his residence later for some fun. Therefore he did not molest her further.

Guo Xiu’er, who was sitting beside Zhao Zhi, was paying attention to Li Yuan and on seeing that he was flirting with Zhao Zhi, her pretty face changed and felt resentful.

During the warring states period, the distance men and women had to keep from each other was very different from the period after Han Dynasty, where strict Confucian teachings was flourishing. However, it’s still not considered proper etiquette for men and women to flirt in public and Guo Xiu’er couldn’t help but discount her good impression of Li Yuan.

At this time, Xiang Shaolong’s suddenly decided to turn and look at Li Yuan and as luck would have it, Li Yuan was also looking at

him. Even though they were separated by 10 more seats, Xiang Shaolong could still clearly see that Li Yuan was holding Zhao Zhi's hand, and he can't help but flash a look of hatred through his eyes, extremely furious.

Li Yuan was pleased with himself on seeing that and smiled and nodded at him.

Zhao Zhi followed Li Yuan's gaze and looked over, straight into Xiang Shaolong's eyes and she was suddenly reminded of Xiang Shaolong. Her heart shuddered and she forcefully pulled away her hand away from Li Yuan's devilish grasp.

Li Yuan of course didn't know about the complicated relationship between Xiang Shaolong and her, and only thought that she was embarrassed for being caught in the situation with him. Instead he gently rubbed her bountiful thigh, before sitting properly and ignored Xiang Shaolong to continue watching the competition.

Xiang Shaolong's face was furiously stern as he turned back towards the fight on the field, fury burning inside. For the first time, he started to feel the need to challenge Li Yuan.

Ji Yanran saw everything and whispered, "Don't act impulsively, if you're hurt by Li Yuan, you'll have more to lose."

These few words was like pouring oil into fire, Xiang Shaolong made an effort to push down his anger, after mulling over things for awhile, turned towards Zhao Mu, "Can we send someone to invite one of my family warriors?"

Zhao Mu immediately understood and after asking clearly who this person was, he ordered someone to summon him.

At this moment, Dai Feng had at least given out 40 more moves, and yet he still couldn't do anything to that Dong Luzi, even the supporting cheers slowly died down.

Dong Luzi knew that the opportunity had come, looked up and smiled as he changed from the defending position to the attacking position, erecting his wooden sword to force his way into his opponent's sword formation, executing an exquisite and magnificent sword move. He dispelled each move as it came and he kept his sword attacks in a very tight circle such that Dai Feng's is unable to properly execute his way of brash fighting which uses wide sweeps of his sword.

Zhao Mu and the others all sighed in despair, even Zhao Ba who had absolute confidence in Dai Feng's skills was frowning.

Zhao Zhi, who was sitting beside Li Yuan, saw that her side was facing danger, came totally to her senses. She secretly blamed herself for not keeping a line between friends and enemies, even letting Li Yuan take advantage of her and felt ashamed towards her Teacher and school. However, if she leaves now, it would be too obvious and she was in a dilemma.

The two fighters on the field exchanged a few more moves. Dai Feng's previously awe-inspiring performance was never seen again as he constantly retreated in defeat.

Dong Luzi roared loudly, the sword's shadow flashed by, breaking through his opponent's flaw, quickly entering the inside of the opponent's sword moves, heading directly towards Dai Feng's chest.

Dai Feng was shocked but was unable to retract his sword in time as he abruptly stumbled backward and barely missed this severe blow.

However Dong Luzi is someone who can be merciless once he gains the upper hand. His feet flew and kicked towards the groin and if not for the armor, this kick would have made Dai Feng a eunuch. Nevertheless, it was enough to give him much pain as he cried out in pain, his hand dropping the long sword as he staggered and tumbled, with his hands gripping his groin.

The crowd did not expect that Dong Luzi, who looks so gentle and refined, can be so ruthless once he has gained the upper hand. They all stared at him shell-shocked and for a moment, the whole field was so silent that one can even hear a pin dropped and only the sound of Dai Feng's moans were heard.

Zhao Ba's face paled as he stood up and shouted, "Isn't anyone helping instructor inside to tend to his wound?"

Instantly, they all scrambled forward to help bring Dai Feng inside.

Dong Luzi didn't look at all regretful; instead he jauntily bowed

towards both sides, handed over the wooden sword and returned to his seat.

Zhao Zhi had always had a good friendship with Dai Feng, so she can no longer be bothered with Li Yuan as she glared hatefully at him before quickly following Dai Feng inside.

Li Yuan didn't even care about Zhao Zhi at all as he smiled suavely, "It's hard to avoid injury during a martial arts competition, if Master Zhao is afraid of more accidents happening, let's just stop it all here and let me play host tonight as an apology?"

This time even Ji Yanran could not tolerate what has happened as she quietly cursed, "Li Yuan, you're too overbearing!"

Zhao Ba's huge, round eyes were glaring with murderous intent, obviously he was seriously infuriated. Xiang Shaolong was really afraid that he will volunteer to enter the fight himself, so he quickly pushed Han Chuang forward.

Han Chuang understood his meaning and made a hand signal towards his own chosen warrior whom he was planning send for the duel to come forward.

That warrior, called Fu Jianyin, obeyed the order and jumped off the stand as he called out, "Fu Jianyin would like Mister Li Yuan to give me some pointers!"

The whole field solemnly waited in silence to see if Li Yuan would personally accept the challenge.

Fu Jianyin's stature wasn't tall but he was strong and stout, his face has some crisscross scars. His appearance looked a little bit scary, but this is exactly the ironclad proof that he had fought in many battles.

Li Yuan displayed a condescending attitude as he languidly leaned half his body against the table next to him and said nonchalantly, "Wuxin! Why don't you go and learn from the expert?"

The crowd had already guessed that he wouldn't find the opponent to be worth his time, so they weren't surprised.

The robustly built Lou Wuxin slowly walked down the stand, briefly bowed and straightened himself arrogantly. After accepting the wooden sword, he brushed off the person who was about to put the armor on him, "It's not even a battlefield, why do we even need this useless thing?"

On seeing that, Fu Jianyin said loudly, "Since Brother Lou is not wearing armor, I'll dispense with it too."

At this time, Lord Longyang stepped in behind Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran and delicately whispered, "In this world, is there anyone more arrogant than the Chus? We don't see such arrogance coming from them when they were facing the Qins. Will Sister Yanran be participating?"

Ji Yanran sighed, “Yanran also find this difficult to accept, but I know that I cannot win against Li Yuan, so there’s nothing I can do.”

Lord Longyang gave an icy snort and did not speak as he returned to his seat. He knew that he himself would be on par with Ji Yanran, so if even she said that she couldn’t beat Li Yuan, there was no way that he could win. At the same time, he decided not to let his chosen Jiaoxu fight so that his man would not be beaten and humiliated.

Zhao Mu turned towards Guo Kai and Le Cheng and sighed, “If Fu Jianyin loses as well, we can only rely on Luo Xiang to redeem our face, otherwise we’ll have to let the Master of the School fight, but I am really reluctant to let this happen.”

Guo Kai replied, “Li Yuan is the number one swordsman of Chu. His men are already so formidable, it’s not hard to imagine the level of Li Yuan’s sword skills.”

At the moment, everyone felt helpless.

Even though Zhao Mu was a master swordsman, but due to his status, it’s not convenient for him to join the fight as it might create a discord between the two countries.

Li Yuan was lucky that he does not hold any official post, otherwise he would not be allowed to fight others on a personal basis without the orders of his King.

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The two fighters on the field shouted out loud simultaneously and violently attacked the other side. Lou Wuxin's sword moves like the wind, sweeping widely and the sword aura is like the mountain, extremely mighty and ferocious. Almost as soon as they made contact, Fu Jianyin fell into the situation of being badgered.

Xiang Shaolong at this moment caught sight of Teng Yi galloping on the horse, passing through the gate, he reached out and pushed Han Chuang on the back, saying "Go and stop this duel quickly!"

Han Chuang looked like he was in a dilemma because this Fu Jianyin was passed off as a Zhao to enter the fight. If he says anything, wouldn't it be obvious that Fu Jianyin is actually his man.

Both sides were watching the fight quietly, it wasn't like before where everyone was screaming their support, the tension was as tight as a drawn bowstring.

Right when Han Chuang was still hesitating, the winner emerged.

Fu Jianyin lost in strength, as he stumbled slightly, Lou Wuxin swept towards his shoulder with the sword and the sound of bone breaking could be heard. As he groaned in pain, Fu Jianyin tumbled forward, and when he got back on his feet, the pain is already causing his face to be wet with cold sweat.

Lou Wuxin laughed out loud, “Thank you for giving way!”

Xiang Shaolong gestured towards Teng Yi who was walking towards them after getting off the horse. The latter understood his intention and shouted loudly from the distance, “I’m Long Shan, Dong Kuang’s family warriors, this brother looks very familiar, would you mind giving me a few instruction?”

The crowd at this time can’t be bothered to find out how Fu Jianyin was being carried out, neither did they notice that Zhao Zhi has just returned to the field and was seated amongst her senior and junior brothers, they were all focused on sizing up this uninvited warrior.

Lou Wuxin looked Teng Yi up and down disdainfully and coldly replied, “If you want to fight, you have to use real swords to able to display real skills.” Teng Yi laughed, “Why not? But Mister Li better send another fighter for me to tire me out a little bit before we can fight or so that it’ll be fair when I fight with you.”

Zhao Mu sighed, “Is your family warrior a moron, he didn’t even know how to take advantage of the situation?”

Ji Yanran smiled, “A Master will have a servant who behaves like him, and this is what a true hero is about.”

Zhao Mu couldn’t help but give an embarrassed laugh, angry at himself for showing that he is not a hero at all.

Li Yuan was afraid that Lou Wuxin didn't have time to regain his breath yet and when he saw that at Xiang Shaolong did not show any reaction, happily said, "Definitely hero material!" He made a gesture and one of the warriors behind him whose face looked like an ancient copper obeyed his order and stepped out.

Xiang Shaolong turned towards Ji Yanran, "Who's this person?"

Under the crowd's expectant gaze, Ji Yanran shook her head bewilderedly.

That person came in front of Teng Yi, and very calmly said, "I don't like to use fake swords too, what is your opinion?" Teng Yi frostily replied, "Brother, how may I address you?"

That person calmly replied, "My name is Yanfu, I am just a nobody!"

Once everyone heard, not one of them didn't get stirred.

Xiang Shaolong of course didn't know who he is, his questioning gaze turned towards Ji Yanran for clarification.

Ji Yanran looked solemn as she replied, "He was originally a famous swordsman from Qin but ran away to Chu because he killed someone. I did not expect him to join Li Yuan. From this, it could be seen that Li Yuan's influence in Chu is growing by leaps and bounds, no wonder he is so arrogant."

Han Chuang and the rest started to worry for Teng Yi.

“Clang!”

Yanfu pulled out his glimmering sharp sword, fell back two steps, pointed at Teng Yi and shouted, “Still haven’t pulled out your sword yet?”

Teng Yi was expressionless but a coldness radiated from his eyes as he unhurriedly said, “When the time comes, the sword will naturally be pulled out of its sheath!”

Yanfu was furious as he roared, straighten up the sword and attacked.

Instantly, a cold glare flared, blinding everyone’s eyes.

No one could have expected that the friendly competition between influential officials could turn into a real life and death fight.

Book 8 Chapter 3 – Awe-Inspiring At The Field

Once Yanfu attacked with his sword, everyone could tell he was formidable.

No matter the angle or the speed, technique or footwork, all these can be clearly seen in this simple looking sword execution that was moving like a swimming dragon, indeed deserving of his great reputation as a master swordsman.

The most exhilarating part was he borrowed the twisting power of his waist and legs to exert his moving strength, creating a powerful stab that pooled the energy in his whole body, moving as fast as lightning, with no warning sign in advance. It was really instantaneous, seemingly like a volcanic eruption and in the blink of an eye, the sword point arrived only a foot away from the unmoving Teng Yi's chest .

The crowd imagined themselves in Teng Yi's position. At the moment, the only path left was to retreat and pull out his sword, but this would only boost the opponent's dominance, the offensive attacks will come in waves and he may even perish under the sword. In other words, whatever happens, it's only because Teng Yi's did not draw out his sword first and thus lost his chance to act first.

A small smile escaped from the corner of Teng Yi's lips as he swiftly drew out his sword without even retreating a step.

The crowd was secretly alarmed. Guo Xiu'er and Zhao Ya were so scared that they shut their pretty eyes, unable to bear watching the tragic outcome of this hero when he spills his blood.

“Clang!”

While everyone was stupefied, Teng Yi drew out his sword to about two feet from the sheath and actually accurately blocked the edge of Yanfu's sword with his sword handle.

Even if Yanfu was stronger than Teng Yi, but the power emitted from the sword's edge is incomparable to the power emitted from the flat side of the sword handle, especially since Yanfu's arm strength simply wasn't on the same level as Teng Yi.

Ever since Yanfu started to appear in the pugilistic world, he has never seen anyone who from the start could beat an enemy using the sword handle only. He had placed his full power to attack forward, and he could not stop his momentum and was heading towards Teng Yi as if he is throwing himself into his embrace.

Just as he realized his mistake, Teng Yi's iron fist loomed in front of his eyes.

“Bang!”

Fresh blood spurted from Yanfu's mouth and nose as he stumbled backwards, unexpectedly knocked out by Teng Yi's left fist, whereas Teng Yi's sword was only half out of the sheath.

“Clang!”, the sword slid back into the sheath.

Silence reigned on the field, before the swordsmen from the training school burst into loud cheers which filled the whole field, amazed by Teng Yi’s skills and also ecstatic because he had gotten revenge on their behalf.

Li Yuan did not expect that Teng Yi could be as skillful as this, his face turned green as he shouted, “Carry that useless guy out!”

Once this word was out, even Zhao Ya, who was sitting beside him furrowed her brows, could feel that this person, Li Yuan, is an unkind and fickle person, showing no sympathy at all towards a subordinate who has failed.

Yanfu was quickly carried out of the field.

Teng Yi pointed towards Lou Wuxin, “It’s your turn now!”

The crowd’s eyes all fell on Lou Wuxin, waiting to see if he dared to accept the challenge.

Xiang Shaolong is the only one in the field who can predict the result of the fight. After Teng Yi received his instruction from the ‘Mohist Swordplay’s Addendum’, his sword and martial art skills improved exponentially, even he himself couldn’t be sure to win against him, much less Yanfu. This time he laughed out loud, “Brother Lou, if you still have not rested enough to get your breath

back, we can ask Brother Dong Luzi or others to fight first.”

Once this was said, there was no way for Lou Wuxin to avoid this any further, he stood up, snorted and walked out towards the field.

Everyone immediately quieted down.

Ji Yanran whispered in Xiang Shaolong’s ear, “I have never seen anyone with such queer sword skills as your Second Brother, he not any more inferior compared to Li Yuan .”

Zhao Mu was instead elated, secretly thinking that it’s no wonder that this “Horse Fanatic” is so boastful, so it turns out that he has a subordinate who can fight against a hundred fighters single-handedly with his out of the world sword skills.

“Clang,” Lou Wuxin pulled out his sword and assumed a stance, yet he didn’t immediately attack, quietly studying his opponent’s sword movement and techniques. Teng Yi faced the sky and laughed aloud, his right hand holding the sword handle, stepped forward and looked as if he was going to pull out his sword.

Lou Wuxin felt awestricken by his imposing manner and actually took a step back, so that a gap of seven to eight steps still remained between them. Teng Yi dashed like lightning forward towards Lou Wuxin’s left side, the long sword slid back in and then out of the sheath again, creating the unbelievable illusion of countless seemingly real sword sparks, looking like an attack but yet not an attack, and poisonous snakes in a pit, rearing their heads and sticking out their tongue so that at any time, it could fiercely

attack its enemy with one bite, but it would definitely be a merciless killing move.

Xiang Shaolong slapped his thigh and cheered. This move that Teng Yi used was based on defending in order to attack, beyond doubt that it has reached perfection, completely utilizing the essence of Mohist Swordplay's Addendum.

Lou Wuxin was completely baffled by the opponent's sword movement, even though he shouted and assumed a fierce posture but in the end he still moved back a step, everyone could see that he had been intimidated.

When master swordsmen were pitted in a battle against each other, how can one constantly retreat.

With wondrous instinct, Teng Yi's sword suddenly moved widely, changing from defending to attack into attacking to defend, waving his long sword seemingly like a rainbow, accompanied by refined and intricate footwork, dashing forward to Lou Wuxin's left, taking him by storm.

"Clang!" Lou Wuxin strenuously tried to block Teng Yi's sword, which has reached perfection regardless of technique, posture, strength or movement. Teng Yi sneered, "Is this all you have?"

The long sword slid out, and quickly morphed into a sweep.

"Clang!"

Lou Wuxin raised his sword in trepidation to block, only to be swept away by Teng Yi and there was no way he could retaliate at all.

Not one of them from Li Yuan's side that didn't turn pale, for it must be known that Lou Wuxin's arm strength is the best amongst them all but it turned out that this "Long Shan" can easily beat him.

By this time, everyone knew that Teng Yi plans to subdue and humiliate this person in terms of strength.

Zhao Ba was ecstatic, but also secretly alarmed. He was always self-assured that his strength was unbeatable, but now looking at Teng Yi's might, he realizes that there will always be others who are better.

Le Cheng who was sitting at the back moved forward, "Your family warrior's superhuman strength was just astonishing, I won't be surprised if it's comparable to Xiao Weimou."

Xiao Shaolong secretly snickered, if Le Cheng knew that Xiao Weimou was killed by Teng Yi, who knows what would he think about it?

History is being repeated again. Earlier it was Fu Jianyin who was beaten senseless by Lou Wuxin till he cannot retaliate at all and ultimately lost; this time it's Teng Yi slowly pressing forward, making Lou Wuxin sweat with effort, continuously retreating.

This Lou Wuxin can be considered as awesome as he could ward off Teng Yi's unfathomable 25th sword stance before he lapsed and thus creating a flaw in his defense.

Teng Yi moved forward like a lightning kicking his lower abdomen.

Lou Wuxin scrambled backward holding the sword, curled up on the floor from the pain. Besides moaning, he had no more energy to get up anymore.

The crowd was awestruck by this terrible sword move that all have forgotten to cheer.

Li Yuan completely lost face. After ordering someone to move Lou Wuxin, he saw that everyone and that Long Shan's eyes are on him, he secretly groaned. If he joined in the fight, even though he might not necessarily lose, he didn't have the confidence to get the upper hand, but at this time the situation is such that there's no other way out so he snorted, "So Mister Dong has such a skillful subordinate, from this we could infer that Mister must also be an expert, why don't we use this time to play a little bit, so as to avoid others speaking badly of me for taking advantage of your subordinate when he is tired from all the fighting."

Even though his words sounded reasonable, but everyone knew that he is in fact extremely wary of Teng Yi.

Xiang Shaolong waved to Teng Yi to come back to the stand,

before standing up slowly and replying calmly, “Regarding my skills, Brother Li should already have a clear understanding of my level from your family warriors, but how can listening be compared to watching. Since Brother Li is in a mood to play, I would of course love to accompany you.”

Li Yuan did not expect that he'd be willing to fight, and his joy plummeted.

This time, besides the men on Li Yuan's side and Teng Yi, everyone else was worried for Xiang Shaolong. Li Yuan is known as Chu's number one famous swordsman, just by looking at Lou Wuxin and the others' skills, they can all deduce his formidability. Dong Kuang, this 'Horse Fanatic', wasn't well known for his sword skills, so it's not too hard to imagine who'll win or lose.

Ji Yanran was anxious to the point where her brows all furrowed together, if Xiang Shaolong lost, even though Li Yuan wouldn't dare to publicly kill him, but he will definitely injure or maim him.

Xiang Shaolong took off his precious sword Bloodwave and gave it to the person beside him as he smiled at Li Yuan, “How can we follow these youngsters and compete with our lives. We can dispense with the armor, but we will still use wooden swords to exchange pointers and hold our strength in check, all should be carried out in the spirit of a friendly competition.” Even though Li Yuan was reluctant, he couldn't openly show his desire to kill his opponent, so he smiled calmly, “Since this is Mister Dong's suggestion, I will naturally agree.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly grinned, he is someone who's used to

using wooden sword. Just on this point alone, Li Yuan is destined to lose. After accepting the wooden sword and testing the weight, despite it only weighing about 70% of his Mohist sword, it's still much heavier than the average iron sword.

Li Yuan used both hands to wave the sword around, pondering if he could just blind the other party in one eye, it would be most ideal.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly shouted, "Master Zhao, let's play some drums to add to the atmosphere!"

While everyone was stunned, the drummer responsible for this had already started drumming like a violent rain producing earth-shaking drumming sounds.

Li Yuan's handsome face turned cold and ruthless as he held his sword and stood erect. With his tall and graceful stature, and suave appearance, he truly had an extraordinary posture.

Xiang Shaolong placed his sword in front of him, staying as still as a mountain, both eyes shining sharply like eagle, focusing on the opponent.

The both of them stood facing each other, immediately revealing the air of an expert. Everyone was filled with tension, anticipating the coming storm, for that moment everything was silent.

After spending the past six months training intensely, Xiang

Shaolong has changed from being blindingly brilliant to being calmly unwavering, even someone like Zhao Mu and the rest who had seen him fight several times in the past couldn't link through his movement that he is the Xiang Shaolong of the past.

Ji Yanran is an expert swordsman, with just a glance she can see that Xiang Shaolong's casual stand has the aura of an immovable mountain. She was inwardly surprised, could it be that the last time they fought, he didn't fight with all his might? She could never have guessed that his improvement in swordplay was all due to finding the Mohist Swordplay's Addendum.

In Zhao Zhi's eyes now, there is only Dong the Horse Fanatic who has that natural, graceful bearing of a hero, to the extent that even the handsome looking Li Yuan seems to pale on comparison.

Zhao Ya looked at Li Yuan, and also looked at Xiang Shaolong. She felt that although both parties had their own powerfully attractive qualities, Xiang Shaolong's uniquely alluring enigmatic and mysterious quality is something that Li Yuan cannot give.

Guo Xiu'er felt something altogether different.

Li Yuan was truly the ideal husband of her dreams, talented in both literature and martial arts. He is dignified and graceful, at the same time he has status and power. Despite knowing that he's a playboy, but that's the way of all men, so she could only resign herself to this fate and obey her father's command to marry this Lord.

But the appearance of Dong Kuang allowed her to experience the lure of another type of man, unrefined and straightforward yet revealing a thrilling wisdom and extraordinary thinking, making her willing to be conquered by him. This dilemma of choosing between them is making this young girl's heart disconcerted, unable to make a choice.

Now that the both of them are finally competing to decide their superiority, would it help her make a decision? During this warring period, everyone knows martial art, sword skills has long become the standard in judging someone's skills. An expert swordsman will naturally be regarded as important and admired.

Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong stared at each other unwaveringly, and said in a frosty manner, "Brother Dong's horse rearing skills are unparalleled in this world, I really would like to see whether Brother Dong's sword skill is comparable to your horse rearing skills."

He lowered his body to assume a stance, waving the sword and pointing at Xiang Shaolong, repeatedly shaking.

Everyone in the audience broke out into cold sweat on Xiang Shaolong's behalf, no one had expected that Li Yuan's sword skills to have reached such high levels. Even when using the wooden sword, he's still able to create ingenious changes, confusing the audience to the point where one can't be sure where the attack will be coming from.

Xiang Shaolong was still standing stiff like a pillar, the corner of his mouth revealed a mysterious smile as he blandly replied,

“What are you waiting for, Brother Li?”

His words were imbued with strong confidence, everyone can clearly feel that he's not even a little bit intimidated.

Li Yuan definitely proved himself to be worthy of being Chu's number one swordsman, he wasn't at all provoked by these words. He smiled and swiftly attacked. When Xiang Shaolong raised his wooden sword, pointing at him diagonally, he retreated and returned to his previous position when they were facing each other, the distance between them totally remaining unchanged. It can be seen from this how precise Li Yuan's footwork was. Just based on this point, Ji Yanran's earlier conclusion that Li Yuan's sword skills were above Xiang Shaolong was definitely not without evidence.

Zhao Zhi was thinking that if Xiang Shaolong's sword skills is on par with that Long Shan, these two people together would be enough to carry out the secret task of assassinating anyone. She can't help but feel resentful towards Xiang Shaolong's heartlessness.

Teng Yi concentrated on watching both of them, with their swords drawn and poised to attack. He was originally confident that Xiang Shaolong would undoubtedly win, but when he saw Li Yuan's expertise when testing the water and his intricate and harmonized footwork, he couldn't help feeling a little bit worried.

On the contrary, the one with the most confidence was Xiang Shaolong himself, not because he was underestimating his enemy, but because he had entered the state of Mohism protection, a state

where there are no others and no self, yet at the same time his opponent's intent cannot escape his observation at all.

He knew that Li Yuan is luring him into attacking first, but he was totally unmoved. If both sides are not striking at all, the one who will lose face wouldn't be this 'Horse Fanatic' but the arrogant Li Yuan who had made his boast earlier.

While training in the 21st century, they really focused on the psychology of warfare and he is currently applying what he has learnt, intending to strike at Li Yuan's weak points based on his character.

After facing each other for awhile, sure enough, Li Yuan couldn't endure any loss of face and got impatient. He gave a cold snort, single-handedly lifted his sword overhead and leapt forward. As the long sword was about to violently strike Xiang Shaolong, his left hand grabbed the sword handle as well, and the power was intensified as now he is wielding the sword with both hands instead.

Even though many disdained Li Yuan, but on seeing this outstanding move, everyone can't help but be impressed. Furthermore, this move was extremely severe and violent, gathering the power in the whole body's strength to the arms. If Xiang Shaolong raised his sword with one hand to block, then it very possible that this single move will determine the winner.

Xiang Shaolong still looked as calm as still water. He only raised his brows, turned his wrist, and actually used only one hand to block Li Yuan's move.

Ji Yanran was so astonished that her heart was beating rapidly, her slender hands rose to cover her gasping mouth that was about to scream.

In the past, she had fought both of them separately so she naturally understood that their arm strength were comparable. But this time Li Yuan is using both hands to attack and he has the added power from the running momentum so it's not hard to know who would be stronger.

Ai! How can Xiang Shaolong be so reckless?

Everyone there can only hear the swooshing of Li Yuan's sword cutting thru the air and could tell the ferocious power behind it, all couldn't bear to see the happening of another tragic ending.

Li Yuan saw Xiang Shaolong trying to block with a single hand and was secretly happy so he intensified his strength into the strike.

Who knew Xiang Shaolong could suddenly change from blocking horizontally to flicking his sword up, heavily pushing aside his opponent's move that was bearing down on him with the weight of a mountain. The hard block changed into deflecting the enemy's blow using its own momentum.

Li Yuan watched helplessly as a surefire move was deflected to the side by Xiang Shaolong, and it went off target a little to only chop down towards the empty spot where Xiang Shaolong's left

shoulder used to be.

Cheers reverberated around the field.

Even Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi, these two beautiful ladies who hated Xiang Shaolong, enthusiastically clapped their hands and cheered. Luckily, this time Li Yuan cannot afford to be distracted, or else he would have died of anger on seeing this.

Everyone thought that Xiang Shaolong will take this advantage to attack first, who would have guessed that he would instead move back a step, his wooden sword moving in a bizarre and mysterious path, moving backwards and forward in front of his body, floating and waving around randomly.

Even with Li Yuan's sword skills and experience, he still cannot determine which moves are true and which are fake. With no alternative, he was forced to retreat but tried to look as if he is arranging a forbidding defense. However he is not as commanding now as he was before.

Teng Yi felt relieved, knowing that Xiang Shaolong had guessed correctly that in Li Yuan's had wanted to impress Ji Yanran with his martial prowess so he purposely made him lose face, provoking him into being more impatient and reckless so that he'll lose his advantage. He's truly brilliant in strategy.

Ji Yanran is no longer worried about her lover, her eyes were shining with love and affection, looking at Xiang Shaolong's vigorous body emitting an imposing aura and indomitable charm.

The autumn sun was shining high above the sky upon the field filling it with life.

There's another person who cannot 'refrain himself from liking' Xiang Shaolong, which is Lord Long Yang. From the first moment he saw this stout and forthright man, 'his' heart was stirred. Now that he witnessed his splendid sword performance, his heart was sent into disorder and he was secretly determined to captivate Xiang Shaolong into becoming his love slave.

On the other hand, those family warriors under Li Yuan were so astounded they remained silent, they couldn't believe that even with Li Yuan's amazing sword skills, he still couldn't even get a little bit of upper hand.

Li Yuan forced himself to concentrate, the wooden sword slashed up and down, forming his second attack.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his original spot, standing still like the mountain, not even moving a little bit.

Now, no one would think that he was too self assured and belittled his opponent.

Li Yuan softly said, "Who would have thought that Brother Dong is such an expert, be careful!"

With a diagonal forward attack, he moved around towards Xiang Shaolong's back in an instant.

Not only did Xiang Shaolong not turn around to receive the

attack, instead he quickly moved forward towards Li Yuan's last position before turning around, the wooden sword pointing at the opponent, his steps steady and his bearing confident, with the posture like an erect mountain. One look is all it takes to know that he did not flounder at all despite his enemy's tactical attack.

Li Yuan missed his intent and landed at Xiang Shaolong's original spot and it seemed like the two of them made an agreement to exchange places.

The spectators didn't dare to take a breath, afraid that it might influence both parties on the field who are caught in a deadlock.

Xiang Shaolong wasn't without his own difficulties, for it is hard for him to go all out and fight. If he did not rein himself, it would be difficult to conceal his moves and it may even trigger the memory of those who have seen him fight in the past. By then, even if he killed Li Yuan, the loss will still outweigh the gain.

Li Yuan saw that both his moves has failed and lost his patience. He waved his sword to attack again. The sword point trembled like lightning, relentless, ruthless and flawless.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was anxious for victory and was secretly delighted. Just before the sword touched his body, he coolly deflected to the side. The move was truly as calm as an immovable object yet as swift as an escaping rabbit. Besides, his movement was suave and unrestrained as well, thus attracting the cheers of others.

Li Yuan saw that he was evading the attack and happily thought

there was hope. He shouted and waved the sword quickly.

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud, drawing out his wooden in a flash, turned around and flew forward, continuously blocking the opponent's five sword strikes without retreating a single step. His defense was as solid as an iron bucket, while his every move contained possible hidden changes thus causing Li Yuan to be hesitant about advancing rashly.

The clash of the wooden swords rang continuously non-stop.

The crowd was so focused on the fight that they forgot to cheer for their own side, only seeing both parties' sword skills soaring powerfully without constraints, fluttering and flashing indefinitely. Not only were they marveling at Li Yuan's unparalleled moves, but also astonished at Xiang Shaolong's unfathomable moves.

Zhao Ya felt that this Horse Fanatic is just like his character, unfathomable. Judging from his appearance, anyone would have guessed that Xiang Shaolong is a proactive person and who would have thought that in actuality it was the other way around.

Even though Li Yuan is always the initiator of the attacks, yet his opponent's defensive yet seemingly offensive moves is restricting him the use of the full strength of his skills. At the same time, the opponent displayed a strong will and tenacious power and he cannot help but feel discouraged. This is also the negative aftereffect of his two failed attacks; otherwise he wouldn't have this feeling of discouragement.

His sixth attacks haven't come out and yet the opponent's wooden sword suddenly created numerous shadows, confusing him such that he has no idea where the attack will be coming from. Li Yuan was alarmed and naturally he retreated.

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud, placing the flat side of the wooden sword on his shoulder, appearing calm and composed, said to Li Yuan who has retreated close to ten steps away from him, "Brother Li's sword skills are indeed ingenious, I think that it will be extremely difficult for me to win, let's just quit while we're ahead and call off the battle at this point, what do you think, Brother Li?"

Li Yuan stood frozen on the field, his handsome face flitted between turning red and pale. Even though it was still not clear who will be the winner and the loser, but everyone saw that all of his three attacks were nullified by this Horse Fanatic, how can he lift his face up again?

But if he insist on continuing the fight, firstly, it will show his lack of bearing, even more importantly, he had lost his confidence and all of his fighting spirit had been dispelled.

While he was still hesitating, Guo Kai, who was worried that Xiang Shaolong will really injure Li Yuan, stood up, "Let's consider this fight is a draw, today is indeed an eye opening experience for all of us."

Li Yuan secretly hated this but he had to maintain a smiling front, accepting other people's congratulations together with Xiang Shaolong. Ji Yanran greeted Xiang Shaolong and said

tenderly, “Mister Dong, from today onwards, you can be considered equally brilliant in both horse rearing and sword skills. I wonder if you would be willing to visit the place where I’m putting up for the moment to take care of my sick horse?”

Everyone who heard this envied him.

Although she’s using to the horse as an excuse, but her invitation came publicly after his incredible performance of martial prowess so everyone knew that this peerless beauty known for her heart of stone is no longer concealing her feelings towards this Horse Fanatic whom had stirred her heart.

The other three girls who were rushing to congratulate Xiang Shaolong, felt snubbed as Ji Yanran snatched their chances and quietly withdrew.

Li Yuan was the one who felt the worst. Originally he thought that today he would be able to impress everyone during the martial arts competition, instead he ended up with two of his famous subordinates seriously injured, while he himself could not win the fight, which is a total loss of face. The hardest hit was Ji Yanran is actually making giving an invitation to his biggest rival right in front of his eyes. His felt a strong hatred and hurriedly left with his subordinates.

Zhao Ba was ecstatic and said as he pulled Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi, “No matter what, I want to invite both of you to become our honored guest instructors. Please do not decline!”

Zhao Mu sighed, “If Mister Dong and Brother Long was here a

year earlier, that fellow Xiang Shaolong would not be able to leave Handan alive.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged glances, both felt very amused.

Amongst all the uproars, Xiang Shaolong finally was able to extricate himself to leave with Ji Yanran under everyone’s admiration gaze.

Book 8 Chapter 4 – Isolated Without Support

Ji Yanran, accompanied by Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi on her right and left, galloped out of the school.

As Xiang Shaolong remembered Zhao Ba's invitation for them to become the honored guest instructors, he couldn't help be reminded that Lian Jin must have received the same treatment when he was alive, therefore he had the opportunity to become closer to Zhao Zhi thus evoking their short affair.

Maybe Zhao Zhi is fickle in love, for her first lover was killed and she instead fell in love with him, the person who killed her lover, but because of her relationship with Jing Jun, he didn't dare to accept her love. However, if she threw herself into Li Yuan's embrace out of anger because of this, it could really make one feel resentful.

Li Yuan will definitely not appreciate or care for the fairer sex for he is too selfish.

Returning to the busy town centre, Teng Yi said, "I want to go to the Hidden Army Valley to see them, I may not be able to return by tonight."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement, replied offhandedly, "Have you sent someone to see 'Father'?"

'Father' was Lu Buwei's codename.

Teng Yi replied, “Sent the day before!” After requesting leave of Ji Yanran, he rode towards the city gate direction. They have been granted the Pass Document so they could leave the city at anytime without any problem.

Ji Yanran begged, “I want you to stroll around town with me, will you agree?”

Xiang Shaolong joyfully agreed and they rode back to his residence first, before going out to leisurely stroll around town.

After walking for only a while and Ji Yanran couldn't take it anymore because every one on the street were staring at them in surprise, making her feel uncomfortable, so she had no choice but to drag Xiang Shaolong and slipped back into the borrowed residence she's currently residing in.

The owner, a great Confucian Scholar in Handan, Liu Huasheng was playing chess with Zou Yan and when the two of them returned, they were delighted.

Liu Huasheng and Zou Yan were old friends who had known each other for thirty more years and they treated Ji Yanran like their own daughter and everyone was talking joyfully.

So far, Zou Yan hadn't gotten a chance yet to speak of old times with Xiang Shaolong. He urged Ji Yanran to take his place playing chess, while he and Xiang Shaolong walked together into the quiet and secluded back garden, and sighed, “Since the Prince of Ping

moved to the east, it's been more than 500 years where there's no true leader. There had been continuous wars, and who else but the common people suffered, luckily, we now have you as the new Saint to become our hope of ever stopping these wars."

Xiang Shaolong wouldn't dare to underestimate this wise 'Five Elements' School founder, because truly without him Xiang Shaolong, Emperor Qin who united the six countries wouldn't exist. But he still didn't know how to answer his question, the only way left was just to stay quiet.

Zou Yan was intoxicated inside his own vision of vast and broad history and softly said, "I know Shaolong is someone who pursues peace, but true peace can only be achieved through war, there's no other way beside this. Otherwise with these seven states continuously fighting, sooner or later, we'll be attacked from the tribes in the northwest who are watching intently for the right opportunity to invade the mainland like locusts coming to destroy our civilization."

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly startled, Zou Yan's words were like a blow to his head, getting him to think of problems he didn't think of before. All along, he had deliberately avoided having a hand in any wars; however, he never thought that it'd be better to suffer momentarily than to suffer long-term pain, employing war as a way to bring peace. This was mainly because of his foreigner mentality.

But this problem is in fact his problem now as he had become a member of this era so naturally he have to accept the responsibility that comes with staying in this time period.

Even if Qin didn't dispatch soldiers to go on an expedition, the other six states also won't let Qin off, this is basically a time period where the strongest rules.

Instead of allowing the flames of war to reign free indefinitely to the point of flashing an open invitation for the outside tribes to invade, it'd be better to use the Qins' might to unite the whole country earlier. If he leads the army, at the very least, he can reduce the senseless massacre to the bare minimum thus reducing the burden of war on the people.

Once he reached this conclusion, his heart stirred to passion.

Zou Yan measured him with rapt attention for a while before grinning, "The universe undergoes thousands of changes constantly, but is always connected to the activities of the five elements – gold, wood, water, fire and earth. The heaven is five elements, people are also five elements. Even though from outward appearance the usage is always full of changes, on the inside the essence stays the same. If heaven and people are always interconnected, every time there's a rising energy, when both of them are taking turns, an auspicious omen can be seen. Wherever auspicious omen is, that is where the master of the new time period is. For example, the time of King Zhouwen, there was a red crow holding a red book in its beak which flew down to the sacrificial altar, signifying the time for them to develop the unification plan."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help himself asking, "So where is the auspicious omen now?"

Zou Yan joyfully replied, “Did you remember that I once mentioned to you the appearance of a new star? Half a year ago, Shaolong left Zhao and went towards Qin, that star immediately vanished. Just when I was confused, I saw on the sky where the position of Qin is, a bigger and brighter new star appeared, glowing in the night sky. Now I am positive that the one who will unify the whole country must be a Qin and will have a direct relation to you.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned speechless, with this he can no longer underestimate the authority of this ancient astrologer.

Zou Yan extended his hand and placed it on his shoulder, saying sincerely, “For the sake of the well being of the people in the whole world, Shaolong, you must accelerate the Qins unification plan or else the fate of the new star might suddenly become gloomier. Do not worry about how others will see you, as long as you grab tightly to your ideals and do your best, you wouldn’t disappoint the expectations placed on you by Heaven. The unification plan must start with you and this is something I am very sure of.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart was stirred, only now did he understand how open Zou Yan’s heart is, filled with passion and love for the universe and mankind.

His opinion is aimed at the current actual situation, unlike Confucius and Mencius who could only talk about virtue and morality, while hard reality pointed out that near expiring State of Lu can only perish.

During this warring period, the only way to fight violence was with violence.

Zou Yan continued, “Yanran always had this idea, she wish she can support a brilliant leader to unify the whole country and stop the war.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled in his heart, the path to attaining this goal is very long and arduous, but without Great Qin, it would not be possible for the following period of the two Han Dynasties to have peace, even more so for China to exists in the 21st century. When he thought of this, he abruptly resolved to cast aside his own moral principles and see if he can help Xiao Pan a little.

At the same time, he secretly sighed. For someone like him who views all wars are evil, it wasn't easy for him to suddenly change his ideology.

Right at this moment, Ji Yanran and Liu Huasheng came out side by side.

Zou Yan laughed, “How did it go?”

Ji Yanran blushed, “Scholar Liu saw that I am not in the mood for war so he let me off this time!”

Everyone laughed.

That Liu Huasheng didn't know Xiang Shaolong background and only regarded him as horse fanatic Dong Kuang. After some small talk, he and Zou Yan went back inside to continue contending for supremacy on the chessboard while Ji Yanran happily led Xiang Shaolong towards small building she's temporary residing in.

Two beautiful servant-girls opened the gate and welcomed them in. Xiang Shaolong recognized them and suddenly felt a surge of familiarity.

Ji Yanran took him upstairs to her room. After waving away her maid, she sat on his lap and gave him a scorching kiss.

Both of them felt like they were transported to another world.

Yanran pretended to be solemn and asked, "Brother Dong! May I dare to ask when will you officially take Yanran as your wife?"

Xiang Shaolong grinned, "Since Miss Ji is asking this question, hmm, let me inspect you first to see if you are good stuff!"

He extended his hand and start stroking her bosom.

Ji Yanran melted into his embrace, but still stubbornly asked, "I am being serious now. When I can't see you, that longing feeling is truly tormenting for me."

Xiang Shaolong felt deeply touched by her love for him, sighed, "If everyone knows that I have won you over and even sleeping together with you, it'll be difficult for me to move around. By that time, everyone will pay attention to us even you surely will lose your position and status as a detached girl free from all manly and womanly lust. This will be detrimental towards my operation here in Handan."

These few days, Ji Yanran has fallen head over heels in love and has forgotten everything else. Now that Xiang Shaolong has reminded her, she pondered and nodded, “Yanran’s too reckless, forgetting that you are in a dangerous situation, I understand now!”

After a short discussion, the two of them reluctantly parted.

Xiang Shaolong leisurely walked back to his residence instead of riding.

Wu Guo interrupted him at the entrance, “Lady Ya and Miss Zhi are both waiting for you. I brought both of them separately to the east and west room respectively.”

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming as soon as he heard this. His hasn’t even gotten any headway for his proper work, instead he got himself entangled with relationship problems and he couldn’t help but feel discouraged by this. After considering for a minute, he decided to see Zhao Zhi first.

When he entered the west room, Zhao Zhi was well-behaved and quietly sitting in the corner staring blankly. She looked down as she heard the footsteps, not sure if it means that she’s still annoyed at him, or because she felt ashamed that he saw her allowing Li Yuan to be frivolous with her.

Xiang Shaolong sat down beside her, “Miss Zhi, don’t you have to accompany Li Yuan?”

Zhao Zhi paled and bit her lips, not answering the question at all

as she replied, “Teacher asked me to invite you to our school.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that she is just using this as an excuse to come see him, otherwise why would Zhao Ba task a beautiful girl like her to come alone to invite him for it just doesn't conform with the etiquette. He sighed, “How are you these last two days? Now, my heart is very troubled.”

Zhao Zhi still looked down, whispered like a fly, “What are you troubled about? You have just flaunted your abilities today and also won the talented Lady Ji's favor. I thought you won't be home so early.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood her intention for coming here looking for him. She wanted to show him that she didn't give in to Li Yuan. Coming from such a proud and arrogant beautiful girl, this is already a large concession. It can also be seen that this girl had fallen hard for him to the point of losing her self-control.

Zhao Zhi slowly lifted her head, sadly watching him, “You can do whatever you like to me, hit me, scold me, because it's Zhao Zhi's fault.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, when a beautiful girl is willing to allow him to punish her, it's an equivalent to allowing her husband free reign to handle her. If he still rejected her, there's no other way for her to redeem her pride besides suicide. He couldn't help getting a headache and stood up.

Zhao Zhi watched him in trepidation.

Xiang Shaolong said, “Miss Zhi, just sit here first, I will be back with you right away.”

He hurried over to the east room.

Zhao Ya was leaning on the window blankly watching the garden outside. Under the evening sun, the flowers and trees gave out a thick autumn feeling.

Hearing his footsteps, Zhao Ya trembled slightly, turned around and smiled, “Talented Lady Ji did not invite you to spend the night?”

Xiang Shaolong snorted, “Did you think her a wanton girl? I didn’t even have the chance to touch her little finger.”

Zhao Ya knew that he taking the opportunity to blow this up and being sarcastic that she’s making herself easy for Li Yuan. She looked down in shame and sighed, “I come here now to apologize to you. Will Mister accept my apology?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, he really shouldn’t have fought today. During this period where they value martial prowess over literature, there are no beautiful girls who won’t admire heroes with superb sword skills. Just because he wanted to gain a momentary pleasure and although he put managed Li Yuan down a little, he also made two girls fall head over heels over him and now he’s at a loss as to how to handle them.

At the moment where there is a lot of urgent business for him to handle, he didn't have any more free time to cope with them two.

Zhao Zhi's much easier to handle, Zhao Ya on the other hand gives him a headache and he is in a dilemma.

The biggest problem was that he himself still held a residue of love towards Zhao Ya and still crazy about her arousing body, so it's easy for him to feel jealousy and resentment towards her. On the whole, Zhao Ya's not a bad person, it's just that she does not have a strong will. But it's impossible to forgive her, besides he didn't dare to trust her anymore, it's just that sometimes he doesn't have the heart to hurt her excessively.

He exclaimed, "Don't joke with me, Lady. You have never offended me the slightest bit so there's no need to apologize at all."

Zhao Ya gracefully walked over towards him till her chest was nearly touching him, before gazing up tenderly, "Can Zhao Ya stay here tonight?"

Watching her lips spew out these luring words, breathing in her orchid-like scent, he felt like he was brought back to the happier days when they were still delightfully entangled and for a moment, he forgot where he was.

Zhao Ya saw his indecisive expression and moved half a step forward, throwing her slender body into his embrace, her soft perky bosom pressing tightly against him and enchantingly asked, "Do you really disdain me, Mister?"

Xiang Shaolong was shaken awake, secretly relieved that he had applied the sap from the Love Plant, otherwise Zhao Ya might have recognized him. He reached out and grabbed her shoulder. With strong willpower, he hardened his heart and pushed her away a little to avoid being tempted by her enticingly soft breast.

His eyes sharp, he laughed, "Why would Lady have such a thought? Any normal man would not have let you go."

Zhao Ya bashfully replied, "What are you waiting for then?"

Looking at her laying out the obvious, a look of wantonness which hinted that he can do anything to her, Xiang Shaolong was tempted but also angered. His eyes wantonly roved over her beautiful, heaving breast, and asked with a wry smile, "If Li Yuan wants you to sleep with him tomorrow night, will Lady be able to reject him?"

No one understood her wantonness and weak-will better than himself. Even when she was deeply in love with him in the past, she still couldn't resist Qi Yu's seduction and slept with him. After she broke off her relationship with Zhao Mu, she was still willing to allow herself to be toyed by this traitor. So these words are like a stab to her vital point.

Indeed Zhao Ya instantly was dismayed and she looked down, "Can you not ask me this kind of question! It's difficult for me to give you an answer."

Xiang Shaolong was indescribably furious, turned around and

walked out as he replied icily, “Lady, please return to your residence! I still have other guest that I need entertain!”

Zhao Ya cried out piteously, “Dong Kuang!”

Once he heard how miserable and sorrowful she sounded, his heart softened and he stopped, replying with a deep voice, “Is there anything else you wish to instruct me, Lady?”

Zhao Ya went behind him and discarding all etiquette, she hugged his waist holding tightly, melding herself to his back and suddenly cried desolately, her cries filled with untold misery.

Xiang Shaolong fears neither Heaven nor Earth but he is most afraid of women crying. Remembering their past love, he embraced her and used his sleeves to frantically wipe her tears away.

Who would have known that her cries just kept intensified unstopably, making his sleeve wet with her tears.

No matter how much Xiang Shaolong hated her, at this moment, he couldn't bear to chide her anymore.

After a while, Zhao Ya calmed down and slowly removed herself from his embrace. Her puffy red eyes glanced mournfully at him and she whispered, “Zhao Ya's leaving!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and he had a distinct feeling that

her loss of composure was probably due to remembering him, Xiang Shaolong, and the sadness just welled up in her. At the same time she is no longer interested in other men so for that instant she did not know what to feel.

He nodded, "I'll send you out to the main door!"

Zhao Ya woodenly replied, "Mister, don't stand on ceremony!" She turned around and hurriedly left.

Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner chamber and changed his clothes. In the meantime, he also sent someone to invite Zhao Zhi who had been waiting for awhile to come to the inner hall.

He felt thirsty, so he asked someone to pour him two cups of hot tea, enjoying it together with Zhao Zhi, who sat across from him.

Zhao Zhi felt slightly flattered by his treatment and occasionally stole a glance towards him.

Xiang Shaolong's heart started burning up and secretly thought that if he wanted to take her, she definitely will not refuse. Precisely because of this tempting thought, he had to make a lot of effort to rationalize his mind and forcefully control his impulses.

Zhao Zhi, at this moment in time, displayed a pitiful expression.

Truthfully, he himself didn't understand why he had not touched this beautiful lady, for it seems that Jing Jun is not enough reason

for a deterrent, because it was apparent that she didn't fall in love with the boy.

Zhao Zhi whispered, "That traitor has entered the city!"

It took a while before what she said dawned on Xiang Shaolong and he asked in bewilderment, "Traitor? Oh! You mean Tian Dan?"

Zhao Zhi looked down, "I am afraid that Sister Rou might go and assassinate him without much thought."

Xiang Shaolong's heart skipped a beat, "You need to warn her not to be reckless in doing things, otherwise it will be too late for regrets."

Zhao Zhi was pleased, "So you do care about us."

Xiang Shaolong knew he had accidentally betrayed his intention and smiled wryly, "From the start, I have always cared about you two."

Zhao Zhi's pretty face seemed suddenly revitalized as she rolled her eyes at him, "But why are you always so indifferent and ruthless towards us?"

Xiang Shaolong replied exasperatedly, "That night, I wholeheartedly thought that I would be able to enjoy the night Miss Zhi, but instead I got ambushed from the back and nearly lost

my life, how much nicer do you want me to treat you?”

Zhao Zhi is after all an unmarried maiden and to hear him speak so honestly, both her cheeks blushed but on the inside she was deliriously happy as she said with embarrassment, “Sorry! That was just a misunderstanding. Zhao Zhi will now bow and apologise to you, alright?”

Surprisingly, she really did kneel down.

Xiang Shaolong was so surprised that he jumped out of his seat and to help her up.

Zhao Zhi allowed him to grab her shoulder and pressed her to her seat again. With a blushing face, she raised an eyebrow at him and asked sadly, “You’re no longer angry with me?”

Xiang Shaolong felt her delicate body trembling under his hands like a frightened little bird and a surge of sympathy welled up as he said gently, “Why torture yourself like this?”

Zhao Zhi’s eyes reddened as she mournfully said, “Zhao Zhi has been unlucky since young, my whole family either separated or dead. Sister Rou is constantly thinking of revenge, so my temper can be quite bad sometimes, consequently offending Mister.”

Xiang Shaolong sympathized even more with her as he secretly thought that he was the one who made her say all those heartless and obstinate words. He suddenly couldn’t help but feel apologetic

towards her as he reached out his right hand to hold her chin up and smiled, “Let’s stop with the blaming game, from today onwards, why don’t we forget all about our old and new hatred forgotten?”

Zhao Zhi face turned redder as she lowered her long eyelashes and with half-lidded eyes, nodded her agreement. Who wouldn’t be affected by that kind of tender expression on a young lady’s face?

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but leaned closer and lightly kissed her lip.

Zhao Zhi’s body trembled and even her ears turned red. Her reaction was more intense than the last time when Xiang Shaolong forcefully kissed her while on the horse.

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to press her down on the bed on impulse to copulate with her but there was still an ounce of clarity in his mind as he reluctantly released her and asked, “Where will Tian Dan be staying and how many people will be coming with him to the city?”

Zhao Zhi heard Tian Dan’s name and became clearheaded again, “He’s staying in the Zhao Palace. I’m not sure how many people will be coming with him, but usually, regardless of where he’s going, he’ll have many bodyguards around him.”

She added, “Tonight, the King of Zhao will hold a banquet to welcome this traitor, and all the envoys have been invited to

attend.”

Xiang Shaolong knew immediately that he's not invited again. The King of Zhao is obviously on Li Yuan's side and deliberately giving him the cold shoulder.

Zhao Zhi asked shyly, “Would Mister mind going to advise my Sister Rou? In my opinion, she will definitely listen to your words.”

At any rate, Xiang Shaolong couldn't allow Shan Rou to take the risk in trying to assassinate Tian Dan so he readily stood up and said, “Alright! Let's go see your sister.”

Xiang Shaolong and Zhao Zhi rode their horses out of the residence. From far away, someone came riding towards them and shouted, “Master Dong, please wait!”

Both of them looked over in surprise and it turned out to be Pu Bu.

Xiang Shaolong seized the chance to tell Zhao Zhi, “Go home first and wait for me there!”

Zhao Zhi meekly nodded and left immediately.

Pu Bu stopped beside him, panting, “Marquis has invited Mister Dong to see him at once!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his agreement and followed him back towards the Marquis' residence.

He had on several occasions wanted to reveal his identity to Pu Bu, but in the end he bit back his words. After all, a person's heart might have changed within the last half year.

Xiang Shaolong met Zhao Mu inside the secret room in the Marquis' residence.

This traitor's expression was stern as he grimaced, "Li Yanyan has indeed delivered a crown prince!"

Xiang Shaolong took a moment to understand his meaning before he exclaimed, "That's not good!"

Zhao Mu clenched his fists and stamped his foot on the floor, "This time, that little thief managed to take full advantage of us. He can openly become crown prince uncle whereas my father has to worry that the King of Chu will find out that the baby is actually his son. Just based on this alone, father is already at a disadvantage. Moreover, Li Yanyan's relationship with my dad is just based on beneficiary gains and there's no real love at all. Now with her raise in stature, she can easily manipulate the King of Chu. Li Yuan will be able to get whatever he ask for in Chu."

Xiang Shaolong remembered Li Yuan's scheming character and asked in shock, "Would Master be in danger?"

Zhao Mu was deeply worried, “You figured this out as well, now Li Yuan’s biggest obstacle is my father. If I am Li Yuan, the first person I would deal with is the King of Chu. The King’s health has never been good so as long as Li Yanyan leads him down the path of destruction, it’s guaranteed that he wouldn’t last much longer. Once the King of Chu is gone, Li Yanyan and Li Yuan would be able to legitimately control Chu’s politics thru that bastard. Father has not taken any precaution against this, still thinking that the pair of siblings are still pawns that he can control but it would be so easy if those wretched siblings wants to harm him.”

Xiang Shaolong calmly replied, “The only way to handle this is to use the opportunity for me to completely eliminate Li Yuan when he leaves the country by posing as horse bandits.”

A shadow hung over Zhao Mu’s expression and he did not speak for a long moment. Finally he sighed and said, “I’m afraid it won’t be so easy. Li Yuan alone has incredible sword skills and this time, inclusive of his family warriors and attendants, he has close to five hundred people with him, even more men than you’ve got. Especially now that his worth has increased so much, King Xiaocheng will surely send his army to escort him back to Chu. Even when passing through Wei, the Weis will do the same too. If you act rashly, you won’t gain any advantage at all.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly smiled as he thought that it’s a good thing that traitor knows this because it would spare him a lot of problems.

Zhao Mu was obviously very worried and after sighing in despair, he asked, “Do you have any other better strategy?”

Xiang Shaolong deliberately replied, “Let me quickly go back to Chu to report to the Master so that he would be able to take some precautions.”

Zhao Mu unhappily replied, “But then who’ll help me take care of things here. Besides, Father often disregard me, his own son’s words so why would he listen to an outsider’s advice?”

Xiang Shaolong had known for a long time that he is a selfish person, who wouldn’t care about family. That’s why he certainly won’t let him leave. But by pretending concern like this, he will gain more of Zhao Mu’s trust. He replied, “Then we have to move faster, otherwise without Master’s support, even if Marquis ascend the throne, it will only attract other country’s intervention.”

Zhao Mu’s expression was heavy as he creased his brows, “I want you to investigate for me one thing.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Marquis, please give your orders.”

Zhao Mu dejectedly replied, “This last six months, King Xiao Cheng has been giving me the cold shoulder. For example he recently had a few secret discussions with Li Yuan and also today, when he received Tian Dan, he wouldn’t let me attend. There must be a problem somewhere.”

Xiang Shaolong also found this to be odd, but hasn’t gotten a chance to consider it deeply so he said offhandedly, “Could it be because Guo Kai is carrying tales?”

Zhao Mu replied with disdain. “Guo Kai is a useless man, and does not possess the ability to create friction between me and the Zhao King. I suspect it to be Zhao Ya. She bears a heavy grudge because I ruined her relationship with Xiang Shaolong. I wonder what evidence does she holds against me that the Zhao King trusts her so much.”

Xiang Shaolong broke out in cold sweat. Despite his careful planning, he has neglected the fact that he once mentioned to Zhao Ya the possible relationship between Zhao Mu and the Chu spy. Looking at things, it is likely that Zhao Ya has told this secret to King Xiaocheng, raising his suspicions about Zhao Mu. Therefore, King Xiaocheng must have bribed Guo Kai to his side and gave him promotions and responsibilities. This is to make him stronger in order to counter against Zhao Mu. Le Cheng would also have been bribed to turn against Zhao Mu. Otherwise, how can King Xiaocheng allow him to continue serving as Handan City’s chief military commander?

A twist of events has made the simple task complicated beyond measure.

It is impossible to Zhao King to bring down an established senior official like Zhao Mu overnight. He has to work in the background, slowly removing his power, disallowing him access to state secrets, breaking up his connections with other important ministers and generals. This is to minimise any further chaos in the country. Alas, after the departure of the Wu family, this country can no longer suffer another blow.

Xiang Shaolong ponders: How would I act if I was in his shoes? The best way would be to ignore all the rules. Summon Lian Po or Li Mu (Zhao's best generals) back to Handan City to assist in bringing down Zhao Mu. This would guarantee success! With these two capable and famous generals protecting Zhao, any invaders will have to pay a price for their attack.

However, Lian Po and Li Mu are busy battling the Yan people and the northern Xiong Nu. If not, Zhao Mu would be finished by now. The day either general can return to Handan City is the best time to deal with Zhao Mu.

Realising the serious danger he is in, Xiao Shaolong recalled Guo Kai's initial warning about Zhao Mu. Zhao Mu is indeed someone you should not be on friendly terms. In case the relationship sours due to the smallest circumstances, you may even have your entire household annihilated.

Even more complicating is that Li Yuan is now the Imperial Uncle of Chu. With his huge increase in status, King Xiaocheng has to give in more to his demands. Who can tell if this muddle-headed king will even sacrifice his horse breeder (Dong Kuang, Xiang Shaolong) to please him? Thinking of this will only bring more headaches.

Zhao Mu watched Xiang Shaolong's deep thinking and his expression switching between both hope and dismay. He thought Xiang Shaolong is worrying about both of them. He spoke in a low voice: I can tell that Zhao Ya is smitten with you. Based on your intelligence and interaction with her, see if you can deduce any information about what she is holding against me. If we cannot

salvage the situation, we will kill that weak King, control Handan and handle Lian Po and Li Mu after that.

Xiang Shaolong is awe-struck. Judging from the tone of this Zhao traitor, he seems to have a ready plan to overtake the Zhao King but is not anxious to be the Zhao King himself. Reflecting on this point, he could help but remind himself of Zhao Queen.

Zhao Mu is proficient in medicine/poisons and can enter the Zhao inner palace without obstacles. If he can work together with the Zhao Queen who has been tolerating her anger at the Zhao King, it would be not be too difficult to overthrow the Zhao throne.

Riding on the momentum, Xiang Shao Long asked: If such a day were to come, who will be assisting Marquis in Handan City?

Zhao Mu hesitated for a moment, said: The only trustworthy fellows are Le Cheng and a few of my warriors personally trained by me. Luckily, I have you to help me as well. In addition to my 2000 family warriors, we should be able to attack the palace easily. We will use this plan as a last resort. Before he gave me the cold shoulder, I can kill King Xiaocheng as easy as lifting my hand and no one would even know that I did it. Nowadays he keeps guarding against me so killing him would be much harder.

Continuing his excited tone: By now, you should know who is Xiang Shaolong, right?

Xiao Shaolong had a big fright, just nodded his head to express a positive answer. He wonders why Xiang Shaolong was suddenly

mentioned.

Zhao Mu continued: I just got word from Qin. Xiang Shaolong is leading a force here to seek revenge. I will enter the palace and report this to King Xiaocheng later. However crafty is Xiang Shaolong, he will never expect I have a spy in Xianyang (Qin capital).

Xiang Shaolong is dying to know who is the spy but he suppressed this unwise emotion. He pretended to be surprised and quoted: What has this got to do with our rebellion?

Zhao Mu replied: There is a big connection. Long Shan (Teng Yi) and your physical body resemble that of Xiang Shaolong. We can prepare wooden swords for you and disguise as him to kill the Zhao King. After “escaping”, the public opinion would put the blame on Xiang Shaolong, our scapegoat. This way, we will not bear the crime.

While thinking secretly what a close shave he had, Xiang Shaolong displayed an admiration for the flawless plan: Marquis is thorough indeed. If King Xiaocheng has any plans to leave the palace, let me know the time and place beforehand. I will do a clean job, including leaving the necessary “evidence.”

Zhao Mu grew happier and said: From today onwards, we should avoid seeing each other unless absolute necessary. You have to be careful about Li Yuan. Not only has King Xiaocheng changed his treatment, even Tian Dan has distanced himself from me and build

ties with him after knowing that he is now Chu's Imperial Uncle. You may not be familiar with Tian Dan. This man is much more powerful and scheming than Prince Xinling. Definitely not an easy man to handle.

Xiang Shaolong discovered that today is all problems upon problems.

During the expedition to steal the Lu Gong Manual, he identified Chu and Qi people are very secretive and scheming. Now that Li Yuan has the opportunity to be the most powerful man in Chu, Tian Dan would collaborate with him due to common interests in trying to break up the Three-States Pact. This will make his own life more perilous. If both Li Yuan and Tian Dan exert pressure on King Xiaocheng, Xiang Shaolong may be a sacrificial lamb.

What can be done to handle such a dangerous trap?

Zhao Mu keep reminding Xiang Shaolong to check what is Zhao Ya up to before releasing him.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed. He can no longer avoid seeing Zhao Ya. With Zhao Mu numerous Handan City spies, he will know and be suspicious of Dong Kuang (Xiang Shaolong) if he never visited Zhao Ya.

Adding another worry is whether Zhao Ya will spill the beans on what Xiang Shaolong told her about the suspicion between Zhao Mu and the Chu spy. If Zhao Mu hears of this, he will be prone suspecting the Dong Kuang is a fake. Thinking about how Guo Kai

promised to bring himself to the official brothel but has yet to fulfill his word, he must have been influenced by Li Yuan. Since King Xiaocheng's attitude has changed, and Guo Kai being the apple-polisher, he will naturally stay away from Xiang Shaolong.

Suddenly, he felt that he has lost the advantage he had in Handan. He felt cornered and attacked from all four directions. He bitterly suffers his isolation.

Book 8 Chapter 5 – Reacting With Calmness

As Xiao Shaolong starting riding away from the Marquis's Residence, he couldn't help but feel a sense of loss in his heart.

Right now is evening and the street lamps are being lighted. The autumn wind blows a chilling sensation in the air.

Teng Yi has already left the city for Hidden Army Valley and Ji Yanran is not available. Now that he wants to confide in someone, who can he look for? Thinking about his date with Zhao Zhi, he starts to feel better. His only escape to forget all the headaches is to indulge in the flesh of a beauty.

In hindsight, he cannot openly visit Ji Yanran but he can still do so discreetly. His conscious in clear and the intelligent beauty may even have a good plan to counter the present danger

With this thought, he hurried home and changed into fresh clothes. With his skills, he slipped into Liu (Huasheng) Residence and finally found his belle in her loft.

Seeing him, Ji Yanran is crazy with happiness. After an intense frenching session, Xiang Shaolong related everything he encountered at Zhao Mu's residence.

After thinking long and hard in his bosom, Ji Yanran straightened her pose and offer: I have a plan which would help to solve all the present problems, although I am not very happy to execute it.

Xiang Shaolong did not feel good hearing this and quickly asked her for the details.

Ji Yanran replied:” Li Yuan has been feeling dejected because of me. He is against you also because you won my favour. I have to openly show no interest in you and conspire with him. In the process, I have to make him understand that if he harms you again, I will ignore him forever. Thus, he may hate you but he will not dare to plot against you anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong couldn't take it anymore. He revealed: “How can we proceed in such a manner? What if you really fall for him? Li Yuan is merciless when he wants to achieve an objective. He resembles Han Chuang who gave me a bottle of aphrodisiac to make you succumb to me.”

Ji Yanran was incensed: “That shameless brat!”

After they consolidated their thoughts, Yanran hugged Shaolong:”Relax my dear. Yanran is well-equipped to deal with all kinds of evil men. I guard very well against people who try to tamper with my food and drink. Li Yuan will not succeed in wooing me. Moreover, I am the famous Ji Yanran, the stone cold maiden If Li Yuan wants to marry me openly; he has to wait till he goes back to Chu. ”

Xiang Shaolong still feels uneasy: “Now that Li Yuan is the Imperial Uncle, he is probably thinking of going back to Chu to consolidate his power to match Lord Chunshen Huang Xie. If he

wants to bring you back to Chu and you disagree, it will reveal your real intentions.”

Ji Yanran reasoned: “If we can drag the matter for one day, we benefit the extra day. In Handan City, everyone is clamouring to Li Yuan’s side. And your situation will grow from bad to worse. If we do not hasten to hold his hand, we may not be able to survive tomorrow. Let’s hope the treaty will take more time to finish so that Li Yuan has to remain in Zhao for a longer period.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly admits that this is the best strategy. If he tried to escape now without capturing Zhao Mu, how is he to face Lu Buwei and King Zhuangxiang? No matter what it takes, regardless of personal or official obligations, he cannot retreat without settling his blood debt.

Gritting his teeth, he consented: “Sorry to trouble Yanran!”

Before he finished his sentence, the maidservant came to report that Li Yuan has come to invite Ji Yanran to enter the palace together for the banquet.

Xiang Shaolong felt the ultimate discomfort and his heart is bleeding.

Xiang Shaolong has just arrived in the bamboo grove when the large yellow dog started barking.

This time, he entered through the front main door. Zhao Zheng

welcomed him in and keep tugging his clothes. “Please dissuade Little Rou. She never listens to anyone. Tian Dan is at the peak of his power and I did not want to see Little Rou commit such a dense act akin the moth flying towards the flame (to get burned 飞蛾扑火)”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “But I do not have full confidence in dissuading her”

Zhao Zhen replied:”Despite her display of hatred for you, I can tell that she thinks often about you. These few days, she is depressed and throws tantrums and it is all because she is upset with you.

Xiang Shaolong thought of that night when he held Shan Rou on the floor. Her dress had spilled opened to reveal her white and supple legs. Swallowing his saliva, he headed to the back of the house. He asked: “Don’t you employ any errand boy or page?”

Zhao Zhen explained: I like peace so the errand boy goes over to sleep at the school after dinner. This is more convenient for Little Rou as she cannot be seen by the public.

Xiao Shaolong finally understood.

Zhao Zhen sent him to the stairwell and asked him to enter own his own.

Xiang Shaolong banished all the troubles in his mind, consolidate

his spirits and came to the front of the door. He was about to knock when the door was pulled open. Zhao Zhi was dressed in an entirely new outfit which put her in a different light. Waiting at the door, she gives the impression of a dainty wife welcoming her husband home after a hard day's work. In a pleasant voice she cried: "Master Dong please come in!"

He cannot bear but look at her intensely before stepping into the hall.

Zhao Zhi let him have a good look at her. Not only is she not offended, she happily tugged his sleeve and pointed upstairs: "Sister is upstairs. Would you please go and find her?"

Xiao Shaolong endured the thought of caressing her and questioned: "Aren't you going up with me?" Zhao Zhi giggled: "I am preparing cakes to pamper our esteemed guest. Please be lenient and don't bully too much. Remember Zhao Zhi has promised to do your bidding from now on."

Xiang Shaolong is aroused by her tender attitude and cannot bear to hurt her anymore. He knows he is deeply entrenched with the Zhao sisters till the point of no return. After, humans are creature with feelings. The two girls have such a pitiful background. As a typical man, he is compelled to protect the weaker sex. He cannot help but feel drawn towards them.

Hai! Since he is here, he will do his best according to the circumstances.

Xiang Shaolong smoothly gave a light pinch to Zhao Zhi's cheek before ascending the stairs.

Zhao Zhi's delicate face turned red as she returned to her baking.

He reached the place where he had his first tussle with the two ladies. He did not see Shan Rou immediately. After scanning the area, he noticed two huts on the right. One has its door blinds down while the other hut seems to be uninhabited.

Xiang Shaolong purposely took off his boots and approached the hut with the blinds down.

Shan Rou's icy voice shot out from the hut: "Who is it?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Me" and lifted the blinds and entered the hut.

Shan Rou is leaning on a couch at the side of the room. She straightened herself immediately. Under the candlelight, her chiseled face and curvy lips in addition to her slightly untidy hair gave off a tantalizing aura that Xiang Shaolong has never experienced before. Although he is used to beauties, his eyes lit up at the sight of her.

Shan Rou stared at Shaolong with mixed reactions. She tidied her hair and stood up and said embarrassingly: "I did not sleep well the last few nights. I unexpectedly fell asleep while leaning on the couch for a slight rest."

For Xiang Shaolong, this is the first time he saw this beauty in such a stylish light. In spite of strong external character, she carries another side of her. If not for the fact that he heard it with his own ears, he cannot believe Shan Rou can speak in such an affectionate tone.

Shan Rou caught Shaolong examining herself and became shy. But she resumed her icy tone and spoke displeasingly: "Will Mister Dong please wait outside, allow me to freshen up..."

Xiang Shaolong interrupted her: "No need to freshen up. Miss Rou is looking her best!"

Shan Rou's beautiful and big eyes blinked in puzzlement but she did not insist. Using her icy voice, she replied: "You are strange. My clothes and hair are disorderly and you said it is prettier. Fine. Let's talk outside."

Shan Rou was about to cross the door ledge into the inner hall when she had to stop. Apparently, Shaolong had blocked her path with his large hand. If she had gone a further two inches, her chest will collide into his huge arm.

Shan Rou could not apprehend why he wants to block the way and keep her in the room. She forgot to react and only stared at him dumbly.

Xiang Shaolong also couldn't understand why he is so rude with her. He knew that without a proper explanation, this female

assassin will not take it easy on him. He spoke: “Will you assassinate Tian Dan regardless of whatever I say?”

Shan Rou is indeed distracted by him. She replied slowly: “You are not me, how would you understand how I feel? Zhao Zhi is still young that time and does not have a deep impression. But I saw with my own eyes how my parents, siblings and everyone who loved me caged in a row like pigs and dogs. They were led by traitorous soldiers who brought them back to Qi. From that moment I only have one wish – that is to kill both Zhao Mu and Tian Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in agreement. “That is truly a tragedy. Supposedly, you can only kill either Zhao Mu or Tian Dan. Who will you choose?”

Shan Rou has never thought about this question. Eyes flickering, she thought for a while and replied: “I will kill Zhao Mu.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief but felt bewildered. He enquire: “Isn’t Tian Dan the mastermind?”

Shan Rou revealed a pained expression. Gritting her teeth, she reasoned: “If not for Zhao Mu, my household will not be annihilated. What I detest most is he betrayed us while pretending to be our friends. Such a despicable man. In order to please Tian Dan, he resorted to committing these heinous crimes.”

Xiang Shaolong gently offered: “Great! If you agree not to act recklessly and only to act with my permission, I will help you to

assassinate Zhao Mu and let you three sisters unite. Are you agreeable?”

Shan Rou is greatly shocked. Confused, she gazed at him. Out of a sudden, her eyes turned piercing and cold. She recalled icily:”You have no reason to assist us at all. In the last meeting, Little Zhi offered you both our bodies without seeking my consent. Nonetheless, you did not waver. Why would you suddenly change your mind now? Are you not afraid this will affect your new career in Handan City?”

Xiang Shaolong is unable to answer her questions. Due to her background, Shan Rou is in a state of constant preparedness. She does not trust people easily. If he is unable to provide a satisfactory respond, he cannot win her trust, much less her cooperation. Seems like the only way out is to disclose his real identity as Xiang Shaolong. He has no idea what are consequences of this revelation.

While considering, he unconsciously let his sight rest on her naked feet. Seeing the healthy glow of her flesh, he felt attracted and aroused at the same time.

In this instant, a sharp dagger appear around his waist. Shan Rou’s cold as snow voice rung out in his ears:”Can’t even think of a good lie? I told Zhi Zhi long ago that you are only interested in our bodies. That is why you did not blow the whistle on us. Finally you have shown your true colours. Heh! And she is defending you.”

Xiang Shaolong understands that she is thirsty for revenge and behaves differently from other people. But never in his dreams would he imagine her to start using a weapon so early in the

conversation. On the other hand, he believes she will give him a chance to clarify matters before killing him. Shaking his head and smiling bitterly, he responded: “If you recognize how Zhao Mu is spreading slanders in front of the Zhao King about how I am detrimental to Zhao-Chu relationships; if you know that my only wish right now is to leave Zhao as soon as possible, then you will realise what a good reason I have to help you deal with Zhao Mu.”

Shan Rou glanced at him for a while and at long last withdrew the dagger.

Shaolong’s words are full of truths and falsehood. Shan Rou had heard from Zhao Zhi how King Xiaocheng ignores Dong Kuang but had no idea this was linked to Zhao Mu. She believed the majority of what Xiang Shaolong said.

Shan Rou moved her body towards him and allows her full, lively breasts to gently rest on his arm. Shyly she whispered: “If you can really lend us a hand in killing Zhao Mu, I will be your woman.”

Xiang Shaolong is filled with unparalleled excitement. This beauty does not make him feel guilty as she is not linked to Jing Jun. Therefore, he can rest easy and enjoy the pleasure of her flesh. What makes Shan Rou even more irresistible is she can be cold, vicious and unyielding on one hand but can be affectionate and enthralling to tempt him on the other hand. Face with a lady as this, Xiang Shaolong is in cloud nine.

Nevertheless, if Shaolong gives in and make love to her, it would make Shan Rou look down on herself.

Pretending to be disinterested, Shaolong declared: "I wish to make things clear. Unless Miss Rou obliges me with a willing and pure intention, I would never take advantage of Miss. If this is to be a transaction, you can definitely forget about it as I am not a crafty man who takes advantage of someone when they are in need."

Shan Rou was dumbfounded and remained still. She did not move her breasts away but instead subconsciously increased the pressure. Xiang Shaolong hoped to move his arm away except he lack the superhuman willpower and determination.

In this moment, both parties exist in an extremely delicate and subtle situation, with neither person willing to move apart or make any adjustments.

Shan Rou furrowed her eye brows: "In that case, why are you willing to accompany us in this dangerous expedition?"

Scrutinizing her beautiful jade face that is as charming as a scenery of hills and lakes, Xiang Shaolong felt both adoration and sympathy. In a warm voice, he answered: "The main reason is that I really like the both of you from the bottom of my heart. It is also because of my best friend, who happens to be Shan Lan's husband. When you meet Shan Lan in the future, you will grasp the full picture."

Footsteps sounded.

Both of them panicked. Xiang Shaolong extracted his arm from the comfort of the twin peaks while Shan Rou takes the chance to quickly get out from the room. Following behind Shan Rou, Shaolong saw Zhao Zhi carrying heated wine and aromatic cakes, smiling cheekily as she climbed the final steps.

Shan Rou moved a coffee table into the centre of the hall. Mesmerized by the two flawless beauties, Shaolong experienced a wave of romance. He took down the hanging lamp from the wall and set it in the centre of the coffee table, making it a candlelight dinner panorama.

With the three persons sitting around the table, Zhao Zhi hastily pour a cup of hot, steaming wine for everyone. The wine smelled wonderful. She then dispensed the pastries and smiled sweetly: "Mister Dong, please try Zhao Zhi's baking skill. They taste best when hot."

Xiang Shaolong recalled that he had missed his dinner and busied himself with the cakes. Whether it is due to hunger or not, the cakes taste delicious and he kept praising them to no end. Zhao Zhi's smile brightened with his compliments.

Shan Rou only took one piece and watched Shaolong as he handled his first wave of wine and cakes. When he finished the first round, she asked in a surprisingly intimate tone: "Has Mister Dong prepared a plan yet?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that unless he showed some trump cards, Shan Rou will never believe him. He simply replied: "Zhao Mu is planning to rebel; are you aware of it?"

Both girls look at each other for answers.

Shan Rou reasoned: "How would you know about such matters? Didn't you just say that he is out to harm you?"

Xiang Shaolong silently thought this it is indeed not easy to deceive this head tigress. Holding a calm outlook, he replied: "This matter is complicated beyond measure."

He abruptly creased his eye brows and remained mute.

Both girls are amazed at his reaction and looked at him dumbly.

Xiang Shaolong is pondering over if he should reveal his true identity. This will save a lot of needless explanation and prevent further misunderstanding.

The conditions are all very obvious. Based on Shan Lan's sisterhood, they will not betray him. In addition, both sisters are attracted to him. Zhao Zhi is even in love with both of his characters.

Shan Rou asked with suspicion: "Are you deceiving us? That's why you cannot justify your answers"

Zhao Zhi came to his defence: "Sister Rou, Mister Dong is not that kind of person."

Shan Rou demanded angrily: "You let him explain himself"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly decided. He was relieved to unload such big burdens off his shoulder. He gazed upward and let himself down, lying on the floor, rubbing his stomach, "Zhi Zhi, you made the best cake in the whole world."

Shan Rou was angry, "Don't try to deflect the question towards her. Quickly answer my question."

Xiang Shaolong spread out both his hands and his legs crossing under the big table just barely grazing Shan Rou's leg on the opposite side of the table.

Shan Rou was annoyed as she move aside, "If you keep evading, I'm going to kill you."

Xiang Shaolong pointed at his neck, "You pointed your sword here then I'll tell you the truth."

Both sisters locked gaze and felt totally confused. This person's behaviors were always out of the ordinary, truly made them unsure on what to do.

Xiang Shaolong took advantage of the time that he wasn't in their line of vision, to turn around and bend over to take off his mask, before swiftly sitting down again. As if there's nothing wrong, he extended his hand and grabbed another cake, slowly

munching it.

Both girls at first didn't realize what's going on until they saw him clearly, then they started screaming in shock.

Shan Rou moved backward, pulled out her knife, returning to her old scary bad wolf expression.

Zhao Zhi, on the other hand, was dumb struck. She kept staring at him in disbelief.

Xiang Shaolong sat on his knee, continued to drink his wine calmly, narrowed his eyes as he lazily stared at them, "I truly have been lying to you all along, but you have to understand my difficulty!"

Zhao Zhi calmed down again, stood up, her whole face was blushing up to her ears. She looked down shamefully, upset, "Xiang Shaolong, you truly ashamed me, how could I face you again?"

Xiang Shaolong of course understood her meaning, smiled, "Relax! I won't be jealous of Dong Kuang. Even more, he hasn't done anything towards you yet."

Zhao Zhi was both upset and embarrassed. She doesn't know what to say anymore but everyone can see how joyful she is deep inside.

Shan Rou suddenly lighted up, packed away his knife and sat down, "You are truly amazing. You even deceived the whole town

of Handan.”

Xiang Shaolong put on his mask again, returning back to his Dong Kuang’s identity. Both girls marveled at the change.

Shan Rou turned towards Zhao Zhi, “He looks better like this.”

Xiang Shaolong didn’t know whether to cry or laugh, stretched his waist, “Now you don’t have to be suspicious of why I want to kill Zhao Mu! But I felt that it’s too easy for him to just be killed right away, so I want to capture him alive to bring back to Xian Yang to receive just punishment. I hope you two sisters wouldn’t object.”

Both girls were stunned.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “The Qis sent Shan Lan to Lu Buwei as a gift. Fortunately, Lu Buwei turned around and gave her to me. She and my brother, Teng Yi, fell in love at first sight and got married right away. It’s all very romantic.” He turned towards Zhao Zhi and said, “Today, the one who beat Li Yuan’s famous underlings in a row was Teng Yi. Now you understand why he’s called Long Shan, right?”

Shan Rou was murmuring, “Fell in love at first sight”. She felt that these words were totally refreshing.

Zhao Zhi suddenly understood and looked down, “So where is Jing Jun?”

Xiang Shaolong started to hope again for Jing Jun, honestly replied, “Sister Zhi, are you interested in my brother?”

Zhao Zhi was so surprise that she looked up again, afraid that Xiang Shaolong misunderstood her intention, spit out, “No! I only thought of him as playful kid! But he’s very friendly!”

Xiang Shaolong became somber. He realized that he can’t force feelings, Jing Jun can only kill his feeling towards her.

After knowing that he’s Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou’s curiosity was aroused and she continuously watched him, “So what is our next move?”

Xiang Shaolong directly explained the situation to them, “Zhao Mu or Tian Dan. Between the two of them, we can only choose one. Before Sister Rou already chose Zhao Mu, so we used this as our goal. If only we could get Zhao Mu to rebel, we will get the opportunity to capture him alive from Han Dan.”

Zhao Zhi had already stopped being embarrassed, happily asked, “What can we sisters do to help?”

Xiang Shaolong was touched and told them of Tian Zhen, “Lady Zhi, would you mind contacting her on my behalf so she won’t be worried. If it’s not important, please don’t look for me. I will send Jing Jun to contact you.”

Both girls were disappointed.

Shan Rou stubbornly insisted, “No one has seen me before. If you can arrange for me to be by your side, we’ll be able to work together towards this.”

Xiang Shaolong’s head was spinning, “This could arouse suspicion, let me think about it first, alright?”

Shan Rou frostily replied, “If I don’t hear back from you in two days, I will pretend to be your wife coming to Han Dan to look for you.”

Xiang Shaolong lost his voice, “What?”

Shan Rou haughtily raised her chin, atrociously replied, “Too bad if you didn’t hear it!”

Zhao Zhi pitifully asked, “What about me?”

It’s too late for Xiang Shaolong to regret his decision. He bitterly smiled as he stood up and shrugged, “Give me some time to think about this!”

Zhao Zhi astonished, “Where are you going?”

This time, it’s Xiang Shaolong’s turn to be surprised, “Of course going home!”

Shan Rou grunted, “Men! Don’t understand women heart! Zhi Zhi wants you to stay and spend the night with her! Stop pretending to be dumb.”

Shan Rou stood up and headed out of the room. Just as she reached the curtain, she stopped and turned around, leaning on the door, “My room’s just next door. The only thing barring the room is this curtain. If you’re not afraid to die, just come and look for me, Shan Rou!”

She grinned right after she finished spoken. With a slightly flushed face, she lifted the curtain and left.

Xiang Shaolong saw a flaming red face Zhao Zhi. He couldn’t help but feel excited, thinking that it has all come to this. He doesn’t need to be considerate anymore. Furthermore, Zhao Zhi’s life so far has been miserable. Her love life also wasn’t as one wishes, how could he not sympathize with her.

Anyway, in this time period, who doesn’t have three wives four concubines and a large harem, as long as both sides agree, no one would blame you. But he also thought that that place wasn’t an appropriate place, gently said, “Come home with me?”

Zhao Zhi was terribly embarrassed that she doesn’t know where to hide, nodded slightly.

He felt warm throughout on seeing this.

Xiang Shaolong shouted towards Shan Rou's room, "Zhi Zhi will follow me home, what are you planning to do?"

Shan Rou replied, "I'm very sleepy. You guys should leave! Remember, you only have two days to think."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head in grim and waved Zhao Zhi to go ahead downstairs.

Book 8 Chapter 6 – Cornered!!

As he reached his residence, Wu Guo was waiting for him.

This joke-loving person was imposing, “Lady Ya is looking for you. She seems very unsettled, insisting on waiting for you to come home inside.”

Xiang Shaolong didn’t expect Zhao Ya to return again after leaving earlier, now that banquet specially set up to welcome Tian Dan hadn’t finished, how come she left the banquet halfway and come looking for him?

He gently said to Zhao Zhi, “Zhi Zhi, you go first to the east room to wait for me!”

Zhao Zhi at that time had become very attentive towards him. Without any protest, she went and followed Wu Guo.

Xiang Shaolong quickly went to the inner hall. As he was about to step over the threshold, Zhao Ya had in a flash already turned around, her face paled, her pair of eyes were full of despair.

He was shaken, came over and said, “What happened? What scared you so badly?”

Zhao Ya seemed to have changed into another person, with a shocking voice replied, “Dong Kuang! Zhao Ya is here to do an irresistible transaction with you.”

Xiang Shaolong became wary. His eyes became grim and his lips

hinted of a smile, calmly asked, “Even if it’s got to do with my life, I might still reject it.”

Zhao Ya realized that she had provoked the opponent, sighed and became soft, “Let’s consider another circumstance then, just think of this as me requesting your help. As long as you agree, from this moment on, Zhao Ya would only listen to your command. What do you think Mister Dong?”

Xiang Shaolong was confused. What kind of circumstance would force this lascivious lady to not hesitate to sacrifice everything, betting everything on this request? He creased his eyebrows, “I’ll listen to your request first.”

Zhao Ya replied with a bleak voice unlike her usual calm and gentle voice, “Dong Kuang, you might not know that you are currently in a critical situation. After Li Yuan had been informed that he had just become the country’s uncle, he proposed to our king to detain you back to Chu. Otherwise, he wouldn’t support the alliance between the two countries.”

Xiang Shaolong was furious. If this afternoon, he had killed him, then he would have gotten rid of any future troubles.

Zhao Ya saw him turned solemn, but still in a calm mood without displaying any of his emotions and thoughts. She admired this of him, softly said, “Brother currently is still hesitating. What he was most afraid of is that even if he sacrificed you, Chu will still be like in the past break their promises. In that case, he would lose in both cases.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt like laughing out loud.

Among the absurd things in the world, there is none that surpassed this example. From this event, you can tell that Xiaocheng is an exceptionally selfish being and every person is just a statistic to him.

If he has a troop of elite Qin soldiers on call, he would definitely make trouble for both Xiaocheng and Li Yuan these two crafty bastards. Zhao Ya continued: "Presently, I am the only person who can influence Xiaocheng, allowing you to flourish in Handan alive. So if Zhao Ya is dead set on doing your bidding, it will benefit Mister Dong in many areas."

Xiang Shaolong recollects the day after he defeated Lian Jin (history: the guy he defeated in Zhao palace and won Wu Tingfang's marriage). Zhao Ya had this same display of intensity of power when she negotiated with him. Snickering, he solicited: "I know Miss is great both in bed and out of bed but you have yet to tell me what assignment you have in mind for me."

Zhao Ya's eyes shot out a look of determination. She plainly said: "I want you to contact a person and warn him never ever to step into Handan City. The Zhao King has received secret information that he is on his way to Handan and has laid traps everywhere, waiting for him to send himself to his demise. "

Xiang Shaolong athletic body trembled, gazing at Zhao Ya with eyes wide open.

He finally understood what has transpired.

Zhao Da (Zhao Ya's bodyguard) is right; Zhao Ya has been unable to forget her feeling for him. The moment she knew about Zhao Mu's secret message from Qin, she dropped everything and approach him to warn Xiang Shaolong so as to save him from the traps of Zhao.

Composed, Zhao Ya explained: "You, Dong Kuang, are the only man in Handan with the courage and strength to accomplish this task. Most of your subordinates are staying outside the city and are used to the wilderness. I reckon only your forces have the ability to intercept Xiang Shaolong and his followers."

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to embrace her deeply and tell her he is the Xiang Shaolong she had wanted to save.

Zhao Ya squirmed under his stare. Hanging her head lowly, she pressed: "Dong Kuang, please give me answer quickly. Let me remind you. If I am rejected again, even I would not know what I will do next."

Xiang Shaolong has seen what she will resort to when driven to the wall. Letting out a big sigh, he chided: "If you had known this would be the result, why do it in the first place?"

Zhao Ya was expressionless as she chanted his words twice. Unable to hold her tears anymore, she wailed: "Because Zhao Ya does not want to betray him for a second time."

Xiang Shaolong could feel his emotions rising. Rushing forward, he grabbed her shoulders and barked sharply: "Look at me!"

Zhao Ya was taken aback at this outburst. "Why is Mister Dong so emotional?"

"I am Xiang Shaolong!"

"I am Xiang Shaolong!" he was about to explode but at the last moment, he swallowed his words and made a heart-rending promise: "Rest assured Princess. I will help you not because of your threat, but because I am touched by the selfless love you have for Xiang Shaolong. I, Dong Kuang, hereby swear that if Xiang Shaolong stepped into Handan City one step, I will bear no descendants and die an inconceivable death!"

Zhao Ya stuttered: "Dong Kuang! Do you know how grateful Zhao Ya is towards you?" From her bosom, she produced a cloth painting and gave it to Xiang Shaolong. "This is his portrait. Obviously, he will assume a different identity and appearance to cover his tracks."

Receiving the painting, Xiang Shaolong yanked it open for a look. The fine lines detailing his appearance gave it a life-like manifestation. He was shaken and enquired: "Who drew this?"

Zhao Ya replied: "I did."

Xiang Shaolong surmised: "Seeing this painting is like seeing the real person. From this we can conclude Xiang Shaolong has left a deep and strong impression in the mind of Princess."

Zhao Ya shot out a strange look. She looked closely at him and slowly quotes: "You have strong piercing eyes that could compare to Xiang Shaolong's."

Xiang Shaolong smilingly said: "Princess's love for Xiang Shaolong is well-known. Are you not afraid of jealousy from evil admirers?" Zhao Ya heartbreakingly answered: "You are a special man. Among the men I have come across, you are the only one who can make me forget Xiang Shaolong. Are you happy now?"

Xiang Shaolong naturally accepted: "Very happy. Princess, please return to your home. I need to assign my men and investigate the surroundings so as to accomplish this case that you have appealed to me. At the end of the day, I have full confidence in intercepting Xiang Shaolong and invite him to return back to Xianyang."

Zhao Ya gratefully agreed to his recommendations to leave. Her mind is full of concern for Xiang Shaolong's safety and can longer think of other matters. But if Dong Kuang had asked her to stay, she would not reject him.

All the love and hatred for Zhao Ya has dissipated for Xiang Shaolong at this point in time. He accompanied her to the main door and both parties remain in silence.

Reaching the waiting horse carriage, Zhao Ya can no longer hold

herself and beseeched softly:”Mister Dong is indeed someone who does not bother about the danger around him”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh:”Birth and Death are fated. Worrying is good for nothing”

Amidst laughter, he returned to his villa.

Zhao Ya waited until his silhouette had disappeared before rousing up. Within the carriage, her mind kept revisiting “Birth and Death are fated”

Having untied his knotty issue regarding Zhao Ya, Xiang Shaolong completely recovered his self-confidence and has the strength to deal with his powerful foes such as Li Yuan and King Xiaocheng

The mindset of the Special Forces is to win through unique methods.

Using smaller numbers to defeat bigger numbers. Using elite to defeat the ordinary.

Utilising the highly efficient organization, he is convinced that no one can keep them in Handan City. Once they leave the city and enter the wild, their chances of escape and survival would be even higher.

Momentarily, he abandons all his thoughts and fear and march

towards the unforeseeable future.

Tonight, he still needs to seek out Ji Yanran and inform her that she need not put up with Li Yuan the petty thief anymore.

Arriving in the east room, Zhao Zhi is leaning her face on her palm with her elbow on the table. She is waiting for him painfully.

Watching Xiang Shaolong stepping over the door ledge and looking full of energy, she happily pounced on him and checked: "Has Zhao Ya left?" Xiang Shaolong held her soft fingers and brought her through different rooms, going deeper into his villa. Halfway through, Wu Guo intercepted them. Peeping twice at the shy Zhao Zhi, he reported: "Since dawn, there are some stalkers outside our quarters. We have located their exact locations. There are four of them and situated in front and behind our villa."

Xiang Shaolong coldly commanded: "Capture them alive and interrogate them. I want to know who sent them."

Zhao Zhi was stunned and focused her beautiful big eyes on him

Wu Guo is pleased and rushed off.

Xiang Shaolong reached out and gives a light pinch to Zhao Zhi's egg-shaped face. Dragging her along the way, he grinned: "Does Miss Zhi know where I am bringing you and what are we about to do together?"

Zhao Zhi's face turned red and whispered: "I know!"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "What do you know?"

Zhao Zhi cannot resist looking at his wonderful physique. Bashfully, she protested: "You are very good with your methods. No matter which identity you assumed, you are able to make me feel attracted to you, causing me days of untold suffering!"

Xiang Shaolong pulled her straight into the bath quarters. Someone has prepared hot water and poured it into a pool. There are another three bronze pots of hot water on standby.

How in the world would Zhao Zhi have guessed the destination is the bath quarters? Not knowing what to do and at a complete loss, she hesitated between going ahead and backing away. Observing her introvert expressions only caused Xiang Shaolong's blood to race even faster.

Waving the servants to take their leave and after closing the door, Xiang Shaolong remove Blood Wave and laid it besides the pool. Stripping his outer garments, his climbing tools and flying needles are exposed.

Zhao Zhi was horrified that Xiang Shaolong was a single man armed like an entire army. Putting aside her shyness, she lightly assisted him to remove his hardware.

Xiang Shaolong took off his mask and placed it neatly, and

proceeded to take off her clothes.

Reacting to his movements, Zhao Zhi's entire body turned soft and cannot even stand properly.

Under Xiang Shaolong's well trained hands, Zhao Zhi is only left with a thin and tight singlet and a pair of short panties. Her neck, shoulder, breasts and feet are all fully displayed.

Her flexible and curvy silhouette, her firm flesh and her scent would cause anyone to undergo the magical seduction of a youthful body.

Xiang Shaolong is not in a hurry to strip her all the way. Locking her strongly in an embrace, he kissed her for long session, making her pant. Releasing her, he mocked: "Xiang Shaolong and Dong Kuang, who is a better suitor to win your heart?"

Zhao Zhi chose: "I'm afraid it is Dong Kuang! Sometimes you use hard tactics, sometimes, you use soft tactics. It has made me terribly confused and lost my bearings. I cannot even have a good meal and have no idea how to please you."

Xiang Shaolong felt apologetic and felt more love for her. Hugging her and sitting by the pool, they dipped their feet into the hot water. Cheekily he asked: "Let me serve Zhi Zhi to take a shower as an apology, it is ok?"

Zhao Zhi was both happy and timid. "It should be Zhi Zhi serving

hubby instead” she corrected.

Xiang Shaolong took off the rest of her clothes. Admiring her ivory white skin and her full naked body in the misty bath quarters, he said in a soft voice:”If you regret, you can reject me now!”

Zhao Zhi’s heart was thumping non-stop but she maintained her stand and shook her head vigorously.

The steam generated caused the light from two wall lamps of the bath quarters to become blurred, creating a special romantic ambience.

Xiang Shaolong swiftly stripped to his birthday suit and exhibits his manly aura and perfect toned body. He leaped into the pool first and carried Zhao Zhi from her seat at the poolside into the warmth of the water. He started to scrub her carefully.

Zhao Zhi’s flawless body started to tremble. She stood in the centre of the pool and allowing her lover to do whatever he wants. Her wet black hair was glowing and they were sticking to her back and her chest. Such a seductive posture made Xiang Shaolong stopped scrubbing and grabbed her for an intensive kiss.

After being through the various challenges, their love is finally seeing a bright future.

Under Zhao Zhi’s passionate and active responses, Xiang Shaolong remembered the times when he was frolicking with the different girls and maids in the Zhao palace pool. Now that Zhao

Ni (the other princess who committed suicide after being raped by Zhao Mu) is no longer around and Zhao Ya's relationship has taken a different turn, he swelled up with various emotions.

In this condition, he has a strong urge and his target is of course the beauty naked in his embrace. Even if someone held a knife to his neck, it will not discourage him from taking her.

For a while, the bath quarters is filled with Xiang Shaolong's wild breathing and Zhao Zhi's delirious and delighted moaning

When Xiang Shaolong slipped into her room agilely, Ji Yanran has just taken down her accessories and is looking at her bronze mirror blankly. Catching the man she has been pining for, she leapt into his arms.

Xiang Shaolong blew out the lamp and cuddled her onto the bed. After a passionate and intense kiss, he related Zhao Ya's encounter.

Ji Yanran mused; "She is still unable to forget you! Yanran has always been bewildered at why would any woman want to betray you?"

Avoiding the question, he chortles: "Please do not get entangled with Li Yuan anymore. This will affect me emotionally and distract me from the circumstances at hand"

Ji Yanran cooed: "Judging at how confident you are, Yanran loves you even more! You have caught Guo Kai's four-man surveillance

team, what do you plan to do next?”

Xiang Shaolong replied innocently:”Early tomorrow, I am going to employ some methods to force King Xiaocheng to explain his stand. This muddle-headed king has always been indecisive. If I do not give him a wakeup call, he may well heed Li Yuan’s advice.”

Ji Yanran loved his “wake up call” description. At the same time, she sighed:”I had thought Li Yuan is a man of talent. This cad is a loser who doesn’t care about the big picture. If the governance of Chu were to be in his scheming hands, what hope does the state of Chu have?”

Xiang Shaolong thought of something and enquired:” You have seen Tian Dan. What kind of a person is he?”

Thinking silently for a while, Ji Yanran gave a rundown.”He is a very powerful and charming man but is also a lecher. The way he looks at you makes you feel that he want to swallow you up immediately into his stomach. Compared to Li Yuan, he has the air of a powerful general.”

Xiang Shaolong joked:”In this case, you are also attracted to him.”

Ji Yanran said:”You can put it this way, but it is not male-female attraction but human to human observation.” Xiang Shaolong guffawed:”You don’t have to clarify. I am not a petty person.”

Ji Yanran joyfully kissed him and state:”Of course you are not petty, but I am your woman and it is necessary to be transparent for matters like these.”

Xiang Shaolong thought about Li Yuan. Frowning, he asked:”What about the Li little thief?”

Ji Yanran followed his (frowning) tone and sighed:”I wittily hinted the little thief that we do not have any relationship. His spirits rose and started speaking with better composure. Along the way he kept bragging on how he will manage the politics of Chu in the future. He sounds correct but he neglected the threat of Qin. He is only concerned about expanding his territory but has no idea on ruling the country well internally. I can only sigh at him.”

Xiang Shaolong continued:”Did he send you back?”

Ji Yanran countered:”I will not cheapen myself to that level. Riding with him to the palace is torturous enough. This person may look good on the outside is actually full of crap.”

Xiang Shaolong put down the huge rock on his mind. Both hands slithered into her inner vest and started to fondle.

Ji Yanran could not speak another word. Nights of passion are always too short. She was still having the sweetest dreams while Xiang Shaolong slipped away before dawn breaks.

Stealing back to his house, Zhao Zhi laid flat in his tent. (?).

Tucked under a blanket, a blissful smile hanging by the corners of her mouth.

Xiang Shaolong silently laughed at himself, thinking that the entire episode had been ludicrous.

It might be due to the extreme danger surrounding him or the ruthlessness of his enemies. Either way, Xiang Shaolong is all fired up to put up a good fight and to win both battles of love and war. After enjoying two beloveds in a row, he is dog tired and gave up thinking. Embracing Zhao Zhi, he threw his head back and went into slumber.

He finally woke up in the afternoon. He caught Zhao Zhi with her eyes closed but her eye lashes fluttering. Knowing that she was awake but pretending to be asleep, he purposely exclaimed: "Hey! Since you are still asleep, let's go for second round!"

Flipping around he got on top and pinned her down.

Zhao Zhi has just had her first love-making session and had no energy for the second battle. Opening her eyes widely, she pleaded for mercy.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Ha ha ha. See if you still dare to deceive me?" Jumping up from the bed, he was in great spirits as he washed up and got dressed whereas Zhao Zhi continued to laze in bed.

Stepping out of the inner hall, Teng Yi, Wu Zhuo, and Jing Jun have followed his instructions to summon all the 300 elite force soldiers back to his residence.

Not knowing if it was initiated by Teng Yi, Jing Jun kneeled down immediately and declared in a thankful manner:”Jing Jun knows third brother is helping fifth brother to take care of Sister Zhi. Regarding her issue, I only have happiness and not even a hint of jealousy!”

Xiang Shaolong realised why Teng Yi rushed back to Hidden Army Valley. He wanted Jing Jun to spell out matters once and for all and not making himself feel bad. Zhao Zhi is Teng Yi’s sister-in-law and obviously he did not want love to spoil the relationship between the two sisters.

Xiang Shaolong supported Jing Jun up. Wu Zhuo was chuckling at the side:”You need not worry about this kid. He made an excuse to go hunting but went to a nearby village to pick up a sweet-like-honey village girl. You have no idea how much fun he had these few days.”

Jing Jun nearly died from embarrassment.

Teng Yi enquired:”What has happened? When we got the news this morning, we set off immediately.”

Xiang Shaolong did not answer him first. Glancing at Wu Guo who looked like he wanted to say something, he predicted:”How long has Guo Kai been waiting?”

Wu Guo was impressed: "Third master is indeed good at forecasting. Master Guo has been waiting for one hour in the outer hall."

Xiang Shaolong explained his plan to Teng Yi and company. He returned to his room and spoke briefly with Zhao Zhi before going out to receive Guo Kai.

When this malicious man saw Xiang Shaolong, he put on a smile and said: "Mister Dong must be mistaken. These four men are merely here to ensure your safety!"

Xiang Shaolong is very amused: "Using these four clowns to protect me, Master Guo sure knows how to joke. Having said that, I would not hold it against them. As a matter of fact, I am about to leave Handan City and definitely have no time to hold it against them."

Guo Kai was blown away. He asked in disbelief: "Why is Mister leaving?"

Xiang Shaolong coldly answered: "Since this place does not desire me, other places will. Except for Zhao and Chu, who will not welcome a horse breeder like myself?"

Guo Kai's face changed colour and turned cold. "Since Mister Dong belonged to Zhao, leaving like that is as good as rebelling. Please reconsider."

Xiang Shaolong eyes blinked coldly. Staring at Guo Kai face to face, he used his strongest tone: "Under my command are three hundred death warriors. They have all spent years with foreign horse bandits and are used to fighting for their lives. Every one of them is capable enough to fight a hundred enemies all by himself. We are going to force our way through the city gates. Your Majesty may feel free to dispense his army. We shall see if my subordinates are cowards who flee in danger. We can also show that world how Your Majesty repays kindness with cruelty."

Ignoring Guo Kai's persuasion, he walked towards the courtyard. Teng Yi and the three hundred elite troops are armoured and armed with swords and bows, ready to fight when commanded.

As Xiang Shaolong climbed onto his war-house (Jifeng?), Guo Kai rushed over and held onto the head of the horse. Almost begging, he pleaded: "Mister Dong, please stop whatever that you are doing. Everything can be discussed. Why don't we ride into the palace to see the King and clear up the misunderstanding?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled coldly: "If Master Guo wishes to keep his hands where they are, please let go now."

Guo Kai knows his swordsmanship is excellent and quickly withdrew his hands in fear.

Xiang Shaolong roared: "The way Zhao king treats Dong Kuang is enough to send shivers down the spine. Pei!" He spit and continued in a loud voice: "We are leaving the city now. We will kill whoever

that blocks our path!”

The three hundred elite soldiers rallied in unison. The commotion can be heard far and wide, causing fear to those who heard it.

The residence door flew open and Teng Yi rode out first, leading the pack.

Guo Kai knew that things are going out of control and hastily left for the palace to report to King Xiaocheng.

The huge body of troops slowly moved towards the nearest East Gate.

Under the planning of Xiang Shaolong, the news spread like wild fire and in a while, the entire city of Handan knew about their departure. Everybody came to surround and watch the proceedings while a large number of people begged them to stay.

After the exit of the Wu Family, everyone viewed this horse fanatic as their new saviour. The gift of a thousand war-horses is like a life-saving pill for the people of Zhao. Their abrupt leaving is causing public panic.

The East Gate commander has gotten word of the situation and hurriedly closed the city gate. He assembled archers on the battlements and foot soldiers in front of the gate.

Funnily, the city gates are built to repel external invaders and not internal attacks so there wasn't much of an advantage.

Le Cheng was the first to reach the gate. After fortifying the gate defences, he rode out and waited on the main road leading to the gate, ready to negotiate with this horse fanatic

Teng Yi saw the huge army blocking the path. Under his command, everyone held up a large shield on the right hand and a bow on the left hand. Using only their legs to control the horse, this display highlighted a huge attacking power and made everyone shrink back.

Le Cheng shouted: "Mister Dong, please come and speak with Le Cheng."

Teng Yi issued a new command and the three hundred troops broke up into two groups. Divided on two sides, each group gathered debris and wood to serve as fortification. Smart and imposing, they were on high alert and ready to fight on command.

This leaves only Xiang Shaolong highly perched on his horse in the open. Facing Le Cheng, he hollered bravely: "Although I respected General Le greatly, times have changed. If General insists on preventing me, there will be a skirmish and I will not hold my hand."

Le Cheng was troubled: "What has happened that Mister had taken such an extreme measure? Everything can be discussed. Why not Mister and General pay a visit to His Majesty? If His Majesty

approves, Mister can leave in peace. Isn't this better than staining the gates with blood?"

By now, there are more and more people crowding to see the excitement. The nearby streets and alleys are all filled up. Of course, nobody dared to enter the main road that is packed with countless soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong has a sharp vision. He noticed a large body of royal bodyguards appearing near an area behind Le Cheng. He deduced that Zhao King is on his way here via one of the city wall outlets. Laughing in his heart, he called out: "Is General Le jesting with me? If I enter the palace just like that, it would be a miracle if I am not tied up and sent to Chu as a gift. I only hate myself for being a blind boor. Undertaking such an arduous journey back to serve my country, I thought Zhao will follow tradition (using horses instead of chariots) as dictated by the previous kings and use horse battles to conquer the world. Who would have expected that Zhao will fall not on the battlefield but on the negotiating table with the state of Chu? I am disheartened and I will fight to my death in Handan to show that I, Dong Kuang, am a man of resolution."

Le Cheng was dumbfounded. All his captains and soldiers displayed looks of pity and morale was low. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong's troops were not afraid to die. Their spirits were high and are just waiting to attack.

Zhao soldiers made some movement. King Xiaocheng rode out with Guo Kai and Cheng Xu on his two sides. He has a determined look and upon reaching Le Cheng, he called out: "Subject Dong,

please ignore those rumours. I have no intention of sending you back to Chu. It is a misunderstanding.”

Xiang Shaolong looked up into the sky and gave a long laugh.”Your Majesty, please forgive me for being frank. Now that Qin has their soldiers on our borders and the Xiong Nu are up north waiting for opportunities to invade us, our country is in mortal danger. But all I, Dong Horse Fanatic, can do is waste my time away because we are afraid to offend some contentious a55holes. History has told us that if we fight among ourselves, the only result is broken families and a conquered country. You win the war by fighting, not by begging.”

Someone in the crowd started to cheer and more people are affected. Soon, there was thunderous applause all around, praising Shaolong’s words.

Xiang Shaolong put on a very angry expression and yelled:”Your Majesty, please move away from the battlefield. I am going to lead my troops to break out of this encirclement and the city. If I am unlucky enough to sacrifice on the battle grounds, let it be my repayment towards you. If my death can inspire Zhao to flourish and not be manipulated by people with bad intentions, I will die in peace.”

These words are both hard and soft, giving the Zhao King the break he needed.

King Xiaocheng is in a dilemma. He loved and hated this Dong horse fanatic, but he has a guilty conscious. He has had plans to sacrifice this Dong Kuang in exchange for Li Yuan persuading the

Chu King to join hands against Qin.

King Xiaocheng surveyed his army and civilians from near and far. Everyone felt sympathy for Dong Kuang. Sighing to himself, he promised: "Subject Dong's words are provoking indeed. I concur with your thinking and from today onwards, Brother Dong, please open up your heart and help Zhao rear horses and related. Please stay Mister. I will not ill-treat Mister. "

From all four corners, the army and the civilians cheered like thunder and it is the first time they cheered for King Xiaocheng.

Xiang Shaolong delightedly confirmed: "The king keeps his promise!"

King Xiaocheng helplessly confirmed: "Definitely keeping my promise!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that the show is about to finish. He flipped down his horse and kneeled down, giving his thanks.

On Teng Yi's command, three hundred elite troops dismounted and prostrate themselves in a swift and orderly manner. In one voice, they shouted: "Long live the king." This gives a lot of face to King Xiaocheng.

An earth-shattering event ended on a satisfactory note.

That moment, King Xiaocheng and Xiang Shaolong rode together

back to the palace for a feast while Teng Yi led the troops back to Hidden Army Valley.

That same afternoon, Xiang Shaolong led a second and last batch of five hundred war horses into the farm while making it a grand affair. This is to teach Zhao King not to belittle the usefulness of this horse fanatic.

Relying on bravery and opportunity, Xiang Shaolong resolved the frontal danger brought by Li Yuan.

Book 8 Chapter 7 – Giving In To Madam

After the event, Xiang Shaolong's status rose a few times. That night, Zhao King hosted a special banquet to appease him. Those present were all ministers and generals. Both Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi were present and their relationships with him are now very different. They do not have to make any excuses to get close to him like before.

Zhao Zhi has tasted the forbidden fruit for the first time. Since then, she has become more attractive and charming.

Zhao Mu saw an opening and berated him in a low voice: "Such an important matter, why didn't you discuss with me in the first place?"

Xiang Shaolong has long prepared his model answer. Sincerely, he replied: "Firstly, things are moving too quickly. Secondly, I deliberately kept this from Marquis. If there was an inquiry, this would have nothing to do with you and would not raise any suspicions."

Zhao Mu is still slightly uncomfortable but he couldn't help but praised: "You did a beautiful job. With a talent like you by my side, what can I not achieve?"

To increase Zhao Mu's trust in himself and to stir him to rebel at the same time, Xiang Shaolong lied: "I have gotten some information from Zhao Ya. This matter has got Qi involved. I haven't got the details but who is Zhao Ya closest to among the

people of Qi? ”

At the mere mention, Zhao Mu faced darkened:”It must be Qi Yu; he came along with Tian Dan on this trip. Heh! Despite my loyalty towards Tian Dan, he still betrayed me!”

Xiang Shaolong then came to know that Qi Yu is here as well. Leveraging on this, he asked:”Why is Marquis so unwise to reveal your secret to Tian Dan?”

Zhao Mu explained:”It is only because of the Lu Gong’s secret manual and that Xiang Shaolong. But they do not know my real identity; they only knew I keep in secret contact with Dad. But if King Xiaocheng knows about this matter, then I would be in a precarious situation.”

Xiang Shaolong was about to delve deeper into the secret manual incident when Zhao Ba led Zhao Zhi over. He asked: “When is Mister Dong free to come and give us some pointers at the training school?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he could not refuse. Powerless, he fixed a date and time. Admiring Zhao Zhi, he added: “Let Zhao Zhi come and fetch me on that day.” Knowing that Xiang Shaolong is crazy over her and created this excuse and opportunity, this horny beauty is mad with joy.

Both Zhao Mu and Zhao Ba gave Zhao Zhi a strange glance.

This time, the voluptuous Zhao Ya came by. Taking him aside, she commended: "I am beginning to feel that you are a brilliant man. Without my help, you are able to turn the tables around. Just wondering if your promise is still valid?"

Xiang Shaolong beat his chest and promised: "A man's word is his bond. Why would I want to cheat a beauty like you? Just rest assured. As long as he is really coming to Handan, I will have his news within a few days."

Zhao Ya looks at him with regrets: "Why is Mister Dong suddenly showing love and concern for Zhao Ya?"

Xiang Shaolong's mind was blank. Stalling for time, he said: "Seriously speaking, I have heard rumours about Xiang Shaolong's incident and did not have a good opinion about Princess. I have a better opinion only last night when I found out that Princess is not a heartless and vicious woman."

Zhao Ya depressingly agreed: "Mister's reprimand is right. Zhao Ya is truly regretful. If not for some unfinished business, I would have committed suicide, avoiding this living-worse-than-death punishment."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "What has Princess left unfinished?"

Zhao Ya threw him a stern gaze: "You seem to have no objection about my death."

Xiang Shaolong gave a bitter laugh: "A beauty's heart is the hardest to fathom. Since Princess is living a worse than death life, if I advised you not to die, wouldn't that make you suffer more? If Princess is not satisfied, that what kind of logic is that?"

Zhao Ya smiled charmingly: "Chatting with you is truly enjoyable. My door is always open to you. No matter when Mister feels like dropping by, Zhao Ya will wait for you wholeheartedly. "

Xiang Shaolong could not bear it anymore: "In that case, you had better break Li Yuan's legs. I am not willing to wait outside your bedroom for hours."

Zhao Ya was dumbstruck. Knowing herself, it would be really difficult to decline Li Yuan. When she committed herself exclusively to Dong Kuang last night, it was because she was frantic over Xiang Shaolong's welfare. She would not be able to keep her word. Luckily, King Xiaocheng arrived followed by other guests so she was able to avoid answering this tough subject.

That night, King Xiaocheng frequently toasted Xiang Shaolong and decreed all officials to support Xiang Shaolong in expanding the farm. The party lasted till midnight before her left happily.

Zhao Zhi's desires are hard to withhold. Following Xiang Shaolong back to his Residence, they proceeded to use their time most effectively. Xiao Shaolong is so exhausted that he had to cancel his other romp with Ji Yanran. Early next morning, Ji Yanran could not wait any longer and came to visit him.

They were delighted to see each other again.

Ji Yanran led him to the back garden, strolling shoulder to shoulder, she informed: "Not only has your stunt caused Li Yuan to bang into a wall, even Tian Dan is starting to notice you. He believes that you are an extraordinary talent and may even try to recruit you."

Xiang Shaolong assumed with displeasure: "You make me feel that by mixing with Li Yuan and Tian Dan all the time, you are able to forecast their actions very well."

Ji Yanran giggled: "Do not be angry, husband. Yanran has been disobedient but my goal is only to collect intelligence for you. Now, Tian Dan and Li Yuan are exerting pressure on King Xiaocheng to withdraw his soldiers against the State of Yan. They are naturally afraid that after defeating Yan, their territory and standing will increase by a lot. This ending will be detrimental to Qi and Chu's conquests. Tian Dan is more anxious, as the fall of Yan will mean that Zhao will surround the entire west border of Qi."

Xiang Shaolong had a dreaded feeling. Forgetting to chide Yanran, he frowned: "That will be disastrous. If the Zhao soldiers do not retreat, the treaty will not be completed and Li Yuan will not leave Handan City. This will risk exposing my identity and my fake promise of more livestock."

Ji Yanran cooed: "Don't worry. Zhao Mu has been checking up on Tian Dan's secret agenda for the past two days. He is even more alarmed than you."

Xiang Shaolong stared at her in wonder: “You even found out about this!”

Ji Yanran laughingly fell into his embrace. Giving a tortured sighed, she said: “Yanran is elated that husband is jealous. Oh! No! Fearful is more correct. Yanran’s actions are to help husband from being the target. Yanran has successfully shifted Li Yuan’s hatred to Tian Dan. They appear to be good friends but are not really on good terms. As they fight to discuss governance with Yanran, it has allowed me to spy on their actions easily. If hubby feels than Yanran is wrong, you are free to punish me as you like.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that Ji Yanran has an independent character. Although she is smitten with himself, she will not submit blindly. Smiling bitterly, he advised: “Your better be careful. No matter how confident you are, you are still surrounded by tigers and wolves. Who would not wish to gain the fortune of bedding you?”

Ji Yanran was mesmerized: “Hubby is really good at sweet-talking. {Fortune of bedding you} such a nice phrase. All right! I have to make a move. Will you be as vicious tonight as what you were last night, making Yanran sleep alone? ”

It has never crossed Xiang Shaolong’s mind that she would even pursue the absence of one night. Feeling sweet in the heart and pain in the head, he made a solemn promised enquired: “I will not pretend to go to Hidden Army Valley to work on the farm. What are your plans?”

Ji Yanran whined: “The Zhao Queen has invited me on several occasions. I have run out of excuses and have to make this trip.” They finally parted dejectedly and Zhao Zhi went back to the training school on her own.

That night, he rushed back to Handan with Teng Yi. All the soldiers at the gate recognized him and allow him to enter without verification.

Jing Jun’s girlfriend is beyond doubt an exquisite beauty. Enjoying her companionship, Jing Jun has forgotten all past relationships. Xiang Shaolong finally rest easy and left him at the farm.

After Wu Zhuo’s management, the Hidden Army Valley farm is starting to take shape. More importantly, he had designated several strategic locations and prepared a few secret escape routes. In short, they are ready to turn the tables and flee anytime into the wild mountains and dense vegetation. Once Zhao Mu is lured to this place, they can bring him back to Qin alive.

On the way back to the residence, Teng Yi reported: “I have send men to collect animals from all over the place. When our farm reaches a bigger scale, the time will be right to act.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in agreement.

The moment they stepped into the villa, Wu Guo welcomed them with a strange expression: “Third Madam is here!”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi stared at each other. Exclaiming together: “Third Madam?!”

Wu Guo smiled indignantly: “Third Master’s wife is Third Madam. Third Madam is pretty but not as pretty as her temper”

Teng Yi is disgruntled: “What crap are you talking about?”

Xiang Shaolong recalled Shan Rou’s deadline. Lamenting that he is so occupied the past two days, how can he remember her comic warning. Hauling Teng Yi into the residence, he told him about this affair.

Teng Yi could feel the same headache coming. He proposed: “Coincidentally, we had a batch of war horses that came in yesterday. Let’s just pretend she came along with the horse shipment. I’ll see to it.”

Xiang Shaolong countered: “Aren’t you going to persuade your elder sister to give up the idea of becoming my wife?”

Teng Yi gave a pained expression: “You try to handle her first. I can tell that she is interested in you. Using hard and soft methods, your woman-handling skill should be able to manage her just right.” Casting their brotherhood to the wind, he disappeared.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his resolve and entered the inner chamber.

Before he could step in, he caught Shan Rou chiding: “What has the world become? There is not even a female maid here. You expect these rough and unruly men to serve me?”

Xiang Shaolong has just crossed the door ledge and his foot has yet to land when Shan Rou cried: “Hubby is back. You guys are done here. Now get lost!”

These four men are considered the cream of the cream, the best of the elite troops. They slipped out of the room hastily as if they have just offended the king himself.

Shan Rou has changed into a gorgeous gown. Her hair is tied up neatly in a bun and she looks grand and imposing. Her beauty made Xiang Shaolong’s eyes pop out and can longer say another word. However, her arms on her waist pose will send fear into those who saw her.

Shan Rou giggled: “Hee! Do I look well disguised as your wife?”

Xiang Shaolong reached to her back and caught a whiff of her white neck. Praising her bewitching aroma, he frowned: “The deadline has yet to pass and you cannot wait to rush here and masquerade as my wife. Is sister having the desire?”

Shan Rou raised her chiseled face and gave him a glance. Hesitating, she replied: “You can think whatever you like; I am definitely staying with you and almost motivate you at the same time.”

Xiang Shaolong slipped to her side and purposely leaned on her shoulder. Nudging her lightly, he timidly asked: “Big sister, aren’t you concern that the show becomes reality and I took advantage of you?”

Shan Rou purposely did not look at him at all. In an awe-inspiring manner, she quoted: “You can do whatever you want. People who undertake big tasks do not sweat the small stuff. Letting some fools take advantage is just part of the process.”

Xiang Shaolong could not do anything to her. Infuriated, he shot: “Whoever is the one that is taking advantage of the other, Miss knows the truth in her heart!”

Shan Rou smiled sweetly. Turning around, she cuddles his firm and stout neck, her curvy and captivating breasts leaning on him without reservation. In a teasing voice, she raised: “Good hubby! When are you getting two maids to serve your wife?”

The wife of the reputable Dong Horse Fanatic surely deserves some maids.

Mad and humoured at the same instant, Xiang Shaolong is bowled over by her display of intimacy. Grabbing her thin waist, he unwilling agreed: “You lass is just desperate to marry me but does not know to do to it without putting yourself down. You cannot even wait for just one more night; I can only resign myself to fate. After all, your brother-in-law is my second brother.”

Shan Rou kept her cool and did not dispute with him. She

conceitedly watched him and does not mind his caressing.

Xiang Shaolong pats his hand on her pert butt twice and moan: “Fine! I will transfer two maids from the outer chamber to serve you. But you have to behave yourself and check your temper. Do not flash your knives at the slightest discontent. Hai! With outsiders, I may have to sleep with you without taking off my mask.”

Seeing that Xiang Shaolong has been forced into obeying her requests, she slipped out of his grasp gleefully. She pleasantly warned: “Who is sleeping with you? I will be sleeping next door. Don’t blame me for not warning you beforehand; if there is any silly thief who steals into my bedroom, be prepared to face my flying daggers!”

Eyeing her as she disappeared into the corridor leading to the adjoining room, Xiang Shaolong shook his head and let out a long sigh. Having this forever-stubborn beauty at his side, he could foresee the arrival of many more troubles.

On the other hand, her present cheerful disposition is way better than the depressed and tortured-by-revenge outlook before. Xiang Shaolong believed that he had done a good deed by giving in to her.

Honestly speaking, Xiang Shaolong is more attracted to Shan Rou than Zhao Zhi. Maybe this is the theory of the harder it is to achieve something; the more value is placed on it. While hesitating to follow her for a romp, Wu Guo came to report that Zhao Mu had sent for him.

Xiang Shaolong is mystified. Zhao Mu has earlier told him to meet up less often to minimise suspicions. Why did he send someone to fetch him now?

Arriving at the outer hall, his escort turned out to be Pu Bu.

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Why has Marquis sent for me?”

Pu Bu replied respectfully: “Subordinate was here this morning only to find Mister Dong had left for Hidden Army Valley. Luckily, Master Dong is back. Marquis is hosting Chancellor Tian (Dan) tonight. Chancellor Tian has indicated that he wishes to meet Master Dong, so please leave with me. The horse carriage is waiting outside the gate.”

Xiang Shaolong is anxious that he is about to meet the legendary history titan. Checking himself, he thought that titan is also a human. In hindsight, who is more famous than Qin Shi Huang whom he is nurturing? Releasing his stress, he hurriedly changed and came to the main gate.

The courtyard is lined with fifty plus soldiers guarding a luxurious horse carriage, giving an imposing aura.

Xiang Shaolong smiled at Pu Bu: “Brother Pu! Come! Join me in the carriage and let’s have a good chat!”

Pu Bu cannot decline and boarded the carriage with him.

After some idle chat, Pu Bu shone: “Master Dong is a great man who views life and death with fear. Our band of brothers thinks highly of you.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot fathom that his risky feat will bring about so much goodwill, including Tian Dan’s attention. He gave his humble thanks: “That is nothing. Just staking everything I have got and forcing the tiger to jump the wall.” (Force the other party to act)

Pu Bu affirmed: “Other than Master Dong, subordinate has met another great hero. Please pardon me for not saying who he is.”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong recognized that this man is still loyal to himself.

Pu Bu enquired: “Why has Master Dong chosen Zhao to settle down?”

Xiang Shaolong jumped: “Does Brother Pu know that if word leaks out, you will lose your head?”

Biting his teeth, Pu Bu stated: “I know. But I appreciate that Master Dong is not that kind of person. I must ask or I will not be in peace.”

Xiang Shaolong put his hand around his shoulder and leaned to his ear. He whispered: “Good brother! You have good eyesight because I am Xiang Shaolong!”

Pu Bu was floored. He tried to bend down and pay his respects. Xiang Shaolong held him back and using this opportunity, he disclosed his mission and the big plan for this trip. Pu Bu is mad with ecstasy and cursed fiercely: “That traitor Zhao Mu is inhuman. He is bad-tempered and has a cruel hand. At his whim, families are destroyed. We have been waiting for Master Xiang in agony!”

Xiang Shaolong calmly state: “His retribution is near.”

By this time, the horse carriage has reached the Marquis’s residence. Both men fixed the future methods of communication before alighting. The banquet location is the same hall where Xiang Shaolong first met Mohist Yan Ping. Since he came to Handan City, he has yet to hear about this man. He will inquire about him the next time he saw Zhao Zhi.

Thinking of Zhao Zhi, he chanced upon her coaching a bunch of top-grade song courtesans at her usual place.

Zhao Zhi caught his eye and signaled him to speak to her. Xiang Shaolong understood her wink and instructed Pu Bu to stop leading the way and wait for him at the side. Striding towards Zhao Zhi, he called: “How are you, Miss Zhi!” The courtesans were awestruck by Shaolong’s magnificent posture and their beautiful eyes lit up, not hiding their appreciation.

Zhao Zhi left the courtesan group and met him welcomingly. Strolling shoulder to shoulder, she informed: “Last night, Zhao Mu

sent the Tian Zhen sisters into the palace to accompany the treacherous Chancellor. Tian Dan is full of praises and may demand them from Zhao Mu. Tian Zhen begged you to save them.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded. “Got it! Tell them I will not sit by and do nothing.” Despite saying that, he had no idea how to save them.

Zhao Zhi almost treated Xiang Shaolong like a deity, believing that he will honour his words. Joyously, she added: “I already told them you are not a heartless man and will definitely help them.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned internally and updated Shan Rou’s intrusion.

Zhao Zhi covered her mouth chuckling: “Hubby Xiang is really great. I think sister is going wild over you.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart trembled. “What about you?”

Zhao Zhi’s petite face shone red and pretended to think deeply. She posed: “I, hmmm, want to be with you every minute.”

Xiang Shaolong is originally composed but is affected by the twin’s development. Collecting himself together, he returned to the corridor and made his way towards the inner hall.

Book 8 Chapter 8 – Chancellor Of Qi, Tian Dan

Light shone through the inner hall and faint music can be heard.

Security is especially tight and scores of shadows can be seen everywhere.

Right outside the door of the inner hall, there are fifteen to sixteen sturdy and serious-looking Qi warriors. This is the first time Xiang Shaolong has seen such a parade at a banquet location.

Among them, there is a young and handsome swordsman who is especially majestic and carries an imposing air. His athletic frame appeared from the corridor garden and he marched over in big strides. Bowing, he greeted politely: “This must be the glamorous Mister Dong that Chancellor Tian has been eager to befriend. Your subject is Qi citizen Dan Chu, head of Chancellor Tian’s personal bodyguards. I take this opportunity to wish Mister well.”

Xiang Shaolong was awe-struck and returned the compliments.

Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi had mentioned Dan Chu before. He is Qi’s famed general and possess outstanding swordsmanship. He truly matches up to his fame. He has a rare domineering spirit that emits right from his bones.

After the pleasantries, Dan Chu beamed at Pu Bu: “Brother Pu can hand over Mister to General.”

Pu Bu was intimidated by his spirit and hastily agreed.

Dan Chu projected the posture of a guide and invited Xiang Shaolong to walk in front of him.

The gate keepers retreated to two sides and allow Xiang Shaolong to enter the inner hall.

At that instant, someone announced: “Mister Dong Kuang is here!”

Xiang Shaolong thought of the sword scar on Shan Rou’s breasts and wondered how she managed to stay alive after trying to assassinate Tian Dan twice.

Xiang Shaolong crossed the door ledge and saw Tian Dan for the first time.

He knew it was Tian Dan not because of the two well-built and cool-looking Liu Zhong Xia and Liu Zhong Shi bodyguards cum brothers behind him; nor was it the full white outfit he wore that contrasted with the rest of the flowery costumes. It was because his spirits and complexion are hard to forget once you set your eyes on him.

He had heard about the Liu brothers from Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi.

No wonder Ji Yanran who has seen heroes from all over the world is also impressed with him.

Tian Dan is around forty with a slender frame with a high nose bone like an eagle's beak. Coupled with his high cheekbones, they form a threatening air. Adding his thick eyebrows and penetrating sharp eyes, he exudes leadership and dominance. It is no accident he managed to rise from a small official post and occupy one of the most powerful positions under the sky.

Seated beside him, the traitorous Zhao Mu looks like a kitten beside a tiger.

There are twenty people seated around the table. The biggest surprise Xiang Shaolong had was seeing the voluptuous Zhao Queen. Except for palace banquets, this is the first time he saw her at an official's private banquet. It seems that Tian Dan's status is high enough for her to make the concession.

Familiar faces like Guo Kai, Le Cheng and Zhao Ba are not present. Those present were Guo Zhong, Guo Xiu'er, Ji Zhong, Li Yuan, Han Chuang, Lord Longyang and Zhao Ya.

There were two Qi citizens. One of them is 'old friend' Qi Yu. Seated left of Zhao Ya, he spoke incessantly but Zhao Ya paid no attention to him.

The other is a knowledgeable and fine-looking scholar. With a wide and full forehead, he gives an intellectual impression.

A group of musicians were initially playing on the side. When Zhao Mu heard about Dong Kuang's arrival, he clapped and the ten over musicians left through the side door. The inner hall quietened.

Tian Dan's glare shot towards Xiang Shaolong like an arrow. Observing him, he was obviously shaken by his bearing. His eyes shone and he stood up. Putting his hand out, he chuckled: "People say fame is exaggerated. I say fame is understated. Finally, I get to make your acquaintance. What great fortune!"

Other than the three ladies, which are the Zhao Queen, Guo Xiu'er and Zhao Ya, the rest of the guests are forced to stand up and welcome Xiang Shaolong after seeing Tian Dan's example. Li Yuan is the most unwilling, but his attitude has improved probably due to Ji Yanran's effective strategy.

Xiang Shaolong respects Tian Dan for his open and easy-going nature. He did not put on any airs like Prince Xinling. If he were to compare both of them, Tian Dan won him by half a grade.

He increased his speed and paid his respects to Zhao Queen before he faced Tian Dan and shake his hand strongly with both hands.

Tian Dan's hands are wide and thick until the bones cannot be seen. Yet, they feel strong and warm.

The legendary character sized him up and grinned: "Imperial Uncle (Li Yuan) has told me on several occasions that Mister is not

only great with horses but also highly-skilled with the sword!”

Xiang Shaolong looked over to Li Yuan unconsciously and forced a smile, nodding his head slightly.

Tian Dan gently commanded the Liu Brothers: “Add a seat beside me for Brother Dong!” In the same breath, he introduced Qi Yu and Tian Bang, the military advisor. Tian Bang seems to be related to Tian Dan.

After the commotion, everybody settled down again.

Footsteps sounded and Tian Zhen and Tian Feng emerged out of nowhere and started to fill up the wine cups. By using these two girls to serve the guests, one can tell how much importance he placed on Tian Dan.

Tian Feng did not appear to know Xiang Shaolong’s real identity. Although she peeped at him, there was no change in her composure. Tian Zhen has kept her promise to Xiang Shaolong and has even withheld the secret from her own sister. Based on this alone, Xiang Shaolong felt responsible for her.

When Tian Zhen is pouring wine for Xiang Shaolong, her delicate hands actually trembled.

While other guests are chatting with their partners, it did not escape Tian Dan’s eyes. He questioned: “Why is Little Zhen so nervous?”

After he spoke, everyone was focusing on Tian Zhen.

When Tian Zhen saw Xiang Shaolong, it is like seeing a light in the ocean of suffering. Misery swirled through her heart and she lost her calm. Interrogated by Tian Dan, she thought she had exposed Xiang Shaolong. She panicked and the bronze jug crashed onto the table and wine splashed over Xiang Shaolong's vest.

Zhao Mu's countenance changed and was about to hurl abuses.

Xiang Shaolong gave a big laugh and supported the terrified and shaking Tian Zhen. Soothingly, he coaxed: "It's Ok. It's Ok. Beauty, please don't take it to heart." Lowering his head for a whiff, he exclaimed: "Good wine!"

Everyone was humoured and have a good laugh.

Zhao Queen joked: "People drink wine. Mister Dong sniffs wine."

As Tian Zhen is propped up by Xiang Shaolong on her back and hand, she cooled down and believed that this long awaited gentleman will protect her well.

Zhao Mu knows that it is not a time to blame her and ordered lightly: "Dismiss yourself."

Both girls kneel down to pay their respects and withdraw to the

back.

Zhao Mu looks like he has something to say to him. Standing up, he invited: “Mister Dong, please come with me. I trust that my clothes should fit your body.”

Xiang Shaolong excused himself and left with him.

Once they stepped out, Zhao Mu spoke in a low voice: “I have investigated Tian Dan’s intentions. He is quite offended with King Xiaocheng. He hinted that if I can overthrow Zhao, he will do his best to lend a hand.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed: IDIOT! For Tian Dan, a chaotic Zhao will give him more opportunities.

Instead, he proclaimed: “What is the deal with Qi Yu? Why did he leak your relationship (with Tian Dan) to Zhao Ya?” This is a pre-emptive tactic.

Zhao Mu sighed: “Don’t simply discount Zhao Ya as a free for all ****. In actual fact, she is more intelligent and powerful than anyone. Qi Yu only needs to say a wrong sentence and she will blackmail him.”

Reaching the inner chamber, Zhao Mu got fresh new clothes for Xiang Shaolong to change.

Xiang Shaolong intentionally mentioned: “Marquis is truly

resourceful. Acquiring these twin beauties that look exactly like each other is no easy feat. ”

Zhao Mu’s face showed dilemma. Sighing: “Why don’t you say so earlier? Tian Dan tried them last night and was showering with praises. Needless to say, I have presented them to him. How can I break my promise now?”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart sank to the bottom and his face showed total disappointment.

Zhao Mu has regarded him as his confidante and able assistant. Frowning he suggested: “These is an alternative. And success will depend on how important are you to Tian Dan. ”

When they returned to the banquet, the courtesans have just finished performing.

Lord Longyang haughtily hit on Xiang Shaolong: “Mister Dong’s luxurious clothes have made me look at you differently!” Winking at him, he continued: “Marquis has promised to bring Mister Dong to attend to my sick horses. Why has he not made good his word?”

Everyone witnessed Xiang Shaolong’s embarrassment and felt sorry but hilarious at the same time.

Zhao Mu knows that Xiang Shaolong is straight and laughed: “Mister Dong is always running off to the farm. How can I grab hold of him?”

Tian Dan joined in the laughter. Digging Lord Longyang: “If it is only for horses, I have a few vets. Of course they are not as good as Brother Dong but we can let them have a try first and see if they can solve the problem on behalf of the expert.” Lord Longyang recognized that Tian Dan is jesting with him. “Hiyah!” he cried and gave him a look.

Tian Bang the scholar approached Xiang Shaolong: “My country has a horse named Playful. It runs like the wind and nobody has been able to tame it. We have tried both hard and soft tactics but to no avail. Since we have the good fortune to meet, I wish to consult Mister.”

Once spoken, even Tian Dan furrowed his eyebrows, knowing that he is out to make things difficult.

How can anyone predict how to tame a horse without laying his eyes on the horse beforehand? But if Xiang Shaolong said he needs to see the horse first, it becomes a lame excuse that anyone could have given and does not add to his reputation.

Amazingly, Xiang Shaolong answered at leisure: “In The Art of Horse Taming, the initial step is to make it defenceless against you, but this is a low method used by common folks. The best would be to make them view you as equals and treat them with utmost care. The wildest horse will start to listen and cooperate.”

Mentioning this, he could not help but look opposite to Zhao Ya who is seated between Qi Yu and Han Chuang. This beauty that he

shared a love-hate relationship is paying attention to him intently. Catching his eyes and reminding herself that he had once compared her to a horse (at the banquet where XSL first saw Ji Yanran in Handan), she started to feel uncomfortable and bat him an eye.

Tian Dan's interest is piqued: "Humans are humans. Animals are animals. How can you treat an animal like a human?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "They are many methods. A newborn animal will regard their parents as the first being that comes into contact with them. If you have any doubts, you can feel free to experiment with a bunch of newborn ducklings and you will agree that I am not kidding."

His words carry logic and it has been proven by modern psychology.

Everyone begin marvelling at this enlightenment.

Han Chuang helped: "No wonder there are stories of babies that have been abandoned in the wild and brought up by wolves. They became werewolves and treated wolves like their birth parents. Mister Dong is definitely a first class animal expert! "

Seeing that everyone nodded in consensus, Li Yuan is still unconvinced and interrupted: "Master Tian's Playful Jade Horse is no longer a newborn. We cannot employ this method anymore. Does Mister Dong have a suitable strategy?"

Everyone in the dining hall, including Tian Dan is well aware of the animosity between the two of them. Li Yuan is long expected to make Dong Kuang look bad. They look to see how this Horse Fanatic will counter him.

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward and deepened his voice. Secretively, he announced: “I have a horse-taming methods that never fails. All along it is my hidden weapon and I have never told a second person about it. Since today is such a joyous occasion, allow me to showcase my talent and honour Chancellor Tian!”

Everyone unconsciously leaned forward and await his big revelation.

Xiang Shaolong gradually started: “It is pretty simple actually but it will not be easy unless you are a horse lover.”

Holding the suspense of his audience, everyone’s hearts begin to itch.

Knowing that everyone is addicted to his words, he divulges: “It is to sleep with the horse and he will loosen his guard against you and regard you as his own kind.”

Initially, everyone is astounded. Comprehending the logic, they cried: “Excellent!”

Xiang Shaolong theory is backed by science. He learned from a television documentary about a wild animal tamer who confesses

that he often sleeps with beasts. Using this technique, they will really accept you one of their family and no longer guard against you.

This is another difference between modern men and ancient men.

The twenty-first century is the boom of the information age. One only needs to sit at home and surf the internet and one will be able to gain access and utilise plenty of resources from all over the world and different periods in history.

Ancient men traveled all over the place and relied on precious books written on bamboo stems or on word of mouth. Compared to Xiang Shaolong who came from the 21st Century where data is prevalent, he has transformed into a know-it-all.

Tian Dan slapped the table and professed his highest regard: “Come! Let us toast to Dong Kuang’s enlightenment through years of hard experience!” Qi Yu added: “Now we all realize why Mister has been crowned the champion of all horse fanatics”

Everyone raised their cups and joined in the toasting.

Li Yuan banged into another wall and toned down his hostility. He dared not belittle his opponent and start thinking of another scheme.

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng emerged again and started filling up the

wine cups.

After the twins retreated, Zhao Mu winked at Xiang Shaolong and faced Tian Dan smilingly: “Chancellor Tian and Mister Dong not only hit it off well but shared the same interests. Both are keen on the twins and after Mister Dong realised that they belonged to Chancellor Tian... ..”

Xiang Shaolong cackling interrupted: “Beauty going to the Ruler, I only offer congratulations and not a hint of jealousy.”

Zhao Mu is pleased with his words and silently praised his timely interruption. Now it is up to Tian Dan to see if he is willing to let go of the twins.

Tian Dan is no common man. Generously, he joked: “Since brother Dong has such interests, I will transfer both of them to you as a welcome gift. This will give Mister Dong more than just horses for sleeping companions.”

Such acts of generosity are common among high ranking officials and come as surprise to no one.

Xiang Shaolong purposely rejected his proposal but Tian Dan will not hear the end of it. With great relief, he gave his utmost thanks.

Zhao Mu intentionally showed goodwill to Xiang Shaolong. He summoned the two girls and instructed: “From this moment, both of you will be sent to Master Dong instead of Chancellor Tian as

gifts. Perform your duty with care, diligence and perfect obedience.”

Both girls were initially shocked.

Tian Zhen is smart. Lowering her head to hide her gratitude and glee, she kneeled and gave her thanks.

Tian Feng performed appropriately. Her face turning pink, she stole a look at her new master and kneeled down.

Zhao Mu ordered simply: “Go and pack your belongings now and wait for Master Dong to bring you home.”

Zhao Queen sniggered: “With these pair of jade-liked maidens, Mister Dong must not forget to sleep with the horses.”

Xiang Shaolong had hugged her one. Sensing the emotions in her words, his heart stirred.

Keeping quiet all this while, Guo Xiu'er gazed at Xiang Shaolong with her appealing eyes and asked: “Has Mister Dong really accompanied horses to sleep?”

Xiang Shaolong detected the innocence in her tone and replied warmly: “Of course. I have been sleeping with horses since I was seven. We did not sleep in the stable but in my bedroom.”

Everyone was greatly amused and burst out in guffaws.

Li Yuan smirked at Lord Longyang and challenged: “I want to speak up for Lord Longyang. After the sword duel, Talented Lady Ji needed help with her horse and Brother Dong went to her assistance immediately. Why has Lord Longyang received inferior treatment?”

This incident is new to Tian Dan and he raised his concentration.

Lord Longyang could not hide his bitterness and shot Xiang Shaolong a look, making all his hairs stand up.

Xiang Shaolong released a heavy sigh and apologised: “Imperial Uncle is correct. I should not have left that day. Talented Lady Ji got me to discuss about songs and poems and I disappointed her greatly. I dare not face her in the future.”

Everyone knows of Ji Yanran’s characteristics. Notwithstanding those who still bear grudges against him, most of those present have reduced their jealousy towards him.

This Dong Horse Fanatic is strikingly charming. Regardless of the occasion, he is able to grab the centre of attraction. Luckily he is a boor or he may even entice Ji Yanran.

Accepting his automatic retreat, Li Yuan greatly reduced his enmity and toasted him sincerely for the first time.

The atmosphere is back in harmony.

Only Zhao Ya still subtly suspects that things are not so simple between him and Ji Yanran.

Those present at the banquet consists of powerful representatives from Qi, Chu, Han, Zhao, Wei and Eastern Zhou (Yan?). The conversation topics naturally drifted to the common enemy Qin.

Ji Zhong analysed the Qin situation and explained: “We have allied on several occasions but still failed to defeat them. The main rationale is that Qin has used the terrain well and constructed crucial Passes. They have Han Gu Pass, Hu Lao Pass, Yao Sai Pass in the east and Wu Pass in the southeast. As long as we can break through one of them and continue to advance, what further resistance does the Qin have?”

During the Spring-Autumn Warring period, chariot battles are fought on plain land. After war developed into infantry (foot soldiers) and cavalry (on horseback), the Passes become even more important. They play a life-death role in the fate of Qin.

Ji Zhong appears to be highlighting the Qin’s prowess but is actually identifying the strongest and potentially weakest point.

In this manner, he is taking the chance to unite everyone and destroy Qin.

Tian Dan smilingly retort: “A country’s size, ruler, economy and army cannot be discussed separately. In my opinion, Qin is putting up a strong front but is weak internally. After Bai Qi’s death, there is no strong general in Qin. Lu Buwei is managing the court affairs but is not on good terms with the military. I dare guarantee that as long as this person is the Prime Minister, the Qin people are disunited. If we raise a campaign against Qin, the threat of foreign aggression will unite the Qin people and turn the tables against us. Does anyone see my point of view?”

Ji Zhong is dumbstruck and his face darkened.

Guo Zhong asked: “So I assume Chancellor Tian is against this collective agreement?”

The hope of this agreement is his last hope for staying in Zhao. If it fails, he will have to relocate somewhere else.

Although Xiang Shaolong highly regarded his insight, he sighed inwardly that no matter how brilliant one is, he can never foretell what may develop in the future. King Zhuangxiang has only three more years to live. When Xiao Pan the Qin Shi Huang takes his place on the throne, there will be no one under the sky who can hold a candle to him

Tian Dan gently replied: “Of course not. The agreement has to go ahead. But the strategies and methods has to be discussed in great detail. Otherwise, I would not have made the long journey here.”

When he speaks, his words carry a natural intimidation and

nobody dared to rebut him. At the same time, countering him may result in being put down further.

Lord Longyang shrieked in a high pitch voice: “Chancellor Tian is so familiar with the Qin’s activity; can you update us on what has occurred to Xiang Shaolong? Many of us here are interested to know if any calamity has befallen him.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken. Since his return to Handan, his name has been mentioned here and there but was never brought out as a topic for discussion.

Zhao Mu’s eyes shone fiercely when he heard his name.

Zhao Ya turned a shade paler but exhibits a keen curiosity.

Zhao Queen’s eyes lit up and increased her concentration.

Qi Yu gave a cold snort as he hated Xiang Shaolong to the bone.

Masking his thoughts well, Tian Dan happily said: “Xiang Shaolong is not a simple man. He manages to come out tops every time. Even my old friend Bother Wuji is turning in his grave after being tricked by him. The rest of his story is well-known to the rest of you. ”

Wuji is Prince Xinling’s real name.

Han Chuang peeped at the dazed Zhao Ya besides him and began to feel jealous. Unsatisfied he cried: “Is Chancellor Tian exaggerating? I think this creep is probably just lucky he got away!”

(Note: Zhao Ya helped XSL in stealing the Lu Gong manual from Prince Xinling. Probably revival of sweet memories of their adventures)

Tian Dan affirmed: “Knowing yourself and your enemy, you can fight and win every single battle. I hate him to the core but must never belittle him. Xiang Shaolong had barely reached Qin but his accomplishments are accumulating quickly. In front of Qin King and all major officials, he proved to be a good match against Qin’s number one strongman Wang Jian. Using his weapon’s edge, Xiang Shaolong untiringly deflected his enemy’s arrows. His arrows are shot from an iron bow and can even penetrate a shield. I guess he is giving way in order to preserve the dignity of the military. Qin King immediately promoted him to be the Grand Tutor and Lu Buwei gained a lot of prestige from him. If he is not eliminated, Lu Buwei will be like a tiger with wings. Given time, he will control the entire Qin Court.”

Ji Zhong smile chillingly: “From what you have said, Qin should not have a shortage of people who wanted him dead.”

Tian Dan laughed coldly: “If Xiang Shaolong is an easy target, he would have died numerous times. Qin assassins have tried to harm him but suffered a great blow and even lost a few men. Now that the Wu Family is becoming more and more influential in Qin is also due to Xiang Shaolong. Even the Qin military that are anti-Lu

Buwei are changing their opinion about him and are trying to win him over to their side.”

Guo Zhong revealed an envious expression on his face but he could not say anything.

Listening, Xiang Shaolong could feel his entire body turning cold. Tian Dan would not be so foolish to divulge all his information. But just analyzing what he has alleged, his facts are accurate as if he had been there to witness the event himself. This man is deadly efficient and like what he believed in – Knowing your enemy and knowing yourself and never belittle your enemy, are the ways of the Victorious!

Zhao Mu may have gotten the news of his arrival from Tian Dan. Zhao Queen laughed coquettishly: “I don’t believe he cannot be defeated, he does not have three heads and six arms.” Finishing, she purposely threw a glance at Zhao Ya.

Zhao Ya turned a shade of anger.

From these two reactions, Xiang Shaolong knew that these two girls are having some disagreement.

Qi Yu started: “Of course we have a plan to fix him. Chancellor Tian... ..”

Tian Dan made a sound of displeasure and Qi Yu was frightened into silence.

Everyone was staring at Tian Dan and knew that he had a good plan to deal with Xiang Shaolong.

Tian Dan declared: “Everyone has a weakness. Xiang Shaolong’s weakness is he placed too much importance on relationships and is too soft. This will be the cause of his downfall.”

Guo Xiu’er’s eyes turned confused. Thinking to herself, this is a strength; when has it become a weakness?

Thinking that Xiang Shaolong is on his way to Handan City, Zhao Ya began to feel anxious and looked at Dong Horse Fanatic pleadingly.

Xiang Shaolong is both edgy and amused. Hearing how everyone is pondering hard on how to deal with him, he felt distasteful and funny and the same time. Fortunately, no one noticed him.

The banquet is concluding and Tian Dan left first with Zhao Queen and Ji Zhong. Before he went, he bid his fond farewell to Xiang Shaolong reluctantly and promised to meet up in near future. Under the heavy protection of his personal guard, he boarded his carriage and rode off.

Zhao Mu has wanted Xiang Shaolong to stay and chat but he was hampered by the large crowd of guests. He also feared that Zhao Ya would see through their relationship. Helpless, he reminded: “The pair of beauties are awaiting Mister Dong in the horse carriage. The journey may take some time so do take this opportunity to

inspect the goods.”

All the guys who heard him laugh out loud.

Li Yuan had wanted to accompany Zhao Ya and be fresh with her. Seeing her coldness and invited by Guo Zhong to share his carriage, he departed unwillingly.

Lord Longyang saw them boarding the same carriage and joked: “Seems like the Guo Family will soon have an Imperial Uncle son-in-law.”

As his carriage went past Xiang Shaolong, he batted an eyelid and him and groaned: “I had wanted to share your carriage but Mister Dong had female companions. Why not I visit Mister tomorrow?”

Han Chuang looked elsewhere, reluctant to witness Xiang Shaolong’s distress.

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “So sorry. I still have to work at the farm tomorrow!”

Lord Longyang added with pleasure. “Even better. I’m sick of the city and would love to wander around. I will look for you at dawn.”

Not waiting for his reply, he rode off.

Xiang Shaolong could feel all his goose bumps standing and stood

there in a daze.

Zhao Mu patted his shoulder and recommended: “Want me to teach you a few tricks to take care of him?”

Xiang Shaolong sourly reassured: “Thanks for Marquis concern. But I’ll be fine.”

Zhao Mu and Han Chuang grinned.

The quiet and flustered Zhao Ya softly invited: “Marquis Han, please proceed home first!” but did not give a further explanation.

Seeing her icy demeanour, the hot and passionate Han Chuang lost half his enthusiasm. Harboured hatred and yet powerless, he left with disappointment.

Leaving only Zhao Mu, Zhao Ya and Xiang Shaolong, the atmosphere became slightly embarrassing.

Xiang Shaolong knew in his heart that Princess Zhao Ya was frustrated by the updates of himself. She wanted to approach him and get the matter off her chest. On the same note, she would want to know how he is progressing with his plan to prevent him from coming to Handan City. Remembering the tigress in his residence, he dare not invite her home and create more complications.

In addition, he has vowed to visit Ji Yanran and could not have Zhao Ya over. The worst issue is Lord Longyang’s visit tomorrow.

Even if he is made of iron, he cannot satisfy so many people.

Though he sympathises with Zhao Ya's condition, he can only offer: "It's late! Let me escort Princess to her carriage."

Zhao Ya looked at him faintly and did not agree or disagree. On her own, she stepped ahead to her own convoy of servants and horse carriage.

Xiang Shaolong rushed to her side but Zhao Ya boarded straight into her booth and did not say a single word.

Xiang Shaolong is afraid of Zhao Mu holding him back. Taking the opening, he waved goodbye to him and slipped into his aromatic carriage booth, diving into the wonderful and lively paradise created by the Tian sisters.

Book 8 Chapter 9 – Unpredictable Woman

He had just boarded his horse carriage when the twin sisters leaped into his embrace without a care in the world and start to cry happily.

In the confusion, Xiang Shaolong could not tell them apart. Cuddling and consoling, he finally got them to calm down.

One of them disobeyed: “You kept us waiting in agony.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “You are Tian Feng!”

The horse carriage had left the Marquis Residence for a while when it suddenly halted.

Xiang Shaolong got the two girls to behave properly. Stretching his head out of the window, he inquired: “What is going on?”

His escort Pu Bu came from the front and reported: “Princess Ya’s convoy has stopped in front of us and invited Mister to go over.”

Xiang Shaolong could feel a tremendous headache coming but he is powerless to do anything. Soothingly, he patted the exquisite faces of the two girls and jumped down the carriage. Before he left, he ordered: “Protect the carriage well and follow me.” Finishing, he stride towards Zhao Ya’s stationary carriage in big steps.

The carriage start to move off but they are heading to Xiang Shaolong's place instead.

The two of them sat side by side.

Zhao Ya has a wooden expression and remained in silence for a long while.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was starting to feel awkward, Zhao Ya faintly cried: "Dong Kuang! Tell me! You are not lecherous by nature (yah right!), but why did you pay so much attention to the Tian Sisters?"

Xiang Shaolong was feeling fearful that Zhao Ya is very suspicious of him. He had once made love to the Tian sisters (during his first visit to Zhao Mu's place) and Zhao Ya knew about it.

Although he has more confidence that Zhao Ya will not betray him again, this matter concerns the lives of a few hundred people. He cannot act on his own wistfulness and abandon his train of thought. Moreover, he has yet to fully comprehend the degree of loyalty she has towards King Xiaocheng.

Fearing that he will deny, she continued: "Knowing that they belonged to Tian Dan, Zhao Mu and you signaled each other and wrestle them back. This is unlike your usual way of doing things! Otherwise, you would have accepted the courtesans from Zhao King."

Totally lost, Xiang Shaolong illogically retort: “I have no idea what you are talking about!”

In an angered and pitiful voice, she cried softly: “Shaolong! Are you still pretending that you do not know me? Do you want me to die in front of you?”

Xiang Shaolong was filled with sorrow but hardened his heart as she is too fickle-minded.

Strengthening his resolution, he mock surprise and exclaimed: “My God! So you have mistaken old Dong to be another person. Come, examine my face and see if I am wearing any disguise.”

Using the oldest trick in the box, he deceived her as she had never seen such a well made mask.

Zhao Ya’s delicate body trembled. She was baffled and disappointed and dare not touch his face. Still shaking, she tried: “You are really not him?”

Xiang Shaolong had applied “Love Seed” scent. Challenging, he proposed: “If you still have doubts, you can smell my scent. Every horse smells different and humans are the same. Come!”

Moving forward, he exposed his neck to her nostrils.

Zhao Ya sniffed twice and discovered a new but refreshing scent that leaves a deep impression on her. Disappointed, she grunted

and like avoiding scorpions, she withdrew to the other side of the carriage and leaned on the window. Curious, she asked: “Then why are you eager to possess them?”

Xiang Shaolong has a burst of inspiration and grumbled: “It is all because of that tigress. Leaving Chu, I had wanted to avoid her for a while. How would I predict that she would single-handedly pursue all the way to Handan City? She threw a huge tantrum and even wanted two maidservants. Seeing that the two sisters would serve her fine, I requested them from Zhao Mu. If I knew they belonged to Tian Dan, I would have asked for any other two girls and it will be good enough. Alas, Marquis misunderstood my intentions and tried his best to interfere, causing this mess and your misunderstanding.”

Inquisitively, he pondered: “What has the sisters got to do with Xiang Shaolong?”

Zhao Ya’s face is void of colour. Her pretty eyes were shining at the peak of excitement and cheer. In an instant, they dimmed to disillusion and depression. Turning her head fiercely, she wallowed: “Please leave!”

Coincidentally, the horse carriage has stopped at the main gate of his residence.

Sighing inwardly, Xiang Shaolong alighted.

Shan Rou had not expected Xiang Shaolong to come home with two similar looking beauties. Entering the inner hall, she saw his

gloomy face and asked in an unpleasant tone: “Where the hell have you been? You should inform me if you have to go out.”

Xiang Shaolong is troubled over Zhao Ya. Impatiently, he shouted: “You saw me changing in my room. You think I do not know that you are sneakily spying on me?!”

Both Tian Zhen and Tian Feng were startled and their pretty faces lost all colour. Terrified, the two sisters stared at them.

Xiang Shaolong realised he had overreacted. Before he had a chance to make up, Shan Rou put her hands on her waist and anger was written on her face. Short of brandishing her knives, she snapped: “Who is sneaky? Do you only change when you have a damn banquet? Can’t you change to shower? Can’t you change to pee?” With a snort, she covered her mouth and could not stop laughing. Batting an eye at him, she ended: “That’s all!”

Seeing the matter is resolved, Xiang Shaolong is relieved. He did not want the Tian ladies to undergo any frightening situations. They are all lonely and vulnerable and cannot withstand any shock.

Joining in the laughter, he praised: “Great acting, Sister Rou. Even I was convinced that you are really my wife.”

Hearing these two lines, Shan Rou faced darkened.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly filled with glee. Acting surprised, he declared: “You do not let me touch you and yet you wanted to be

my real wife; how can such a deal exist?”

Shan Rou glared straight at him. She resembled a wounded beast which is ready to bite, showing her vicious yet adorable self.

Xiang Shaolong instantaneously softened. Hand around her shoulder, he promised: “Say you love me and let us soar through the skies together!”

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng finally come to the conclusion that they are teasing each other and find them very fascinating.

Shan Rou’s complexion turned loving and arms still on her waist, her view landed on these two alluring sisters. Pointing, she asked: “Who are they?”

Xiang Shaolong was afraid that she will vent her anger on the two girls. Slipping behind her, he caressed her sweet smelling shoulders and replied in the tenderest voice: “They are the maids who are here to serve the wife of myself, The Horse Fanatic Dong Kuang!”

Tian Zheng and Tian Feng obediently kneeled down and pay their respects.

Shan Rou was overjoyed. “Get up,” she commanded. And shouted: “Wu Guo!”

Wu Guo nearly appeared as soon as her voice thundered. He was

obviously eavesdropping outside the door.

Shan Rou let out another command: “Bring those luggages outside to my adjoining room now!”

Facing the Tian sisters, she added: “Go and tell them to place your luggage nicely”

The Tian sisters have gotten the “Madam’s” permission to stay on and they left in a great mood. As long as they are with Xiang Shaolong, they are willing to endure all kinds of hardship.

Only this “real imposter” is left in the inner hall.

Witnessing that the Tian sisters have overcome the obstacle, his mood improved. Kissing her fine face, he laid out: “Is wifey satisfied now? You wanted a husband, you got one. You wanted maids and there they are!”

Shan Rou was humoured by him but she kept her icy look. She snubbed: “We are not laying a beauty trap; why have you gotten such first class beauties? Judging by their elegance, I think it is better that I serve them instead.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Are you jealous?”

Shan Rou’s excellent and small lips curled at the corner: “This is not jealousy. This is logical deduction. What good can come out from a lecher?”

Despite her harsh tone, she did not protest Xiang Shaolong's caressing of her shoulders and back. For a masculine beauty like her, it is actually a sign of consent but she is unwilling to say so verbally.

Xiang Shaolong saw through her and was amused and annoyed at the same time. Thinking hard, he pleaded: "Good Rou Rou! Please obey me. These two sisters are very pitiful. Having been insulted and tortured by Zhao Mu, this is their new freedom. I must definitely give them a blissful and happy future. If you disbelieve, you can always verify with Little Zhi Zhi. She will relate their story to you."

Shan Rou was touched and lowered her pretty face, maintaining silence.

Xiang Shaolong turned her over and let her face himself. Pressing his lips, he was about to kiss her.

Shan Rou put up a violent struggle and escaped. Red-faced and dazed, she decreed: "You think I am Zhi Zhi; following you without question? After eliminating Zhao Mu, we will go our separate ways. Don't think you are the only man for me."

Knowing she is just using tough words, Xiang Shaolong still find it unbearable and shot back: "Going on separate ways is all right with me, must I kneel down and beg you to spare me some love? Be careful that I will divorce you in the heat of my anger and kick you out of the Dong family. Ha!"

Finishing the last part, he could not hold it any longer and burst out laughing.

Shan Rou face was about to darken but seeing his comics, she had to laugh too. Swiftly straightening her cute face, she warned icily: “Miss has no intention to go against you and is retiring now. If I detect any thief breaking into my bedroom, I will kill first and ask later. Don’t say that I did not give you this warning”

Closing, she levelled her chest and sauntered gracefully into the corridor leading to the back.

Xiang Shaolong thanked the heavens that she did not enter his room. Otherwise, he would not have any more energy to please Ji Yanran who has recently tasted the forbidden fruit and is dying for his attention.

At this point in time, he discovered that Shan Rou had inadvertently facilitated him to forget about Zhao Ya’s incident.

Shan Rou’s charm is indeed world class, definitely the hottest type.

As Xiang Shaolong was walking towards the Tian sisters’ bedroom, Wu Guo and a few elite soldiers were humouring the two girls, making them laugh like a blossoming flower. When Xiang Shaolong entered, they quickly left.

As Wu Guo passed Xiang Shaolong, he whispered: “Amazingly, this world can produce a pair of similar looking beauties. Absolutely a prized possession.” Adding a huge sigh, he led the “porters” away.

The two girls are kneeling on the floor, awaiting Xiang Shaolong’s instructions.

Seeing their heads pressed down on the floor, and their high collar exposing their snow white necks followed by their enthralling back, Xiang Shaolong experienced a strong surge in emotions.

Xiang Shaolong dedicated himself to aid Xiao Pan to conquer the world and build a strong China; however, the non-supportive cultures and traditions are things that he still cannot change overnight.

The lowly status of female slaves has to go on until the Nineteenth and Twentieth century before they are abolished.

The only thing he can do is to treat the females around him with love and care. He admired [Mozi](#) for he is the bright light of knowledge, illuminating these ancient times. His “Universal Love” is to counteract long established vices of society. It is deplorable that most rulers chose to adopt rituals and ceremonies and further lowered the status of women. Thinking that the issue has been buried in darkness for over two thousand years, he cannot help but feel sadness for all women.

(Note: Very “deep” paragraph. In contrast to those of Confucius, Mozi's moral teachings emphasized self-reflection and authenticity rather than obedience to ritual. I personally think Huang Yi is trying to say that society treats females as second class citizens. Mozi tried to abolish this system but failed. The rulers prefer Confucius's ritual (?) system and females continue to be unimportant until the recent centuries.)

Xiang Shaolong approached them and lifted them from the floor. Lovingly, he put his arms around their slender waists and they sat on the couch together. Softly, he stated: “I have yet to really talk to both of you. I am unlike Zhao Mu. My only rule is that you need not kneel and greet me and in the bedroom, there is even less need to do so.”

Blushingly, one of them spoke: “Master Xiang has put us in a difficult position; we are totally willingly to serve Master Xiang well and make you delighted!”

Xiang Shaolong recognized the deep dimple on her face. Like he had won the lottery, he cried happily: “You are Tian Feng!”

Both girls covered their mouths and giggled charismatically. Behaving in the same fascinating manner, Xiang Shaolong was swept off his feet by the display and could not move his sight away from them.

Appreciating, Tian Zhen cried: “Master!”

Xiang Shaolong corrected: “Address me as Master Dong for the

time being and be careful not to let the cat out of the bag!”

Both girls were taken aback and obediently agreed.

Observing their reaction and submissive nature, Xiang Shaolong discerns that this change is hard for them. Astonished, he gave them each a comforting long kiss.

Amidst their strong responses, he can finally tell the difference.

Tian Zhen is gentle; Tian Feng is wild.

Xiang Shaolong was in complete ecstasy and forgotten where he was.

Tian Zhen commented considerately: “Master Dong should be exhausted, let us serve you in showering and changing. We are well-versed in massaging and Tui-Na (acupoint massage), oh... ..”

Her small mouth has locked with Xiang Shaolong’s once again.

Separating, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I would love to enjoy your Tui-Na but I still have things to attend to. You girls go ahead and wash up and have a good rest. I will shower and share your room tomorrow night and make great love to both of you.”

Hearing his words, both girls are over the moon, rejoicing in complete safety and bliss for the first time in their lives.

Tian Feng teased: “Does Master Dong know I have always envied elder sister who managed to copulate with Master Dong? Since you left, we have been pining for you every day and night. We chatted about you whenever we are alone and can only be happy when we meet you in our dreams.” Xiang Shaolong was praised to the skies like he was some deity. Curious, he asked: “We have only met once; why have you taken such strong fancy to me?”

Tian Zhen joyfully exclaimed: “Master Dong is not the same as anyone. You truly care from the heart. We have never seen a hero like yourself. The staff from Marquis’s residence often gossiped about your exploits. When we heard about your legendary prowess and your wondrous escape from Handan City, we were exhilarated beyond imagination.”

Tian Feng continued: “We thought we would never see Master Dong anymore. It is our great fortune that Heaven has finally heard our prayers and ultimately let us serve Master Dong”

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to caress them. Recollecting Ji Yanran, he suppressed his desire. If he starts any activity with them, he would be too worn out to go anywhere else. While he is still in control of himself, it is best to leave.

Just as he was about to pacify them with a few words and slip out, Shan Rou materialized at the open door of the bedroom. A cold and emotionless face, she directed icily: “Dong Kuang! Get out here! I need to talk to you.”

Up till this point in time, the Tian sisters still do not have a clear idea on the ambiguous relationship between Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou. Traumatized, they kneeled down on the floor and beg for forgiveness from the “real imposter wife.”

Shan Rou hurriedly explained: “This does not concern you, please get up!”

Xiang Shaolong helplessly pacified them with a few words and ordered them to shower and rest. He then followed Shan Rou to her room next door.

This inner chamber holds a total of four spacious rooms. The four of them have taken up three rooms, leaving one vacant. With her back facing him and her arms folded in front of her chest, she looked out of the window. Staring at the little garden illuminated by moonlight, she mentioned coldly: “Xiang Shaolong, I cannot fall asleep!”

“What?!” Xiang Shaolong was bowled over.

Stamping her feet, she unreasonably threatened: “Are you deaf? Help me to fall asleep now!”

Xiang Shaolong moved his well-built body and attaches himself to her enticing backbone. Looping his two strong hands around her slender but alarmingly supple and flexible waist, he remembered their first encounter. She had mistaken him for Zhao Mu and carried out a fumbling and embarrassing assassination. Sweet feelings arise in his heart. Xiang Shaolong smooches her jade

neck, he suggested: “Allow me to undress you and coax my darling you into the deepest slumber?”

Shan Rou did not resist his invasion and harassment. Twisting her waist, she yelled: “Who wants you to coax? You did not close your door and expose me to all your sweet talking. The noise unsettled my nerves and causes my insomnia!”

Stunned, Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “If you have closed your own door, how would you have heard our whisperings?”

Shan Rou’s faced reddened. Maintaining her nonsense, she retorted: “What has my door’s opening or closing has to do with you?!”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “Good Sister is jealous. Come! Let me also kiss your chirpy mouth and make them disorientated with our noise and cannot fall asleep!”

In a sharp turnabout, Shan Rou slithered out of his grasp like a slippery fish. She demanded: “I am jumping mad and you are so thick-skinned to take advantage of me. Scram!”

Xiang Shaolong is gradually getting used to her unpredictable mood swings. Stretching in a yawn, he recalled his date with Talented Lady Ji. Passing her, he reached out his hand and patted her egg-liked face: “I’m scrambling. In fact, I am scrambling to the streets. Is Rou Rou contented?”

Displeased, Shan Rou enquired: “Where are you going?”

Grinning bitterly, Xiang Shaolong answered: “Do you think we are here on vacation? Do not forget your blood debt. To accomplish our goal, how can hubby not put in more effort?”

Stressed by her mission, Shan Rou kept quiet.

Like a dragonfly skimming the water surface, Xiang Shaolong bypassed her full lips and pecked her lightly on her cheek. Wishing her a good night, he slipped out.

Unexpected, Shan Rou kept on his tail tightly. Astonished, he stopped: “What are you following me?”

Shan Rou replied naturally: “I am your assistant and bodyguard. Logically, I have to escort you.”

Xiang Shaolong was at his ends. How to bring her to rendezvous with Ji Yanran?

Turning around in the blink of an eye, he wanted grab her tender waist. Shan Rou’s hand made a sudden wave and a sharp dagger is pointing straight at his throat. The fast turn of events gave Xiang Shaolong a big scare.

Proudly, she presents: “Skilled enough to be your assistant?”

Assuming that the dagger is nonexistent, he tried to seize her breasts.

Dismayed, she retreated and avoided his grasping palms, shouting: “How dare you!”

Xiang Shaolong gave a hiss. “I did what I did, what is the use of asking if I dared or not. You better comply and go back and sleep. If you disobey, I will divorce you immediately. A man will make good his word. Don’t try my patience.’

Shan Rou stared at him ferociously. Evaluating his degree of seriousness, she eventually shrugged her shoulders in a cute manner and scolded: “Since you begged me to sleep, I will! What’s the big deal anyway? And why do you keep mentioning about divorce!”

She turned around and returned to her room.

Xiang Shaolong can sense the thoughtful part of her character, making him feel love and sympathy at the same time. As she stepped over the door ledge, he shouted: “Rou Rou!”

Thinking that Xiang Shaolong had a change of heart and is willing to bring her along, she speedily turned her slim frame and cheered happily: “Yes?”

Xiang Shaolong looked at this wonder woman with deep passion. Opening his arms, he called: “Come! Let me hug you before you go

back to sleep.”

Shan Rou glanced at him with disappointment. Two red clouds formed around her cheeks. Shooting him another furious look, her small, straight mouth let out a cold grunt. She entered her room and slammed the door shut.

Thrilled, Xiang Shaolong gave a big laugh. He then left his home in the direction of Talented Lady Ji.

Book 8 Chapter 10 – Surmounting Problems

When Xiang Shaolong arrived at Liu (Huasheng) Residence, he felt extremely uneasy. It was because there is a huge increase in the number of guards and all the nearby houses have all been evacuated and converted into security posts.

Based on this fact, it is evident that Lord Longyang has the backing of Zhao. If not, there is no way he can relocate the neighbours.

The surrounding high points are all ambushed by reconnaissance troops and are very well-hidden. If Xiang Shaolong is not an expert in this field plus his familiarity of the neighbourhood, he may just rush head in.

Lord Longyang is awfully obstinate. Swearing that Ji Yanran and Xiang Shaolong (not Dong Kuang) are keeping in touch, he has deployed more men and cast his net wide and big, hoping to catch Xiang Shaolong who is rumoured to be on his way back to Zhao.

However, he has to admit that Lord Longyang has laid his bets on the correct stake. The only hiccup is that Lu Buwei and himself has, through Lord Yangquan (Lu Buwei's Qin Court rival), tricked everyone who wishes to capture him. The fact that he has arrived much earlier makes it crucial to the success of his plan.

After a thorough examination of the environment, he has a seventy percent probability of success if he tries to enter her room undetected. Still, the risk is too high to undertake. When he was

about to quit, he heard the whistling sound of an arrow. A strong arrow shot out from Ji Yanran's loft and fly through the backyard, burying itself into a soldier laying in ambush on the high tree outside the wall.

The receiver of this arrow fell from the tree and broke dozens of branches before he landed on the street with a loud "pong!" In terms of accuracy and arm strength, the shooter sends fear into one's heart.

The nearby ambushers were thrown into confusion and did not know how to deal with the enemy archer from the loft. Two more cries were heard on the other side of the room. Two more men were shot and they slipped and fell head-down from different levels of the building onto the pavement.

Under the mesmerizing moonlight, Ji Yanran appeared on the balcony of her loft. Dressed in a full black spying suit and holding a strong bow, she hollered: "If there is anyone else who dare to peep at me Ji Yanran, I will kill without mercy."

The ambushing soldiers were frightened by her posture and her sure-kill arrows. Everyone withdrew, especially those hiding at the higher positions.

Xiang Shaolong was full of excitement. He could not imagine the usual gentle and scholarly Ji Yanran could be full of female prowess when provoked. Compared to Shan Rou, she do not lose even one bit. Without hesitation and while the enemy's monitoring network is in chaos, he used his agile climbing skills and swiftly vaulted over the high wall. Travelling within the

shadows, he arrived at the bottom of Ji Yanran's loft and sent out his secret signal.

Ji Yanran was heard dismissing her maidservant.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the obstacle is gone and he started climbing to the second floor with his back facing the street. Ji Yanran is already waiting at the door with a big welcome.

This beauty leaped in for a full embrace. Both happy and annoyed, she chided: "You should not have come amongst all these danger. I can hold out for one night right?"

Laughing, Xiang Shaolong explained: "Beauty has commanded and regardless of danger and obstacles, it must be done. Moreover, one night's waiting is equivalent to three autumns (一晚已等若三秋). If Talented Lady cannot hold her desires and someone else took advantage of this, who can I find to settle the score?"

Ji Yanran is still dressed in her tight night outfit, revealing her full delicate curves, making Xiang Shaolong busy with his hands like a desperate lecher.

This beauty was violated until her desires can be seen from her eyes. She groaned: "I want to quit. I, Ji Yanran, would only yield to two men. It is either Dong Kuang or Xiang Shaolong. You are degrading me, humph!"

Both males and females are alike. Once their last line of defence

has been broken, even virgins and gentlemen will pursue the need for sex. This is basic human nature and nothing to be surprised about.

Somersaulting in the blankets, both of them are entangled in the peak of passion. The thought of danger right outside the room only serves to increase the excitement of the rendezvous.

Until both of them are exhausted did all the heavy action started to slow down and stop.

Still wearing his mask, Xiang Shaolong laid horizontally on the bed while the naked Ji Yanran has transformed into a warm and lovely little lamb. She rested on his board chest with her silky hair spread over his face and neck.

Both of them do not want to spoil the peace and serenity of the loft and listened quietly to each others' subsiding breath.

The wind begins to blow harder outside the loft and the curtains rattled "pi pah."

The moon is gradually covered by dark clouds.

Charmingly, Ji Yanran complained: "You have harmed me and made me more and more wild. Yanran dare not look down on those loose and wanton women anymore."

Xiang Shaolong could hear the howling wind outside.

Affectionate and tenderly stroking her delicate back, he summarized what has happened in the past few days, including that of Tian sisters, Shan Rou and Zhao Ya.

Hearing Shan Rou's masquerading as his wife; the carefree Ji Yanran could not resist a bout of jealousy. "That person should be Yanran! I also want to keep you company!" She whined.

Reassuring her, Xiang Shaolong observed: "Tian Dan did not come with good intentions. He wants to stir up internal strife and weaken Zhao from within."

Forgetting her whining, Yanran climbed up from his chest and shared his pillow. Kissing him, she painted: "I have the same thinking too. Yan may even be instigated by him to attack Zhao in the first place. Qi shares its border with Zhao and Yan. If Tian Dan does not have any motives towards Zhao and Yan, even a kid will not believe it. Including the powerful Qin, no one is unafraid of Li Mu and Lian Po (Zhao's best generals fighting Xiong Nu and Yan respectively). If Tian Dan can borrow Zhao Mu's hands and get rid of these two men, it would be his dream come true."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, adding: "King Xiaocheng may be muddle-headed but he still has the basic wisdom that Lian Li both generals are the pillars of Zhao and must not be shaken. But if Zhao Queen and Zhao Mu assassinates the Zhao King and takes over the state, this will be a different matter altogether."

Ji Yanran surmised: "Breaking all norms, Zhao Queen attended Zhao Mu's banquet tonight. This may be Zhao Mu's display of strength to Tian Dan, showing him that even the Queen has to

listen to him.”

Continuing in a smile: “Regarding Yanran’s husband (Dong Kuang), it is also a point of contention between them. Fearing another Li Mu or Lian Po appearing, even the rare twin sisters have to be forced to change hands”

Xiang Shaolong is engrossed with her story. Patting her twice on the shoulder, he digged: “Are you jealous, my darling?”

Ji Yanran gave a serious reply: “Jealous to the max! Unless you come and accompany every other night, Oh! I am joking only. It is too dangerous.”

Xiang Shaolong felt a sensation in his heart. He bemoaned: “I may find a solution to this problem. Hai! I have to go again. That Lord Longyang is coming over early in the morning. I’d rather face thousands of soldiers in battle than to face this eyelid-batting and coquettish man no matter how womanly he is.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “In Daliang (Wei’s Capital), there are tonnes of gay men who wish they could swallow him in their stomach. Are you taking things for granted?”

Upset, Xiang Shaolong whimpered: “You are still making fun of me?”

Ji Yanran hurriedly gave him a sweet kiss and some passion as compensation.

After another bout of entanglement, they both got dressed. Ji Yanran set off to distract the enemy to cover his departure.

As the beauty was riding her horse out and looking for targets to vent her jealousy, he had long disappeared into thin air.

Back at home, Teng Yi had yet to retire and was drinking by himself.

Shaolong was amazed. Joining him for a couple of cups, he checked: "Does second brother have any difficulties?"

Sighing, Teng Yi explained: "When I saw Shan Rou, I thought of her sister. Before we left for Zhao, she got pregnant. How can I not be worried?"

Xiang Shaolong happily congratulated him. Then he apologised: "It is my fault to take you away from Sister in law and also from witnessing your child's birth."

Teng Yi chortled: "We are brothers and these words are unnecessary. Even if we cannot make it back to Xianyang, I will not be the least upset. However, our emotions do fluctuate and stuck in such a boring place with no task in sight, I tend to let my mind wander. Do you really think I can abandon all thoughts and meditate my Mozi everyday for a few hours?"

Xiang Shaolong can finally detect some humanity in this iron

man. Pleased, he proposed: “There is a new task that needs your attention.”

Teng Yi solicited: “What?”

Xiang Shaolong sniggered: “Disguise as me!”

Still surprised, Teng Yi called: “What?” Comprehending, he asked: “Xiang Shaolong or Dong Kuang?”

Xiang Shaolong leisurely answered: “I will take responsibility for Dong Kuang. I only need second brother to use my flying needles to harm a few Zhao citizens. After that, leave a trail pretending that you are escaping to Wei. Once this is done, it will arouse everyone’s suspicions.”

Teng Yi nodded: “You can let the big sized Wu Guo wear my disguise and the plan will be flawless. But why are you escaping to Wei instead of Xianyang?”

Xiang Shaolong concludes: “This is my style, never returning until the mission is completed.”

Teng Yi confidently spoke: “Who can understand you better than yourself? I will act as planned within the next ten days. In the wilderness, no one is my match.”

After further discussion, it is past four in the morning. On his way back to his room, he remembered the Tian sisters. Excited, he

yawned and visited their room.

Both girls were having sweet dreams and the bed is full of their scent. If he had not given his all on Ji Yanran, he would join them in bed. Now, all he can do is to give a longing sigh.

Suddenly, it began to rain heavily.

Xiang Shaolong frantically shut the windows and happened to hear Shan Rou closing the windows too.

Xiang Shaolong could not resist his adoration for this wilful girl. Reaching her door, he knocked lightly twice. No response.

Thinking how funny it is, he pushed open the door, entered and closed the door, latching it.

In the fine bed, Shan Rou was pretending to be asleep.

Thrilled with excitement, he slowly took off his clothes and weapons. Leaving only a pair of shorts, he lifted the blanket and was about to climb onto the bed. As expected, a gust of cold air blew into his face. Armed to the teeth, Shan Rou jumped up and pointed a dagger at his bare chest. Infuriated, she challenged: “Are you going to use force on me?”

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand and twisted the tip of the dagger. Moving aside, he cheered: “Use force? Tonight is not appropriate. It will be dawn soon. Maybe tomorrow night! Now I

only wish to hug my wife and have a short nap.”

Shan Rou could only watch as he yanked her dagger away and put it aside. Following that, his exploring hands squeezed her against his near naked body but she could not put up any resistance.

Hugging her to sleep on the bed and covered with a blanket, he kissed her nice smelling face and enquired: “Do you always sleep armed like that?”

Drumming with anger, Shan Rou offered: “I trailed you secretly just now. You walk very fast and purposely find the hardest roof and tallest walls to climb. I was tired and lost track of you. If you promised to give me a set of scaling and climbing tools, Shan Rou will let you hug until the cows come home but you cannot take my virginity.”

Xiang Shaolong jumped. Giving her cheek another peck, he rejected: “Whether you are agreeable or not, you must accompany me to sleep tonight.”

Shan Rou roared: “I dare you to repeat what you just said!”

Xiang Shaolong gave up: “Fine! I surrender. You want the wind, I’ll give you wind. You want the rain, it is raining outside. Come! Let me kiss your lips and we’ll sleep. Want me to undress you so that it is more comfortable to sleep?”

Flustered, Shan Rou stated: “You dare! I sleep like this every night so that it is easier to run away!”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by a wave of realisation. Remembering that she was on the run for seven years, he felt fearful and gently coaxed: “Come and sleep in my arms. This is the safest and most enjoyable place in the whole world.”

Shan Rou really yawned and closed her pretty eyes. Resting her face between his neck and shoulder, she begins to sleep deeply and made soft breathing sounds.

Filled with a strong urge to sleep, Xiang Shaolong lost consciousness and entered dreamland.

Not knowing how much time has passed, Xiang Shaolong suddenly woke up in a fluster.

The sky has yet to brighten. In his embrace, the weeping Shan Rou is shouting for her Mum and Dad. Xiang Shaolong kissed her tears away. In a moment, this beautiful girl begins to quieten down. Apparently, she is having a nightmare.

Xiang Shaolong is really dog-tired and resumed sleeping.

When he woke up again, he could hear the Tian sisters wishing Shan Rou good morning. He then noticed that the person in his embrace has gotten up long ago.

He overheard Shan Rou protesting softly: “Let the Lord Longyang have a good wait! Our master slept late last night and must let him rest a while more.”

The Tian sisters would not dare to go her against her wishes and obediently complied.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off the bed. The sky is brightly lit. Walking to the door, he commented: “I have slept enough.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to his direction. Witnessing his topless and muscular built, the three faces turned red at the same time.

The Tian sisters have seen quite a few naked men but it is Xiang Shaolong’s body that made them lost their bearings. Making an excuse to retrieve the washing up tools, they make a quick exit.

Xiang Shaolong put one hand around Shan Rou’s cute waist and invited: “Accompany me to the farm?”

Shaking her head, Shan Rou rejected: “Not today. I have something on.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Where are you going? You are now my wife. If you leak out our identity, we shall perish together.”

Shan Rou’s round almond eyes stared at him. Angrily, she boasted: “Are you the only one who knows how to trick other people? Yesterday, I slipped out of the city and re-enter to look for

you. Using the identity as your official wife, I was escorted in by the gate soldiers. Last night while you were out partying at the traitor's place, Teng Yi and I had a good talk about our plans. I guarantee I am not someone who will give you away with just a normal interrogation."

Xiang Shaolong could not defend himself from her attacks. Kissing her, he asked again: "You have yet to say where you are headed to." Shyly, Shan Rou divulged: "Zhi Zhi is accompanying me to the tailor and make some dresses. Otherwise, how I can dress up to match your status?"

As Xiang Shaolong is thinking over her words, Shan Rou took the chance and slipped away. Before she entered the corridor, she turned around pretended to speak sternly: "Don't hug me every time we meet; I am not born for you to take advantage of!"

Disgruntled, Xiang Shaolong asked: "Want me to coax you to sleep tonight?"

"Let me think about it." Shan Rou answered cheekily and left laughing.

Thought comforted at her happy disposition, Xiang Shaolong could not help feeling some fear.

Carrying a bronze basin, the Tian sisters assisted him in washing up and changing.

Continuing his earlier train of thought, Xiang Shaolong thought deeper about his conversation with Tian Dan.

He is definitely too soft hearted and is not suitable to survive in this cold-blooded and unfeeling times. It is his soft-heartedness that all these girls come under his wing of care one by one. He has even released all his hatred for Zhao Ya and did not hold her betrayal to heart.

In these times, anyone with power will be surrounded with wives, concubines, courtesans and maids. At the end of the day, he is still someone from a different time zone and a different mindset. At the beginning, he is overjoyed and tireless with all his companions. Now that he has more and more beauties around him and does not want to compromise the quality of each relationship, he starts to feel the surmounting problems.

Not including the Tian sisters in his harem, he has Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qing and Ting Fangshi in Xianyang. Here, he has Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou. Despite having a lesser burden than [Tang Bohu](#) the Ming Dynasty playboy who has eight wives, he is still slightly overwhelmed. Making a silent vow, he will not get into any future love traps or he may die of exhaustion from his night activities.

Li Mu has warned him about sex and alcohol running one's health but he has forgotten this great advice on many occasions.

As his mind was wandering, Shan Rou's voice can be heard asking in the corridor: "Who are you?"

Wu Guo was heard answering: “Madam! This is Wei’s Lord Longyang. He wanted to see if Master has woken up.”

Lord Longyang’s eerie voice sounded: “So it is Madam Dong who just came to Handan City.”

Afraid that Shan Rou may say something wrong; Xiang Shaolong groped the breasts of the Tian sisters for a moment and scampered out.

Out of the blue, Shan Rou is acting like a gentle and mild-mannered wife, appropriately counteracting this gate-crasher Lord Longyang.

Giving a loud laugh, Xiang Shaolong put on a false front and paid his respects to the “beautiful” Lord Longyang from afar. Lord Longyang was dressed in a snow white battle gown.

Lord Longyang’s phoenix eyes brightened. He apologised: “I forgot that your wife has just arrived here plus you received a pair of beauties last night. I should have come later and not disturb your sweet dreams. Please forgive me.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly fascinated by his “consideration.” To Shan Rou, he announced: “Hubby and Lordship are leaving the city. The earliest I will return would be in the evening.”

Shan Rou submissively agreed.

Xiang Shaolong caught the look of sympathy Wu Guo had for him and escorted Lord Longyang to the front hall.

Lord Longyang smiled: "Your wife is so exquisite. No wonder you are not interested in any of the beauties in Handan City."

Xiang Shaolong does not know how to answer him. Giving two dry coughs, he avoided the question.

Stepping out of his residence, he can feel the warm sunshine all over the place. Even the wet floor from last night's rain was completely dried up,

Outside, there were nearly a hundred of Lord Longyang's personal bodyguards. Holding their horse, they waited patiently. Witnessing this display, Xiang Shaolong unconsciously shivered.

Lord Longyang's "fragrant shoulder" leaned towards Xiang Shaolong. With a soft nudge, he explained tenderly: "Now that the roads are unsafe, it is better to have more swords protecting the excursion."

Smelling the flowery scent on Lord Longyang's clothes, Xiang Shaolong did not know whether it is good or bad.

Before he left for Zhao, he had not foreseen the dramatic turn of events. Not only does he have to deal with women, he must also deal with this man. To make it worse, he cannot offend him.

The complexity of Handan's situation is getting out of hand.

When can he successfully escape all this?

end of book 8

Book 9 Chapter 1 – Ambush On The Narrow Gorge

Xiang Shaolong and Lord Longyang rode out together out of the city, protected front and back by high skilled bodyguards.

After receiving the news that Xiang Shaolong was about to arrive in Handan, the atmosphere in the city had been very tense, like a tightly drawn bowstring, forcing everyone not to be able to take a breather.

Even though everyone was itching for a fight, seemingly very confident, but everyone was afraid that they will be one of the unlucky ones.

From this it could be seen that he had built a god-like reputation, no one dared to underestimate him.

Lord Longyang brought his horse nearer to him and said, “Why haven’t I seen Long Shan?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly commended Lord Longyang for being observant.

During this dangerous warring period, everyone was always vigilant. If it was any other influential officials, if they had someone as powerful as Teng Yi, they would want him close by to protect them twelve hours of the day. So when Xiang Shaolong went out without him close by was really something out of the

ordinary.

He smiled, “This is my first time to a big city. So with all the excitement to go shopping, I wouldn’t feel right without someone to accompany me.”

Lord Longyang was only asking out of curiosity and not because of some suspicions, changing his topics, “Li Yuan sees Brother Dong as number one rival in love. He has misunderstood your intentions. It’s truly outrageous.”

Xiang Shaolong was confused, “My Lord, why do you say this?”

Lord Longyang smiled, “The person that Ji Yanran is in love with is Xiang Shaolong. Oh! Maybe, Yanran, herself, hasn’t realised. The expression on her eyes when she’s looking at Shaolong compared to when she’s looking at others is totally different. Maybe at that time, she hadn’t realised yet that she had fallen in love with Xiang Shaolong, but I had known for sure.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart trembled in fear. This Lord Longyang is definitely someone with sharp observation skill. If he’s not careful, he might accidentally reveal his identity from the slight tip of his eyebrow. He must be constantly alert around him. Lord Longyang grunted, “I don’t believe that Ji Yanran and Xiang Shaolong didn’t already have a secret agreement. As long as we observed Ji Yanran closely, we can surely lure Xiang Shaolong out.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Didn’t you also want to take care of Learned Lady Ji?”

Lord Longyang sighed, “I have always viewed her as an irreplaceable friend. She fell in love with Xiang Shaolong is a natural thing. Mister Dong hasn’t yet seen Xiang Shaolong, he is someone with out of this world talents. Regardless of his style of conversation, insight, heart or spirit, they are all distinctive amongst us. I, myself, would like to be his friend, if we weren’t already standing on the opposite grounds as enemies. But now, I have to find any way to assassinate him regardless of how unscrupulous it might be.”

Xiang Shaolong intentionally probed him out, “Even though I know that I don’t have an ounce of hope of attaining Learned Lady Ji, but I felt that she has high regard of me. Hey! According to your observation, how does it compare when she looks at me compared to looking at Xiang Shaolong?”

Lord Longyang nodded, “She truly regards you highly. That’s for sure. The problem is she is a once and one type of person, unlike that promiscuous Lady Ya. Xiang Shaolong had the advantage of entering her heart first, you and Li Yuan would be better off to forget about her.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “The situation doesn’t seem hopeless yet. We have someone as powerful as you here, My Lord, to take care of Xiang Shaolong. We can already count down the days that he stayed alive. At that time, wouldn’t Learned Lady Ji need to start searching for another person?”

Lord Longyang smiled bitterly, “The fact has proven that everyone who underestimates Xiang Shaolong will end up on the

losing ground. No matter how the Zhaos tried to arrange everything, I still believe that Xiang Shaolong would have ingenious plan to sneak into Handan. With the craftiness of both Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong, how could they have leaked their whereabouts to the other hostile party in Qin, there must be some trap in there.”

Xiang Shaolong trembled in fear.

He started to realise that this Lord Longyang isn't a simple person. No wonder he could become Lord Xinling's formidable adversary.

Amongst all of the countries' influential politicians here in Handan, beside the heavyweight class Tian Dan, Lord Longyang also needed to be counted in.

But his weakness is: Hey! It seems like he has fallen in love with himself, so he has confided in himself, hoping to win Xiang Shaolong's good favour. Oh my God! This is such a complete mess. Such complicated situation!

At that time, they had left the Handan city far away, riding along the government road towards the Hidden Army Valley, surrounded from both sides with tall mountains in the open countries in the autumn weather, with withered and fallen leaves.

Lord Longyang's underlings were all seemingly like they have reached the countryside relaxing and stretching their muscles. Lord Longyang saw Xiang Shaolong was quiet without a word,

knew that he was pondering his words previously, joyfully continued, “Xiang Shaolong has three important enemies: King Xiaocheng, Zhao Mu and Guo Zhong. As long as Xiang Shaolong is alive, I am afraid that these three people wouldn’t be able to sleep peacefully.”

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly filled with uneasy feelings. This was called a soldier’s alertness. It didn’t need a factual proof for a reason.

This time, they were about to enter one of the small narrow gorge towards the Hidden Army Valley. Both sides were surrounded with dense thick forest. If there was an ambush, this would be the idealist place for it.

Xiang Shaolong swiftly stopped his horse.

Lord Longyang continued for another ten or more steps before noticing it and looked back, filled with confusion, “Is there a problem, Mister?”

When the rest noticed that Lord Longyang had stopped his horse, they all followed his lead.

Xiang Shaolong continued gazing towards the entrance of the narrow gorge, frowned, “Have you and Xiang Shaolong ever celebrate a festival before?”

Lord Longyang was slightly surprised, turned his horse’s head to

follow his gaze towards the narrow gorge, ordered his underlings, “Go open the road for me!” More than ten riders rode out from amongst the crowd towards the narrow gorge.

Those persons’ shields were all hanging on the side of their horses. Apparently, they didn’t believe that there would be someone waiting to ambush them.

Xiang Shaolong was also extremely puzzled, who would want to take care of Lord Longyang? Could it be that he’s being overly cautious, raising a false alarm?

Lord Longyang relaxed a little as he saw his underlings entered the gorge, smiled, “If Xiang Shaolong came to take care of me, then there must be some kind of misunderstanding. Otherwise, how would he know that I will go to the Hidden Army Valley today?” Xiang Shaolong’s uneasiness was growing by the minute.

After exercising the meditation method according to the Mohist Addendum, his sixth sense had become sharper. It had repeatedly saved him from dangerous situations, otherwise he might still be nursing his grievances back in Xianyang.

Even though the autumn sun was still hanging low in the sky, but he could feel the chill in the air.

Lord Longyang shouted, “Have you clearly thought about what I told you before, Mister Dong?”

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming, changed a topic, “How come your underlings haven’t come back yet?” Even before the words finished spoken, crying sounds could be heard. One of his famous swordsman underling appeared from the gorge, waved from far away indicating that everything’s alright.

Xiang Shaolong was embarrassed for being overly suspicious.

On the contrary, Lord Longyang consoled him, “It’s never wrong to be more careful! I admired Mister Dong alertness!”

Everyone continued riding towards the gorge.

Lord Longyang spoke in his soft and sweet tone, “Mister, have you ever ponder over our current war and what you would do to establish a long-lasting career for yourself?”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed at his craftiness. This person definitely has a sharp intelligence, something that most people have long been lacking in this period. He had seen that he’s not the type of person who’d be happy raising horses his whole life. That’s why he uttered these words.

When they were about 100 steps from the entrance, Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt alarmed again. But he could only indistinctly catch a blurry shadow and nothing concrete.

He casually replied, “Besides rearing horses, I know nothing about the art of war. Just based on fierceness, how could I lead the

three armies through the desert?”

Lord Longyang smiled, “Mister doesn’t have to be modest. Just from looking at how you’ve been trained and that you have no fear of death, I know that you have the talent to be a famous general, otherwise, Tian Dan would have ignored you.”

Now, they were about 50 more steps from the entrance, the front guards had started to enter the gorge.

An idea suddenly flashed through Xiang Shaolong’s mind. He whipped his horse and shouted, “Quick! Turn around!” Now he realised the reason for his uneasiness.

Lord Longyang’s underling that passed the safe signal before quickly returned the gorge after signaling. It just didn’t make sense. Inside the gorge, there were 10 more Lord Longyang’s personal bodyguards. As a reconnaissance team, they should have guard the entrance and exit of the gorge, along with all of the strategic points inside the gorge until Lord Longyang passed through before withdrawing their position. Otherwise, if the enemies ambush from the entrance and the exit, wouldn’t they be surrounded and died inside? Xiang Shaolong also wasn’t basing this from the carelessness of Lord Longyang’s underling alone but because he had been on guard the whole time, he finally realised that if his enemy was planning on ambushing them there, they wouldn’t have placed anyone in the dangerous zone. That’s why he quickly rushed back in.

This time, Lord Longyang and his four personal bodyguards all frowned at him. They all felt that he’s being too extremely

cautious.

The front guards ignored his warning and kept on riding into the entrance.

Lord Longyang forcefully reined in his horse to be polite. As he was about to speak, a tragic scream could be heard faintly coming from the gorge.

Everyone's face paled. Suddenly, a stream of enemies flow out from inside the gorge, each one of them was holding a crossbow and arrows, and stringing them on. The front group of 10 or more soldiers jumped off their horse and prepared a frontline defence.

At the same time, killing shouts could be from all four corners.

From both sides of the dense forest, the enemies flowed out. In an instant, enemies could be seen everywhere.

All of these people dressed as common people. As far as the eyes could see, there must be at least several hundred people. Lord Longyang personal guards, even though they were elite soldiers who have experienced hundred battles, but there were many enemies compared to them. Crossbows were also hard to guard against. Without any time to prepare, they've been ambushed and were now in complete disarray.

Xiang Shaolong ducked down and avoided two arrows but from underneath, he could hear a pitiful neigh and the horse reared up.

He didn't even get a chance to see where his horse had been shot, both feet fiercely kicked off, forcing him to lean sideways and fell off the saddle. He leaped across towards Lord Longyang, held on his waist and leaped off the horse. Both fell on the bushes on the side of the road. Lord Longyang's saddle had long fallen off the horse, it was filled with arrows.

Lord Longyang was the enemy's main goal.

His number one underlings, Jiao Xu, and other unhurt underlings all jumped off their horse and rushed in to protect Lord Longyang.

Lord Longyang was about to join in the fight when Xiang Shaolong dragged him back to the forest. Surrounded on all four sides with battles, all around killing sounds can be heard. The enemies had finished their first batch of arrows and hurrying to reload their arrows. This was exactly the perfect time to escape.

Wind of swords swished through.

Xiang Shaolong's back was leaning against the grass. He moved his two feet, continuously pressuring the enemies back.

Those two people screamed in agony. While trying to scramble away, they rushed into three other attacking enemies.

"Clang!" Xiang Shaolong pulled out his long sword out of the

sheath, followed with two people spilled their blood.

When he leaped up, Lord Longyang shook out of his reverie, pulled out his sword and sprung forward. “Swish!” His sword flew like a water dragon, slaying two rushing enemies instantly.

Jiao Xu and the other ten more guards fought and retreated at the same time towards the forest while protecting them both.

Xiang Shaolong knew that they were in danger just from looking that they were surrounded on all sides by the enemies. He quickly determined the best way to break out of the enemy’s barricade, shouted, “Follow me!” He waved around Blood Wave, leaving behind layers of the sword’s shadows, leading the way out of the barricade and deep into the forest.

His swordsman skill was superb. His strength surprised others. Moreover, inside the forest, the enemies were unable to take advantage of their numbers to crush them. They were truly swept over by the wind.

“Dang!” One of the enemy was chopped off by him to the point of scaring away all of the onrushing enemies.

But this scene would only last for a second before the reinforcement arrived and countless enemies rushed forward again.

Xiang Shaolong entered the Mohist’s defensive mind, calmly

leading Lord Longyang and the others deeply into the forest, even killing seven or eight enemies on the way.

Xiang Shaolong took advantage of this time to observe Lord Longyang and the others.

At this time, besides Jiao Xu, there were only seven people left following them. Everyone of them was badly injured. The situation was extremely dangerous.

But the enemies kept coming like tidal wave.

Even though Lord Longyang forged ahead courageously, but he was covered in blood. Not sure though whether it's his blood or the enemies' blood splashed onto him.

His right back shoulder was blotched bright red.

Xiang Shaolong wildly shouted, swung his sword backhand and penetrated the abdomen of the raid soldier, followed with a flick of his wrist to fend off an attack from the left side. While the opponent dodged his attack, in that instant of gap, he continuously attacked, wildly stabbed, and hardly penetrated the enemy's chest.

When the enemies saw how brutal he can be, they all retreated, allowing him to enter by several meters.

"Peng!" Lord Longyang staggered and bumped into his back. It seemed like he'd been injured again by the enemy's poisonous hand.

Xiang Shaolong shouted loudly, “Don’t worry about me!” He waved his sword, killing another attacker.

“Argh!” One of the guard injured badly and toppled over, the situation had just become more critical.

Xiang Shaolong’s Blood Wave sword was like a lightning. Within a move, an enemy instantly met with a violent death. He fiercely pulled Lord Longyang, at the same time, he called out to Jiao Xu and the rest, “Follow me!” Forcing his way into the left side of the enemy’s net, he repeatedly waved his Blood Wave, forcing the enemy to retreat one by one.

During this time when they were bathed in blood like the war, Xiang Shaolong displayed his boldness, strong stamina and his years of strict training as an elite soldier. He was like a never tiring machine, moving freely amongst the enemy formation.

Amongst all this, he still didn’t forget to examine all four surroundings. He saw on the left hand side, not far away, there was a slope road. That’s why he called Lord Longyang and the others to follow him to break through the formation.

One move of attacking to defend executed quickly and violently.

“Argh!” The enemy’s sword was split in half. While he was shocked, Xiang Shaolong moved sideways and kicked him, causing him to spew out blood repeatedly and fell on the big tree behind him.

Xiang Shaolong dodged right and left, swung backward and

stabbed the left chest of the enemy that tried to surprise attack him from behind. While at the same time, he moved and tackled the enemy till he tumbled down and met the earth.

Up till now, he had succeeded in breaking out and killing all the way to the edge of the slope. The pressure had been reduced. Gazing downward, he saw a strong flowing river.

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. He turned back, pulled out his sword swiftly and broke into the formation surrounding Lord Longyang, Jiao Xu and the rest. Amongst them, one was at the end of his life.

Xiang Shaolong used his sword to forcefully sweep away his enemies, shouted, “Jump down! That’s the only way to escape with your life.” He turned around and pounced on Lord Longyang, grabbing his waist and rolling down the slope, not knowing how many branches and leaves they’ve broken and smashed along the way.

Jiao Xu and the other five bodyguards dared not hesitate. All followed his way and rolled down the hills. “Splash... splash...” All eight people fell into the river successively, instantly dying the river blood red.

Xiang Shaolong grabbed hold of Lord Longyang and swam away following the river’s currents. Before long, they had left the place far away.

The enemy pursued by following along the river.

Up the front, the water noise grew louder like an exploding volcano.

Before anyone realised what's happening, the currents were moving faster and faster. Unexpectedly they had reached the edge of around 7 metres high waterfall. They immediately fell onto the pool below following the waterfall.

When everyone was still recovering from the high fall, the current brought them away again. The enemies' shout was growing quieter as the distance grew.

When Xiang Shaolong, Lord Longyang and the rest met the Zhaos convoys, it was already midnight. (三更 means the time between 11-1pm so midnight would closely reflect that in here).

Even though the injuries had been properly bind up, but because everyone had lost a lot of blood and was tired, they all looked pale and exhausted. Two amongst them even had a fever which required immediate attention.

Zhao Mu, Le Cheng and the rest had already received the news and were waiting anxiously on the gate.

Zhao Mu and Lord Longyang had always had a private agreement between each other, while Xiang Shaolong was his hope of ascending the throne. His heart was burning with worry. On the other hand, if Le Cheng, acting as Handan's guardian's general, allowed anything to happen to this important Wei's official, Lord Longyang, it would be hard for him not to get blamed for it. So, both of them were equally anxious and worried.

Both Zhao Mu and Le Cheng scrambled forward towards Xiang Shaolong and Lord Longyang's horse cart. When they saw both of their appearance, even though a little bit shocking, but since there wasn't any fatal injury, they were both able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Lord Longyang was secretly watching Xiang Shaolong affectionately, strenuously uttered, "If it wasn't for Mister Dong risking his life to save mine, I wouldn't have any left to meet you two anymore."

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly.

It could be said that Lord Longyang is his number one mortal enemy, but at that time, there was no time to think about this problem, even if he had this idea, he wouldn't be able to not rescue him when he saw it. This was so like what Tian Dan had analysed, "Softhearted," is truly his biggest weakness. Le Cheng heavily said, "Did you see Xiang Shaolong?"

Xiang Shaolong and Lord Longyang were both astounded.

The latter frowned, "It doesn't seem like it was Xiang Shaolong. But during those chaotic situation, we only cared about escaping, using the river to escape, and didn't have the time to see clearly who the enemy might be."

Le Cheng replied, "I've already sent out soldiers to seal off all roads and scout the area. Hopefully, we will receive the good news soon to report to my Lord."

Lord Longyang and Xiang Shaolong knew that he didn't have any confidence of this just from listening to his tone.

The raiding party surprisingly was able to slip within 15kms of the area surroundings Handan in great secrecy. It wouldn't surprise them if they had already prepared an escape route.

But who would want to get rid of Lord Longyang? Xiang Shaolong of course knew that it wasn't he himself who was responsible.

Lord Longyang wasn't sure whether the reason why he wasn't interested in speaking up was due to the injuries he had sustained.

Both Zhao Mu and Le Cheng personally escort Lord Longyang and Xiang Shaolong separately returning to their residence.

Shan Rou and the Tian sisters had long heard of the news and were both waiting in front of the gate to welcome him home.

Le Cheng then took leave.

Shan Rou complained, "If I knew, I would have come with you!" Wu Guo was confused, "Who did it?"

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng supported him inside towards the inner chamber. Both sisters had long been crying till their eyes were red

and swollen.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled, “Let me rest a little bit before I will explain everything clearly to you, alright?”

Suddenly, he remembered the circumstance of which Lord Longyang’s underling lured them into entering the gorge.

He trembled when he realised who probably would like to assassinate Lord Longyang.

No wonder he’s got that long face.

Book 9 Chapter 2 – Faking Injury

While the Tian sisters and Shan Rou were frantically dressing the wounds on Xiang Shaolong, he had a brainwave. To Wu Guo he inquired: “If there any where to make me look even worse? I want to give others the impression that I am so badly injured that I cannot even get up! ” Scratching his head for a while, the impatient Shan Rou cut in: “Let me disguise you like a corpse and scare the hell out of everyone who sees you.”

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng could not hold their giggles.

Xiang Shaolong explored: “That is not enough. It is best to make me bleed non-stop or even a high fever all over my body.”

Tian Feng chuckled: “Leave this to us sisters. Just hide heat pads under the blanket.”

Shan Rou and Wu Guo looked at each other before they both turned to him. They cannot comprehend what tricks is he up to?

Xiang Shaolong commanded Wu Guo: “At dawn, send someone out of the city and invite Big Brother and Little Jun back with half of our forces. At the same time, bring someone to see me immediately. ”

He then taught him how to liaise with Pu Bu.

Knowing that Xiang Shaolong is going into action, Wu Guo left

happily. The Tian sisters started working on the heat pad. Shan Rou sat by the bed and personally applied a layer of white powder on his mask. Frowning, she whined: “Aren’t you going to tell me what you are up to?” Instead, Xiang Shaolong’s mind is on another subject. Shaking his head, he protested: “This sucks. If someone touches my face, their hands will be stained by the powder and everyone will know that I am faking my injuries. ”

Paying no heed to his words, Shan Rou left the room and came back shortly with a full haversack. In a cold and negative manner, she demanded: “This is not my problem. Quickly tell me your plans. Otherwise, I will not display my best skill and help you to fake your injuries.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Work on the injuries first. If delayed and I have visitors, the scheme will fall apart.”

Pouting, Shan Rou held her obvious anger and produced several bottles of different sizes from her haversack. She poured liquids from them and started to mix them in a separate basin.

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand and caressed her elastic and smooth legs. Shan Rou exclaimed: “I want to kill a man! But I cannot disclose who he is yet!” Shan Rou’s slender body trembled slightly and gazed towards him.

The sky has yet to brighten when King Xiaocheng descended upon his residence with his entourage. Seeing his corpse-like look and with a temperature running, King Xiaocheng was terrified. He cried: “Subject Dong! They had said your injuries are not serious. This won’t do! I must summon the Imperial Physician to attend to

you.”

Now, it is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to be shocked. In a hoarse voice, he frantically replied: “I am deeply grateful for Your Majesty’s benevolence. I caught a bad chill when I fell into the river and lost a lot of blood to end up in this state. I will need only a few days rest to get back to my feet. Moreover, I have subordinates who are well-versed in medicine and I am used to their prescriptions. If we change the medication, I am afraid of side effects. Ai!”

He pretended to cry out and even showed his blood-stained blanket and his open wound on the shoulder.

King Xiaocheng was amazed that he was more severely injured than Lord Longyang. Thinking for a while, his eyes turned ferocious and interrogated: “Did you catch a glimpse of Xiang Shaolong?” Swerving around and patting his head, he added: “I was not thinking clearly and have forgotten that you have never seen this traitor.”

Xiang Shaolong was tickled.

After a moment a silence, he praised: “On this fateful trip, it is all thanks to Subject Dong protection of Lord Longyang or he will surely lose his life. If he died, how am I to account for it to King Anli? And the hope of an alliance treaty will also go up in smoke.”

Xiang Shaolong could only smile sourly.

He originally came to Handan to kill but under the unique circumstances, he saved the lives of Zhao Mu and Lord Longyang.

Right now, even he does not believe that he is Xiang Shaolong, much less others.

He purposely investigates: “Your Majesty has probably visited Lord Longyang; did he say that he saw Xiang Shaolong?” King Xiaocheng shook his head and replied: “Lord Longyang is almost as badly injured as you. His spirits are very low and he refuses to say anything. But except for Xiang Shaolong, no one is that powerful. And only he can access information in Handan from spies. Now that he is the bastard of Qin, he would naturally fight against the five other states.” Sensing his tone, Xiang Shaolong recognized that King Xiaocheng does not consider the State of Yan to be an ally or an equal. He deduced that Zhao King has not succumbed to the pressures of Li Yuan and Tian Dan.

King Xiaocheng can see that Xiang Shaolong has difficulties opening his eyes. Patting his feverish shoulder, he promised: “Subject Dong please rest well. I will send some rare medicine for external injuries.”

Standing up, he continued: “Your abilities are not limited to horse-breeding. I will give you more responsibilities in the future.”

After King Xiaocheng left, Xiang Shaolong could not hold back his exhaustion and truly fell into deep slumber. In his sleep, he can sense human activity and visitors to his bedside. Wu Guo is always present and naturally described his injuries in detail and exaggerating some facts. Actually, he needs not say anything. The heavy smell of medication and the “bleeding” open wound is sufficient to paint a bleak picture.

At the appointed time, Pu Bu arrived.

Xiang Shaolong was in high spirits and they had a good talk. The attendant reported that Zhao Ya is here to visit him and Pu Bu hurriedly left from the back door.

Zhao Ya moved to his bedside and put her hand on his steaming forehead. Startled, she withdrew her hand and exclaimed: “You are sick!”

Opening his eyes by half, Xiang Shaolong replied: “It’s ok! I will be fine after two days of sleep!”

Scrutinising his complexion, she sighed: “Luckily, there is still energy in your eyes. Otherwise, it would be disastrous.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, knowing that Zhao Ya had seen the only loophole. Fortunately, she had yet to raise any suspicions. He was puzzled at her calmness over the “Xiang Shaolong reappearance” and tested: “Seems like Xiang Shaolong came to Handan earlier; or else your old man (himself) would have caught him.” Zhao Ya cocked her head and softly analyzed: “The assassination of Lord Longyang can be masterminded by Tian Dan, Li Yuan, Zhao Mu or even Prince Xinling but it will never be Xiang Shaolong. I know him too well. Unless it is his sworn enemy, he will never kill. Lord Longyang did not have any enmity with him and he will not raise the alarm with such a meaningless act.”

Xiang Shaolong is astonished at Zhao Ya’s attention to such minute details. Feelings started to swell up again in him. Knowing

that he is a good man, why did she still conspire with King Xiaocheng and Zhao Mu to harm him?

Xiang Shaolong has suspected it was Prince Xinling's assassination plot but after Zhao Ya's explanation, he started to waver on his earlier conclusions.

Zhao Mu is definitely out of the picture. Li Yuan and Tian Dan are the main suspects as they have a strong motive. The power struggle in Wei is the Wei King and Lord Longyang versus Prince Xinling. In addition, Lord Longyang is the heir to Anli (Wei King). If anything befalls him, Anli will lay the blame on Prince Xinling and fight him to death.

When Wei descends into chaos, the main beneficiaries are Qi and Chu who are opposed to the three-state ally.

Now that Qin is disunited and are not preparing any offensive campaigns, this is the best time for the rest of the states to display their strengths.

Remembering the Lu Gong secret manual, he derided: "Xiang Shaolong may be working with Prince Xinling to deal with Lord Longyang." Zhao Ya factually countered: "Prince Xinling could not wait to tear Xiang Shaolong apart and drink his fresh blood. Xiang Shaolong is also someone who will not bow to his command. How can there be such a possibility?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and asked: "What event has caused this enmity?" Craftily, Zhao Ya whispered: "This

is a secret. Mister has yet to fulfill his obligation. Once you succeed, I will tell you everything I know.”

Xiang Shaolong was hopping mad but was touched by her appreciation. He closed his eye and sighed: “I am getting tired. Thank you Princess for your care and concern.”

Zhao Ya did not want to leave after such a short visit. She stood up reluctantly but leaned forward towards Xiang Shaolong. She lowered her petite head and kissed him fully on his lips, her tongue snaking out.

Xiang Shaolong is afraid she may detect his scent. He changed his style and attacked her flexible tongue roughly. He used a lot of force and grabbed her breasts wildly.

Unexpectedly, Zhao Ya did not mind his uncouth manners and lie down and begin tussling with him lustfully.

As things are getting out of hand, Zhao Ya aggressively retreated. Red-faced, she shrieked: “No! You cannot lose control now.” Giving him a look, promised: “Once you are well, I will let you do whatever you want to me!”

Old feelings swelled up in Xiang Shaolong, making him horny. Sighing lightly, he apologised: “Please forgive subject for being unable to send Princess out.”

Curling her eyelashes in a smile, she sashayed off. Just as she

stepped out, Ji Yanran's entourage arrived. Seeing his devastated condition, hot tears poured out from her eyes. When the truth is revealed, her sadness turned into glee.

Sitting on his bed hugging his sweet-smelling belle, he enquired: "Have you seen Lord Longyang?" Ji Yanran happily commented: "You are really farsighted. Nothing can escape your eyes. Hai! Though I am your wife, I am the last to know about your injuries. I was terribly anxious but still have to force myself to visit that cross-dressing fellow first to avoid suspicion. There is more to come. When I come to visit my husband, I have to be interrogated by that wild bitch who is masquerading as your wife. My hubby! You must decide for me and give me the justice I deserved." Xiang Shaolong could feel his headache expanding. He slipped both his hands into the clothes and started to fondle, hoping to distract her. Changing the topic, he disclosed: "Before the attack, Lord Longyang confided in me. He told me to give up on you for the person Talented Lady Ji has fallen for is not Dong Kuang, nor Li Yuan, but the number one enemy of the six states Xiang Shaolong."

Under his daring fondling, Ji Yanran moaned: "Number one enemy of the Six States, Shaolong's words are indeed fresh and creative. Oh! No wonder Lord Longyang is focusing all his attention on me. Ai! Shaolong! Are you trying to kill me? Ah! If this goes on, I am going to want you right now."

Xiang Shaolong frightfully withdrew his hands; he has to be "ready" for potential visitors.

Ji Yanran lied on his body with her face red like embers. She

groaned: “Has Shaolong concluded who is the mastermind behind the assassination?” Xiang Shaolong stroked her fair back and replied: “I wish to seek the wisdom of Talented Lady.”

Biting his ear in return, she answered: “The biggest suspect would be Prince Xinling. He will definitely send people to retrieve the Lu Gong Secret Manual stolen by you. As a matter of fact, everyone here would love to lay their hands on the manual.”

Stressed, Xiang Shaolong suggested: “If the manual is with Guo Zhong, then Li Yuan would have proposed marriage to Guo Xiu’er.”

Straightening her beautiful posture, Ji Yanran proudly proclaimed: “If I make Li Yuan give up hope, he will marry her straight away”

It finally dawned on Xiang Shaolong. For a top quality beauty like Guo Xiu’er, there would be no lack of suitors. The only issue is the status in society.

Guo Zhong will never let his daughter marry down and even much less of becoming a concubine.

Ji Yanran holds a more prestigious status than Guo Xiu’er. If Li Yuan won her heart, she would be his official wife. If Li Yuan sealed his marriage with Guo Xiu’er, Ji Yanran will never marry him. This is precisely his present dilemma.

Recalling earlier events, she suspiciously judged: “I think hubby is better than Lu Gong. Even Lu Ban may not be able to design the first class climbing tools you possess.”

Xiang Shaolong felt guilty and shared a passionate kiss with Ji Yanran. Using an excuse to visit the injured Xiang Shaolong, Wu Zhuo arrived with a huge force.

After Ji Yanran left in the most reluctant manner, Wu Zhuo, Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Shan Rou gathered in a secret room for a discussion. Zhao Zhi also came early and entered the room with the rest.

After they are settled in their seats, Xiang Shaolong jested: “If Le Cheng lost his head to a band of masked fighters tonight, who will the public will speculate the killers to be?” Everyone shook with excitement and stared at him with bewilderment.

His actions are beyond comprehension.

Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi cried: “Ah!”

Zhao Zhi reached out and grabbed Shan Rou’s hands tightly, her eyes reddened with emotion.

Jing Jun was puzzled: “Does two sister-in-laws have an enmity with Le Cheng?” Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Le Cheng is Zhao Mu’s right hand man. How can he not play a part in Zhao Mu’s devious schemes?

Zhao Zhi heard this kid addressing him as sister-in-law sincerely and was pleased. She took a quick glance at him before lowering her embarrassed face.

Shan Rou put on a satisfied look with her “sister in law” title. Her eyes flashed and recalled: “The person who came to arrest my family is indeed Le Cheng, he even... Ai!” She sadly lowered her head and announced: “I wish to stop bringing up the past!” Suddenly, she raised her head. Gritting her teeth, she swore: “I must cut down his head personally.” Wu Zhuo seriously questioned: “Does third brother really have confidence? Le Cheng is a crafty and cowardly character. He is heavily protected by able fighters at all times. Now that the city is in a state of alert, it will make the task much harder.”

Full of confidence, Xiang Shaolong said: “If you can do what others cannot, life is more interesting. Assassination is based on strategy, not numbers. If we can accurately understand his movement, we can devise a brilliant operation that will enable us to make a silent attack and retreat.”

Wu Zhuo is still hesitant and added: “Would this raise the alarm and reveal whereabouts in Handan City?” “Coward!” Shan Rou despising scolded.

Wu Zhuo’s face darkened. He is a proud warrior and cannot tolerate such words at him, moreover the person who said it was a female. Zhao Zhi was horrified and tugged at Shan Rou’s shoulders with blame.

Upset, Xiang Shaolong roared: “I respect Big Brother Wu the most! You crossed your line of authority, apologise now!”

Shan Rou knew she was too much but she gave a meek laugh and corrected: “I am not talking about Big Brother Wu. I saw Little Jun trembling and scolded him for being a coward, causing the misunderstanding.”

Jing Jun eyes widened and was about to protest that he was wronged. Catching Zhao Zhi’s wink, he could only keep quiet and took the blame for Shan Rou.

How can Wu Zhuo hold it against her? For Shan Rou case, this is as good as an apology. Shaking his head, he could only clarify: “I am never one to shy from danger. I only wish to emphasize on the important issues and make sure that we do not be penny wise and pound foolish.”

Jing Jun place a lot of importance in family relations. He helped to speak up for Shan Rou: “I am truly the coward. Big Brother Wu is courageous and majestic. He is fearless in the most fearful situation.”

Everyone is amused by his exaggeration and the atmosphere lightened up.

Xiang Shaolong analyzed: “Le Cheng is a dangerous man. If he acts, we can be annihilated. The big question is where his loyalty lies. Is he still loyal to Zhao Mu or has he been bought over by King Xiaocheng? Most likely he is only true to himself. Like the grass on

the wall, it will bend towards whichever strong wind that it blowing.”

While waiting for them to digest his words, he continued: “If Zhao Mu wants to rebel tomorrow, he will expose our relationship with him to Le Cheng to increase his confidence. This will make it easier to deploy his men but it will be very dangerous at the same time. Do you understand my meaning?” Shan Rou, Zhao Zhi, Wu Guo and Jing Jun frowned deeply, not being able to catch the underlying meaning. Only Wu Zhuo let out a lasting sigh and agreed: “Yes! I understand why Le Cheng has to be killed first. If he happens to be King Xiaocheng’s spy in Zhao Mu camp, he will pass on the secret to King Xiaocheng and we will die without even knowing why.”

Shan Rou was hit with realization.

Xiang Shaolong smilingly added: “Killing Le Cheng brings us another benefit.”

Even Wu Zhuo cannot see where the benefit lays.

Xiang Shaolong explained plainly: “We will make the assassination as ambiguous as possible. We will create a scenario whereby it seems to be done by Xiang Shaolong but after careful thinking, it may not be done by him. Based on Le Cheng’s wavering allegiance, this will stir up suspicions between Zhao Mu and King Xiaocheng. Both will suspect each other of killing Le Cheng in Xiang Shaolong’s name. What will be the end result?” Everyone was blown away by the brilliance in this plan and admired his throughout analysis.

Jing Jun deduced: “Both men are suspicious by nature. They will start arming themselves for a head on confrontation.”

Nodding, Wu Zhuo visualised: “It would be best if King Xiaocheng summoned Lian Po or Li Mu back for his protection and assistance. This will provoke Zhao Mu into immediate rebellion. We can then take this opportunity to fish Zhao Mu this big fish in troubled waters.”

Shan Rou frowned: “Then the biggest challenge is how to cut off Le Cheng’s head?” Xiang Shaolong was ticked and was about to answer when an attendant reported that Tian Dan is here to visit him.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed.

Within Handan City, the man whom he has the most misgivings is Tian Dan.

Book 9 Chapter 3 – Opportunity To Kill At Night

Tian Dan entered his bedroom and on his left and right is his bodyguard Liu Zhong Xia and Liu Zhong Shi brothers. He walked straight to the bedside and intimately asked: “How is Brother Dong doing?” Tian Dan has a natural dominating spirit and Xiang Shaolong raised his awareness and monitored his words carefully. Nodding to him as a gesture of acknowledgement, he replied: “I am up to my neck in work and is also enjoying the pleasures of wine and women. After a little soak in the river, I caught this resulting fever. Ai! Chancellor Tian, please have a seat!”

Tian Dan smiled and corrected: “I love to talk while standing. Hei! Brother Dong’s eyes are full of energy, how can you be immersed in women? You must have over exert physically and purposely caught a chill!”

Xiang Shaolong knew he cannot pretend in front of this man. He grumbled: “I guess so!”

Scrutinizing him for a while, Tian Dan simply asked: “Are Brother Dong’s followers all personally trained by you?” From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that when he was trying to force his way at the city gates with King Xiaocheng dissuading him, Tian Dan must have been present and observed the entire situation. He was alarmed that Tian Dan is now suspicious of him. He pretend to be unaffected and answered: “To raise horses, you must first prevent your horses from being stolen. The south is full of barbarians so I trained them every day to prepare for this threat.”

After a moment's thought, Tian Dan nodded: "If Brother Dong can train my Qi soldiers to be as elite and unafraid of death like yours, Qin would not pose a threat." Xiang Shaolong relaxed as Tian Dan is only identifying his real strength and he admired his foresight.

His biggest strength lies in bringing the special forces concept into this ancient age.

And this strength was identified by Tian Dan in an instance.

After exchanging looks, Xiang Shaolong closed his eyes for a while before opening them again. Looking straight at Tian Dan's suspicious gaze, he shot: "I understand your intentions. Chancellor Tian, please give Mister some time." Tian Dan was amazed by his forthright and direct answer. Stunned, he joyfully praised: "I acknowledge Brother Dong as a sentimental man with strong emotions. Otherwise, you would not have risked your life saving Lord Longyang. If it was anyone else, they would save their own skin first."

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be under some pain and his eyebrows frowned. Shaking his head, he said: "My mind is blank at the point in time. All I know is we are on the same boat and should face danger together."

Tian Dan eyes shone and he asked in a deep voice: "According to Lord Longyang, Brother Dong had a premonition of the incoming danger. How did Brother Dong foretell the future?"

Under his penetrating gaze, Xiang Shaolong was very

uncomfortable and wished he could leave immediately. Pretending to be tired, he simply answered: “I have been with horses longer than anyone. I may have picked up their sensitivity to surroundings. Before every natural disaster or extreme change in weather, all birds, animals and insects are known to exhibit strange behaviour.”

After all, Xiang Shaolong is not a criminal. He cannot interrogate him nonstop.

Tian Dan commented: “Brother Dong is an extraordinary talent. The assassin must have been very unlucky to run into Brother Dong, resulting in his failure. The Chu King may have overlooked your capabilities but how would Lord Chunshen Huang He (Zhao Mu’s dad, Li Yuan’s master) let you go?”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken. This man possesses the highest intellect. If he is let slips any detail, he may be blackmailed by him. He joked: “Lord Chunshen may not even remember how I look; what is there not to let go? I am tired of the Chu people and have no wish to bring them up anymore.”

It is Tian Dan’s turn to admire Xiang Shaolong’s prowess. His ambiguous reply makes him even more mysterious and intelligent. Nodding, he agreed: “The people of Chu are short sighted and only look for short term gains. They refuse to learn from their mistakes and are not worth mentioning. But if Chu is led by Li Yuan one day, what are the changes Brother Dong can foresee?” Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort and hissed: “Li Yuan is a ungrateful and narrow-minded brat. He indulges in wine and women and got his position through dubious means. What can he possibly

accomplish?” Electricity seemed to shoot out from Tian Dan’s eyes and land squarely on his face. He could not help laughing: “Brother Dong is truly someone of great judgement; how can I believe you are just an ordinary horse breeder!”

Xiang Shaolong’s entire spine is freezing cold. Giving a dry cough, he humbly said: “Chancellor Tian is exaggerating.”

Tian Dan officially said: “If Brother Dong knows the ways of the world, he should not remain in this declining state of Zhao. He should have better aspirations and set his sights high and far. Brother Dong is a smart man and should understand what I mean.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is naturally referring to himself. He felt great relief and eased himself on his pillow. He released a huge sigh and kept his silence.

Tian Dan may be eloquent and highly persuasive but he is still helpless at Xiang Shaolong’s silence. Giving in, he implored: “What is holding Brother Dong’s tongue?” Xiang Shaolong pretending to be in discomfort and forced himself to sit up. He supported himself by the bed rest and cried: “It is my dad’s dying wishes that I return to Zhao to farm animals. Everything is fated and I usually don’t give a damn about things. Chancellor Tian and I have a great affinity for each other and I am thankful for our acquaintance. I need time to ponder this over and I hope Chancellor Tian can appreciate my predicament.”

He is so blunt that Tian Dan can no longer force him to make a stand. He took a deep breath and surprisingly shot: “The assassin is not related to Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong was startled. Acting stupid, he asked: "How did Chancellor Tian know?" Tian Dan stepped forward by a step and patted his shoulder lightly. He smiled: "I wish for a day when Brother Dong will visit me in Qi. I will give Mister the grandest treatment. Please rest well! When you recover in a few days, I hope to tour your farm."

Evading Xiang Shaolong's question and leaving like that, Tian Dan got Xiang Shaolong filled with questions about what he has accomplished in such a visit.

At dinnertime, everyone is heavily burdened about the upcoming assassination and atmosphere is very depressing.

Zhao Zhi took a few bites and laid down her chopsticks, watching Xiang Shaolong eating with a good appetite.

Jing Jun is the only excited individual. He egged Zhao Zhi: "Sister Zhi! If you are not full, you will not have energy!" Zhao Zhi quietly replied: "I am not hungry!"

Shan Rou scolded softly: "Useless girl. We are not the victims so why are you so nervous!" At this moment, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng came over to pour wine for everyone. Wu Zhuo halted: "No drinking tonight!" He turned to Xiang Shaolong and laughed: "Lord Longyang sent two big caskets of wine. One is medicated wine; the other is tonic wine. Ha! I think third brother is in for a good time."

Xiang Shaolong is troubled with Lord Longyang's gratitude and concern and could not say a word. Shan Rou coldly snorted: "Letting him die would be a clean break. You had to go and save his life and got into a whole bunch of nonsense."

Irritated, Zhao Zhi chided: "Sister!"

Shan Rou shot her a look and demeaned: "You are only good as a noisemaker."

Xiang Shaolong could only face Wu Zhuo and Jing Jun and smiled.

Shan Rou patted her little tummy and stretched her body. In a hoarse and harsh voice, she demanded: "I want a piece of the action tonight. Your wife is going for a quick nap. You better prepare a set of those climbing tools for me. I want the best quality."

Everyone was dazzled by her mannerisms. She headed back to sleep as she said and one of the Tian sisters hastily escorted her back.

Zhao Zhi was shaking as she tried to apologise: "Dear Masters have a broad mind to fit your status. Please do not blame Sister Rou. She..." Xiang Shaolong laughing interrupted: "Zhi Zhi rest easy. No one will really blame her."

Wu Zhuo nodded in agreement: "Definitely an experienced first

class assassin. She knows that it is crucial to rest and relax before any action. We must learn from her.” At this time, Wu Guo led Pu Bu and his buddy Liu Chao in. Waiting for their news in agony, everyone was elated to see them.

After pouring out his sorrows over their earlier parting, Liu Chao started speaking: “After I got word from Pu Bu, I instantly contacted my colleagues who are deployed in Le Cheng’s residence. After some investigations, we finally got something conclusive.”

Everyone cheered and listened attentively.

Liu Chao explained: “Le Cheng is a very cautious person. He committed all sorts of atrocities and is afraid of revenge. His movement are highly confidential and is always surrounded by a large group of well-trained warriors. Even now, we have yet to penetrate his circle of trusted escorts.”

Jing Jun was distressed: “I thought you said we have something conclusive?” Liu Chao explained: “That is normally the case. However, Handan City is in a state of panic for the past two days. Le Cheng deployed a huge number of house guards into his escort team, so we have two brothers who managed to slip in. Otherwise, I would not dare to come and see Master Xiang.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “He seems to be afraid of me!”

Liu Chao stressed: “Master Xiang and him have deep grudges. Of course he wants to stay alive!”

Xiang Shaolong is surprised. He asked: “We have deep grudges?”

Liu Chao was alarmed: “What! Does Master Xiang not know that Shu’er is gang raped by Zhao Mu and him till death? He even tells us how he did it and he enjoyed playing with Master Xiang’s woman.”

“What!” Xiang Shaolong was shaking strongly. Afraid that he may be too emotional, Wu Zhuo coaxed him and asked Liu Chao: “Where will Le Cheng be tonight?” Liu Chao replied: “For the sake of the city’s defence, he has spent most of his time in the east gate command post. He is rarely home in the last few days and couldn’t wait to return to his residence.”

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his grief but recollecting Shu’er’s horrifying death, warm blood filled him. In a deep voice, he asked: “What is he afraid of?”

Liu Chao responded: “Madam Le is King Xiaocheng’s sister, Zhao Ya’s elder sister. She is a very smart woman and Le Cheng is afraid of her. All his sexual activities have to be hidden from her.”

Zhao Zhi worriedly said: “If he remained in the command post tonight, what chances do we have?” Liu Chao added: “He has three other villas which he use to house any new girls or concubines. This man is cruel and loves underage girls. The girls he tortured till death or disability are beyond calculation. Recently, an official offended King Xiaocheng and Le Cheng was tasked to annihilate his clan. He secretly kept two concubines for his own pleasure. He has yet to visit them recently so we gauged that he will do so within these two nights.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood why Empress Zhu Ji (Qin,

Xiao Pan's new mother) bore such hatred towards Le Cheng. Now, even without her command, he will never let him off.

Wu Zhuo continued to clarify everything he needed to know about Le Cheng, including the location of the villa used to hide the women. He also asked about Le Cheng's personal escort team and other details. Liu Chao replied all his questions in concise details. After he finished, Wu Zhuo praised him to Xiang Shaolong: "Brother Liu is a talent and has never stop working for you."

Liu Chao modestly replied: "After the visit from Daliang, our band of brothers is willing to lay our lives for Master Xiang anytime. In our opinion, there is not one hero who can match Master Xiang."

Xiang Shaolong recomposed himself and nodded: "After this incident, please come back to Xianyang with me! We will share wealth and woe together and be united as one family."

Li Chao was overjoyed and gave his thanks.

Xiang Shaolong sent him out personally and reminded him to tell his two brothers in the personal escort team to find an excuse not to depart with Le Cheng before returning to the inner hall.

Wu Zhuo and the rest had left to prepare for tonight's operations, leaving only Zhao Zhi and the beautiful pair of twins from Yue.

Xiang Shaolong had calmed down when he thought about the dead Shu'er. He felt like his heart was being stabbed and was in agony.

On his return to Handan City, he has been on the receiving end of Le Cheng's hospitality. Despite knowing it is all a false front, there had been no real sense of enmity. Now that things have changed and he wanted to tear this traitor to pieces. His death will only bring benefits to humanity.

The only issue Xiang Shaolong had with this ancient time is that women are treated like playthings or slaves. Even a Princess like Zhao Ya is also dependent on making men happy for her survival.

A person's authority should arise from an objective and fair legal system. Thinking about this, he remembered the fathers of Legalism Li Si and Han Fei Zi. He wonders if he can influence them to replace Legalism instead of Confucian governance.

After he thought deeper, he realised that as long as it is still a monarchy, real Legalism is just a reflection in the water. A reflection only and never the real thing.

Zhao Zhi slide up to him and tugged: "Master Dong! Your face is really pale and I am worried for you."

Xiang Shaolong was stricken. In this state, he is not suited to lead the assassination. But he is unable to release his agitation for Shu'er.

Reaching out and hugging Zhao Zhi's waist, he coaxed: "Zhi Zhi must stay here tonight and await my return."

Zhao Zhi thundered: "Ah! No! I must be by your side, don't look down on my swordsmanship." Xiang Shaolong lowered his hand and patted her buttocks strongly. He officially state: "Your martial arts and swordsmanship are brilliant but you have never drawn blood before. This is a different matter altogether. Be obedient and listen to me, ok?" Thinking about killing, Zhao Zhi gave a cold consent and lowered her head in silence.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of a great way to relax. He intimately whispered besides her small ear: "Zhi Zhi you wait for me in my room. I do not want to see a piece of clothing on you. I will come and make love to you in a while; did you hear what I said?" Happy but shy, Zhao Zhi tinkled a sweet reply before she tore away from him and ran straight into his room, not daring to look back at him.

The Tian sisters stared at them unknowingly.

Xiang Shaolong summoned the two girls before him. Hugging one on each side, he proclaimed harmoniously: "Tomorrow night is your turn!"

Sometime after the second watch.

The east gate command post's giant doors opened and out galloped two hundred over riders. In formation, they started traveling on the long street. They swerved left and entered an

express lane which is part of the city wall and begin cruising.

Except for four lanterns in front and the four behind lighting the path, the centre formation traveled in total darkness, causing anyone to be unable to see clearly who is riding.

Two rows of forty riders formed a long line and they rode on the edge of the formation, one after another. They resemble a moving wall safeguarding the five groups of riders in the centre. Everyone is holding onto a large shield and is facing externally. If someone were to shoot an assassinating arrow from the houses or the streets, they are likely to miss them, much less the riders in the centre.

The centre group of riders has the most soldiers, numbering fifty. Those at the perimeter all carried tall shields, showing that there is an important person in the centre.

The remaining four groups have twenty soldiers each. They carry a long lance each and are ready to charge or use them as a throwing weapon.

Under the sickly autumn wind, one can feel the strict chill in the air.

The hoof beats shattered the tranquility of the late night.

There are thirty over feet between each group. Even in the case of an ambush, it is hard to surround them unless the enemy has a

force ten times larger. After riding for half a mile, the formation left with express lane and swerved right towards the city.

The sky is thick with clouds, hiding the moon.

The elite members trailing them quickly climbed onto higher buildings and out of sight from the formation. They signaled their nearest teammate and pinpointed Le Cheng's position.

Waiting anxiously at Le Cheng's alternative villa, Xiang Shaolong and company swiftly plotted out their travel route and laid their ambush.

Xiang Shaolong and his troops flattened themselves on roofs. Their head and faces are all securely covered with black cloth. Only their eyes are showing, resembling ghosts. Until they saw the faint light from the lanterns appearing at the far end of the street did they finally put their mind at ease.

If Le Cheng did not use this direction to return to his alternative villa, tonight's operation would have gone to waste.

As the hoof beats sounded, the prey draws nearer.

On the left Wu Zhuo analyzed: "Le Cheng may be a cruel child predator but he still holds water as Zhao's famed general. Looking at his formation, we can tell that he is well qualified."

On the right Shan Rou whispered: "Le Cheng is mine. I must cut

his head personally.”

Xiang Shaolong purposely twisted over and bit her ear softly before adding: “This is a city hunt. Whoever has the best ability will receive the biggest gains.”

Shan Rou shot him an icy look and bend her head with disdain. Her body remained still though.

Xiang Shaolong is high with anticipation.

Right now, the lantern bearers in front have arrived at their ambush point and pass them.

Group after group of enemies rode along the long street. The atmosphere becoming more and more tense.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the time is ripe. He nudged Wu Zhuo as the biggest group of riders with Le Cheng in it entered the heart of the narrow lane below him.

Wu Zhuo let out a shrill whistle, breaking the orderly hoof beats.

The enemy is taken by surprised and looked at the two sides.

The air is filled with the sound of arrows whizzing by. Prone on the two rows of roofs, the elite troops shot out arrow after arrow, killing the horses but not the men.

The war horses' tragic cries and the angry howls of men filled everybody's ears.

The lanterns have been taken out. In the darkness, the war horses jumped wildly and it was chaos.

But the formation remained intact and this is enough to prove the Zhao army has strict training and quality soldiers.

Wu Zhuo knows that the time is appropriate and give the signal to attack.

Xiang Shaolong remained still but Shan Rou had leaped from the roof like a leopard. She dropped a few feet before she shot a cable from her climbing tool at her waist. Like heavenly soldiers descending, she landed on an empty area on the street.

In the same instant, over ten burning fireballs erupted from left and right, vaguely illuminating the enemy's position. The enemy still imagined the attackers are from the two sides. Unknown to them, the attackers have all climbed up.

The elite troops used their flying daggers to deadly perfection. By the time the enemy realised, over half of the formation has been wounded and fallen from their horses. The complete formation is now in disarray.

The rider-less horses started bumping around, adding to the

chaos.

Since Le Cheng's group is the main target, it suffered the most casualties. Fifty over men are down to nearly twenty. The remaining survivors continue falling off their horses.

Those hit by flying daggers are wounded on the face or the chest, transforming this peaceful long street into a living hell of corpses and carcasses.

Xiang Shaolong used his waist cable and descends onto the street.

Before his foot touch the ground, he sent out two palms on his right and left. Unable to feint, two enemies on horseback received the palm on the face and fell off their horses. When he landed, Blood wave was drawn out and he killed two of his three attackers. The last man was stabbed by Shan Rou from the back and tragically yelled before falling towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong stepped aside and scanned the area. The fireballs are still burning on the floor and ten over personal escorts are shielding the calm-looking Le Cheng as they retreated to a back alley.

With shouts of "Kill" ringing the street, the elite soldiers leaped out from both sides. Carrying giant axes, they slayed the remaining foes and left Le Cheng's group alone without support.

Xiang Shaolong winked at Wu Zhuo, leading four of their troops

for the kill.

Like a tigress breaking free, Shan Rou rushed to their backs and shot out a flying dagger. She shot later but she hit the target first. Before Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo make a kill, the dagger hit the throat of an enemy, proving her assassination skills.

Le Cheng roared: “Attack!”

Five men advanced to meet Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo while he continues to retreat.

Xiang Shaolong shouted: “Le Cheng you traitor, let me Xiang Shaolong take your worthless life!”

Le Cheng has entered the back alley. Confident, he grinned: “Come if you dare!”

Shan Rou dashed past Xiang Shaolong, her sword waving ferociously, engaging the enemy before he could.

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo were afraid that she may fail and quickly attacked. The swords and sabres flashed and the aura of death was all around.

These men are Le Cheng’s best swordsmen and they defended their attacks well.

Le Cheng was about to turn and run into other alleys when his bodyguards were felled by arrows.

Leading more men, Jing Jun jumped down from the roof and forced Le Cheng and his troops to panic and head back to the main street.

Those in front can no longer hold back and start falling into their own pool of blood. Helplessly, Le Cheng commanded: “Come with me!”

The remaining six men accompanied him back to where Xiang Shaolong was.

Le Cheng let out a howl and drew his own sword. Fast as lightning, he exchanged three stances with Xiang Shaolong in an instant.

His arm strength is not as strong as Xiang Shaolong. In the last strike, he lost his balance and retreated three steps. Killing the rest of the enemy, Jing Jun somersaulted and sent two flying legs to Le Cheng’s back. “Piak!” Both feet hit Le Cheng at the same time and on the same level as his heart.

Le Cheng staggered and fell forward, his helmet landing on the floor.

A sword flashed. Having just killed another enemy, Shan Rou pounced out from nowhere and overtook Xiang Shaolong. In a cry

of triumph, Le Cheng's head dropped onto the floor. Decapitated, he died tragically on the spot.

Wu Zhou held up the lifeless head and gave the order to retreat.

The cables hanging from the roofs were retrieved, leaving no evidence.

The entire operation, taking less effort than to boil a cup of tea, completely highlights the highly efficient and explosive attacking power of the elite forces.

Other than the strong flames, the floor is littered with carcasses and the blood soaked corpses of the Zhao soldiers.

Book 9 Chapter 4 – The New City Commander

Zhao Mu came to talk to Xiang Shaolong in the earliest hours of daylight. His eyes were lined with red veins and were flashing with uncertainty. Obviously, he has lost his footing.

Xiang Shaolong is still in bed. Half-conscious, he struggled to stay awake. Holding his blanket, he enquired: “Why is Marquis’s complexion worse than myself?” Zhao Mu sat on his bed side was deep in thought. Finally, he replied in a deep voice: “How are your injuries?” Xiang Shaolong pretended to move his limbs with difficulty and act tough. He gave a bored answer: “It is just superficial wounds but I caught a bad chill. After lying for a whole day and night I am feeling much better.”

Zhao Mu did not find anything suspicious. In fact, all those who survived Lord Longyang assassination are still bedridden. It would be strange if only Xiang Shaolong is walking around full of energy.

“Ai!” Zhao Mu cried. “Le Cheng ran into trouble last night!”

Shaken, Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “What!?” Looking at Xiang Shaolong’s eyes wide open, Zhao Mu added: “Le Cheng was assassinated on his way home last night. Even his head was chopped off. Two hundred over personal armed escorts were either dead or heavily injured. Ai!”

Aghast, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “That Xiang Shaolong is really so powerful?” Zhao Mu coldly said: “The residents of the

neighbouring houses did hear someone saying he is Xiang Shaolong himself. But all these attackers are masked and no one can really be sure of their identity. After further investigations, we discovered another batch of soldiers was killed at the east wall, leaving only their climbing ropes. We did not find any footprints outside the city wall though.”

Energized, Xiang Shaolong concluded: “In this case, Xiang Shaolong must be hiding in the city. Marquis must dig him out quickly.”

Zhao Mu angrily shot back: “Do I need you to teach me to do this? The entire Handan City has been flipped over. Unless Xiang Shaolong and his men can burrow underground like rats, they will leave some traces. But we have yet to even detect his shadow. Can you explain to me what the hell is going on?” Zhao Mu was in a bad mood and lost his usual courtesy towards this Dong Horse Fanatic.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing inside. Faking a thinking face, he asked after a while: “Who will be the new commander?” Zhao Mu responded: “Based on the current situation, it will be Cheng Dan!”

His face changing colours, Xiang Shaolong mused: “This is bad for us.”

Zhao Mu recovered: “You finally understand. Le Cheng’s death only benefits King Xiaocheng and not Xiang Shaolong. If Xiang Shaolong wants to kill, it will be long before Le Cheng’s turn. King Xiaocheng has always been cruel. It could even be Zhao Ya’s instigation. If Xiang Shaolong can really come and go as he wishes,

King Xiaocheng and I will be dead long ago.”

Biting his teeth, Xiang Shaolong proposed: “The first mover gains the advantage. If Marquis can poison him through Zhao Queen, this will solve all our problems.” Zhao Mu bitterly replied: “Do you think she is my subordinate? She will not be so stupid to be directly involved in the assassination. But if we manage to kill that muddle-headed King Xiaocheng, I have a way to control her. Ai! What should I do now?” Xiang Shaolong was delighted to comprehend the relationship between Zhao Mu and Zhao Queen – they were only making use of each other.

Zhao Mu saw that Xiang Shaolong is keeping very quiet and thought he is thinking about how to save them. He released a very long sigh before summarizing: “Some things cannot be rushed. It is my great fortune to have a nameless superman like you so I am not defeated yet. But without Le Cheng, my power will diminish greatly and Tian Dan will not be as friendly as usual.”

Standing up, he finished “Rest well and heal your injuries first! I still have to visit other people and calm their nerves. You try to gather more news from Zhao Ya and see what other moves King Xiaocheng is planning.”

Xiang Shaolong advised: “Marquis, please be careful of people changing sides. The mind is unfathomable. Things are not as easy as they always seem!”

Displeased, Zhao Mu said: “How can I not know this? I will contact you in the future.”

After he left, Xiang Shaolong remained in bed and was filled with thoughts.

When the Tian sisters came in and helped him to wash up, Shan Rou skipped in energetically like a little girl. Grinning, she approached his back and used her shoulder to knock him lightly and proudly asked: “Who killed the biggest tiger?” “Another tigress, I admit my inferiority” came Xiang Shaolong’s irritated reply. He reached behind and held her closely against his own back, giving him much excitement.

Shan Rou was in her best mood and did not resist his molest. She curiously mentioned: “We only have ten over injuries; This is indeed miraculously. Nobody will believe even if we say it. Why not we kill Tian Dan as well, then I will do whatever you wish. Zhao Zhi and I can be another pair of Tian sisters.”

Both Tian sisters turned red-faced.

Xiang Shaolong could feel a headache coming. Changing the topic, he asked: “Where is your nice sister?” Shan Rou broke free from his back embrace and chirped: “Don’t change the topic! What kind of hero are you?” As she was combing his hair, Tian Zhen softly mentioned: “Miss Zhi is out gathering news. Aiyah!” She was pinched by Shan Rou.

Xiang Shaolong turned around and folded his sleeves shouting: “This is the first time I have seen such an unreasonable woman. Let me use my wild-horse-taming skill on you shrew! ”

Jutting out her chest, Shan Rou faced him with her almond shaped eyes challenged: “You dare!”

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng knew that he is putting up a show and held their laughter while peeping.

Xiang Shaolong used his large palm and poked her face. Before she could retaliate, he withdrew and joked: “Sister has improved; now she only uses her hands and not her daggers.”

Shan Rou giggled and bats her eyelid at him, showcasing her charm and adorability. Xiang Shaolong was aroused and wanted to give her a bear hug but Shan Rou slipped out of his grasp. Sliding to the door, she smiled departing: “You have not skilled enough to gain my favour. Go home and train for a few more years!” She disappeared laughing but the tinkle of her laughter remains in the air.

Xiang Shaolong was mad and gnashed his teeth. Tian Feng smilingly commented: “Miss Rou does carry a torch for Master Dong. She often chats with us about you.”

Embracing their two waists, Xiang Shaolong softly asked: “What about the both of you?” Both girls squirmed in embarrassment and lowered their heads.

The two similar looking girls with two different attitudes have reignited the desire started by Shan Rou in Xiang Shaolong. Assessing that Handan City will be in mayhem today and that all

his sick visitors have come, he would have plenty of free time today. If he did not enjoy his jade beauties, there would be no better time.

Minds and bodies as one, the chamber is filled passion.

The long awaited rewards for these two beauties were finally bestowed to them in this beautiful moment.

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng's enticing bodies are intertwined with his like an octopus securing its prey. A slight movement by him cause the two exceedingly charming sisters to awake in fright.

Both girls looked outside the window and saw the break of dawn. Startled, they stumbled out of bed.

Xiang Shaolong was overwhelmed by physical scrambling of the sisters jade bodies. He nearly wanted to pull them back into bed but recalling Handan's situation, he forced himself to get out of bed too.

The two girls were delighted to wash up and change for him.

Happiness and joy shone out of their faces, making Xiang Shaolong delirious. His hands worked non-stop like them, causing both girls' ears to turn deep red before he left.

The main hall was totally quiet and no one can be seen.

Xiang Shaolong was enjoying the rare tranquility. Feeling lazy, he abandoned all thoughts and walked over to a sofa and lied down.

Tian Zhen was tidying some clothes when she swayed over and kneeled down beside him. In a crystal clear voice, she asked: “What does Master Dong long to eat? I will prepare it for you.”

Reminded by her words, his stomach rumbled like a drum. Patting her face, he replied: “Anything is fine! Hei! Where has that tigress gone to?”

Tian Zhen could not resist replying: “The tigress is naturally sleeping in the tiger den in daytime. Little Feng is attending to her.” Finished, she left cheerfully.

Xiang Shaolong closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep when Jing Jun and Zhao Zhi returned one after another. Neither of them brought back any negative reports. Xiang Shaolong could finally see the clouds clearing and put down a burden on his mind.

With Le Cheng gone, the stakes have changed and he now holds the initiative.

As Jing Jun and Zhao Zhi ate with him, Zhao Zhi commented: “I have never seen Handan City in such a state. The streets are full of soldiers and every household is being searched and interrogated. Even all our martial warriors at the school have been despatched to help out, causing widespread panic.”

As Xiang Shaolong stuffed himself, he asked: “Did anyone suspect it was my work?” Looking at him with utmost admiration and worship, she chuckled: “Master Dong is famous for his flying needles. Because none were used, everyone is highly suspicious. Zhao Ba even suspects the mastermind to be Li Yuan. Hei! This is so funny!”

Jing Jun added: “I have never seen Sister Zhi so happy before.”

Zhao Zhi shot him a glare and cried: “Busybody!”

Jing Jun quickly smilingly apologised.

This is called everything has its relationship with one another, Xiang Shaolong thought. “Where is big brother?” he asked. Jing Jun answered: “He is back at the farm.” Lowering his voice, he added: “Now that the Zhao soldiers are searching the population, we should take the chance to send the injured brothers back to the farm for healing and cover a potential loophole.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved.

Wu Zhuo is clever and cautious and will have a good excuse.

Jing Jun continued: “Big brother had wanted to speak to third brother but third brother ... Hei!”

Zhao Zhi stared and questioned: “Why are you stuttering, Little Jun? What is wrong is third brother?” Xiang Shaolong is unafraid of Zhao Zhi. His hand snaked under the table and began to feel her thigh. This appealing beauty instantly kept quiet and lowered her head.

Tian Feng walked out of the kitchen, holding a huge jar of wine. She asked: “Does Master Dong want to try Lord Longyang’s tonic wine?” Jing Jun clapped and yelled: “This is what he needs right now! You should join us for a drink too.”

Both girls’ petite faces start to become hot.

Xiang Shaolong found the situation very ironic. He whistled: “Unless you are too weak to absorb the nutrients, every man needs this stuff. Come! Get Zhen Zhen to join us too and let’s celebrate.”

Time passes by in this happy setting.

In the evening, a fresh Shan Rou left her bedroom and dragged Zhao Zhi to the backyard and prayed to their departed parents.

Jing Jun loved excitement. Leading ten over experts, he went out to spy but was actually out to party.

Xiang Shaolong did not stop him as he agrees that it will give them more knowledge about Handan City’s current affairs.

He was pining for Ji Yanran but knows that he must stay indoors.

The only way to suppress this yearning was to seek out Tian Zhen and Tian Feng, pleasuring them to the maximum.

All the other men only love their bodies; who is willing to share their sorrows?

Zhao Zhi is unofficially his mistress and moved in as well. He could not bear to contradict her action. After dinner, he was intended on a quiet night when there was a sudden visitor – it is Marquis Pingshan Han Chuang.

Sitting in the hall, Han Chuang scrutinized his complexion and nodded: “Brother Dong is fitter than his horses. Your complexion has improved so much. Does the wound still hurt?” “Thanks for Marquis’s concern. I am indeed much better today. Ai! General Le Cheng left so unexpectedly.”

Han Chuang revealed a cold air and spoke with disdain: “There are some people in this world that can die suddenly and no one can guess who the murderer is. This is because they have harmed too many people. If I may, I would love to stab him myself. In the past when he was guarding the Zhao-Han border, he often trespassed my area and committed atrocities. Both his hands are full of blood. Humph!”

Xiang Shaolong was mortified. He normally saw Han Chuang and Le Cheng behaving like close brothers but they were hiding these deep grudges. Feigning surprise, he exclaimed: “General Le Cheng is really such a person?” Han Chuang cut in: “Forget this man. Let’s discuss about the future.”

Xiang Shaolong muttered to himself. Does this man want to use me to face off Li Yuan?

Han Chuang received his tea from Tian Feng and lecherously looked at her back frame. Swallowing his saliva, he recomposed himself and described: "On your return to Zhao, you would hope to carve out a prosperous career. Ultimately, horse-breeding is just horse-breeding. The most you can be the next Wu Family. You will never hold an official post, do you understand Brother Dong?" Xiang Shaolong thought to himself – even if I am the real Dong Kuang, I would never go to Han as it is even weaker than Zhao. Putting up a false front, he started: "I am grateful that Marquis recognizes my talent. But..." Han Chuang interrupted: "Brother Dong is mistaken. If ever you wish to come to my state, I welcome you with open arms. But today's topic is about the vacancy of the City Commander created by Le Cheng's death."

Xiang Shaolong was befuddled. Han Chuang is a Han citizen. When is his turn to meddle with the affairs of Zhao? The City Commander is equivalent to the biggest protector of Zhao King and is someone the Zhao King would trust the most. He would never try to vie for this position even in his dreams.

Han Chuang proudly revealed: "Brother Dong would have never guessed that the Zhao Queen has Han roots. Through her, I am able to influence Zhao politics to a certain extent."

Xiang Shaolong then remembered that Zhao Queen is part of the plan to unite the three states. The Han royalty married to King Xiaocheng would naturally have some connections to Han Chuang.

Kicking himself for this oversight, he confessed: “I have no idea at all!”

Han Chuang loftily added: “If I put in a few words for you to Zhao Queen, she can influence King Xiaocheng’s decision.”

After Zhao Mu’s decline in power, Zhao Ya and Zhao Queen are the two people who have the most influence on King Xiaocheng.

Xiang Shaolong was shaken. Like Lord Longyang, he had underestimated Han Chuang. This man is always lusting after Zhao Ya. Besides her body, the more crucial reason is to manipulate King Xiaocheng through her. He can even conquer Zhao without bloodshed. From this point of view, Zhao Mu is at best a little pawn in the hand of Zhao Queen.

In this warring period, everyone survives by acquiring information. National conspiracies are all executed openly and discreetly.

Frowning, he asked: “Didn’t King Xiaocheng get Cheng Dan to succeed Le Cheng?” Han Chuang scolded angrily: “Who the hell is Cheng Dan? He stole some of Xiang Shaolong’s credit to attain his present position. His prestige and abilities are insufficient to win the hearts and minds of his subordinates. In this urgent situation, he is only temporary assigned to take charge!”

Xiang Shaolong was agitated. If he is the City Commander, capturing Zhao Mu will be the easiest thing on earth. Disbelieving King Xiaocheng’s naivety, he bitterly joked: “I have been in

Handan City for a short while only. My seat is not even warm yet and I don't even qualify in the first place. Marquis need not waste the effort."

Still highly enthusiastic, Han Chuang encouraged: "Brother Dong is too humble. Everyone in Handan City knows you and your popularity is sky high. From the gift of a thousand war horses, the dissing of the Chu people, the gate-crashing, the saving of Lord Longyang, etc. If you become the City Commander, there will be no one who can offer a better candidate."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "One gate-crashing is not enough to change Zhao King's opinion."

Han Chuang smiled craftily and continued: "Black can be twisted to white and white can be twisted to black. All it takes is a mouth. If King Xiaocheng appoints you, it also shows he is open-minded, generous and good at utilising talents. Brother Dong is all prepared but only lacks the mouth. I can even influence Zhao Ya and have both of them speak up for you. What more is there to worry by then?" Xiang Shaolong is finally blown over and his heart is rejuvenated. He looked at Han Chuang suspiciously and asked: "This act of kindness; what can I do to repay Marquis?" Han Chuang saw that he is tempted and is just as happy. He laughed loudly: "We are all family and there is no need for such words! Come! Let me arrange for you to meet the Queen and we can talk about the rest later." He stood up and turned around.

Xiang Shaolong pretends to get up forcefully and send him to the door.

As they walked, Han Chuang advised: "Do not get involved with

Zhao Mu or Guo Zhong. At the same time, do not offend Zhao Ya or Guo Kai. This way, the City Commander's position will be yours. Hey! King Xiaocheng is very impressed with your saving of Lord Longyang."

"Has Lord Longyang recovered?" Xiang Shaolong queried. Han Chuang hissed: "If you need one day to recover, he will need at least ten days! Oh! Are the twin sisters thrilling?" How can Xiang Shaolong not understand his intention? Cursing to himself, he whispered: "I can send them to keep you company but we better be discreet and do not let others suspect our relationship. When I am appointed the City Commander, then we will have no fear."

Han Chuang reluctantly sighed: "Brother Dong is right. Better to be discreet. Once I have word from Zhao Queen, I will notify you immediately."

Sending off Han Chuang, Xiang Shaolong wanted to shout out for joy and express the joy and excitement in his heart.

Who would have guessed that killing Le Cheng will bring about this wonderful ending?

Book 9 Chapter 5 – Stealing The Bell While Covering The Ears

Xiang Shaolong had yet to turn back to his residence when Zhao Ya's carriage passed Han Chuang's carriage and entered the driveway.

Xiang Shaolong sighed and approached her carriage, opening the door personally.

Zhao Ya simply stared at him and asked softly: "Can you get up and start walking?" Flexing his limbs, he escorted her into the hall and answered: "If I continue to stay in bed, I will be bored to death"

Zhao Ya jested: "You are healthier than Lord Longyang. He is still bedridden. He probably needs another 10 odd days before he recovers completely."

She continued in a low voice: "What did Han Chuang say to you?" Xiang Shaolong did not want her to run into Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi and led her to the east guestroom. Without a care, he said: "Nothing worth mentioning. That lecher saw the twin sisters I had and wanted to borrow them for a night. I turned him away instead. Humph! So what if he is unhappy, I hate this kind of perverts."

His words are half true. It is true that Han Chuang did have that intention. It is untrue as it is not his actual motive. Zhao Ya could not distinguish the truth and nodded in agreement, adding a few

words criticising Han Chuang.

Xiang Shaolong was guilt-ridden. Seriously speaking, he is not better off than Han Chuang. He is also the one who snatched the Tian sisters from Zhao Mu. The only difference is that they followed him willingly!

Out of a sudden, Zhao Ya grabbed his arm and led him out of the side door into the garden. As they walked to the pond at the centre of the garden, she whispered: “What is the relationship between Zhao Mu and you? Why did he take special care of you? Why did he look for you so early today morning?” Xiang Shaolong was taken aback. Knowing that she is working for King Xiaocheng, he shrugged his shoulders and insisted: “You ask me; I ask who? I have no need to explain to anyone why someone is treating me well or ill-treating me! I don’t give a damn.”

They reached the poolside and Zhao Ya dragged him to sit down together before laughing: “I love to see your angry look; it is like watching a stubborn child.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be upset but was very intimidated. Based on her attention to details, his winking at Zhao Mu (during Tian Dan’s dinner) could not escape her eyes. He wonders if she has reported this to King Xiaocheng.

Zhao Ya innocently leaned on him. Wrinkling her nose, she complained: “Oh! You are reeking of herbal smells. It is clogging my nose!”

Xiang Shaolong rudely shot: “Nobody asked you to follow me!”

Zhao Ya laughed like a blossoming tree and looks like she is enjoying herself.

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Your old flame entered the city to commit murder and you can still be carefree and unbothered. Just what in the world is going on?” Zhao Ya smoothly picked a yellow leaf from a short tree and sniffed on it: “This leaf is more fragrant than you.”

Stunned, Xiang Shaolong demanded: “Are you not listening to me?” Zhao Ya’s beautiful gaze floated over. Batting her eye, she replied: “Your voice is so special and full of character. I cannot stop listening even if I want to” Followed by a giggle, she chuckled: “Dong Horse Fanatic is just like the others, thinking that it is Xiang Shaolong who did the killings. The ignorant cannot be blamed. You were not aware of Handan’s affairs so you can only guess blindly.”

Xiang Shaolong was laughing to himself but on the outside, he gnashed his teeth cursing: “Who else can it be that hates Le Cheng so much that he must kill him?”

Zhao Ya leaned even closer with half of her enticing chest resting on his arm. She threw the leaf into the river and looked up to the moon and spoke softly: “Must you hate someone to kill him? If you want to know who may be Le Cheng’s killer, you must first tell me what did Zhao Mu said this morning. Ai! Didn’t you know that I am concerned about you?” Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “You are really concerned about me? I think you are more afraid that I

may die and cannot detain the real Xiang Shaolong.”

Zhao Ya’s face reddened and cooed: “I am concerned about both of you! Frank enough? Tell me quick.”

Xiang Shaolong was mesmerized by her tireless spirit and evoked his past happy memories where they often have the usual couple’s tiff. Charmed, he was lost in thought.

A smile formed on Zhao Ya’s face and she sighed; “You are always in your own world and do not care about me. Handan City is full of danger and any mistake would lead to the annihilation of your entire clan. I cannot protect you and you are still acting angry.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be perplexed and replied: “He did not tell me any secrets but came to ask me more about Chu. I could tell that the Marquis of Julu was troubled and I guessed he must have been traumatized by the formidable old flame of yours.”

After a moment’s thought, Zhao Ya faintly said: “This matter should be kept from you but I am afraid that you may get involved with Zhao Mu so I have to force it out from you.”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted to know that his guess was accurate. Le Cheng is a two-headed snake whose loyalty is shuffling between King Xiaocheng and Zhao Mu. Both parties will suspect each other to be the mastermind.

Zhao Ya reached to his ear and disclosed: “Zhao Mu is the chief

suspect in Le Cheng's death."

Xiang Shaolong feigned shock and cried: "What!?" Zhao Ya stated: "That's all you need to know and do not ask anymore. Ai! Zhao Mu is really stupid, measuring others by his own yardstick and made this wrong move. King Xiaocheng no longer has any hesitation about this man and will not hold back anymore."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "In this case, why didn't King Xiaocheng seize Zhao Mu immediately?" Zhao Ya coldly snorted: "Did you know how Le Cheng died? Over two hundred of his best men killed or injured in the time needed to boil a cup of tea. Zhao Mu did not have such capabilities and must have received assistance from someone. Besides, we have no evidence and dare not act rashly. The king had wanted to recall Lian Po or Li Mu but we will fall into the mastermind's trap. Ai! We are all in a dilemma."

"Oh heavens," Xiang Shaolong told himself. Even Tian Dan has been embroiled into this case. Maybe Li Yuan will be implicated sooner or later. Le Cheng's death has brought about many effects.

Thinking ahead, Xiang Shaolong acted alarmed: "Guess I better head out to the farm tomorrow and leave this place of deceit. I will focus on horse-breeding and occasional pleasures of the flesh and happily live this life."

Zhao Ya whined: "If you really leave, then what is to become of me?"

Xiang Shaolong declared: “You are you; I am I. What has Princess got to do with me? You promised to be frank and only shared little titbits of information with me like I am begging you for it. I seriously don’t give a hoot about your information. If not for your soothing touches, I would have thrown you out of the house and here you dare to ask me what is to become of you!”

Not only was Zhao Ya not offended, she was laughing till she nearly couldn’t catch her breath. Holding her belly in pain, she asked: “Have you fulfilled your promise? You only know how to anger others. Ai! Times passes fast when I am with you. Too bad I still have to visit my brother in the palace. Shall I come by to accompany you later?” Xiang Shaolong moaned: “If you want my wounds to reopen and bleed, then come and find me! This is called sacrificing blood to accompany the jade beauty”

Zhao Ya cried: “You rejected me again; am I not attractive to you?” Xiang Shaolong started to undress and hissed: “If you don’t believe, feel free to check out my body.”

Zhao Ya laughingly helped him up and exclaimed: “I take my hat off you! Not an inch of shame and decency. I’ll need to go off. Can you send me to the door?” Holding hands, Xiang Shaolong led her back to the east room, through the corridor and back to the courtyard.

Zhao Ya was in great spirits and began to hum a tune that Xiang Shaolong used to hear from her frequently.

Xiang Shaolong could not endure and asked: “Why is Princess exceedingly happy tonight?” Zhao Ya’s complexion suddenly

darkened and she lowered her head in silence. Until she reached the external ground and boarded her carriage did she held onto the window and waved to him softly saying: “After Xiang Shaolong’s departure, I thought of suicide on many occasions but that will only benefit Zhao Mu. I had also hoped to be able to do something for Xiang Shaolong. Now that success is nearing, how can I not be delighted?” Xiang Shaolong could feel his hostility reducing and his mind is in turmoil. Following her lead, he asked: “If Zhao Mu is dead, what are your plans?” Her face becoming burning red. Gazing at Xiang Shaolong with strong feelings, she said: “At first I did not know what to do. After your insolent attack yesterday, I know I have found someone to replace Xiang Shaolong. No one else will suffice. Does Master Dong understand my thinking?” The blind was lowered, blocking Xiang Shaolong’s sight.

Even though the horse carriage has gone far, he is still stoned on the courtyard, tasting an indescribable sensation.

Shan Rou and Jing Jun were waiting in the hall. Shan Rou is enthusiastically poring over a map laid on the table while Jing Jun is yawning and couldn’t wait to get away.

“Where are they?” Xiang Shaolong asked. Shan Rou impatiently answered: “Who knows if you are coming back? I have sent them to sleep first.”

With a pained expression, Jing Jun pleaded: “I did not sleep the whole day like sister; why didn’t you send me to sleep too?” Shan Rou rolled up the map and glared at him: “Are your legs grown on my body? You did not go to sleep on your own and now you are blaming others.”

Jing Jun shot back: “Earlier, I said I wanted to sleep. Who is the one who dragged me out to check out the map?” Lacking a good reason, she gave him a strong shove and chimed: “Get lost! I have someone to accompany me now.”

Jing Jun shook his head helplessly and gave Xiang Shaolong a look of sympathy before disappearing like a burst of smoke.

Putting aside Zhao Ya’s issue, Xiang Shaolong sat opposite Shan Rou and asked: “Let me see what ugly drawing you have done.” Shan Rou was about to reopen the map but hid the map behind her upon hearing his words. Her almond eyes staring at him, she spit: “I dare you to repeat that!”

Giving in, Xiang Shaolong toned down: “My good sister. Will you please allow me to admire your masterpiece that was resulted of your dedicated sweat, blood and tears?” From annoyance to joyfulness, Shan Rou laid out the map and hummed: “Dedicated sweat, blood and tears? You are so good at exaggeration.”

Focusing on the map, Xiang Shaolong was quickly absorbed.

It is a geographic map of both within Handan City and the outlying areas. The details are precise and stunning. Although it is not as good as satellite pictures of the 21st Century, it is still a rare piece of work. Xiang Shaolong did not expect Shan Rou to be so talented but on the other hand, this is a basic requisite of an outstanding assassin.

Shan Rou was pleased that Xiang Shaolong is giving the map plenty of attention. She began pointing out several key points and explaining them.

Xiang Shaolong could not stop nodding his head and committing the information to memory.

When Shan Rou finished, he heard the street watchman shouting the time. It was the third watch.

Xiang Shaolong gave a big stretch and yawned: “Can you accompany me to sleep?” Shan Rou turned red-faced, shot him a glare and folded her map. Shaking her head, she rejected: “I am not sleepy at all. You go ahead on your own! Zhi Zhi is in my room. If you like it, you can carry your biggest fan to your room.” Xiang Shaolong casually replied: “If you do not want to sleep, so be it!” and entered his own room.

Shan Rou jumped out with both hands on her waist interrupting: “Hey!”

Xiang Shaolong was amused. Halting but not turning around, he asked with his back facing her: “What advice does Miss Shan has for me?” Shan Rou demanded: “Are you willing to help us sisters against Tian Dan or not?” Turning his well-built frame around, he put one hand out and offered: “Come! Let’s talk more in bed.”

Both of Shan Rou’s cheeks turned reddish, adding more charm to this graceful beauty. Staring harshly stared at him and stomped her feet saying: “Who is afraid of going! If you are lying to me, I

will kill you with one stroke of my dagger.”

Xiang Shaolong smilingly walked to her and pulled her soft and warm hand, leading her back to his room.

One step into the room, Shan Rou gave a violent struggle and pulled her hand back from his iron grip. She turned and tried to leave.

Xiang Shaolong moved quickly and blocked her way taunting: “I thought we have agreed?” Shan Rou’s face was burning like fire. She use her hand to press against his chest to avoid falling into his embrace. “No! No deal!” She shook her head strongly. She withdrew her hand, stood straight up but lowered her head to avoid his devilish gaze.

Xiang Shaolong was very aroused and laughed: “This is not the first time we shared a bed together, why is there no deal this time?” Shan Rou shook her head violently and blushed: “No! I know this time it will be different.”

Xiang Shaolong noticed that she still dare not look straight at him and commented: “So the fierce like a tiger sister Shan also had a frightened and shy side of her!”

Shan Rou forcefully raised her fully-red face. Catching his eyes, she was frightened into lowering her head again. Stamping her feet, she whined: “Are you giving way or not?” Xiang Shaolong started to unbutton her dress and plainly replied: “Feel free to use your dagger!”

Under his caress, Shan Rou could not even stand straight, not to mention using her dagger.

Trembling, she cried: “Ah! Please let me go?” Xiang Shaolong well-trained hands have already unbuttoned her outer garments, revealing her inner garments as well as the start of a deep cleavage.

Shan Rou was shaking non-stop. She closed both eyes and was breathing quickly, causing her chest to heave a lot.

Xiang Shaolong opened up her clothes beyond her shoulders and exposed her sword injury and her chest muscles. Pressing down her shoulders with his left hand, he pressed the sword scar with his right hand and asked: “Does it still hurt?” The trembling Shan Rou yelled: “Ah! Of course it hurts! You.... Ai! Xiang Shaolong! You big bully!”

Xiang Shaolong moved his hand up and held onto her other shoulder tightly. He bent his head and kissed on the sword scar.

How can Shan Rou endure this? She groaned in the most arousing manner.

Xiang Shaolong took off her lower garments and carried her at her waist towards his bed.

Shan Rou weakly held onto his neck and buried her head in his shoulder, panting heavily. When Xiang Shaolong climbed onto the bed, she regained her strength and slipped out from his grasp and

hid in one corner of the bed with her back against the wall.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling very sensual and tore after her, removing other parts of her clothing. Reminded of their earlier tussle when he saw her beautiful legs while her skirt was raised, his heart was burning with wild passion.

After a brave yet hopeless defence by Shan Rou, this normally-stubborn beauty is left with a tight and thin white singlet and a pair of sweet-smelling shorts.

Shan Rou suddenly became clear-minded and held on to her clothes while Xiang Shaolong's invading hands have grabbed her round and supple legs.

Shan Rou feebly looked at him and tremblingly pleaded: "Xiang Shaolong! We cannot do this! You haven't even closed the door!"

Xiang Shaolong was tooting with amusement. Releasing his hold on her white jade legs, he climbed down the bed and laughed: "I thought Sister you are a fearless woman. So you were actually afraid of an open door! I will do what you want!"

When he reached the bed again, Shan Rou was seated up and staring hard at him.

Xiang Shaolong was smiling from ear to ear sat in front of her with their legs touching. He leaned forward and asked: "Rou Rou, did you forget your dagger?" Shan Rou gave a snort and gave him a

charming look before scolding: “So what if I am armed? What can a dagger do against a pervert like you?” Xiang Shaolong unscrupulously reached into her singlet and fondled her firm breasts. “You are not only a first class assassin; you are a natural stunner as well” he praised.

With her eyes full of passion, Shan Rou weakly pressed on his shoulders and whined: “Have you had enough?” Xiang Shaolong was high on adrenaline to conquer this difficult beauty and countered: “Has Sister Rou had enough?” Shan Rou can no longer keep her eyes open. Out of a sudden, she grabbed his evil hand through her shirt and panted: “Can you stop for a while?” This is the first time Xiang Shaolong ever hear her speak in such a pleading tone. Letting his right hand rest between her breasts, he stopped and smiled: “So what now?” Shan Rou forcefully opened her eyes and protested; “I had said you were up to no good. See what you have caused!” Xiang Shaolong acted surprised: “What have I caused? I have caused you to be so mesmerizing and adorable!”

He started fondling again.

Shan Rou can no longer resist and trembled with his violations. She begged: “Can I say a few words?” Xiang Shaolong arrogantly halt his invasion and victoriously exclaimed: “What else is there to say? You should know what is about to happen!”

Shan Rou shying lowered her head and added: “I know so I am here to negotiate with you.”

Xiang Shaolong roared: “In any battle, the loser will have to be kicked out of the city. What is there to negotiate?”

Shan Rou roared back: “Who has surrendered? You only won a small battle, I... ..” Xiang Shaolong is even more turned-on. He withdrew his right hand and smiled: “Ai! I almost forgot you still have some territory that I have not conquered. You still have your capital.”

When his hands retreated, Shan Rou recovered quickly and somersaulted out of his devilish claws. She rolled till she reached the bedside and giggled: “Don’t come over or I will get out of your room!”

Xiang Shaolong has no intention of pursuing. Adopting a waiting attitude, he shifted himself and leaned against the wall. Fully stretching his legs, he pointed at her and commanded: “Wifey come here obediently.”

In a messy state of undress with her hair out of place, the sexy Shan Rou put her arms on her waist and snubbed: “No!”

Noticing the full-of-confidence Xiang Shaolong sitting there admiring her body, she softened and coldly offered: “Unless you promised not to molest me.”

Xiang Shaolong said in a huff: “Who will retreat having tasted some victory? Shan Rou, you are a mature woman and you should know there are some things tonight that you cannot avoid.”

Shan Rou gave him faint look and acceptingly moved to his side. Adopting the same posture and stretching her beautiful legs, she

smoothly said: “You should know better. I know I was arrogant in masquerading as your wife but I am unwilling to subject myself like other females. Other girls are born to be slaves or concubines or courtesans but I will not accept such a fate. Ai! I do not know how to explain further.”

Xiang Shaolong was filled with guilt. Shan Rou possess different views about females compared to her peers. Putting his hand around her shoulder, he locked her fragrant lips in a deep kiss and both of them were lost in paradise.

Shan Rou responded with great sensations.

After a while, Xiang Shaolong held her face in front of his own. Peering into his crystal clear eyes, he vowed: “I will respect Rou Rou’s thinking. Tonight shall end here. You can sleep in my bed while I find somewhere else to sleep.”

Shan Rou was lost and faintly asked: “Are you seeking Zhi Zhi or Tian sisters?” Xiang Shaolong replied: “I do not want to wake them. There is another spare room right? I will sleep there.”

Shan Rou was moved and said: “I have never seen someone like you who is always so considerate about other people. Fine. Let’s go there together.”

“Let’s go together,” was Xiang Shaolong’s stunned reply.

Shan Rou resumed her haughty composure and curled up her

mouth announcing: “If you violate me again, I will personally throw you back here to sleep alone. You are to keep this between us. Do not expect me to be as obedient as Zhi Zhi. Unless I desire you myself, you are not to take any liberties with me.”

Xiang Shaolong remarked: “Aren’t you stealing the bell while covering your ears?” Shan Rou was curious: “What is stealing the bell while covering your ears?” Xiang Shaolong explained: “The thief covered his ears while stealing the bell. When he was running and the bell was ringing, he thought that if he cannot hear it, neither can others. Isn’t that what you are doing now?” Shan Rou bent over laughing and cried: “How is it the same? Nothing is ringing now!” Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Has Miss Rou forgotten that she can moan?” Shan Rou was deeply embarrassed and forcefully pulled him down the bed hissing: “Come! It will be daybreak soon.”

Xiang Shaolong was doubled up in laughter: “Rou Rou, there is evidence of your bell theft on the floor and on the bed.”

In the comfortable night, two beating hearts were ringing. Both of them felt like they were having an exciting affair under the watch of the entire world.

Book 9 Chapter 6 – Each Having Their Own Motives

Having tasted the forbidden fruit, Shan Rou was much more compliant and well behaved. Early in the morning, she pretended nothing has happened and brought Zhao Zhi to practise their swordsmanship on the garden. Jing Jun was pining for his pretty village girl and left for the farm at daybreak, leaving Tian Zhen and Tian Feng to breakfast with Xiang Shaolong.

Wu Guo came in and reported: “Marquis Pingshan has sent word to invite third master to his residence in the afternoon.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed. The person who wanted him to be the City Commander was Zhao Queen Empress Jing and not Han Chuang. Otherwise, it will not be easy for Han Chuang to fix an appointment with the First Lady of Zhao.

Thinking deeper, everything starts falling in place.

Handan City’s generals were all split into different factions. He is the only one who has yet to ally with any party. If he becomes the City Commander, he will naturally be the confidant of Empress Jing. After the demise of King Xiaocheng and the power transfer to Empress Jing, he will be her most powerful weapon.

But why did she choose him?

Wu Guo saw that Xiang Shaolong was deep in thought and dared

not interrupt. When he was about to take his leave, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “How is the situation outside?” Wu Guo strictly reported: “It is more peaceful now but there are still Zhao soldiers doing checks at every main street. King Xiaocheng has sent out an official notice that no one is allowed to house any strangers and every inn is thoroughly searched.”

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng like Wu Guo’s character. Witnessing his strict reporting, they cannot help but laughed in secret. While Xiang Shaolong looked away, he winked at them, adding to their happiness.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly shouted: “Wu Guo!”

Wu Guo jumped up in fright and quickly acknowledged.

Xiang Shaolong instructed: “Send word to Talented Lady Ji that I will officially visit her in the evening and want to have dinner with her.”

Wu Guo received his order and left.

Full of sweat, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou came in and sat on his two sides. The Tian sisters hurriedly see to their needs.

Recalling Shan Rou’s enticing figure and wild beauty, his heart sweetened and coaxed: “Aren’t the both of you going for a shower first?” Shan Rou hesitated but Zhao Zhi joyfully complained: “But I am hungry!” As she ate, she continued: “Sister Rou’s steps have

slowed down and I am able to catch up.”

Xiang Shaolong understood the reason for the slowing down and nearly spit his bun out.

Shan Rou's face reddened and she pinched Xiang Shaolong's thigh fiercely under the table.

Zhao Zhi was deep in thought before enlightenment shone on her face. Her face then turned red and lowered her head, eating in an awkward atmosphere. Xiang Shaolong was humoured. Feeling both girls under the table, he then stood up patting his stomach, mentioning: “I am going out for a walk and exercise my muscles.”

Zhao Zhi yelped: “Wait for me! I nearly forgot Zhao Ba instructed me to bring you to the martial school.”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “Is this considered an invitation?” Zhao Zhi's face was fiery red by now and she retorted: “Your legs are not grown on my body; Who cares where you are going.” Smiling sweetly, she batted her eyelids and left.

Xiang Shaolong faced the Shan Rou who is still eating and added: “We'll wait for sister!”

Shan Rou gave a loud howl and kicked over with her leg.

Xiang Shaolong avoided and smiled: “My good Rou Rou. Do you still think your kicks are as formidable as last night, nearly taking

my life?” Smoke coming out from her ears, Shan Rou picked up a bun and threw it at his face. Xiang Shaolong caught the bun neatly and took a bite. “Sister Rou tastes better,” he said after a short moment of thinking.

As Shan Rou pounced up like a mad tiger, he has followed Zhao Zhi and slipped into the bath house.

He spent the entire morning at the martial school. When Zhao Ba brought up “Long Shan,” Xiang Shaolong gave the excuse that he was at the farm.

As Zhao Zhi was directing fifty female warriors in their practice routines, Zhao Ba pulled Xiang Shaolong aside and intimately said: “I was summoned to the palace last night by King Xiaocheng and your name came up.”

Stunned, Xiang Shaolong asked: “What?!” Zhao Ba continued in a low voice: “He wanted to hear about how you and Long Shan battled Li Yuan. Naturally, I was full of praise.”

Xiang Shaolong quickly gave his thanks but his heart was muttering in turmoil.

King Xiaocheng may not be so astute to discover any suspicious points about him but the crafty and intelligent Guo Kai may raise some suspicions about this horse-breeding army. Of course, King Xiaocheng may be just thinking of a suitable position for him and is seeking advice from Zhao’s chief Martial trainer.

From Zhao Ba's words, there must be other stuff that King Xiaocheng had spoken about. He must ask Zhao Zhi later if she knows anything.

For everyone's safety, he has to win over Zhao Ya and use her to investigate Guo Kai's schemes. Anyway, Zhao Ya had deceived him before. When he deceived her in return, this wanton woman can only accept her fate.

After lunch, Xiang Shaolong left Zhao Zhi at the martial school and went to Han Chuang's residence alone.

Handan City is slowly regaining its former peace but the pedestrians are much lesser. He met some soldiers occasionally and everyone paid respects to him. He felt more prestigious than his former position of Zhao's Number One Warrior.

Han Chuang's residence is swarming with strict Zhao soldiers. Xiang Shaolong deduced that Empress Jing has arrived even before him.

Why is she so anxious about him? Maybe she has a motive and needs someone she can trust to become Handan City's City Commander and this newcomer is the best choice.

He remember that Empress Jing and Zhao Ya were not on good terms at Tian Dan's feast. If Empress Jing recommends other people for the post, Zhao Ya may object but if it was Dong Horse Fanatic, Zhao Ya may adopt a different attitude altogether.

After the servant's report, Han Chuang came to receive him in the main hall. He brought Xiang Shaolong to a side hall and suspiciously emphasize: "Be careful when you speak later. This sister Empress is very formidable. If you say anything wrong, your City Commander promotion will be gone."

Han Chuang continued: "On this trip to Handan City, I have another mission – which is to escort my State's seventh Princess here to marry the Crown Prince. Empress Jing use her as an excuse to visit so there will be no loopholes."

Xiang Shaolong was amazed. This political marriage must be put together by Empress Jing. Among the six states, Zhao and Han are on much better terms.

Taking this chance, Xiang Shaolong asked about the alliance treaty. Frustrated, Han Chuang cursed: "Using Yan as an excuse, Tian Dan and Li Yuan made a huge disruption to the negotiations. These two people in cahoots are more dangerous than Qin as far as we from the Three-States Ally are concerned. Guo Zhong and I heavily suspect them to mastermind the assassination on Lord Longyang and you. Not satisfied with only his death, they wanted to kill you as well."

Xiang Shaolong was blown away. With Zhao Ya's reminder, he wasn't as sure about his initial suspicion that Prince Xinling is the assassin. Although Tian Dan wanted to recruit him, it is just another form of "killing" him. In times like these, talented people that you cannot recruit are better killed so as to deprive other people of utilising them.

An attendant came to report that Empress Jing is ready to meet him.

With Han Chuang at his side, Xiang Shaolong crossed two stairwells, a huge garden before meeting the First Lady of Zhao in the inner chamber.

After they paid their respects, Empress Jing winked at Han Chuang. He retreated with all the attendants, leaving only the two of them seated and facing each other across a table.

Dressed in a luxurious outfit, the Zhao Queen looked even more elegant and attractive.

Compared to Lady Pingyuan, they have their own strengths and it is hard to distinguish who better.

Flashing her eyes and scrutinizing him, Empress Jing simply said: "Does Mister Dong know why I set up an appointment to see you?" From her tone, Xiang Shaolong could tell that it was herself and not Han Chuang who wanted him to be the City Commander. Han Chuang is just the messenger. He respectfully bowed: "Marquis has mentioned. I am grateful for your kindness and I will do my utmost best to repay your favour."

Empress Jing seemed to be unmoved by his display of loyalty. She coldly asked: "There are two reasons I chose you. Does Mister wish to know?" Xiang Shaolong raised his head in surprise; could it be that she was attracted to his masculinity?

Her beautiful eyes looking deeply at him, she slowly said: “The first reason is that Tian Dan looks up to you, so you cannot be incapable.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization. Curious, he asked: “Can I know what the other reason is?” Empress Jing gave a light sigh: “Because you reminded me of someone else. He is fearless like you. Too bad for the timing and he can never be of use to me.”

Xiang Shaolong was stricken. The person she mentioned is naturally himself.

Noticing his silence, she asked: “Doesn’t Mister want to know who he is?” Nodding, Empress Jing is pleased with his thoughtfulness. Her voice switching, she coldly asked: “What is your relationship with Zhao Mu? Why did he try all means to divert his gift of the Tian sisters to you instead?” Xiang Shaolong knows that this is a crucial moment that he cannot afford to hesitate or give an answer similar to the one he gave to Zhao Ya. He shrugged his shoulders saying: “Since I entered Handan capital, the Marquis of Julu has been showering me with gifts. I do not have the slightest idea of why he is doing that.”

Glaring at him briefly, she deeply proclaimed: “From today onwards, you can only be loyal to the King and me, the Queen. Any deviation will result in untold misfortunes; don’t say I did not warn you. Based on Mister’s intelligence, I need not say more and you should understand what is going on!” Xiang Shaolong had to admit that she is really clever. This female strategist put herself on the same level as King Xiaocheng. He cannot even tell if her words are real or false.

On one side, she is using Zhao Mu. At the same time, she is guarding against him.

Empress Jing added: “Did Marquis Julu tell you anything that is of special importance?” Thinking for a while, Xiang Shaolong disclosed: “Marquis Julu is not very fond of Li Yuan and often asked me for suggestions on how to fix him. There are no other special information.”

Empress Jing was satisfied and nodded her head. Changing the topic, she asked: “Does Zhao Ya often come to harass you? She is ugly right? What are you always so aloof towards her?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is asking these personal issues to test his loyalty. He gave a bored sigh: “I do not like loose women.” Empress Jing laughed: “I love your direct character. But if you want to be the City Commander, you have to stay close to Zhao Ya. Let this be my first order for you. ”

Xiang Shaolong acted like he was unwilling and apologised: “Please forgive me for being a rough boor but I cannot deliberately cheat on anyone. If Empress sent me out to the battlefield for a fight to my death, I will not have the slightest hesitation.”

This is called advancing by retreating. If he forgoes his usual style just for the sake of the City Commander position, it will only cause this poisonous and cold-blooded woman to despise him.

True enough, Empress Jing is not the least offended. She

consoled: “I know Mister is not such a person. But a loose woman can tempt men easily. I am not asking you to deceive her. I just want you to showcase your manly character and treat her like a common courtesan.”

Xiang Shaolong was enjoying her charming attitude. His heart warmed up, he teased: “That is also possible, but knowing myself, all women who have done it with me are all reluctant to leave me.”

Empress Jing was staring hard at him but now she is laughing like a shivering squid. Looking at him meaningfully, she said: “Why do you guys all love to brag about your abilities with women? With all these exaggeration, how can we tell who has the real ability?” Xiang Shaolong was suspicious and had a dying question. He held his tongue and laughed along: “From your speech, I realised that other men are also exaggerating too.”

Empress Jing turned red-faced, knowing that she slipped. Isn't this as good as telling others that she had tried many other men before?

Recollecting Cheng Dan who stole his credit, Xiang Shaolong deduced that this ingrate may have been assisted by Empress Jing to reach his current position. By why didn't she continue to lift him up and serve as the City Commander but chose himself instead? He was enlightened that this ambitious woman must have planted people within and outside the Imperial Court and used them for political manipulation.

Both of them did not say anything for a while and the atmosphere was awkward.

Empress Jing stood up and recovered her impenetrable aura. She coldly concluded: “I’ll make a move first! If you tell anyone about this event, I will never let you off!”

Xiang Shaolong was cursing inside but he acted respectfully. He finally sighed with relief after sending her away.

As he was bidding farewell to Han Chuang, Han Chuang put on a big display of friendship and insisted on bringing him to the official brothels one day before releasing him.

Xiang Shaolong was idle and went ahead to visit Ji Yanran. From afar, he witnessed Tian Dan’s entourage entering the Liu Residence noisily. He was frightened and returned home first.

Shan Rou and the Tian sisters were absent. After asking, he found out that Shan Rou went out shopping and took both sisters with her. Wu Guo accompanied him to his bedroom and enquired in a low voice: “Le Cheng’s head has been sent to the farm. First Master asked Third Master what to do with it.”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Let First Master decide. Wait for a few days until security is not as strict and send the traitor’s head back to Xianyang Chancellor Lu. Let him hand it to Empress Ji. Inform them to keep it confidential. Otherwise, everyone will know we killed Le Cheng.”

Wu Guo received his order and left.

Xiang Shaolong slept for four hours and rushed towards Liu Residence. Shan Rou and the Tian sisters have yet to return.

The sun is setting in the west and everyone stayed indoors, giving the city a lifeless look.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling emotional. In fact, everything was caused by King Xiaocheng.

But this could also be fate. Otherwise, Xiao Pan will never be the future Qin Shihuang.

Ai!

This could be the Fate that Zou Yan was always talking about.

Arriving at Liu Residence, Ji Yanran has been pining for him. The attendant sent him straight to her loft. Zou Yan was present as well. This meeting of three was a happy occasion.

Ji Yanran prepared a set of exquisite dishes. When the three of them sat down around the table, the beauty poured wine personally for both of them. After toasting each other, she complained: “I only receive your news today. Before, I was thinking of you tirelessly and had a few white hairs.”

Zou Yan was humoured: “If your hair is rebelling, I will represent

all men and punish you with a cup.”

Both persons toasted and drank one cup of wine. After Xiang Shaolong apologised to Ji Yanran, he winked at her. She understood his meaning and discharged her two attendants.

Ji Yanran lowered her voice saying: “It is really done by you. Really great. Over two hundred people dead or injured in such a short span of time. Not only was the City in chaos, even Tian Dan and Li Yuan were taken aback, confused and suspicious.”

Zou Yan frowned: “This incident also revealed your tracks. When Tian Dan visited Ji Yanran earlier and this issue was brought up, he did mention that Xiang Shaolong could be the real killer.”

Xiang Shaolong was slightly stunned. He knew that he can deceive King Xiaocheng and Zhao Mu but he cannot deceive a legendary hero. Fortunately, he still has Teng Yi the trump card that can add doubts to Tian Dan’s hypothesis. He nodded and asked: “What did he ask from you?” Concerned about his safety, Ji Yanran did not reply and asked in return: “What should we do? What if he really suspects it was Xiang Shaolong?” Xiang Shaolong laughed: “There is no need to worry. In Handan City, everyone is suspecting one another. King Xiaocheng and company suspects it was done by Tian Dan and Zhao Mu. Besides, I have traps that will make my enemies tired and confused with my grass army and trees soldiers.”

Zou Yan was tickled: “Grass army and trees soldiers? This description suits Handan City very well. Ji Yanran and I did analyze Le Cheng’s assassination and thought it cannot be you.

First, you have too little men; Second, you will not put the city on alert with this move without capturing Zhao Mu beforehand.”

Filled with concern, Ji Yanran chided: “Shaolong, you are too reckless!”

◦

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “I thought over this many times before acting. No one will suspect me because I am heavily injured.” He continued to explain why he must kill Le Cheng and the extra benefits.

Adding: “If anyone were to investigate, they will discover that I have only a hundred odd men in my residence and my top expert Long Shan is outside the city. Who will believe I have the ability to do such a thing. The very next morning, this same batch of men left the city back to the farm in one piece. Who could have imagined that they were Le Cheng’s assassins?”

Ji Yanran and Zou Yan stared at him with disbelief. It is a miracle to use a hundred to fight two hundred without a single casualty.

Because of this point, even the brilliant Tian Dan should not have suspected it was them.

Ji Yanran was relieved and poured more wine for him, protesting: “You are always performing deeds that no one dares to perform, making me anxious. Ai! The days seem unfulfilling without seeing you every day.”

Xiang Shaolong apologised: “But my agenda today in finding you is to ask you to separate yourself from me for a while by leaving for Xianyang first.”

Ji Yanran’s delicate hand shook and wine splattered on the table. Her face changing colour, she exclaimed: “I reject your proposal. Unless we discuss this properly, I will not accept any reason.”

Xiang Shaolong looked pleadingly at Zou Yan but this great philosopher can only give a helpless glance.

After Ji Yanran filled Zou Yan’s cup, she sweetly smiled: “Even if you think I am unreasonable, it cannot be helped.”

Zou Yan tried to help: “Why did Shaolong want us to head for Xianyang first?” Ji Yanran picked up a piece of vegetable and placed it in Zou Yan’s bowl, stated: “No one else is allowed to bring up this matter anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong surrendered: “Fine! Let us give up this idea! Is Talented Lady satisfied?” Looking at him with strong emotions, her eyes seemed to say “Satisfied!”

Xiang Shaolong and Zou Yan smiled at each other bitterly.

Zou Yan asked: “Handan City is not a good place to stay around for long. Do you have any new plans?” Xiang Shaolong replied: “If I can be promoted to be City Commander, a lot of problems can be solved. If not, we have to use a good scheme to get Zhao Mu to the

farm and forcibly capture him back to Xianyang.”

Ji Yanran butt in: “Don’t even dream that he will have the guts to leave the city. Even if he did, he will be escorted by one or two thousand soldiers. Every step will be well-planned so this is the worst strategy.”

Xiang Shaolong icily said: “I am now racing against time. The question is that Zhao is awaiting the arrival of more of my men and livestock which does not exist. So I have to get Zhao Mu to rebel in the shortest time. Once he becomes isolated, he will be an easy prey for me. But the time is still the biggest challenge.”

Both persons were worried about him.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Tian Dan’s earlier visit and asked again: “What is Tian Dan here for?” Ji Yanran blushed and replied: “What good can it be? He officially invited me to visit Qi as his guest.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly admired Tian Dan’s direct actions and asked: “How did Yanran answer him?” Ji Yanran said: “I told him I needed to consider for a few days as I want to ask your opinion first.”

After a moment’s thought, Xiang Shaolong surmised: “I guess Lord Longyang is the only person who guessed correctly about our relationship. This is favourable to us. Despite not knowing who his assassin is, we benefited from this episode and dissolved the threat of his constant scrutiny.”

Ji Yanran happily cried: “I don’t care. I am going to your place tonight. I have many issues in my heart that I want to share with you!”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “What issues? Can’t you say it here?” Zou Yan was laughing and suggested: “Shall I absent myself?” Ji Yanran’s face was burning red. She viciously kicked Xiang Shaolong under that table and shyly whined: “Mister Zou is also teasing me.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realised that the “issues” are just something she said for Zou Yan’s sake. The truth is she can no longer hold back her strong desires and wanted to make out with him.

Checking the time, Xiang Shaolong joked: “I will await Miss Ji’s presence tonight. Oh! Do you have any idea when Le Cheng’s funeral is?”

Both of them shook their head.

He consolidated his thoughts and asked about Li Yuan.

Ji Yanran informed: “He came to pester me every day. From his words, it seems like he is very close to Guo Zhong. I believe Guo Zhong will marry his daughter to him for sure.”

Thinking about Guo Xiu’er future, Xiang Shaolong gave a sigh and bid his farewell before leaving.

There are many things that cannot be rushed. He can only pray to become the City Commander.

Book 9 Chapter 7 – A Significant Difference

Xiang Shaolong had just stepped into his residence with Wu Guo received him and reported: “Princess Ya is here. I invited her to the east room but she insisted on going into the inner hall. She has a dreadful look on her face!”

Earlier, he had seen Zhao Ya’s carriage and Zhao Da in the driveway. There is also a platoon of Zhao soldiers outside his door. Hearing about Zhao Ya’s dreadful look, he felt uncomfortable and inquired: “Where is Miss Shan and Miss Zhi?” Wu Guo answered: “They have gone back to visit Uncle Zheng and is not coming back tonight.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Did they meet each other?” Wu Guo stated: “Miss Shan received her personally while Miss Zhi hid herself.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved and strode right into the inner hall. Just as he stepped over the door ledge, Zhao Ya who was seated alone at the table lifted her pale face and looked at him.

Xiang Shaolong sat down beside her and asked carefully: “Why is your complexion so pale?” Zhao Ya icily demanded: “Dong Kuang! Did you really send your men to hold back Xiang Shaolong?” Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and put on an irritated look before replying: “Why did Princess make such a remark? Do I look like someone who breaks my promises?” Zhao Ya shot back: “In that case, why did I receive news that Xiang Shaolong was disguised as a traveling merchant and appeared in a village thirty miles east of Handan City? He was even involved in a fight with the local

guard.” Xiang Shaolong set his mind at rest. Teng Yi had finally acted. Concerned, he asked: “Did they capture Xiang Shaolong?” Zhao Ya shook her head: “In the wilderness, no one is his match!”

Xiang Shaolong curiously asked: “In this case, why is your face so deathly pale?” Zhao Ya was shaken and lowered her head, confessing: “I have no idea too. I think I am afraid that he knows that his tracks are exposed and he may not come to Handan anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong understood her dilemma. She wanted him to come but wanted him to stay away at the same time. He lied: “My men detained him last night and warned him in Princess’s name. At the end of the day, I still do not comprehend why he wanted to come so close to Handan City. I have just received this news and have yet to inform Princess.”

Zhao Ya looked at him suspiciously: “Are you lying to me?” Xiang Shaolong pretended to be infuriated and roared: “You just wait here, I will show you the evidence that I am not lying. Then I will chase you out of my residence and never want to set my eyes on you again!”

Before she can say another word, he slipped back to his bedroom and retrieved a flying needle. He fondled the Tian sisters for a moment before heading back to the inner hall and put the flying needle on the table in front of Zhao Ya.

The flying needle shone under the lamp.

Zhao Ya stretched out her finger and stroked the needle, hot tears pouring out from both eyes. She trembled: “Heavens! You really found him. What... What did he say?” Xiang Shaolong used his sleeve to wipe her tears and lied: “He did not say anything. When we asked him for proof, he picked out this needle from a belt that is filled with flying needles. With that he left us. I did not expect him to stick around; he is really courageous.”

Zhao Ya did not have any more doubts left. Gritting her teeth, she spoke softly after some time: “Dong Kuang, can you help Zhao Ya with another favour?”

Xiang Shaolong was piqued: “What favour do you want? Hey! I nearly forgot to chase you out and you still dare to ask for favour...” Zhao Ya did not even hear his words and begged in a soft voice: “Can you bring me and catch up to him?” Xiang Shaolong was aghast: “No way!”

In a daze, her body was shivering uncontrollably and she turned around and fell into his arms. With a loud “Hoo!” She began crying her heart out.

Filled with her sweet embrace, Xiang Shaolong was saddened as well and sighed that she should not have betrayed him knowing that this will be the end result.

After crying out all the pain and suffering in her heart, Zhao Ya recomposed herself. Still in his arms, she sobbed silently and the front of Xiang Shaolong’s shirt is all drenched. As he is wondering how to end this situation, she calmed down.

After she stopped crying, Zhao Ya sat still and lowered her head while Xiang Shaolong dried her tears.

Xiang Shaolong commented: “Princess must have owed Xiang Shaolong plenty of tears in her last life so she has to return so many tears today.”

Zhao Ya forced a smile and shook her head in silence. Her complexion remains abnormal.

Xiang Shaolong noticed her eyes were swollen with all the crying and sighed: “No one else can replace Xiang Shaolong in your heart. Princess need not deceive myself and yourself.”

Zhao Ya apologetically reached out and felt his wet shirt. Her pretty eyes flashing of desire, she bit her lips: “I want to try. Dong Kuang. I need a man now. Can you carry Zhao Ya into your bedroom?”

Xiang Shaolong was in a difficult position. If he rejects her again, it would put him as an unreasonable man. At the same time, he did not wish to hurt her fragile heart anymore.

For the sake of the City Commander promotion, he cannot offend her.

After he is done with Zhao Ya and Ji Yanran comes along later, will he still have the energy?

Zhao Ya's face is burning hot and she whined: "What are you hesitating about?" Xiang Shaolong sighed loudly and lifted her up but his mind is back in the 21st century. Based on his memory, he is trying to recall the dirty films he has seen and wanted to try out something new and exciting. If he used his usual methods, he may not be able to deceive this experienced woman whom he done with on many occasions.

For an unknown reason, Zhao Ya was trembling with strong emotions. It could be that she is carried but an athletic and well-built man like Xiang Shaolong. Without any foreplay, she is already visibly excited and cannot hold back any longer.

Thinking that there is no way out for him, Xiang Shaolong stepped into his bedroom and placed her on his bed.

Gazing at him, Zhao Ya's face is red like fire and she was panting non-stop. Her unconventional look is the most enthralling.

Xiang Shaolong stood at the bedside and was feeling very inappropriate. In the moment, he cannot understand why as well.

Zhao Ya softly invited: "Why is Mister Dong not joining me" Xiang Shaolong is having cold feet and purposely brought up: "Did Li Yuan visit Princess recently?" Zhao Ya did not reply at once and looked at the empty bed space beside her. Upset, Xiang Shaolong forced: "Answer my question first."

Zhao Ya closed her beautiful eyes and whispered: "Nope. I am

busy with palace duties and did not meet anyone. There are only two men on my mind. One of them is you, and the other one you know who he is.”

Xiang Shaolong sat on the bedside and gritted his teeth, undressing her. He asked in a low voice: “Who is a better lover? Li Yuan or Xiang Shaolong?” Zhao Ya reopened her eyes and gave a trouble answer: “What a difficult question! Oh...” Xiang Shaolong had started to fondle her breasts tenderly and whispered: “I wish to know!”

Under his caresses, Zhao Ya was shaking uncontrollably. Fidgeting, she moaned: “No one is as good as Xiang Shaolong. He is the only man who knows how to appreciate women. Ah! Dong Kuang! Please continue your torture!” With Xiang Shaolong’s movements, Zhao Ya is stark naked. She continued to pant and moan under his revenge-filled invasion.

After the heavy petting, he climbed onto her.

Zhao Ya’s reactions were close to maniacal. After the session, both parties are dog-tired. Although he is pining for Ji Yanran, he lacked the energy to leave the room. Although this session is two hours long, it is still early and he hoped that she hasn’t arrived yet.

Lying on the bed, Zhao Ya is truly a treasure without comparison. She knows how to please men very well. There are prettier girls than her but there are not many who are more wild and wanton than her.

Zhao Ya suddenly entangled herself around him. When Xiang Shaolong was panicking about a second round, the beauty whispered into his ear: “I am absolutely delighted. Even if I were to die now, I would have no regrets.”

Xiang Shaolong had to ask: “Who is better? Xiang Shaolong or me?” After two fragrant kisses on his face, Zhao Ya gazed deeply into his eyes and corrected: “Are you referring to the previous Xiang Shaolong?” Xiang Shaolong could feel his entire body turning into winter and every limb was numb. He put up a brave front and asked: “Why did Princess make such a comment?” Zhao Ya flipped over and pressed her body weight on him. After a few more hot kisses, her warm tears flowed like the fountain and she cried: “Shaolong need to hide from me anymore. You forgot to apply your fragrance and the herbal smell is gone. When I was leaning in your bosom earlier, I recognize you and therefore ask for your love session to confirm my guess. Ai! Shaolong! You may be the most capable man on earth but how can you hide from me when you are in bed? Heavens! Such a delicate mask that caused me so much agony.” She then tried to grab his mask.

Xiang Shaolong removed his mask before her grab and revealed his real looks. Zhao Ya’s pearl-like tears were dripping all over his face. Filled with agony and happiness, she sobbed.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. He stroked her alluring back for a while and flipped over, pressing Zhao Ya below his own body. Staring deeply into her eyes, he gave a forced smile: “Tian Dan was right. My soft-heartedness is my biggest flaw. Witnessing how pitiful and desperate you are over me; I abandoned all our past hatred. Otherwise, how can you embrace me and find out who is behind the sunglasses?” Cursing at his stupidity for there are no

such thing as sunglasses in this ancient times, he stuttered: “Anyway you found out my true identity.”

Under the present circumstances, Zhao Ya is not thinking deeply and delightfully chimed: “Heavens! You have forgiven Ya’er? Shaolong! Please kiss me!”

Even if he did not want to please her, he did not have any other choice. He bent his head and covered her face with kisses.

Zhao Ya passionately reacted. With her adrenaline flowing, she was holding him so tightly that he almost couldn’t breathe and they descended into madness.

After a long entanglement, Xiang Shaolong was finally able to rest his mouth.

Flustered and in ecstasy, Zhao Ya panted: “Shaolong! Can you call my name? Ever since Ya’er committed that big and stupid mistake, I have never enjoyed a moment of happiness and seriously depressed.”

Wasn’t she happy with Qi Yu, Han Chuang and Li Yuan? Xiang Shaolong thought of but just couldn’t bear to ask.

Reading his face, Zhao Ya understood what is on his mind and made a solemn vow: “Ya’er knows that she has erred. From tonight onwards, if Zhao Ya betrays Xiang Shaolong in any manner, let me be subjected to the worst forms of torture until my eventual

death.”

Xiang Shaolong did not know what came over him. He reached to her ear and called: “Ya’er! Ya’er!”

These two words heralded a new storm. When the clouds have dispersed and the rain has stopped, Zhao Ya was lying next to Xiang Shaolong. Twisting her body to face him, she praised: “You are really formidable. With a hundred men, you killed Le Cheng as swiftly as lightning and as quiet as a mute, causing plenty of suspicion.”

Xiang Shaolong comfortably stretched his masculine and well defined body. His hand slapped her bum with a loud “Piak!” and started to caress it, asking: “Did you people suspect me?” Zhao Ya disclosed: “Of course we did! But your men left the city early next morning. All of them were fresh-looking and nobody was injured so that ended our investigations. Ai! Who can beat you?” She continued in a softly: “Can I beg you for a favour?” Xiang Shaolong was disturbed and hissed: “Are you trying to cut a deal with me?” Terrified, Zhao Ya clarified: “No! Ya’er dare not. I am begging you.”

Xiang Shaolong coldly said: “Speak!”

Like a frightened bird, Zhao Ya snuggled closer and buried her face in his broad chest. She whined pitifully: “I beg that you do not use such tones with me. This will cause me to fear that you will abandon me again. When I agreed to help King Xiaocheng against you, I set the condition that you must never be harmed. Otherwise, I will never betray you.”

Xiang Shaolong remained expressionless and state: “You have yet to tell me your favour.”

Suppressing her fear, Zhao Ya gingerly divulged: “Lady Ni’s death is caused by Zhao Mu. King Xiaocheng is guilt-ridden after the incident but there is no point crying over spilt milk. That is why he is now distancing himself from Zhao Mu. When the Wu Family and you left for Qin, he aged ten years in one night. He is tormented with sickness and joint pains. Heaven is punishing him already.”

Xiang Shaolong protested: “He has seemed to forget about his own daughter.”

Zhao Ya was startled: “Can you let him off?” Xiang Shaolong regained his clear mind and intelligence. He did not want to force Zhao Ya to choose between King Xiaocheng and himself. He sighed: “Fine! Since you pleaded on his behalf. I will not hold anything against him.” After all, Qin Shihuang will be the one to take care of him.

Zhao Ya was elated: “Shaolong, you are the best! Come, tell me what assistance do you require and I will do my best to help you.”

Thinking to himself, Xiang Shaolong concluded that this is a blessing in disguise. With Zhao Ya on his side, anything can be achieved.

Zhao Ya dare not offend Xiang Shaolong agreed to all the

missions he gave her.

Xiang Shaolong was pining for Ji Yanran and was about to leave when Zhao Ya happily promised: “Time is of the essence. I will see the King immediately. I will make sure you become the City Commander. The only objection will be from Guo Kai as he has someone else in mind.”

Witnessing her devotion, Xiang Shaolong was thrilled and helped her to dress up. After all the tussling did he finally send her out personally.

Watching her entourage leaving, he returned to his residence and Wu Guo welcomed him and announced: “Talented Lady Ji just arrived, Hey! Third Master is truly capable. I will not be able to take it if it was me.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. How is he to account to Ji Yanran later?

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, it was late in the morning. Shan Rou was the one who woke him up. Totally lethargic, he is aware that if this continues, even an iron man will fall apart.

Full of disdain, Shan Rou pinched his nose scolding: “Look at your deplorable state. You obviously still lacked sleep. Seems like I cannot even leave you alone for one night.”

Xiang Shaolong sat up on the bed and hooked his arm around her

flexible waist and joked: “If you were here last night, I don’t think I can even get up!”

Shan Rou slipped away and stomped her feet: “You did not keep your promise and fooled around with Zhao Ya. I hate you.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and asked: “Wu Guo told you?” Shan Rou made a face and challenged: “He dares to keep it from me? Zhao Ya came first followed by Ji Yanran. You cannot even take care of your own health.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up and began some warm up exercises. “Rou Rou, shall we practise our swords together?” he invited. Shan Rou has never seen the warm up exercises of the 21st century and was taken aback: “Where did you learn such techniques?” Xiang Shaolong laughingly pointed to his brain and continued to ask: “Where is your sister?” Shan Rou replied: “She is back at the martial school. After all, she is one of the instructors.”

The Tian sisters entered and chimed: “Master Dong is finally up.”

Xiang Shaolong felt ashamed and began washing up. He dragged Shan Rou to the garden to be his practice partner.

“Pi! Pi! Pa! Pa!” they were dueling when Teng Yi’s heroic laughter was heard at the side.

Xiang Shaolong was overwhelmed to see him. Getting Wu Guo to take his place against Shan Rou, he breakfasted with Teng Yi in the

main hall and updated him on his recent activities.

When Teng Yi heard how Zhao Ya discovered his identity, he smiled: “I had anticipated such a day to come. Third Brother is soft-hearted and still has old ties to this wanton woman. But this matter only benefits us and gives her the chance to atone for her mistakes. You have better get Zhao Da to spy on her. In case of any deviation, we can still escape.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved that Teng Yi did not blame him. He suggested: “With Zhao Ya’s assistance, we can do a big job here and disrupt the alliance treaty of the six states. We may even create more trouble for Tian Dan and Li Yuan.”

Teng Yi was astonished: “I thought you looked up to Tian Dan?” Exposed and embarrassed, Xiang Shaolong planned: “I had suspected the assassin to be Prince Xinling but it seems even more unlikely now. It could well be Tian Dan and Li Yuan’s scheme to break up the Three-State alliance. I will visit Lord Longyang later and test his suspicions. Ai! I trust people too easily and can be confused by them.”

Teng Yi agreed: “This is both your strength and your flaw.”

Wu Guo came in to report that Zhao Ya is here.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi caught each other’s glance and guessed that she is bringing good news.

Book 9 Chapter 8 – Ready To Kill

Shedding her depressed attitude, Zhao Ya looked like a brand new person. She had regained her grace, beauty and energy. She smiled like a blossoming flower and her eyes were shining and attractive. Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were fascinated and stared in disbelief.

Paying her respects from afar, she cooed: “Abundant health to Master Dong and Master Long. Zhao Ya sincerely pays her respects.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were embarrassed by such a greeting. The beauty behaved like nothing has happened between Xiang Shaolong and herself. Charmingly, she sat beside the small table and presented sweetly: “As per Master Dong’s command, I am lucky to stay alive. Wonder if I can redeem my sins.”

“Please report your accomplishments first and we shall judge them.” Xiang Shaolong laughed.

Zhao Ya smiled coquettishly and looked at him enchantingly. She then proudly state: “There are two big accomplishments and two small accomplishments. Let Miss tell you one by one.”

Teng Yi was amused and served her tea, guessing: “The first accomplishment should be the creation of Dong City Commander, right? This accomplishment alone is enough to redeem your mistakes.”

Zhao Ya batted her eye lashes and praised: “With Brother Long’s appreciation, Zhao Ya’s worries are gone with the wind!”

Xiang Shaolong is full of happiness. Forgiveness is better than hatred and it serves more meaning and joy to life. Comparing the new Zhao Ya to the old is like comparing heaven and hell. He chuckled: “Quickly report the rest of the accomplishments and see how much grace you deserve from me.”

Zhao Ya’s face is shining with delight and she gushed; “I have persuaded King Xiaocheng to recall Li Mu back to Handan City and combine forces against the traitor Zhao Mu. Does this count as a big accomplishment?” Teng Yi banged the table and lowered his voice: “In this case, everything is set. I will be surprised if Zhao Mu does not rebel at once.”

Xiang Shaolong reached out and grabbed his hand tightly.

When Zhao Ya added her hand to join the two united hands, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Such an accomplishment is enough for me to have amnesia and forget about Ya’er’s previous affairs.”

“Ah!” Zhao Ya cried. Shy but happy, she shot him a look.

After the hands are withdrawn, Zhao Ya continued: “That woman (Empress Jing) really recommended Master Dong to King Xiaocheng. When the King came to ask my opinion, I kept praising your abilities and scored another goal.”

Teng Yi and Shaolong stared at her in astonishment.

Like a carefree bird, Zhao Ya proudly detailed: “I told the King – If the Dong Horse Fanatic is the City Commander, he is still considered neutral. Zhao Mu will surely tempt him to his side. That Dong Horse Fanatic can pretend to ally with him and be our spy in Zhao Mu’s camp. We can investigate Zhao Mu through him and may gather evidence of his rebellion. When Li Mu is back, we can get rid of the traitor once and for all.”

Both men were overjoyed and praised her to the skies.

This opportunity is unbelievable. With this, they can execute all their plans.

Zhao Ya seriously said: “Thanks for your praises, Master Xiang and Master Long.” Teng Yi interrupted: “Have you forgotten I am Teng Yi? You can call me Second Brother!”

Zhao Ya is at the peak of Mount Happiness and sweetly greeted Teng Yi: “Second Brother!”

Xiang Shaolong warned: “Ya’er, if you carry on with your mood, it is as good as writing on your face that Xiang Shaolong is back.”

Zhao Ya adorably glanced at him and reassured: “Master Dong need not worry. Princess knows what to do.”

Teng Yi abruptly howled: “Why didn’t sister come and join us?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that she is eavesdropping. Zhao Ya was startled and look towards the back corridor.

Shan Rou was dressed in a luxurious long dress and swayed out in the most gorgeous manner. Her petite face remains tense and does not seemed happy about Xiang Shaolong's renewed ties with Zhao Ya.

Zhao Ya became awkward.

Shan Rou was expressionless but she showed her authority by sitting right beside Xiang Shaolong.

Teng Yi quickly winked at Xiang Shaolong. Shaolong is well-prepared and smiled at Zhao Ya: "With Ya'er's great plan, if we do find evidence of Zhao Mu and Tian Dan's conspiracy, does Ya'er think King Xiaocheng would dare to go against Tian Dan?" Shan Rou let out a small cry and became more focused and looked at Zhao Ya.

Zhao Ya herself is considered quite a beauty as well. Except for her weak spot for Xiang Shaolong, she doesn't give a damn about anyone else, including Shan Rou. She purposely delayed: "We shall see what happens then. If the plot is successful, all the impossible might become possible."

Shan Rou is now on the losing end. She pinched vigorously Xiang Shaolong under the table and wanted him to intercede for her.

Teng Yi spoke up first: “Qi is stronger than Zhao. In addition, Tian Dan did not come alone on this trip. Over ten thousand elite Qi soldiers are camping outside the City wall. I think King Xiaocheng can only swallow his pride.”

Zhao Ya explained: “Qi’s current success is brought about by Tian Dan. If this man is gone, Qi will no longer be a threat to us. However, the ten thousand soldiers led by the famous general Dan Chu will not be easy to handle. Tian Dan is also escorted by a troop of the finest soldiers. Even if you attack him personally, it will still be an uphill task.”

Shan Rou coldly snorted: “We can create a new strategy and force him back to Qi. When he retreats, we will have an opportunity.”

Xiang Shaolong prioritised: “This matter still requires some planning. First, we must gather evidence of Tian Dan’s and Zhao Mu’s conspiracy. The rest can wait.”

Shan Rou was ecstatic: “Make sure you keep your promise!”

Xiang Shaolong chided: “You better be more respectful of Princess Ya so that she will help you in return.”

Zhao Ya took the chance and said: “Master Dong is wrong. Madam Dong has been very respectful.”

Shan Rou was embarrassed and submissively agreed.

Xiang Shaolong was reminded of Le Cheng and asked about his funeral.

Teng Yi suddenly asked: “Is the Lu Gong secret manual in the hands of Guo Zhong?”

Zhao Ya protested: “Of course not! The manual is in my palace residence. Xiao Zhao and the rest are working hard to duplicate a copy. Once done, they will give the copy to Guo Zhong. But it all depends. If Guo Zhong seeks to leave Zhao, not only will he not get the manual, he will also not have a burial place.”

Xiang Shaolong then realised why Xiao Zhao and her lovely friends are not around. He guessed that Li Yuan’s courtship of Zhao Ya is not to take revenge on him but for the manual. He blamed himself for not being sharp enough to notice this earlier. To Zhao Ya, he warned: “You must take more precautions. Tian Dan and Li Yuan would love to get their hands on the manual. Even Prince Xinling may have sent someone here to get the manual too. He hates you to the core. Oh! I better send some men to protect you.”

Shan Rou volunteered: “Let us sisters take up this job!”

Shaolong was annoyed: “You only want a chance to assassinate Tian Dan!”

Shan Rou angrily retorted: “Am I such a narrow-minded person? You ingrate!”

When all three of them looked at her with suspicion, she cutely shrugged her shoulders and surrendered: “It is fine if no one believes me.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up: “Before I become the City Commander, let me seek out Lord Longyang and see what he thinks. Ai! It will be unbecoming if I have recovered but did not visited him.”

Shan Rou coldly laughed: “Do not let him bewitch you.”

Xiang Shaolong coughed and stared at her with irritation.

Shan Rou covered her mouth and laughed in secret while Zhao Ya stood up as well and invited: “Ya’er is leaving too. Let me give you a lift!”

Lord Longyang was seated at a corner of the living room. The seat is covered with thick fur and propped up with a soft pillow. An exquisite embroidered blanket covering both his legs, Lord Longyang’s pale complexion greeted Xiang Shaolong as he was led in by an attendant. He softly greeted: “Forgive Lord for not paying my respects. Brother Dong is most courteous to come and visit me. Please come and sit beside me.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at his four males attendants and was curious about their delicate bodies, clear complexions and a powdery smell.

Lord Longyang understood and apologised: “Brother Dong need not be puzzled. They are all great beauties dressed up as men!”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed. Does Lord Longyang like women too? This will be a thousand year old tabloid article.

After he was seated and had a drink of tea, the four cross dressers and ten over bodyguards left the room.

Lord Longyang looked deeply into Xiang Shaolong’s eyes. His own eyes full of gratitude, he softly thanked: “Brother Dong saved my life. What can I do to repay you?” Xiang Shaolong wanted to say that the only way to thank me is not to get fresh with me anymore. Instead, he said: “I am only doing my best for a friend. It is nothing much. Is Lord getting better?” Cold rays flashed from the eyes of Lord Longyang as he hissed: “They will have to try harder to kill me.”

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice and directly asked: “Who could be the mastermind? A gentleman will revenge his sufferings. I will never let my enemies off.”

Lord Longyang closed his eyes and kept quiet.

Xiang Shaolong was bothered: “Is Lord keeping a secret from me? Who is the person who waves us to enter the gorge?” Lord Longyang opened his eyes and plainly said: “He is named Xia Yue. He has been located by Zhao soldiers. Too bad his throat has been slit and he cannot say anything anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: “Devious indeed. Killing the witness and eliminating the evidence.”

Lord Longyang smiled coldly: “Killing him brings no benefit. He was originally from Qi and has been with me for only two years. I appreciate his swordsmanship and thought he was honest and reliable. To think that he turned out to be Tian Dan’s spy.”

Xiang Shaolong was stricken: “Tian Dan is really the mastermind.”

Lord Longyang confessed: “I have long been puzzled at Tian Dan’s coming to Handan. Now I finally know. He has no intention in the alliance at all. Now that Qin is having an internal strife, he wants to destroy our Three State Alliance. He harbours ill intentions against Zhao. With Li Mu at the border and Lian Po battling Yan, he took this chance to plot against Zhao. His huge army may have secretly entered Zhao and assumed different identities and are in hiding. Once activated, they will assist in conquering Zhao from within.”

Xiang Shaolong has never regarded Tian Dan’s problem to be so serious. He had a rude shock and cried: “Has Lord informed Zhao King of this theory?” Lord Longyang shook his head: “This is such a big issue and I do not have any evidence; how can I say it out? After I recover, I am returning straight to Daliang and escape all the adversities. If Brother Dong wants to leave with me, I will see to it.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Lord intends to watch Zhao swallowed up by Tian Dan?” A cold smile appearing on his face,

Lord Longyang calmly replied: “It won’t be so easy. Brother Dong has yet to reply me.” Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “I appreciate Lord’s kindness but my men and livestock are on the way here. How can I leave like that? After all, I am of Zhao origin and will fight Tian Dan if needed. I must avenge my injuries.”

Lord Longyang sighed and slowly explained: “Tian Dan is the most powerful person now and your King cannot do anything to him. After Xiang Shaolong left, there are only thirty thousand soldiers left in Handan City. Most of them are old or weak. Li Mu and Lian Po are too far away to lend any assistance. If Brother Dong wishes to escape this calamity, the only way is to leave for Daliang. Unless you surrender to Tian Dan immediately, he will never let you off. This man is more vicious than anyone I have seen.”

Xiang Shaolong is frightened by his words, knowing that he had underestimated Tian Dan. Luckily, he still has Zhao Mu’s support or he will die without knowing why. He stood up and wished: “Lord, please have a good rest!”

Lord Longyang knew he remained unconvinced. He sighed and closed his eyes in silence.

Standing quietly for a few seconds, Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and left.

Sunlight was everywhere but Xiang Shaolong felt like he is soaking in ice water.

The streets were as quiet as a graveyard but he could sense danger everywhere and feared an ambush.

After talking to Lord Longyang, his narrow view widened a lot and he starts to think about many things that he has never thought of before. Covering all the possibilities, he managed to paint a complete picture.

Tian Dan is filled with wild ambition and has an accurate picture of the warring landscape. While it is possible, he plans to swallow Zhao first.

After the collapse of the Wu fortress, the Handan army suffered deaths and heavy injuries. There are no strong men to fill up the deficiencies and can only depend on weak and old women.

The Zhao army has two big pillars. However, Lian Po is battling Yan while Li Mu is fighting the Xiong Nu at the border. Both are unable to extricate themselves from the battlefield. The capital is leaderless. Using the excuse to discuss the alliance, Tian Dan brought over ten thousand soldiers as an escort but they can threaten the survival of Zhao anytime.

Of course! This army of ten thousand may not be enough to conquer Zhao. Lord Longyang's speculation of a huge army ambushed with Handan City is unbelievable as it will arouse suspicion. Lord Longyang has this theory because he does not know the relationship between Tian Dan and Zhao Mu.

Through Zhao Mu, he can manipulate the Zhao politics.

Once King Xiaocheng is dead, Empress Jing will be named as the culprit. Using devious methods, Lian Po and Li Mu can be dealt with.

With the two generals gone, Zhao will belong to Tian Dan.

The assassination of Lord Longyang is due to foreign relations.

The other five states will not sit by and watch Qi expand its territory and conquer Zhao. So Tian Dan needs their support.

Yan and Han can be ignored. Yan is busy fighting Zhao and Han is too weak to fight. In fact, Han has lost every battle it fought.

Only the remaining Wei and Chu are still a force to reckon with.

Wei and Zhao are heavily interdependent and Wei will not allow Qi to overrun Zhao land.

Chu is a different matter. Wei remains a great obstacle north of Chu. Without taking down Wei, the army of Chu will find it challenging to conquer China. Tian Dan must have enticed Li Yuan to attack Wei together and split the state between both Qi and Chu.

That is the reason why Lord Longyang is assassinated. It will be Li Yuan's idea to push the blame to Xiang Shaolong.

Due to a stroke of good luck, he disrupted their plans and spoiled their calculations.

Le Cheng's killing has worsened the situation for Tian Dan. A fool proof plan was given the death sentence. Ultimately, Tian Dan do has reservations about attacking Zhao openly. Wei and Han, the other two states of the Three State Alliance will definitely step in.

Now, he can only control Zhao via Zhao Mu and get rid of the two legendary generals. There are no other viable plans.

In such times, if Xiang Shaolong can ascend to become the City Commander, he will be in the centre of all the conflicts and influences.

After hearing his analysis, Teng Yi shook his head and sighed: "This kind of false alliance only serves to cause one's depression."

Xiang Shaolong commented: "We are here in Handan for revenge only. But if this carries on, whether for ourselves or for work, we must try to destroy Tian Dan's and Li Yuan's conspiracy. No wonder Zhao Mu is confident of controlling Empress Jing. He has the solid backing of Tian Dan."

After further discussions, Xiang Shaolong head back to his room for a nap. At evening time, Zhao King sent someone to invite him into the palace. Xiang Shaolong was thrilled and set off at once.

This round, Zhao King received him in the inner hall. Empress

Jing, Zhao Ya, Guo Kai and Cheng Dan were all present. After paying his respects, King Xiaocheng got him to sit at the best seat, followed by Guo Kai and Cheng Dan.

Empress Jing and Zhao Ya sat beyond the tables. Both women have a look of disillusion. It appears that he will not be promoted as the City Commander.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling nervous. King Xiaocheng asked about his injuries as an ice-breaker and he answered duly. Of course, he replied that he has fully recovered.

King Xiaocheng look slightly suspicious asked in a deep voice: “Your swordsmanship is incredible and you are good at deploying soldiers. Looking at your troops, we see evidence of your prowess. Have you thought of serving the military? If you accumulate military contributions, you can be promoted to be a Marquis in the near future, Regarding the farm, you can delegate it to your men. Subject Dong only needs to focus on the big picture and not fret about the other small issues.”

Through the corner of his eye, he could see that Guo Kai and Cheng Dan have a jubilant look on their face. He knows that he has lost the promotion.

But why then did King Xiaocheng hint at another important post for him? His mind turned very fast and he thought of the problem and also knew why the two ladies are frowning.

Cheng Dan is the problem.

Both are important military positions but to Xiang Shaolong, they are as different as black and white.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed. If King Xiaocheng announced his decision, the matter will be fixed and no one can change the decision in a short while.

Although Cheng Dan was promoted due to Empress Jing's backing, he seemed to be allying himself with Guo Kai now and broke free of Empress Jing's control. No wonder Empress Jing changed her stand to support him now.

Before anyone could react, Xiang Shaolong thankfully said: "Many thanks for the King's generosity and opportunities. Even if I have to work myself to death, I must do my best to repay Your Majesty. I have some words that I am normally afraid to say but I will report them to Your Majesty now."

From his surprising confession, even Empress Jing and Zhao Ya were taken aback. They wonder what he has to say at the risk of his life.

King Xiaocheng was moved: "Subject Dong, feel free to say whatever you want. I will not blame you."

Xiang Shaolong seriously said: "I have abandoned everything I have to return to my home state to build a farm. I did this because I am a descendant of Zhao and to also fulfill my father's dying wish to return to my roots. As long as Your Majesty has an order, I will

execute it without hesitation and without complain.”

King Xiaocheng kept nodding his head in appreciation.

Xiang Shaolong vehemently revealed: “But after my observation of the recent developments in Zhao, I feel that we are in mortal danger and can face annihilation anytime.”

The colour changed in everyone’s face. Guo Kai frowned: “Is Mister Dong exaggerating?” As King Xiaocheng’s top advisor, if he failed to detect what Xiang Shaolong has seen, he would have failed in his job and is obviously upset.

King Xiaocheng encouraged: “Subject Dong, say what you want bravely and do not have any reservations.”

Xiang Shaolong simply requested: “Can Your Majesty request the attendants to take their leave?” King Xiaocheng gave an order and everyone left, including the guards. The hall is only left with the six of them.

Zhao Ya was totally intoxicated. She simply adores this heroic air of Xiang Shaolong.

Empress Jing’s eyes are flashing with excitement, improving her opinion of him. She silently praised herself for choosing the right man.

Guo Kai’s and Cheng Dan’s face turned unnatural, disbelieving

the possibility of any earth-shattering news.

Xiang Shaolong continued in a deep voice: “The distribution of power is for all to see. Qin is having an internal strife and every state can finally take a break and focus their energy in expanding their territory in order to unite the world. Today, the power-holders of all states are gathered in Zhao. On the surface, they are here to work together but on the contrary, they are scheming against one another. This kind of plotting is a hundred times more vicious than fighting on the battlefield.”

Cheng Dan laughed coldly: “Aren’t you being too negative?” King Xiaocheng furrowed his brows and added: “The alliance discussion is not proceeding smoothly but it doesn’t seem as bad as it sounds.”

Empress Jing and Zhao Ya did not know what to add so they maintained their silence.

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing and explained: “Only Zhao, Han and Wei are sincerely working to an alliance. Qi and Chu are not sharing borders with Qin and are not worried.”

Guo Kai insisted: “Even if Qi and Chu bore evil motives, Zhao has just beaten Yan and our prestige is sky high. Wei and Han will not sit by and watch Qi and Chu attack us. Moreover, Qi and Chu are ultimately concerned about Qin and what can they use to conquer us?” Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Of course they will use schemes to conquer us. The first example will be Lord Longyang. If he had not survived the assassination, the key suspect will be Prince Xinling. Even if Anli (Wei King) does not blame him, the imbalance of power will cause infighting in Wei. Then, Wei will

not have the resources to deal with other states. Qi and Chu will benefit the most as the Three State Alliance will be destroyed. ”

King Xiaocheng was agitated. He had suspected the assassins to be Tian Dan or Li Yuan but had stopped his speculation. He did not articulate the matter as clearly as or was as confident as Xiang Shaolong.

Cheng Dan interrupted: “Mister Dong had better watch his words. If this was leaked out, it will cause uproar.”

Zhao Ya coldly shot: “Who will leak this out?” Cheng Dan shut up.

King Xiaocheng stared at Cheng Dan discontentedly. He asked with suspicion: “Does Subject Dong have any evidence?” Xiang Shaolong replied: “Earlier, I was right beside Lord Longyang and understood the whole circumstances from him. Lord Longyang has a personal escort named Xia Yue. Lord Longyang told me that Xia Yue is from Qi and has been serving him for less than two years. After the attack, he was found with his throat slit. Why did the mastermind want him dead? It is to prevent him from exposing the mastermind. If he is Prince Xinling’s men, he can easily escape back to Wei. The mastermind can also kill him in Wei. Killing him at all costs can only tell us that the mastermind is still in our State of Zhao.”

Guo Kai and Cheng Dan do not know how to rebut him. After the attack, the assassins have carted away all their injured men, leaving all the Wei corpses. Lord Longyang had not told them about Xia Yue so they did not know one of the corpse belonged to

the traitor.

After some time, Guo Kai asked: “Why did Lord Longyang share this secret only with Mister Dong?” Xiang Shaolong simply said: “I had saved his life and he had wanted me to join him in Wei so he was the most honest with me.”

King Xiaocheng’s complexion is as dreadful as can be. He cursed fiercely: “Well done, Tian Dan and Li Yuan!” and he coldly added: “Subject Dong must never forget that the people of Chu can never be trusted.”

Xiang Shaolong continued: “The second case is about general Le Cheng’s assassination. General Le is the centre of influence of Handan’s army. With his death, if there wasn’t a promising replacement, the army will begin to destabilise. All Tian Dan or Li Yuan has to do is to collaborate with a few ambitious generals and they can manipulate our military. Our two famed generals Li Mu and Lian Po are situated far from Handan. By the time they are back, they will be too weak to put up a good defence. That is all I have to say.”

Everyone is thinking about Tian Dan’s ten thousand strong army camped outside the city. If there is any internal chaos in Handan, this Qi army is sufficient to influence the any developments.

If he did not conspire with Zhao Mu, the Qi soldiers are not to be feared but the situation is different now.

Guo Kai and Cheng Dan remained dumbfounded. Like Xiang

Shaolong before, they can see the danger but did not foresee the potential annihilation of Zhao.

Paled with fear, King Xiaocheng asked: “Does Subject Dong have any plan to reverse this dangerous scenario?” Using his advancing but retreating strategy, he answered: “I am only a martial arts practitioner and do not have any brilliant strategy. This kind of big issues had better be handled by Chief Advisor Guo and General Cheng.”

Guo Kai and Cheng Dan were very awkward. In such a short time, what can they offer to resolve this complex and intertwined circumstances?

King Xiaocheng was disgruntled: “Can’t someone give me a good idea?” Guo Kai helplessly coughed: “The best way is to end this quickly. We will secretly capture and kill all the suspicious traitors and remove the thorn in the flesh. Even if Tian Dan and Li Yuan have a scheme, they cannot do anything... ..” Empress Jing interrupted: “Wouldn’t that cause an immediate rebellion? After the Wu Family incident, we cannot afford any more upheavals.”

Cheng Dan volunteered: “Leave this matter to me. I guarantee that I will destroy all the traitors as fast as lightning and as quiet as a dumbbell.”

Unconvinced, King Xiaocheng asked: “Does Subject Cheng know who the traitors are? While you are still planning, the traitors may have rebelled already.”

Zhao Ya smiled: “Brother! Now you know that my words make sense! Only if Mister Dong becomes the City Commander, we can execute the ‘scheme within a scheme’ and capture all the rebels in one swoop.”

King Xiaocheng decided: “Subject Dong, receive your order. From this moment, you are Handan’s City Commander. During the morning court tomorrow, I will officially issue you the military seal. Do not disappoint me.”

Xiang Shaolong acted surprised before bowing with thanks.

Empress Jing and Zhao Ya were over the moon. Guo Kai and Cheng Dan exchanged looks of viciousness, seeming to have a plot to get rid of him.

All these cannot escape the sharp eyes of Xiang Shaolong. He laughed to himself. No matter how crafty they are, they will never guess that he and Zhao Mu share a special relationship.

Ha!

Now, he can openly conspire with Zhao Mu.

This is truly a miracle.

Xiang Shaolong requested King Xiaocheng that Teng Yi be made an assistant general before he left the palace.

Book 9 Chapter 9 – Lucky Encounters

After hearing the entire story from Xiang Shaolong, Zhao Mu stood up happily and faced the sky laughing: “Heaven is really on my side. If I ever be the King of Zhao, you will be my Supreme Commander.”

Xiang Shaolong was amused: “Time is of the essence. Let us plan against King Xiaocheng immediately. If Li Mu were to really return, the tide will turn against us.”

After a moment’s reflection, Zhao Mu asked: “Zhao Ya has succumbed to you but why if Empress Jing helping you as well. She is in cahoots with Cheng Dan and there is no reason she will help an outsider like you.”

Xiang Shaolong then mentioned the part about Han Chuang and was bowled with laughter. With all his worries gone, he sat down again and said: “I must disclose our relationship to Tian Dan and regain his confidence.”

Xiang Shaolong’s face changed colour: “You must never do that. Unless you reveal your own true identity, he will not believe you with his intelligence. Why don’t I pretend to defect and he may even withdraw his soldiers? It is better to reveal our intentions later and take some precautions against him”

Zhao Mu nodded in agreement: “You have thought through every detail. Li Mu will not be able to return so quickly. We still have some time.”

Xiang Shaolong added: “Marquis had better gave me some names so that I can answer to the muddle-headed king and gain more of his trust.”

Zhao Mu smiled: “So what if he knows all my spies? But let me consider this first. Once we have our strategies in place, we can then push forward. We can fake King Xiaocheng assassination by Xiang Shaolong. Once I control the military, Empress Jing will have to cooperate with me. Li Mu and Lian Po will also see the end of their career. Hai! It is better that Le Cheng is dead for I have some suspicions of his loyalty.”

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity and asked: “What is the relationship between Tian Dan and Li Yuan?” Zhao Mu brushed: “I see that they are just using each other!”

Xiang Shaolong can tell that Tian Dan is hiding some information from Zhao Mu regarding this issue and did not press further. He proposed: “Before I am officially promoted, I must try to meet up with Tian Dan and gain his trust. Does Marquis have any pointers?” Zhao Mu was pleased and clapped: “I am fully confident in your abilities. Do as you wish. Let me plan a few scenarios and I will discuss the grand plan with you.”

He added: “Tian Dan will be attending Guo Zhong’s banquet this evening. See if you can catch him on the road.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of a preposterous idea and departed with glee.

Xiang Shaolong is in his best mood. He slipped to Ji Yanran's loft and shared all the news with her. After a quick session, he intercepted Tian Dan's entourage and entered his carriage.

Tian Dan is indeed a cautious person. The Liu Zhong Xia and Liu Zhong Shi brothers are still protecting him in his carriage.

Xiang Shaolong went straight to the point: "I have thought over carefully and decided to serve Chancellor with all my heart."

Tian Dan is overjoyed and asked: "I thought Brother Dong needs a few days to consider? Why have you made such a quick decision?" Xiang Shaolong seriously said: "I have just met King Xiaocheng and he wishes to make me the new City Commander despite all odds. This has forced my hand. I will slip away tonight and send someone to divert my incoming family and livestock to Qi to show my loyalty to Chancellor."

Even the brilliant Tian Dan was stunned for a while before he recomposed himself and cried: "Is Handan so lacking in talent that King Xiaocheng has to choose such an unqualified person as you? I do not believe that King Xiaocheng has such an open mind and foresight."

Xiang Shaolong explained: "It is due to my good relationship with Princess Ya. She knows that I am still dissatisfied with King Xiaocheng and used this promotion to make me stay and accompany her." While he spoke, he scrutinised Tian Dan's expression closely. When Tian Dan heard about his proximity to

Zhao Ya, his eyes lit up. Xiang Shaolong deduced that Tian Dan might use his connection to Zhao Ya to steal the secret manual.

Tian Dan stretched out his strong hand and held Xiang Shaolong's shoulder. In a serious manner, he dissuade: "Brother Dong, you must never leave like that. If you stay behind as the City Commander, you will lend me an even bigger helping hand, do you understand?" Xiang Shaolong pretending to protest: "But..." Tian Dan heavily emphasized: "From today onwards, Dong Kuang is Tian Dan's good brother and we will share wealth and woe. Do not worry and become the City Commander. I will come and discuss matters with you after two days."

Xiang Shaolong gave up. In these times, everyone he spoke to are blatantly lying with their eyes with open. On one hand, Tian Dan tried to take his life. With his value going up, he addresses him as Brother. If not for his special identity, he will die without knowing why.

The entourage is nearing the hilly roads besides Guo residence. Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and headed back to his residence.

Before daybreak, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were in the palace attending morning court.

In front of all the officials, King Xiaocheng officially appointed Xiang Shaolong as the City Commander and Teng Yi as his Assistant General. He was given the official seal, official sword, and letter of appointment as well as other stuff.

Guo Kai knew that the decision is final and dare not say anything in retaliation. Zhao Mu's lackeys, Empress Jing and Zhao Ya cheered with delight. An impossible appointment has now become reality.

After the court session, everyone came up to congratulate them and pave way for future collaborations, making both of them sigh with negativity.

King Xiaocheng personally accompanied Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi to inspect the City Army, letting the soldiers know who their new Commander is and gaining their obedience.

King Xiaocheng proceeded to discuss with both of them the art of defending the city, Teng Yi took the chance to display his talent while Xiang Shaolong depended on his 21st century experience coupled with Mohist Founder Mo Yi's art of war. King Xiaocheng could finally rest on his laurels and celebrate his excellent choice of men.

The accompanying military leaders were all stunned into silence. From what the two men casually said, most of the strategies are something that they have never heard of. Initially unconvinced, they were finally won over by Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi.

After the discussion, King Xiaocheng returned to the palace while another Assistant General Zhao Ming Xiong escorted both of them back to the East Gate Army Command Centre. North of the Command Centre's Great Hall, there is a raised armchair that is meant for the City Commander. When Xiang Shaolong took his seat there, over a hundred colonels, majors, captains and

lieutenants lined up neatly on two sides and kneeled in respect. Xiang Shaolong felt like he was dreaming and cannot believe what is happening before his eyes.

In the following days, both men are busy deploying the soldiers, improving their weapons and training new recruits. The elite soldiers are inserted into the City army and served as their personal escorts. At the same time, he located Pu Bu and four of his buddies within the City guards and promote them with some other soldiers to the rank of major so as to make it easier to deploy his troops in the future.

When all is done, Xiang Shaolong was relieved and went to visit Zhao Mu.

The traitor met him in the secret room. Zhao Mu sat down and laughed: “General Dong, can you guess what Guo Kai did to topple you? That ungrateful bastard sent me a secret note that you are a pawn of King Xiaocheng who is out to catch traitors like me. He asks me to guard against you and I nearly died laughing. ”

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated. Guo Kai this lowly scum is willing to forgo the big picture and harm him for his personal gain. Such a cunning man! Xiang Shaolong coldly asked: “Can we do anything to bring him down?” Zhao Mu advised: “We must tolerate little nonsense like this and focus on the grand scheme. When Zhao is ours, I will destroy his family and subject him to all forms of torture. Let him enjoy his temporary freedom.”

Xiang Shaolong reported what had been discussed between Tian Dan and himself.

Zhao Mu praised: “You are a genius. No wonder Tian Dan is so enthusiastic lately. He kept visiting me to discuss plans to control the Zhao politics. Everything is ready but we still lack the chance to assassinate King Xiaocheng. Ai! I am getting impatient.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “This matter cannot be rushed. I am still fresh in my appointment and have yet to fully control the army. Every day, my influence grows. The most crucial issue now is to gain King Xiaocheng’s trust by producing some results.”

Zhao Mu waved: “That is easy. We just leak some of our plans to King Xiaocheng and he will treat you like his most treasured object.” After further talks, Zhao Mu came up with a bunch of names. Most of them are situated outside the City of Handan.

Xiang Shaolong could tell from Zhao Mu’s flickering eyes that these men are innocent. Zhao Mu is using his hand to harm them. Cursing, he frowned: “How come there is no one within the City?” Zhao Mu hesitated before he added the names of two petty officials any another four military leaders. The four military leaders are guarding the Great Wall outside Handan. Wang Che of Ci District, (unabridged thread, post 25), whom Xiang Shaolong had met on his trip to Daliang, is also on the list.

Xiang Shaolong is even more certain that this traitor is using this excuse to get rid of his enemies. Withholding this discovery, he nodded: “Marquis must have some spies in the palace. It is better to divulge a few and gain the trust of King Xiaocheng.”

Zhao Mu happily added another two names; one of them is Zha Yuanyu (Post 26) who is Xiang Shaolong's camp officer on his Daliang trip. Xiang Shaolong was amused that Zhao Mu was taking advantage of his ignorance about Handan. In fact, he is more familiar with Zha Yuanyu than Zhao Mu ever will be. He teased Zhao Mu: "Oh! Betraying our own people might not be appropriate. Why don't we skip this list and find some other innocent people as scapegoats and affect our enemies' morale."

Zhao Mu's face changed colour. He can only keep his deceit to himself. If he did not change his list, then he will be openly lying to his 'confidante.' He frantically argued: "Let's see what happens in the next few days! If you have so much intelligence in such a short time, it will seem suspicious."

Xiang Shaolong laughed secretly and agreed: "I will obey all Marquis's instructions. When Marquis feels that the time is right, just send me the list!"

Zhao Mu sighed with relief. He appreciated that Xiang Shaolong is still as obedient despite his promotion and suggested: "I heard that you have promoted some men. I have a few men too that you can promote as well so that they can help you control the security."

Xiang Shaolong could tell that Zhao Mu is increasing his trust for him that he shared his spies' details with him. He patted his own chest and swore: "You can count on me. I will insert these people into important positions tomorrow."

Zhao Mu is glad and revealed the names of four colonels.

In the chain of command, the highest post is naturally the City Commander General. Under him will be two Assistant Generals, eight Colonels and twenty Majors. All of them have the authority to lead the soldiers.

The City Army is divided into ten battalions. Each battalion has its own captains, lieutenants, warrant officers, sergeants and corporals.

A corporal is the lowest rank and he takes charge of a group of five soldiers, including himself. The next higher rank will be the sergeant and he takes charge of fifty soldiers.

The major will take charge of ten thousand soldiers and his own military leaders.

The colonel is ranked even higher and has the authority to lead the entire army into battle. There are some differences between the colonels like there are strong armies and weak armies. If Xiang Shaolong inserts the four colonels into positions of power, it is as good as letting Zhao Mu control the City Army.

Xiang Shaolong has a plan to counter this and is unafraid of such an arrangement.

Xiang Shaolong knows that Zhao Mu will never fully disclose his entire list of spies. A bright idea came to his mind and he asked: "The human mind is difficult to fathom. Does Marquis have any method to guarantee that they will not shy away and do their best

for Marquis in times of urgent need?” Zhao Mu smiled bitterly: “No one can guarantee that!”

Xiang Shaolong thought of contracts and suggested: “I have an idea which is called the loyalty letter. Marquis can get your spies to write a loyalty letter, swear on it and hand the letter for your safe-keeping. If you are in trouble and the letters end up with King Xiaocheng, they will be in trouble as well. Therefore, they will do their best and rebel with Marquis.”

Zhao Mu cannot tell that this is a trick and clapped: “Great idea! With these, our rebellion will surely be successful!”

Xiang Shaolong naturally started: “The first loyalty letter will be from me. This is to show my gratitude and loyalty to Marquis.”

Zhao Mu is so happy that he could hug Xiang Shaolong and kissed him. He got his attendant to fetch some brushes, ink and paper.

Except for his signature, Xiang Shaolong’s handwriting is unintelligible. But he had come so far and could only grit his teeth and wrote ‘Dong Kuang is loyal to Zhao Mu’ messily.

Zhao Mu does not hold it against him for he is a ‘tribesman’ after all.

Both men are now as close as brothers and there are no secrets between them.

Leaving the Marquis Residence, Xiang Shaolong hurried into the palace to see King Xiaocheng. When Xiang Shaolong said he has a secret message, he was summoned to the royal study.

This is the first time he was alone with King Xiaocheng and he knows that he has gained his full trust. He respectfully said: “General has successfully entered Zhao Mu’s circle of trust.”

King Xiaocheng was surprised: “How did Zhao Mu trust you so easily?” Xiang Shaolong answered: “We have been on good terms all along. The other reason is I wrote him a loyalty letter.”

He started to explain the whole situation and added: “Once we get hold of the loyalty letters, we will be very clear of who the traitors are and will not kill anyone wrongfully.”

King Xiaocheng was elated: “General Dong is brilliant to come up with such a plan. I can finally abandon my worries. When the time is ripe, General Dong must help me to raid his house and find the loyalty letters. We shall see who dares to rebel.”

Xiang Shaolong advised: “That is not the best move as it will stir infighting. Besides, Tian Dan is still waiting for opportunities to make his move. Let me get my hands on these letters and investigate first. When we have eliminated the palace traitors and prevent any infighting, we will then focus on the military traitors. Till then, even if Zhao Mu has three heads and six arms, he will still bow beneath our forces.”

King Xiaocheng could not stop nodding his head: “General shall

see to it! Everything is at your disposal.”

Xiang Shaolong continued to give his report on his ‘defect’ to Tian Dan. King Xiaocheng was furious and cursed: “Thanks to your testing, this scum is indeed after our land”

Xiang Shaolong held more talks with him before bidding farewell

He had just left the study when a palace maid intercepted him on Empress Jing’s orders.

He had known about King Xiaocheng’s issue and that he does not care much for Empress Jing. But he had no idea that she was so brave to waylay him right after his meeting with King Xiaocheng. Helpless, he followed the palace maid into the inner palace.

Exactly like the last time, all the female attendants he met en route were all looking at him seductively.

These days, he has to attend morning court before the sun is up. Busy with his duties, he has no time to visit Zhao Ya or Ji Yanran. Back home, all the ladies are fast asleep. Even the Tian sisters who insist on waiting till he came home were asked to sleep first for Xiang Shaolong could not bear to see them losing sleep over him.

He has more time today and wanted to visit Talented Lady Ji or Zhao Ya. Unluckily, Empress Jing acted first and he was upset but powerless at the same time.

Until now, he does not have a clear picture of Zhao Mu's and Empress Jing's relationship. This will be a good chance to find out!

The palace maid brought him straight to a short tower in the east garden. The palace guards paid their respects to him and made him feel absolutely glorious and prestigious.

Another two palace maids opened the tower doors and winked at him smiling: "Empress is waiting for General on the second floor."

Before he could react, the two girls are kneeling on the floor and helping him to remove his shoes.

Xiang Shaolong had a wild thought – you only live once. Since he came to this ancient time, if he could do it with a queen, it will be quite an accomplishment.

Thinking of her rejection the last time and her beautiful posture, his heart is now on fire.

He still has certain reservations. If King Xiaocheng found out about this, how will he deal with him?

In a dilemma, he climbed up the stairs.

Every step is as heavy as a ton.

Empress Jing is dressed in a luxurious robe and was sitting alone

beside a long table. Seeing his appearance at the top of the steps, she cooed: “General is here. Please sit beside me.”

Xiang Shaolong pulled up his socks and sat on the other side of the long table. He sighed: “What orders does Empress have for me?” Empress Jing batted her extended eye lashes and slowly said: “Has General Dong just seen the King? Ai! Your King has been suffering from health problems recently and he refused to get enough rest. I am really afraid that he may fall sick and can never get up anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong’s desires disappeared at once, having tasted her cruelty once more.

She sounds like she is concerned about King Xiaocheng but is secretly wishing for his end. Once the Crown Prince ascends the throne, a young chap around the age of Xiao Pan will simply listen to her command. At that point in time, she will own Xiang Shaolong. If he is smart, he will continue to do her bidding.

In a few words, she has spelt out the penalties and incentives clearly, adding a touch of intimacy and seduction, making it hard for anyone to reject her.

Before he could reply, Empress Jing clapped her hand once. Two palace girls came up the stairs and laid a jug of warm white wine as well as wine cups on the table between them and left.

Empress Jing personally poured two full cups of wine. Her fingers looked like they have never done any manual work before

and her nails were painted in red. She handed one cup to Xiang Shaolong and raised her own cup. Facing Xiang Shaolong, she respectfully wished: “Congratulations on your glorious promotion to become our City Commander!”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly added: “Thanks for Empress’s support!”

Dang!

The two cups collided in mid air. Covering her face with her sleeve, Empress Jing drank the wine in one shot. Within a short while, her cheeks turned rosy, adding to her attractiveness.

Xiang Shaolong swore: “Dong Kuang will never forget your kindness, please rest assured.”

Empress Jing shot a charming look at him and softly said: “I know you are not an ungrateful man. Ya! Your performance the other day was simply exciting. I am more and more confident in you. Hey! Look at yourself! Why are you so uneasy? Are you afraid that King Xiaocheng will find out about our meeting?” Xiang Shaolong sighed and frankly explained: “I am grateful for your trust but this meeting does seemed inappropriate. If the King misunderstands Empress, even my death will not be sufficient to redeem my sin.”

Empress Jing was tickled: “You speak very tactfully, unlike your usual self. I was the one who summoned you but you speak as if you initiate this meeting. Rest easy! The king does not bother

about my affairs. He will not be upset with you. Does this make you feel better?” Xiang Shaolong is more and more confused about the abnormal state palace affairs. He was trying to get more news about Zhao Mu and her when Empress Jing suspiciously asked him: “Did Zhao Mu ever mention about me in front of you?” Xiang Shaolong honestly said: “Forgive my bluntness. Although Zhao Mu has never said anything directly, he has hinted that Empress Jing is in his side. Naturally, I did not report this to the King. Empress can rest easy.”

Empress Jing’s eyes were flashing viciously. She bit her teeth cursing: “So what if he knows? It is entirely his fault.”

From this, Xiang Shaolong knows that it has to do with the 5ex games between King Xiaocheng and Zhao Mu. Even Empress Jing is part of their games. King Xiaocheng is truly an immoral pervert.

Empress Jing slowly sighed: “We are lucky for your reminder. Zhao Mu is an idiot to keep a dangerous animal at home. He even dares to provoke the ambitious Tian Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to jump for joy. This is called thinking too much. From this new information, he guessed that Empress Jing did want to conspire with Zhao Mu. With the introduction of Tian Dan, she beat a hasty retreat.

The relationship between these people fluctuates with their rise and fall in fortunes. If Zhao Mu really sits on the throne, Empress Jing may just leap into his arms.

Empress Jing batted her eye at him and frowned: “Why are you so quiet!”

Xiang Shaolong could tell that she voice is becoming more and more intimate. He was shaken and feigned: “I was thinking of what I can do next to make you happy regardless of the difficulty involved.”

Empress Jing was laughing uncontrollably for a while. She then seductively gazed at him and softly said: “You are delicate despite your rough behaviour and know how to make women happy. No wonder the horny Zhao Ya was intoxicated by you and throw Qi Yu, Han Chuang and Li Yuan out of her residence. Her spirits at an all time high, she has even forgotten about Xiang Shaolong. I would love to have that experience as well. Fine! I know that you are occupied and will not waste any of your time.”

Xiang Shaolong was enchanted by her words and was thinking that he can taste the flavour of the high and mighty Zhao Queen. At the height of his emotions, she asked him to leave. He knows that the Empress is playing a game of ‘acting welcome but actually rejecting’. Hardening his heart with hatred, he bide his farewell helplessly.

Exiting the palace, he was tempted to visit Xiao Zhao and the rest. Suppressing this unwise decision, he head back to the Command Centre.

Book 9 Chapter 10 – Guo's Wedding Feast

Back at the East Gate Army Command Centre, it is evening time and Teng Yi just came back from training the soldiers. They gathered in a study room that is filled with bamboo books and began talking.

Teng Yi gave him a general report of the City defences and ended: "Handan's available soldiers are actually twenty thousand only. The rest are old, weak, female or untrained recruits. If activated, they will only obstruct the rest and ruin the morale."

Xiang Shaolong advised: "Quality is more important than quantity. Second brother please assign the new soldiers and the weak and old to the camps outside the city. Let them undergo training or engage in preventive work."

Teng Yi reminded: "For this deployment, your army seal is insufficient. We need to get the other half of the seal from King Xiaocheng."

Xiang Shaolong reassured: "You can count on me." He continued to relate the issue of Zhao Mu's four colonels.

Teng Yi understood at once and laughed: "Got it! I will promote them based on their abilities and give them a non-existent workload."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "I am lucky to have your assistance. Otherwise, these complex issues will drive me crazy. How in the

world did Le Cheng indulge in courtesans every night and hide so many women?” Teng Yi answered: “Easy. Delegate all the complex issues to Assistant General Zhao Ming Xiong but all the credit goes to him instead. Zhao Ming Xiong is a talent. He was sidelined as he was recommended by Lian Po. I heard that Le Cheng had wanted to demote him on many occasions but they were all overturned by your Ya’er personal intervention to King Xiaocheng. To think that Ya’er commands such influence over King Xiaocheng.”

After a moment of reflection, Xiang Shaolong asked about the Qi soldiers camping outside the city walls.

Teng Yi replied: “I have sent men to erect sentry towers at the four corners of the Qi camp and keep them under day and night observation. On the surface, there is nothing going on, even normal training. I suspect that they are digging tunnels and they are very discreet so we cannot detect anything. I have sent Little Jun to spy on them and we should have news soon.”

“Oh!” Teng Yi exclaimed: “I nearly forgot. Lord Longyang has sent someone to look for you and invited you to make a trip to his place. Guo Zhong is throwing a huge feast at his residence tonight. Not only are you invited, even I am included.”

Xiang Shaolong exchanged a look with him and they both shook their heads and sighed.

Teng Yi decided: “I won’t be going and will manage the fort here. Handan looks peaceful on the outside but it is full of killing aura. Any negligence and it will be too late for regrets.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “It’s all yours! Ai! What in the world are we doing, helping the Zhao solve their problems?”

Teng Yi stood up with him: “King Xiaocheng is giving Zhao Mu to you as a present, third brother must repay his kindness. Make a trip home first! I hardly see you talking to Shan Rou and the rest.”

Xiang Shaolong left with a reluctant smile.

With Wu Guo leading his entourage out of the Command Centre, he ran into Tian Dan’s entourage. Xiang Shaolong naturally knew that Tian Dan is coming specially for him and entered his carriage.

The Liu Brothers are seated behind Tian Dan while Xiang Shaolong is seated beside him. This Qi leader smiled: “Brother Dong is an excellent City Commander. The whole situation looks powerful and refreshing.”

After apologising, he added: “To gain the trust of King Xiaocheng, I have sent someone to monitor your entourage. Please forgive me.”

Tian Dan joyfully patted his shoulder: “I am not an unreasonable man.” Continuing in a low voice: “Have you found out who killed Le Cheng?” Xiang Shaolong nearly fell apart and hurriedly replied: “If I am not mistaken, it is done by Xiang Shaolong. A few days later, he was detected at a village near Handan City.”

Tian Dan mysteriously laughed at his words and plainly state: “This must be Xiang Shaolong’s doing. No one else hated Le Cheng as much as he. In fact, Le Cheng is the first target. If Zhao Mu is not the next target, then it will be King Xiaocheng himself.”

Xiang Shaolong could feel all his bones freezing and was like a fish out of water.

Tian Dan coldly thinks aloud: “If it is done by Xiang Shaolong, this matter will be very interesting. Where is he hiding in Handan? Who is his spy to track Le Cheng’s movements so accurately? Can Brother Dong answer these questions?” Xiang Shaolong answered in a deep voice: “If I am Xiang Shaolong, I will not be so stupid to hide in the City. Regarding the spy, it is a piece of cake. The Wu Family has deep connections here. There will surely be someone who will cooperate with him”

Tian Dan continued smiling: “Why did he alert the city with Le Cheng’s killing? ”

Xiang Shaolong was startled and cannot comprehend where he is coming from. He frowned: “What does Chancellor Tian thinks?” Tian Dan stared at the dark street and slowly said one word at a time: “Xiang Shaolong has been back for quite some time already. I can feel it.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big fright. He lowered his voice and asked: “Does Chancellor Tian know where he is?” He vowed that if his cover is blown, he will kill him right away regardless of the consequences.

Tian Dan let out a very long sigh: “Xiang Shaolong is the most extraordinary man I have ever known. King Xiaocheng did not treasure him and missed out a great opportunity to regain the glory of Zhao.”

Shaking his head, he sighed again and patted Xiang Shaolong on his shoulder: “Mark my words. There are spies in Le Cheng’s personal escort team. Investigate those that did not go along with Le Cheng that fateful night and you will find the spy. Do a good job. If we can really apprehend Xiang Shaolong, we can use him in an exciting negotiation.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “What negotiation?” Tian Dan simply said: “Like exchanging him for Zhao Ya’s Lu Gong Secret Manual.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed. This man is too scary for words. If not for his fake identity, he will not be able to play this game with Tian Dan and may even lose everything he has.

At this point, the horse carriage is driving up the hill road leading to the Guo Residence. As the carriage bumped forward, Tian Dan casually asked: “Where did Brother Dong learn his art of city defence?” Xiang Shaolong had anticipated this question and shrugged his shoulders: “Everything I know is from personal experience. After numerous battles, I know soldiering. After living with horses, I know how to breed them. It is nothing actually.”

Tian Dan maintained his silence for a while before inquiring:

“Why did Brother Dong look up to me?” Xiang Shaolong acted like he was full of sincerity and explained: “Horse breeders must first know how to take care of their horses. Please excuse my eccentricity. Comparing horses to human, among those I have seen, there are none as good as Chancellor’s Tian horses.”

Tian Dan was laughing so hard he started to cry. He readily accepts his answer and warned: “You have to guard against Li Yuan. He is extremely narrow-minded and hates you to the core. He will not stop until you are dead. Especially after Zhao Ya become intoxicated with you and ruin his chances at Lu Gong’s Secret Manual. Remember, he will stop at nothing.”

Xiang Shaolong has no more doubts that Tian Dan and Li Yuan are the masterminds behind Lord Longyang’s assassination. The Guo Residence came into view. Xiang Shaolong quietly cursed that he cannot even share a proper conversation with Shan Rou and the Tian sisters. He wonders if he will get to see Ji Yanran, Zhao Ya or even Zhao Zhi.

He has lost a lot of excitement in his life.

The Guo Residence is brightly lit and full of guests, adding to the festivities.

Xiang Shaolong slipped out of the carriage before entering the residence separately to avoid being seen with Tian Dan.

When he stepped into the residence after Tian Dan, he could see Guo Zhong giving Tian Dan a warm welcome and is busy

introducing him to the other famous Zhao dignitaries, making him the centre of attention.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly happy. He retreated down the road leading to the residence and glided into a big garden in front of the residence. He breathed deeply and was energised by the refreshing cool air and caught a whiff of fragrance.

Xiang Shaolong turned around and Zhao Ya appeared at his side. Grabbing his arm, she dragged him towards a little pavilion deeper into the picturesque garden. She praised: “Ya’er thought Master Ding will be unavailable. Ai! You are really capable. Only a few days have passed and you have improved the military strength of Handan City. With such good defence, no one will miss Le Cheng.”

After crossing two bridges, they came to a pavilion by a pond. The human voice and lights seemed to come from another dimension. They seemed to be in an isolated paradise of their own.

Xiang Shaolong leaned on the stone fence and put his hand around her thin waist and smiled: “I have decided to help your brother (Zhao King) resolve the danger surrounding Handan City. How are you going to thank me?” Zhao Ya trembled slightly and leaned into his bosom saying: “Ya’er can only get rid of her old ways and become Master Dong’s most obedient woman!” In a low voice, she continued: “Can you really forget the past wrongdoings? Ya’er is afraid that King Xiaocheng cannot withstand another blow.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but to look at her with mistrust. Zhao Ya had a big shock and cried; “You have no confidence in

me!”

Xiang Shaolong simply reassure: “Set your mind at ease. I have a great plan and I promise that your brother will never know that Xiang Shaolong has ever been to Handan or has even been the City Commander.”

Still upset, Zhao Ya mumbled: “Zhao Ya understands.”

Seeing her crestfallen look, Xiang Shaolong took pity on her. Kissing her lips, he smiled: “Do not worry. As long as you do what you promised, how can I not love you?”

Zhao Ya slowly said: “Will you really bring me away?” Xiang Shaolong knows that she is terrified and may have wild thoughts or worry incessantly. He seriously state: “Why would I have the heart to deceive a poor girl like you who is looking for your drop of honey?” Zhao Ya’s face began to turn red and she stomped her feet and whined: “I am dissatisfied. After you became Dong Kuang, I still gave all my love to you and my body as well and yet you still bullied me.”

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh. Moving his hands lower, he strongly slapped her two firm bums and asked; “Why is Guo Zhong arranging such a huge feast tonight?”

Zhao Ya was surprised: “You are really immersed in your work and have no inkling that Tycoon Guo is marrying his daughter to Li Yuan.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken and enquired: “Guo Zhong is really leaving; will your brother let him off?” Zhao Ya sighed: “The alliance discussion is on hold because of Yan and King Xiaocheng refused to give in. Guo Zhong is a man who only looks at profits. He will not wait here for the Qin army to conquer the city. With Li Yuan as his son-in-law, what can brother do?” Xiang Shaolong comment: “If you leave with me too, wouldn’t your brother be heart-broken?” Zhao Ya was in a state of panic and faintly said: “Have I not done my best for him? I did not even hold Sister Ni’s death against him and nearly cause the death of my most beloved. Only he owes me; what do I owe him? As a female, what more can I achieve? I know him better than anyone. Don’t be too happy with his appreciation. Once the danger is over, he will treat you differently. Lian Po and Li Mu did so much for the state and look at them now. He only cares about himself and my heart for him is dead. Ai! If my brother is dead and that woman becomes the Dowager, her first target will be poor me. How can I not leave?” Xiang Shaolong concluded: “I am relieved to hear these words from you.”

Still unconvinced, Zhao Ya declared: “Still disbelieving? For you, I am willing to die without any regrets.”

Before he could reply, Zhao Ya added: “The main banquet will be held in Chu. Guo Zhong will have to preside the dinner at the capital of Chu. You should understand!”

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened and affirmed: “Great move! Come, let’s join in the fun!”

He slapped her back, saying: “You go back first or everyone will

be jealous of me.”

Zhao Ya passionately asked; “Shall I come to your place tonight?” Xiang Shaolong thought of Shan Rou and frowned: “We shall confirm later! Is Talented Lady Ji coming?” Zhao Ya proudly said: “She is here long ago and is busy looking for her lover. Luckily Ya’er acted first.”

Xiang Shaolong is very entertained and chased her away before entering the building.

The garden is filled with performers to keep the guests occupied. Seeing this new office-bearer, everyone came to welcome him. By the time Xiang Shaolong managed to extricate himself, Han Chuang led him to a corner and praised: “General Dong is a man of talent. I have never seen Sister Jing having such a high opinion of anyone.”

Xiang Shaolong humbly replied: “It is all thanks to Marquis’s arrangement.”

Han Chuang cursed: “Don’t worry. I have put in the best word for you in front of Empress. You must guard against Guo Kai the scum. He is currently spreading rumours that you have laid the Queen to get your promotion to City Commander. Hei! This cunning bastard dared to act so recklessly only because he is the lover of King Xiaocheng. I cannot take this lying down.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “What?!” Han Chuang continued: “No many people knows about this. Outside the palace, probably

not even a single person knows. King Xiaocheng cannot do without men. Too bad you are not g@y or you can replace him.”

Every strand of Xiang Shaolong’s hair is standing at its end. He coughed: “Let’s stop here.”

Han Chuang intimately added: “It is better you love women! The Queen is a rare beauty and if you can make her happy, Zhao will be at your command when the Crown Prince ascends the throne. When that happens, do not forget your old friend Han Chuang.”

Xiang Shaolong could tell that Han Chuang wants to control Empress Jing through him. He can also deduce that Empress Jing is not fully obedient towards him. Afraid that he will ask for the Tian sisters, he dragged Han Chuang towards the building and warned as they walked: “Marquis must take precautions. I suspect Qi and Chu are behind Lord Longyang’s attack.”

Han Chuang turned pale: “What?!” Xiang Shaolong is confident that Empress Jing does not share all her knowledge with Han Chuang. They ran into another group of guests and Xiang Shaolong took the chance to slip away and strode towards the main banquet hall.

In the centre of the hall, Guo Zhong stood there and welcomed him: “General Dong is newly promoted to be our City Commander and I have yet to send my congratulations.”

Xiang Shaolong swept his gaze and did not see his two sons. He guessed that Guo Zhong must have followed Wu Yingyuan’s

example and sent his sons away first. He shook his hands and politely said: “It should be General congratulating Mister. You have gained such a handsome son-in-law. All the potential father-in-laws in Handan can only stand aside and watch with hatred and jealousy.”

Guo Zhong laughed: “Talking with you is always a joyful occasion.”

The main hall is now filled with various guests, numbering almost a thousand. Some of the more reclusive powerful families were also present in their best outfits. With the grand attires and fanfare, who could have guessed that Handan is in danger of war?

Xiang Shaolong’s sharp eyes caught Li Yuan who is situated at the other side of the main hall. He is cheerfully chatting with Tian Dan, Guo Kai and Cheng Dan.

Empress Jing made her entrance but King Xiaocheng is absent to show his displeasure.

Ji Yanran can also be seen with another group of people. Even the anti-social Zou Yan is here. Yanran is chatting intimately with the just-recovered Lord Longyang. Both of them are old friends and are naturally close.

Zhao Ba and Zhao Zhi are helping to usher in the guests. Zhao Zhi saw Xiang Shaolong and her eyes widened. Abandoning her company of extinguished ladies, she flew over like a bird.

Xiang Shaolong was blaming himself for being muddle-headed and coming without a present so he took the chance to excuse himself and met up with Zhao Zhi.

This unique beauty whined upon contact: “General Dong! Zhi Zhi hasn’t seen you for so many days and is suffering in agony! You must accompany me tonight no matter what happens.”

Before anything could happen, Lord Longyang appeared out of nowhere between them. With his warm eyes staring deeply into his own eyes, he stretched his hand and held onto Xiang Shaolong’s hands tightly and cooed: “Except for Wei King, I have never felt as much gratitude to anyone compared to Brother Dong. No matter what happens, Brother Dong must not forget that there is someone waiting for you in Daliang.”

Xiang Shaolong could feel all his goose pimples standing. He was embarrassed and upset but cannot bear to pull his hand away after seeing how emotional and lonely the other party is. Choosing to believe that he is just affectionate towards both sexes, he started to feel better and consoled him by patting in his shoulder and said: “Dong Kuang understands. Please have a safe journey.”

As Lord Longyang released his hand, he caught Han Chuang walking over. Afraid that he may ask for the Tian sisters, he begged Lord Longyang: “Lord, please help me detain this man.”

Lord Longyang was surprised momentarily and happily intercepted Han Chuang.

With the help of Zou Yan, Ji Yanran managed to extricate herself from a group of admirers and greeted him: “Dong Kuang! You are so busy that you do not have time to visit me?” Xiang Shaolong wanted to say that he will bed her tonight but he remembered Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi and held back his tongue. To distract her, he asked in a low voice: “What are they here for?” Ji Yanran was annoyed and drummed: “I had said that they were after the Lu Gong Secret Manual! What else is there? Dong Kuang! Are you ignoring me?”

This time, he is really in trouble. He laughed: “You are not afraid of Mister Zou teasing?” In his heart he is groaning. Only a few days of rest and he has to manage three sessions tonight?

Ji Yanran looked over at Zou Yan and laughed: “Why are you so formal? He is my godfather! There is no one here and you, Dong the heartless man, need not be so polite.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at the sniggering Zou Yan and smiled: “I’ll have no reservations then. Tonight, I will dig out my heart for Talented Lady Ji’s to see.”

Ji Yanran then brightened up.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to ask: “What did Miss Ji do that ended the dreams of Li Yuan and make him willing to marry Miss Guo?” Ji Yanran hissed: “Nothing works. He came to me today and told me that the official wife position is still available but I kicked him out.”

Li Yuan looked over to them and his face is full of hatred.

The bell sounded and it is time to start the banquet.

Book 9 Chapter 11 – Zhao Palace On Fire

As all the guests are swarming in, Xiang Shaolong pondered over Ji Yanran's words. The more he thought, the more uneasy he is and slipped out to find Wu Guo.

Wu Guo happened to be spouting nonsense with a group of guests who have yet to enter the banquet hall. He was startled to see Xiang Shaolong and he embarrassedly came to his side and asked: "Third Master is leaving so soon?" Xiang Shaolong does not hold it against him and seriously spoke: "Notify Second Master at once. Tell him that Prince Xinling has sent a team of experts to Handan and could take tonight's chance to steal the Lu Gong Secret Manual"

Wu Guo scratched his head: "The palace guards and the city guards like us do not mix. Unless approved by King Xiaocheng, we will get thrown out."

Xiang Shaolong agreed that this is a problem. He warned: "In this case, get second master to send someone to monitor the palace from outside. If there are any suspicious people, he can use this excuse to infiltrate. Oh! If we can only use our elite troops. Pay attention to the secret tunnels entrances. Prince Xinling may even have the map of the secret tunnels or even a spy in the palace."

Wu Guo left with his order.

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief and head back to the banquet.

Before he could take another step, a melodious voice sounded out from his left: “Mister Dong! Please wait.”

Xiang Shaolong found the voice familiar and looked towards the source.

Under the company of eight female attendants, Guo Xiu'er was dressed in a flamboyant red cheongsam. Walking along the left stone path, it appears that she is about to take part in the engagement dinner.

Xiang Shaolong halted and unnaturally congratulates her.

Guo Xiu'er returned the favour and discharged the attendants: “I need to have a word with Mister Dong; all of you wait for me at the side.”

The attendants were taken by surprise and retreated to a distance.

Guo Xiu'er ran her eyes over Xiang Shaolong. In an unhappy tone, she sighed: “Father's orders cannot be disobeyed. Xiu'er has no choice. Can Mister understand what I mean?” Xiang Shaolong is stunned by her frankness and was dumbfounded. In such a short time, he does not know how to reply her.

Even if there is no obstacle between them, based on the family rivalry between Wu and Guo, there is no way that he can marry

her!

Guo Xiu'er smiled sadly and turned around. When she turned back, there is a jade pendant on her hand. She stepped closer and pressed it into his hand, emotionally saying: "Xiu'er cannot give my body to Mister so I have to replace it with this jade pendant. If you have feelings for me, please wear it and I will die without regrets."

Finishing, she lowered her head and hastily walked towards the main hall while the attendants frantically caught up.

In ecstasy, Xiang Shaolong held the jade pendant tightly. The jade pendant is still warm with her holding.

He opened up his palm and took a closer look.

It is an ancient jade carving of a phoenix. If he had brought back to a 21st Century auction, the proceeds will be able to last his expenditure for a lifetime.

Thinking of this, he scolded himself.

The girl is passionate and innocent but he has such crazy notions.

Shaking his head, he hanged the pendant around his neck before participating in the feast.

The main hall is full of activity. Hundreds of servants are

shuttling in and out of the main hall, serving the guests with dishes and wine.

There are four VIP tables facing the main door.

The first table is Guo Zhong and his wife with Li Yuan and Guo Xiu'er. The other three tables are taken by Empress Jing, Tian Dan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang, Ji Zhong and other people.

The other tables are lined up on the two sides. Each side has three layers of tables and each table seats four people. The centre area is left open for the performances of singers and dancers.

A group of musicians were based on both sides of the main door and were actively playing their instruments. The air is filled with drumming and cheering and everyone is in a celebratory mood.

While everyone is distracted by Guo Xiu'er entry, Xiang Shaolong slipped to the back row of the tables and wondered where he should sit?

The seats are arranged according to status and he cannot just take any empty seat.

Fortunately, the Guo Chief Housekeeper Gao Bai saw him from afar and rushed forward informing: "Princess Ya has instructed servant that she wants to sit with General. General, please come with me."

Xiang Shaolong panicked. If he is seated with Zhao Mu, Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi have nothing to say. If he sits with Zhao Ya, they will be jealous and throw tantrums at him. There is a price to pay for having multiple lovers.

He ignored this potential problem and accompanied Gao Bai to the VIP tables.

Among the distinguished guests, many of them are viewing this legendary City Commander for the first time and many of them greeted him.

The women are all eyeing his well-build frame and heroic air. Xiang Shaolong was having mixed feelings. He disregarded every stare and blindly followed Gao Bai, walking between the tables and the wall. Gao Bai stopped and bowed: "General please be seated."

Xiang Shaolong looked carefully and he saw three pairs of beautiful eyes staring straight back at him.

Zhao Ya, Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi are seated on the same table as him. The other table is Zhao Mu, Guo Kai, Cheng Dan and Zou Yan.

Xiang Shaolong was rejuvenated and silently admire Zhao Ya's thoughtfulness. He sat on the far end of the table beside Zhao Zhi. This is a smart move. If he had sat between two girls, the third one will be neglected. This is also to show his respect for the three girls.

Every guy is envious of him to share the table with three ladies while every girl is dying to replace the three girls to get closer to this popular figure.

The drumming stopped suddenly and sounded again. Over a hundred pretty courtesans glide into the main area and began singing and dancing.

Zhao Zhi whispered: "Sister Yanran told me to ask you where you went earlier?" Xiang Shaolong joked: "Can't I even go to the bathroom?" Zhao Zhi leaned towards Ji Yanran to pass the answer and whispered back: "Why are you in the bathroom for such a long time?" Xiang Shaolong could not hold back his laughter and nearly choked on his food. He endured and asked: "When has Zhi Zhi become a telephone? Every business can be big or small. Even the heavenly gods has no control."

Zhao Zhi burst out in laughter too and passed the message after she tried to hold her laughter.

Zhao Ya and Ji Yanran were laughing till their tears came out. Zhao Zhi cheekily asked again: "Princess saw that you and Guo Xiu'er almost came in at the same time and there is a change in both your expressions. Did you pull a fast one on her and snatched Li Yuan's prize?"

Xiang Shaolong could only acknowledge her sharp observation and denied everything.

The singing and dancing ended and so did their flirting.

Guo Zhong stood up and gave a speech, announcing Guo Xiu'er engagement to Li Yuan. The actual wedding will be held in the Capital of Chu. This is followed by toasting and the hall is filled with happiness.

Xiang Shaolong look at Guo Xiu'er's complexion carefully and she looks like a woman resigned to her fate. Feelings swell up in him

If he had never entered the picture, Guo Xiu'er will never have that expression for Li Yuan is indeed a dream son-in-law.

No matter how talented he is, he cannot solve her problem for it is fated that they can never be together.

For the power-holders in these warring times, marriage is just a political game. The higher the status of the female, the higher the stakes in politics. Thinking deeply, when Wu Yingyuan married his daughter to him, it is also a strategy to keep his loyalty. It is a coincidence that Wu Tingfang really loved him or it will be just another tragedy.

For Zhao Qian and him to succeed as a couple is another miracle.

Xiang Shaolong became very emotional and drank another two cups and wine.

Zhao Zhi whispered again: "Zhi Zhi wished that she could make

mincemeat out of Tian Dan right now but I am willing to wait because I know that Master Dong will get him at the end.”

Xiang Shaolong thinks that Zhao Zhi is overestimating him and softly comment: “Isn’t it better to think about happy stuff?” Zhao Zhi thought that he is teasing her and her face became red and she added: “Zhi Zhi will await Master Dong’s instructions!”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden inspiration.

There is a difference between Zhao Zhi and Guo Xiu’er. Both of them agree that the man should be the head of the household and should obey his will even at the cost of their own dreams and thinking.

The difference is that Zhao Zhi has more luck than Guo Xiu’er!

In the same light, Ji Yanran and Shan Rou are women who are opposed to the normal treatment of women. Just like Mo Zi’s opposition of absolute power in a single person and the unnecessary rituals and ceremonies.

Mo Zi is a male so his teachings are carried forward for years.

No matter how profound are Ji Yanran’s philosophies, others will only take note of her beauty.

Simply because of Guo Xiu’er forced marriage to Li Yuan, Xiang Shaolong was thinking about an entire chain of events and is lost

in his thoughts. Out of a sudden, a round of fierce footsteps roused him from his semi-consciousness.

The main hall quietened down and every one watched in puzzlement as a group of Zhao soldiers scrambled into the main hall and even knocked down a tray of food and wine in the process. They continue to fill up the centre of the hall and when they identified Xiang Shaolong, they frantically rush to him and under the looks of everyone, reported: “General Dong, the palace is on fire!”

Everyone present was in a state of shock.

The palace fire was soon extinguished but Zhao Ya’s chamber is burnt to the ground. There are over thirty charred corpses, including that of Xiao Zhao and over ten palace guards. No one escaped alive and all the bodies have sword scars or arrow scars.

Zhao Ya is crying her eyes out and is supported by two palace maids.

By the time Xiang Shaolong and the rest have checked out the scene, the palace guards have searched the entire palace but cannot find a trace of the enemy. The only discovery is that a nearby tunnel has been broken into and the four palace guards securing it are strangled to death.

Cheng Dan’s expression is even worse than King Xiaocheng’s. As the leader of the palace guards, he must take responsibility for this intrusion. He could be stripped of his post or even beheaded as a

result.

King Xiaocheng's hands were shaking like a leaf. Under the heavy escort of the palace guardians, he blew his top and harshly scolded: "All of you are idiots, if the attackers are not after the book but after me, won't I be... Humph!"

All the palace guardians were terrified and they all kneeled down in silence.

Xiang Shaolong thought of Xiao Zhao and his heart was bleeding.

Guo Kai and the rest of the officials are lost as they witness the horrific disaster.

Xiang Shaolong is burning with a thirst for revenge. If the enemy just wants the secret manual, he can just grab it and escape. There is no need to take any lives or even set fire. The act of killing Xiao Zhao shows that the attacker is doing this for revenge.

Teng Yi came to Xiang Shaolong's back and gave him small tug to signal that he has something to say.

Xiang Shaolong left the crowd with him and Teng Yi whispered: "We have discovered the hideout of the criminals. They are hiding in Han Chuang's residence."

Xiang Shaolong was blown away. "What!" He exclaimed. Teng Yi affirmed: "There is no mistake. Jing Jun personally led our elite

men and trailed them. They were seen entering Han Chuang's residence and are still under observation. Even with wings, they will not be able to escape.”

Thoughts raced through Xiang Shaolong's mind.

He thought of the Three State Alliance plan and the three leaders who pushed for it. Zhao's Lord Pingyuan is dead, leaving Wei's Prince Xinling Wei Wuji and Han Chuang's senior. It cannot be Han Chuang as he is too young and lack foresight.

A clear picture appeared in his brain.

After Lord Pingyuan's death, there is no strong official pushing for this alliance. Wei and Han are still working hard on this dream.

This is the reason why Han Chuang harboured Prince Xinling's men.

If Prince Xinling's men did not kill, Xiang Shaolong may let them off as he does not place any importance on Lu Gong's Secret Manual.

But when this involves the blood debt of Xiao Zhao, even the gods will not be able to stop him.

Out of the blue, King Xiaocheng hollered: “Where is Dong Kuang?!”

Xiang Shaolong told Teng Yi: “Assemble our forces and be ready to move.”

He then strode towards King Xiaocheng.

Zhao Mu, Tian Dan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang, Ji Zhong, Empress Jing and Li Yuan were all present. They were expressionless and wanted to see how King Xiaocheng manage this affair.

Pale-faced, King Xiaocheng stared hard at Xiang Shaolong and roared: “What kind of City Commander are you? You can’t even tell that we have enemies entering the city!”

Li Yuan, Guo Kai and Ji Zhong were delighted at his failure. Han Chuang quietly lowered his head as he did not expect Prince Xinling’s men to be so cruel and got his buddy Dong Kuang into trouble.

Empress Jing’s face is void of colour and supported King Xiaocheng while maintaining her silence.

Xiang Shaolong swept his eyes round the room and gathered everyone’s reaction.

He did not kneel down like Cheng Dan and proudly declared: “The murderers have entered the City long ago but only execute their plans tonight.”

Han Chuang was frightened and was in a state of panic.

Li Yuan and company looked at him with disdain, meaning that he is running away from responsibility. If the attackers had come to Handan much earlier, he is not the City Commander yet and so he is not responsible for the slip-up.

King Xiaocheng seemed to have lost his senses and pointed his finger, scolding: “What makes you so sure?” Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand this king better. As calm as still water, he reasoned: “This attack is carried out by people who have spies within the palace. The perpetrators have chosen the best time and acted with the best information. They come and go without leaving trace. Such plans cannot be consolidated on such a short notice. Based on my deductions, they must have been in Handan for some time and only chose to make their move tonight.”

King Xiaocheng regained his senses and began to analyse his words.

Tian Dan interrupted: “Why don’t Your Majesty let General Dong conduct a search for the enemies and atone for his mistakes?” Lord Longyang seconded his opinion.

Empress Jing whispered a few words into King Xiaocheng’s ears.

King Xiaocheng raised his blood-red eyes and glared at Xiang Shaolong, commanding: “I am giving you three day to dig out the culprits.” He faced the kneeling cum trembling Cheng Dan and

added: “Lock this clown in the prison first. If we cannot find the criminals, he shall accompany those who have died in the attack.”

Cheng Dan gave a tragic cry as he is dragged away by a few palace guards.

He turned to Xiang Shaolong again and warmly coughed: “You are not leaving yet?” Xiang Shaolong look at everyone and even smiled at the depressed Zhao Mu. He plainly said: “Such a simple matter; three days is too long. Before the sun is up tomorrow, the lost item will be placed on Your Majesty’s desk. Each and every one of the thieves will be captured. Even if they are dead, their heads will be presented. If I fail, Your Majesty need not lift a finger; I will not see the sun tomorrow myself.”

Finished and leaving the entire crowd dumbfounded, he stride in huge steps towards the palace doors.

Han Chuang’s complexion lost all colours of life. As everyone is focusing on the departing Xiang Shaolong, he smoothly sneaked away and chased Xiang Shaolong from another path.

At the big courtyard outside the palace door, Wu Guo and over a hundred elite troops are waiting by their horses.

Xiang Shaolong has a stern look and flew up his horse without a single word.

Han Chuang caught up to him and called for him to wait.

Xiang Shaolong had known that he would chase him and got a horse for him and they rode out of the palace together.

Han Chuang is horrified: “Where is General Dong going to find the attackers?” Xiang Shaolong eyes were shining and he coldly look at him, replying: “Of course to your residence. Does Marquis think they will be hiding anywhere else?” Han Chuang was mortified: “General must be joking!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “I am not joking. I have received your kindness and I know that Marquis did not expect them to kill anyone. The matter can still be salvaged, depending on Marquis’s cooperation. Otherwise, I will not take responsibility for the end result. Marquis should know better!” He squeezed the horse belly and his war horse dashed forward.

Wu Guo and the rest followed his lead. Raising their horse whips, they rode forward at full speed. Gritting his teeth, Han Chuang pushed his horse to catch up.

Thunderous hoof beats filled the air and shattered the sleep of Handan’s citizens.

Book 10 Chapter 1 - Leave No Witnesses Alive

Xiang Shaolong and his men galloped directly towards Han Chuang's residence. Jing Jun had already led his crack troops to surround the residence, sealing off all the small alleys and roads nearby. After they arrived, he had made a secret gesture towards Teng Yi, who then led the tens of remaining soldiers to mount, then directly charge towards Han Chuang's residence.

Han Chuang, trying to catch up from behind, had no idea what was going on. Wasn't this a case of "striking the grass and startling the serpent"? But at this moment, the only thing he cared about was himself. He had no time to worry about anything else, as he whipped his horse onward.

Just as they nearly arrived at the main door of the residence, the residence suddenly was flooded with lantern lights as a large host of Han Chuang's men charged out, putting up a lively display.

Xiang Shaolong glanced backwards, allowing Han Chuang to catch up. In a deep voice, he said, "Marquis, will you cooperate or not?"

At this moment, the flesh on Han Chuang's face was twitching beneath his skin. Violently grinding his teeth, he said, "I will act in accordance with what you say!"

Xiang Shaolong had secretly worried that he wouldn't speak up. Laughing, he said, "I recommend all of your subordinates to come out and whole-heartedly assist us in catching these thieves!"

At this moment, fifty or so horsemen arrived in front of the main gate. Han Chuang shouted to his men, "By my orders, get over here and help the City Guards pursue the thieves!"

His men were flabbergasted, guessing that he must be putting on an act. Assenting aloud in unison, they returned to the manor and called for men to equip their horses.

Xiang Shaolong and his men continued to gallop without pause. After passing a few more streets, he waved towards Han Chuang. "Dismount!"

Before Han Chuang had a clue as to what was going on, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi flew off their still-galloping horses, their movements as graceful as that of a swimming dragon. The soldiers to each side held their horses' reins, and the two horses continued to gallop without stopping. Han Chuang had no choice but to slowly slow his horse down. Only after his horse had slowed down enough was he able to jump down. His horse was led away as well. In his heart, he couldn't help but feel admiration. By acting in such a manner, Xiang Shaolong's brilliance was put on display. If he were Prince Xinling's men, he wouldn't become suspicious either. At the moment, Handan was filled with running soldiers. It'd be strange if his manor was silent.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi darted off to one side. They watched as a group of roughly three hundred horsemen galloped directly towards them. At this point in time, Han Chuang was walking towards them from a few hundred feet away, at the point where he had dismounted.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Order all of your men to come directly towards us and to obey my men's orders!"

Han Chuang was already riding on the tiger's back and had no way to get off. He gestured to his men, ordering them to continue to advance. He only stopped one person, to whom he said a few words. Only then did the rest of his subordinates, bellies filled with questions, continue forward as directed.

When the sound of hoof steps gradually faded away, Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "Marquis, at this moment, the entire district has been surrounded by my men. Nobody can enter or exit these few streets. So long as you, Marquis, are willing to cooperate with us, I am willing to say that the enemies had buried themselves in Lady Ya's courtyard, and were planning to assassinate her, only for us to have flushed them out, chasing them away towards your manor. Marquis, do you think this plan is workable?"

Han Chuang's face was ashen. After a long time, he gloomily replied, "Is it possible for us to leave no witnesses alive? There's around ten or so slave-girls left inside."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Do those slave-girls know the truth?"

Han Chuang shook his head.

Teng Yi understood Xiang Shaolong's feelings. He said, "We need to act in accordance with the demands of the situation. If we start killing people at random, that would actually raise people's

suspicious."

Han Chuang slowly calmed down. He knew that for Xiang Shaolong to be willing to protect him despite risking execution proved that he really was a true friend. Aside from secretly cursing Prince Xinling's men for having revealed their hiding place and ruined their plans, what else could he do? After sighing, he said, "Let's have you make all the decisions in this matter!"

Right at this moment, Jing Jun appeared suddenly from out of nowhere. He excitedly reported, "Everyone is in place!"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a strange sensation. This was like a counter-terrorist operation in the 21st century. These terrorists had occupied a building, and held in their hands a precious manual of weapons diagrams. Their goal was to safely take the manual back home. At this moment, their greatest advantage against these terrorists was that the terrorists had no idea of the danger they were in, and the fact that they had a traitor, Han Chuang, on their side, who intimately knew all of the enemy's details.

Han Chuang asked no further questions. He let out another sigh, then said, "They have thirty five men in total. However, every single one of them is an expert. Their leader is Yue Xing. He is one of Prince Xinling's competent subordinates."

Xiang Shaolong had once shared a seating mat with Yue Xing at a banquet at Daliang, the capital of Wei. He let out a secret sigh as well. After inquiring regarding the enemy's position, he said, "If your men were to enter the granary they are hiding themselves in, is there some secret password that is needed?"

Han Chuang secretly exclaimed to himself that this man is indeed formidable. Nodding, he said, "The password is, 'Many blessings to Master Lu'. Remember, leave no one alive. I will also need to ask that brother Dong put on a play as well, near Lady Ya's residence."

Wu Guo just happened to arrive by their side with several of his best men. Teng Yi pulled him off to one side and instructed him to order a troop of men one street over to go to Zhao Ya's residence.

Xiang Shaolong clapped his hand on Han Chuang's shoulder. He reassured him, "Marquis, be at ease. I, Dong Kuang, have already decided to act in lockstep with you in this matter. Afterwards, all of the corpses will be spread across the courtyard, the walls, and the streets. In addition, after Xiaocheng gets his secret manual back, he's not going to quibble too much over how I returned it!"

Frowning, Han Chuang said, "The most worrisome problem is that your subordinates might let the secret out."

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder forcefully, before replying in a relaxed way, "The people I have surrounding this place are local Zhao soldiers, but the people who will be accompanying us on this mission are my clansmen. I knew from the start that this had nothing to do with you, Marquis, and I immediately decided to do my best to help you cover this matter up, no matter what."

Han Chuang knew that Xiang Shaolong really should not have acted in such a way. He gratefully said, "Brother Dong, you really are a true friend!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly berating himself for being so soft-hearted, even towards such bad men as Han Chuang. But without Han Chuang's help, it was likely that the only thing they would be able to retrieve would be the ashes of Lu Gong's secret manual. He replied, "Marquis, please go join up again with your servants and wait for news."

After he was done talking, he started to move towards the residence with Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Han Chuang, under the 'protection' of several of Xiang Shaolong's elite troops, was quickly escorted away.

The civilians nearby had been awakened by the hoof steps long ago. All of them were panicked, but nobody dared to stick their heads out to take a look. Instead, they actually shut their doors and windows, afraid that trouble might make its way to them.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the grief and hatred he felt for the deaths of Xiao Zhao and the others, returning to his normal calm and cool-headedness as he began to carry out this counter-terrorist operation.

Borrowing the light of the moon, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, and Jing Jun led around twenty or so crack troopers who were especially talented to flip over the walls with their tools, landing within the wide expanse of the manor's rear garden. They moved as quickly as ghosts, without making any noise.

Everything was quiet, like normal. The only thing which could be

heard was the pre-arranged sounds of horses galloping to and fro, which perfectly concealed and drowned out any sounds which they might have made.

There were three storehouses arranged in a neat row in the garden. The one in the middle was their target, the granary. The group quickly moved towards it, locating all of the doors and windows. They took the best hiding spots they could find. Others climbed on top of the roof, preparing to drop in through the windows.

The granary was totally dark inside. It was totally silent.

Next, around fifty crack troops climbed over the walls as well, hiding themselves within the flowers and other plants in the garden. All of them had loaded crossbows in their hands.

Seeing that all the preparations were in order, Xiang Shaolong motioned towards Teng Yi and walked towards the granary door.

The two pulled out their precious swords, arriving in front of the door.

Knock, knock!

The soul-stirring sound of the door being knocked felt especially grating to the ear.

The granary remained silent.

Teng Yi said in a low voice, "Many blessings to Master Lu!"

A few moments later, a deep voice shouted, "What is it? Why have you come to find us now?"

Teng Yi shouted in reply, "Open the door now! The Marquis ordered us to come here and give you a report."

How could the man know that it was all a trick? With a creaking sound, he opened the thick wooden door by just a crack.

Teng Yi shot out a powerful kick. With a miserable cry, the person who opened the door collapsed inwards along with the door.

The wooden door fell.

It was time to make their move.

The crack troops attacked from the eight windows situated around the granary. First, they threw in around twenty or so wind lanterns which they had just lit. These wind lanterns were marvelously designed. Around the size of a soccer ball, the flame was kept within the center. The lantern cloth were perforated with holes and treated with flame-retardant chemicals. Thus, they would not catch flames. They were one of the secret weapon the crack troops used for night assaults.

The small granary, capable of holding only around ten or so large baskets of grain, was immediately filled with light, revealing the positions of each and every one of the thirty or so men within, be they standing or seated.

At one moment, they were in a world of darkness, where they couldn't even see their own fingers; in the next, they were assaulted by brilliant light. There was no way for their eyes to immediately adjust, rendering them effectively blind. In addition, when hit with such a shocking change, everybody was panicked.

This was precisely one of the best counter-terrorism techniques the 21st century had to offer.

No matter how evil and vile a terrorist might be, in the end, he was still a human. Physiologically, he was no different from any other person.

That was why, out of all the weapons counter-terrorism experts designed to assault the terrorists' senses, Xiang Shaolong was the most proficient and skilled at using cryo beams and nerve grenades.

The former was capable of sending out a beam of cold at a temperature of negative 273 Celsius. At this temperature, absolute zero, all living cells would instantly stop moving. Afterwards, when the enemies were thawed out, they would be totally fine, albeit made prisoners.

Nerve grenades had a very wide radius, and were capable of

paralyzing the enemy's nervous system. After the enemy became totally immobile, they were helpless to resist any attacks.

In this age, he obviously did not have access to such awe-inspiring, powerful weapons. But the 'wind lanterns' which Xiang Shaolong came up with, when used in this situation, had much the same effect.

The only difference was in whether or not there would be any left alive.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi had mentally prepared themselves long ago. As soon as the wind lanterns were thrown within the room and illuminated their enemy's bodies, the two dropped to the floor and rolled into the room.

At the same moment, Xiang Shaolong threw out a flying dagger, sending it flying into the neck of the door opener, who had been knocked down on the ground as well, blood flowing from a wound in his head.

Within the still-bright room, they saw that the bloodstained murderers were still in full battle gear, and had not yet relaxed. There were two people guarding the door, one of whom Xiang Shaolong faintly recalled as being Yue Xing.

When Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi jumped up, their longswords forcefully rose up from the ground as well, gutting into these two men's bellies.

Just as Xiang and Teng made their sword strikes, the sound of crossbows being fired could be heard, followed by miserable cries.

Before Yue Xing and the other had even had a chance to draw their blades, they felt an unbearable pain. And then, as blood spurted from their bodies, they stumbled backwards.

The remaining men were all struck by cross bolts and staggered around.

Yue Xing and the other man stumbled back ten or so steps before fell down backwards. Their breathing halted, they died.

Thinking of how Xiao Zhao had been burned to death, how could Xiang Shaolong feel any pity? Charging forwards, he killed two people in a row before realizing that no more enemies remained standing. Jing Jun, who had flipped in through the windows, had killed one more person than he did.

Xiang Shaolong pounced towards Yue Xing's corpse and began to search the body. He found both the original and the copy of Lu Gong's secret manual. A surge of sentiment suddenly swelled within him. If it weren't for these two things, how could Xiao Zhao and the others have lost their lives?

Teng Yi walked towards him. In a low voice, he said, "Are you really going to cover up Han Chuang's role in this?"

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Rising, he said, "Am I too soft-

hearted?"

Teng Yi wiped away the fresh blood from his sabre. He dully said, "There's not much time left. Let's hurry up and handle this matter!"

He motioned for the crack troops to move the corpses from inside the courtyard to outside, after finishing off the still-living with a stab, something which Xiang Shaolong himself could not bring himself to do.

King Xiaocheng, seeing Lu Gong's secret manual placed in front of him on the desk, was overjoyed. He didn't really pay too much mind to Xiang Shaolong's description of how he had chased the assassins out of Lady Ya's residence, then surrounded and wiped them out.

Off to one side were Zhao Ya, her beautiful eyes still swollen red, and Empress Jing. Watching, they were both gratified that Xiang Shaolong had become the meritorious hero of the day.

Only Guo Kai's eyes were coldly turning as he said, "How could Comander Dong be so unwise as to not leave a single survivor, who would be able to directly accuse Prince Xinling of his crimes?"

And then he said towards King Xiaocheng, "If we had been able to secure a living witness, we might be able to repair the situation with Wei as well. It looks as though these people also played a role in the attempt to assassinate Lord Longyang."

Hearing his "new husband's" reminder, King Xiaocheng frowned. He said towards Xiang Shaolong, "Chief Advisor Guo's words are logical. What do you have to say for yourself, Commander Dong?"

Xiang Shaolong calmly replied, "Your humble servant had no other choice. I had to kill them as quickly as possible. Otherwise, when the enemies realized that their situation was hopeless, they would move to destroy the manual. Even if they only destroyed part of it, it would still be a great loss for us."

Empress Jing spoke in support, "Lord Longyang had already recognized some of the people involved and verified that the leader of the group was Prince Xinling's servant, Yue Xing. All we have to do is deliver these corpses back to Mr. Wuji, and I expect that he will be very frustrated."

King Xiaocheng was primarily interested only in Lu Gong's secret manual. When he thought it over, it made sense. Nodding towards Xiang Shaolong, he joyfully said, "Commander Dong, you have accomplished an extraordinary service. Naturally, we will reward you heavily. Hmm..."

Xiang Shaolong knelt down and thanked him. "Majesty, your generosity shames me. No matter what, your humble servant bears responsibility for having allowed this group of bandits to remain undetected in Handan. Majesty, you are already being very benevolent by not pursuing that further. Your humble servant recommends publicly displaying these corpses for three days, sending a public message of reassurance to the people of the city."

Seeing how humble he was, King Xiaocheng was all the more

delighted with him and nodded repeatedly.

Xiang Shaolong seized the opportunity. "To improve the safety of the city, your servant would like to commandeer some additional men to fortify our defenses. I hope that you will allow it, Majesty."

But on such a matter, King Xiaocheng was not careless at all. He said, "Minister, present your defense plans to us for our perusal. If there are no problems with it, I will immediately approve it." As he spoke, he let out two yawns in succession.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to ask for leave to withdraw.

The day was just beginning to brighten.

Book 10 Chapter 2 - Complicated Situation

Inside the carriage, Zhao Ya curled up inside Xiang Shaolong's embrace, extremely sorrowful over her loss.

Xiang Shaolong rubbed her shoulder and softly whispered, "Keep up your spirit! A dead person can't return back to life. We can only use our grief as strength to embrace all the upcoming dangers."

Zhao Ya twitched, "They all died tragically. We couldn't even recognize their faces. Who would actually dare to collaborate with these murderers? How did they even know the secret path to the palace?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart trembled in fear. If this problem was investigated properly, even Empress Jing would be implicated in it, but if he didn't explain everything to Zhao Ya clearly, with her wisdom, who knows one day she might realize that he had been lying to her all along. So, he explained Han Chuang's role in this incident.

Zhao Ya was filled with hatred, dissatisfied, "How could you let go of Han Chuang?"

Looking at her filled with hatred and fury, Xiang Shaolong started to have a headache, sighed, "I also have no alternative. This incident must surely involve Empress Jing. In our current circumstances, there can only be danger and no advantage towards Zhao. If the relation between Han and Zhao worsen, it would only provide advantages to Tian Dan and Li Yuan. Ya'er, can you

understand my difficulties? Don't forget that I promised you to help your brother to tide over this crisis!"

After this reasoning, it's hard for Zhao Ya to pursue it further, lying back down onto his embrace, she whispered, "Shaolong, I hate my Brother. Besides himself and his personal interest, he doesn't care about anybody else."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed. At the end of it, everyone who becomes the Emperor will become like this.

Absolute power will corrupt anyone.

When he thought about this, he couldn't help but consider Xiao Pan, the future Qin Shi Huang. Just thinking about it brought about intense feeling of dread.

Handan had just passed a quiet but not so quiet morning.

Lord Xinling's underlings had all been executed. Everyone in the city was shaken. This has brought Xiang Shaolong's prestige as the new City Commander to a whole new level of height.

The following few days, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were busy. They have put in place several new preventive measures, but in actual fact, they were secretly preparing a way to capture Zhao Mu back to Xianyang in order to complete this mission.

With Guo Kai persuasion, Cheng Xu was released and allowed to

resume his original post. Both were now even more envious of him. At the same time, they were confused why Zhao Mu hadn't done anything even after knowing of Xiang Shaolong's plot.

Because of Lord Xinling's incident, both Tian Dan and Li Yuan tried to keep a low profile, not allowing anyone to guess what they are doing.

Han Chuang tried even harder to avoid suspicions, rarely went out for anything. Even more, he wouldn't dare to request Shaolong to allow Tian Zhen and Tian Feng to accompany him, relieving Xiang Shaolong of this headache.

Lord Longyang decided to return to Daliang. Xiao Cheng decided on a day inside the palace to organize a banquet in order to send off Lord Longyang.

On the morning of three days before the farewell banquet, Zhao Mu sent someone looking for Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong knew what it is all about, left whatever he's doing and went to Marquis resident to see Zhao Mu.

This traitor invited him in to the secret room, excitedly said, "Your idea of loyalty letter is amazing. I can immediately test who is loyal towards me and who is sitting in neutral ground undecided."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Quickly give me the names of these

undecided people so that I may present them to Xiao Cheng to get rid off.”

Zhao Mu pulled out a letter from his chest, spread it out on the table, gleefully smiled, “We both are thinking along the same line. Look! I have prepared it already.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at it closely and only saw more than ten names written on it. Cheng Xu surprisingly was written amongst them. The rest are all prominent ministers and generals inside the city.

Xiang Shaolong was astonished, “Isn’t Cheng Xu Guo Kai’s underling? How could he appear on this list? Could it be...?”

Zhao Mu’s eyes glinted with wildness briefly, “If it wasn’t for me, this ungrateful bastard wouldn’t even have the right to be Palace Commander? You better used this time when Xiao Cheng is unhappy with him to get rid off him.”

With these words, Xiang Shaolong instantly understood that Cheng Xu is definitely not his underling. He only wants to borrow someone else’s hand to kill him so that he can get his underling onto Cheng Xu’s current position.

From this conclusion, who would have the biggest opportunity to be the next Palace Commander would probably be Zhao Mu’s man.

Zhao Mu smiled, “Even if we couldn’t harm him, we have

nothing to lose!”

Then he went silent, “Xiao Cheng truly summoned Li Mu to return to the city. The 20,000 thousands elite soldiers under his command are on the way here. They will arrive in Handan in 7 days. Hmph! But his return will only bring about his death because Xiao Cheng doesn’t have that many days to live.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly rejoiced. He knew that Zhao Mu had decided on a plan to usurp the throne. Pretending to be excited, “I have also prepared everything. Marquis, when have you decided to act?”

Zhao Mu was shivering in excitement. The poisonous snake-like ugly scar on his face and both his eyes were flashing in excitement. He frostily replied, “Three days later during Lord Longyang’s farewell banquet. Every ministers and generals will all be inside the palace. That would be the perfect time to act.”

This time, even Xiang Shaolong was confused, “But that would be when the security inside the palace would be most tight and the alertness would be most high, where is the opportunity in there?”

Zhao Mu smiled sinisterly, “As long as you can get organise those Generals whom are loyal towards Xiao Cheng to move into the palace and replaced them with our people, then the city will fall under my hands. Under those circumstances, would Handan then be like a meat on top of the anvil allowing me free reign to oppress and exploit.”

Xiang Shaolong replied in a heavy voice, “Could Marquis explain it better for me?”

Zhao Mu nodded, “Our helping hand is that thief, Xiang Shaolong. I will organize someone to leave a mark that he has arrived inside the city. By that time, even if you don’t bring it up, the badly frightened Xiao Cheng will force you to track him down. You can use that as an excuse to move about and blockade the palace. On the other side, you can open wide the gate to allow Tian Dan’s army to enter the city. By then, who would be afraid of the trivial 10,000 palace guards, even more so when I have my own people inside too?”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Isn’t this too forceful? It seems like there is slight discrepancy between this and what Marquis had originally planned for?” Continuing in a soft voice, “Can you really trust the Qi?”

Zhao Mu was slightly displeased, “Regarding this, I have my own consideration. As long as you can attain Handan’s military power and follow my instructions, three days later would be Xiao Cheng’s time to return to heaven. The rest you don’t need to worry about. Afterwards, I guarantee that not only you’ll become the three army commander in chief, wealth and rank will be yours to enjoy.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that the situation won’t be as simple as he described but he knew that if he continues to pursue this line of questioning, it will raise his suspicions. After agreeing to his request, he took his leave and immediately headed to request an audience with King Zhao.

Inside the palace, Xiang Shaolong on seeing Xiao Cheng, was

afraid that there might be spies amongst the palace guards, sent him an eye signal. Xiao Cheng agreed and led him to walk through the palace garden with the guards guarding from a distance. After listening to Xiang Shaolong's report, he sighed, "Until today, I just realized the loyalty and importance of both Li Mu and Lian Po towards this Zhao. After eliminating Zhao Mu and his gangs, with Guo Kai and General Dong's help, and also Li Mu and Lian Po, I am confident that we can rebuild our country again. In addition, we also have Lu Gong Secret Manual. Unifying the whole country is just a matter of time. General Dong need to work hard this time. I definitely wouldn't forget your hardwork."

With a person like Xiao Cheng spouting these words is an equivalent of actually confiding in him. If Xiao Cheng can truly be what he promised to do then there is a hope to rebuild the country again. But listening to this heartfelt confession, Xiang Shaolong for whatever reason felt an inauspicious feeling. His heart felt really uncomfortable. Maybe, it's because it doesn't follow Xiao Cheng's normal behavior, that's why it gave him an abrupt feeling.

Looking at Xiao Cheng's pale face, Xiang Shaolong replied in a heavy voice, "If the city's commander post is vacant, who would you choose as a replacement?"

Xiao Cheng couldn't answer right away, frowning, "General Dong, why are you in a rush to know?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "All along, Zhao Mu doesn't fully trust me. He hides many things from me. I saw how confidence he is so he must have someone who is loyal towards him inside the army. If the city commander's position is empty, this Zhao Mu's

underling would have a big probability of being chosen for this role.”

Xiao Cheng shook his head smiling, “This is only one of Zhao Mu’s wishes. In reality, even I myself am not sure who I would have chosen. There are several candidates, I don’t believe that all of them are on his side.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, “If something suddenly happened to the Commander General, under these circumstances, you must have someone in mind to temporarily lead the guards to avoid any chaos. In your heart, who would be the best candidate?”

Under the Zhao’s Palace Commander, there are 10 Imperial Colonel leading the 10 armies. Each army contains roughly between 1,000-1,500 soldiers. These armies specialize in guarding King Zhao’s safety. All of them have been rigorous training and selection process. They are the elite. Their skills are far above the city guards and the outer city soldiers.

Under normal circumstances, if the Palace Commander could not carry out his duties, one of amongst the 10 Colonel will carry it out instead, selecting the best of them to temporarily take over, mainly because they are familiar the Palace security and activities so as not to cause any problem.

Xiao Cheng deliberated over his choices for a while, sighed, “This problem is hard for me to decide in such a short amount of time.”

Xiang Shaolong understood his indecisive personality and

continued to ask, “It seems like if we can’t obtain those Loyalty Letters, then we can’t feel out what Zhao Mu plan is. Let me handle this! Your Majesty, please relax.”

Xiao Cheng fully trusts him, “Tommorow, I will give you the other half of the army seal. It will give you the authority to move the armies around.” He paused for awhile then continued, “If Tian Dan also joins in with that traitor that wants to usurp my throne, I want to take advantage of this time to kill him. General Dong, do you have the confidence to do this?”

Xiang Shaolong replied in a heavy tone, “Your Majesty, have you thought of the consequences?”

Xiao Cheng sighed, “I have thought over this issue for several days now. The Qi without Tian Dan would be like a tiger without claws and teeth. The problem is this person is not easy to kill. That’s why I am asking General Dong’s opinion.”

Looking at this worried face, Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, “Leave this to me! Hey! I have a request if Your Majesty would be so kind to grant it.”

Xiao Cheng said, “Please continue, General Dong!”

Xiang Shaolong continued, “Regarding handling Zhao Mu, if Your Majesty could keep this a secret between the two of us and not let anyone else knows, including Minister Guo.”

Xiao Cheng was stunned, displeased, “Does General Dong suspect Minister Guo?”

Xiao Shaolong replied, “As long as we haven’t obtained that Loyalty Letters, I couldn’t be sure who is in that traitor’s pocket. Zhao Mu’s men could even be one of Minister Guo’s underlings. In this important moment, one mistake would cause everything to fall apart. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Xiao Cheng contemplated his words for a while then nodded in agreement. After discussing the details of the operation, Xiang Shaolong left the palace and return to his command center. He sent for Teng Yi and told him of the current situations.

Teng Yi was absorbed momentarily then replied resolutely, “Zhao Mu has started to be more wary of you. Hng! Your performance was just too amazing, especially after snatching back the Lu Gong Secret Manual. If I was Zhao Mu, I would also be a little bit cautious towards you.”

Xiang Shaolong anxiously said, “Not only Zhao Mu became more wary over this, but my biggest problem is that I had serendipitously become the biggest benefactor of Le Cheng’s death. Even more troublesome is that Guo Kai is plotting something in the background. Now I am at a critical time. Truly bad timing!”

Teng Yi blanked, “What do you mean serendipitously?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly while explaining it to him then said, “Now, we have to find a way to grab those Loyalty Letters before we can understand Zhao Mu’s movements. I reckon this sly as fox old thief would want me to get my hand dirty while he just sits by watching. Ai! I’m gonna talk to Tian Dan.”

Teng Yi said, “You better not do that. It seems like Tian Dan is also suspicious of you. If you go, it would be an equivalent of sending yourself to death. You might even accidentally reveal a weak point. If he asked you about the Lu Gong Secret Manual, how will you answer to him? He is not Xiao Cheng. He wouldn’t trust you easily. Furthermore, he must have known the relationship between them and Han Chuang. There’s also Li Yuan. Recently, we might have overlooked him too.”

Xiang Shaolong was disconcerted upon hearing this. While troubling himself over this, his underling came in to report that Lord Longyang is here to see him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly, “Now, the only one I can trust is this not man and not woman fellow.” After saying this, he went to the main hall to greet Lord Longyang.

After waving away his people, the two of them sits in the corner and starts chatting softly.

Lord Longyang’s spirit had improved a lot, returning almost to his previous condition and gaining back his confidence, watching him closely momentarily, gently said, “This morning, Li Yuan came looking for me. He wants me to join forces with him to force Xiao Cheng to withdraw his troops from the Yan, otherwise Qi and Chu will resort to military forces. Hmph! He is full of himself. After only becoming the country’s uncle for a few days, he felt like he is the representative of Chu’s Xiao Lie.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “If Qi and Chu combined forces to deal with us, would Wei also come out to help?”

Lord Longyang smiled, “Brother Dong, even though your wisdom is as deep as the sea, but your disposition after all is forthright and honest. You wouldn’t understand someone as treacherous as Li Yuan. What he said and what he does is totally different. He only said that to cover up another bigger treacherous plot. You better warn Xiao Cheng to be more wary of him. Ai! I am really worried about you, Brother Dong!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Why would you say that, My Lord?”

Lord Longyang sighed, “I knew that you attained this City Commander role primarily due to Empress Jing’s backing. After the fire, I want to warn Brother Dong that this woman is very ambitious. Without making any noise, she can play around with people as easily as if they are on the palm of her hand. It wouldn’t even waste a small breath it takes to blow a speck of dust for her to put you beyond redemption. In the past, when Lord Xinling lives away from home in Handan, they were both involved with each other. You are now useful to her, so of course, she would try her best to win you over. Once you have expired your usefulness, let’s see how she will treat you then?”

Xiang Shaolong started to cold sweat, he truly didn’t consider Empress Jing as a threat. Now looking back, she really isn’t that simple. At the present struggle, regardless of which side wins, she will reap benefit regardless.

The problem lies with Li Mu and Lian Po. As long as they're alive, no one would dare to touch her.

Xiang Shaolong considered himself to be in Empress Jing's shoes. She wished someone could help her to eliminate her King husband in name only but not in reality so that her son could ascend the throne while she controlled everything behind the scenes. At that time, with Li Mu and Lian Po, these two loyal and famous generals, backing, her standing will be as stable as Mount Taishan.

Suddenly, he understood the significance of his role as the City Commander. Only he could give her power to control Zhao Mu and contend with Qi and Chu, these two foreign forces.

When he thought of this, one soft jade hand covered the back of his hand.

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and looked at Lord Longyang. He only saw him tenderly gazing at him, sincerely said, "Please leave Handan! Otherwise you will die without burial ground. It doesn't matter who ascend the Zhao's throne, at the end of it, they both will want to eliminate you."

Xiang Shaolong endured his almost acceptable hand on his hand, resolutely shook his head, "I never cared about life and death before, especially when we are at the juncture of my country's demise, even more, I wouldn't avoid and not care about this, otherwise I will regret it for the rest of my life and I would be ashamed to face my father in the afterlife."

Lord Longyang saw that he is determined, retracted his jade

hand, took a long sigh in a depressed state, gently said, “Brother Dong truly is a real hero. I won’t force you anymore but if one day Brother Dong can’t endure this anymore, please remember that I will be waiting for you in Daliang.” Paused for awhile before continuing, “Although Empress Jing and Guo Kai have different opinion on the City Commander post, but both of them, because of gains and losses issues, will collaborate with each other. You have to be careful of them!”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. An idea flashed quickly through his mind. At the same time, he berated himself for his oversight for not realizing earlier Empress Jing’s machinations everywhere.

Lord Longyang had nothing left to say and took his leave.

Xiang Shaolong was touched. Full of gratitude, he saw him to the stable outside the command center and sent him off.

He knew in that instant that he needs to start his strategy afresh. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to leave Handan alive. Furthermore, he wouldn’t be able to capture Zhao Mu alive.

Book 10 Chapter 3 - Appearing To Both Welcome And Spurn

After sending off Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong sent a messenger to secretly summon Pu Bu to inquire regarding Zhao Mu's recent activities.

Pu Bu thought for a while, then responded, "Recently, he spends very little time at his estate. The people accompanying him are all trusted bodyguards who have been with him for over ten years."

Xiang Shaolong said, "How are all of your brothers doing?"

Pu Bu excitedly said, "They are extremely excited. They all say that Master Xiang lives up to his words and has not abandoned them. Your ambush and assassination of Le Cheng was all the more exquisite. However, I still do not dare to inform them that Master Dong is really Xiang Shaolong. It's always best to be a cautious."

Seeing how prudent the man was, Xiang Shaolong felt greatly relieved. "Every time Zhao Mu returns to his estate, is there any room in particular he spends most of his time in?"

Pu Bu was slightly stunned. Nodding, he said, "Now that you mention it, Master Dong, I do seem to recall that the past few times he's returned to the estate, he'll always go to the Jade Peach Garden at the eastern side of the residence. He keeps on walking in circles at the Reclining Traveler's Veranda there, and also ordered me to send people to guard that place in specific. Five sentry posts were set up. Master Dong, for you to ask such a question, you must

know the reason behind his actions."

Xiang Shaolong resolutely said, "Let's see how the situation is tonight!"

Pu Bu let out a sigh. From within his bosom, he withdrew an overhead map of the marquis' estate. "I prepared this map long ago. Every single guard post is marked clearly. This part here is the Jade Peach Garden. The rectangle within the garden is the Reclining Traveler's Veranda. Be sure not to go on the roof; there's a hidden sentry there."

Xiang Shaolong saw how even the hidden sentry was noted down on the map. After analyzing it for a while, he said, "As long as we can breach the outer barrier, we'll have our opportunity. What is this thick line circling around the Reclining Traveler's Veranda?"

Pu Bu said, "That's a man-made creek that also serves as a natural barrier. It definitely isn't easy to get near the Reclining Traveler's Veranda." He explained in detail again.

Xiang Shaolong, fearing that his long absence might raise other's suspicions, quickly urged him to leave.

After sending off Pu Bu, Xiang Shaolong unceasingly analyzed that map, but before he was able to think of any appropriate way by which he could sneak into the estate without attracting any attention at all, in glided in the straight-tempered Ji Yanran.

When this great beauty saw him, she appeared less joyful than she had in the past. She morosely burrowed into his embrace, saying, "I'm very worried! Although you demonstrated your prowess, you've aroused the suspicions of all parties. The strangest thing of all is, why would you have sent people to secretly watch over Zhao Ya's palace, and why is it that when you pursued Prince Xinling's men, you only used your own subordinates?"

Hearing so many flaws exposed at once, Xiang Shaolong was stunned. "Did you come up with this by yourself, or did you hear it from others?"

Snuggling in his arms, Ji Yanran sorrowfully said, "If I can think of these questions, can it be that others will not? Fortunately, no matter what theories they come up with, they still wouldn't be able to imagine that you are Xiang Shaolong. They only suspect that you, Empress Jing, and Han Chuang have some secret plan and are plotting in secret. Everyone knows that without Han Chuang providing information and a hiding spot, there is no way Yue Xing and his men would have been able to sneak into the Zhao palace to commit murder and arson, much less discover the location of Lu Gong's secret manual!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned speechless. Just as he was secretly berating himself for losing sight of the greater picture, this talented woman continued, "For the sake of ruining my opinions of you, Li Yuan unceasingly badmouths you under the pretext of discussing Zhao politics. He claims that you are one of the instigators of the arson, and that you, Empress Jing, and Zhao Ya have formed an alliance, and that you hope to be promoted into the nobility. It's good that he does so. That's why I still go to his place often to hear the news."

Xiang Shaolong unhappily said, "You still meet with him frequently?"

Ji Yanran coquettishly glanced at him. "Oh! How sweet! Shaolong is sipping from a cup of vinegar [getting jealous]. You oversensitive rascal! I'm suffering all this on your behalf. Li Mu has almost returned. When is Zhao Mu planning to make his move?"

Xiang Shaolong explained Zhao Mu's plans to her.

Ji Yanran's face became dignified and imposing. In a solemn voice, she said, "It seems they aren't even willing to let Han Chuang and Lord Longyang off the hook."

Frowning, Xiang Shaolong said, "You think Zhao Mu would be willing to offend both the countries of Han and Wei under these circumstances?"

Ji Yanran said, "Zhao Mu only needs to find an excuse to force the two to remain in Handan. By the time Han and Wei find out what happened, months would have passed. By that time, they would 'hesitate to smash a rat for fear of breaking the dishes nearby'. If within those first few months, Zhao Mu is able to execute or dismiss Li Mu and Lian Po without bloodshed, and also has both Qi and Chu supporting him, it won't be too hard for him to ascend to the throne!"

Xiang Shaolong hesitated for a long time. After first getting a bit frisky with this beautiful woman, causing her entire face to blush

red, he said, "Yanran, will you do as I say?"

Ji Yanran was still 30% clearheaded. She sweetly replied, "As long as you don't intend to force me to leave you, anything is negotiable."

Xiang Shaolong said, "How could I bear to? To the contrary, I intend to fall asleep while holding you each night!"

Ji Yanran doubtfully said, "Don't you need to accompany your other wives?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he had just exaggerated too much. He tried to play it all the way through, "Can't we just spread a large blanket to cover everybody?"

Ji Yanran glanced at him tenderly, unable to keep from smiling. "Sleeping together under one big blanket? How could you think of such a thing! I'm not as debauched and depraved as you. Oh! What was it exactly that you wanted me to do?"

Growing serious, Xiang Shaolong said, "How many warriors do you have under you? How good are they?"

Ji Yanran said, "My father and I have, all together, around a hundred family warriors. Roughly twenty of them can be considered high-class fighters. There are no questions at all about their loyalty, especially my own personal men. They are all clansmen who fled to Wei with us to avoid disaster. Each of them

have their own unique skills. We even have some expert swordsmiths."

Xiang Shaolong remembered that she was a member of the nobility of the country of Yue, the same as Tian Zhen and Tian Feng. He secretly thought that the beauties of Yue really were quite extraordinary. His heart suddenly stirred, he began to attack her with both hands and lips, while saying, "Regardless of whether or not we succeed in this venture, we will need to leave Zhao. I want you to come up with an excuse for leaving..."

Ji Yanran's violently trembling face turned white in the blink of an eye. She sat up straight and, ignoring his hands roaming across her breasts, resolutely said, "No! Even if I am to die, I will die with you. I long ago have had my fill of the pain of being parted."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly moved. In a soft voice, he said, "Your departure will only be a ploy. Now that I am the City Commander, I naturally have the capability of stealthily bringing you back so that you might secretly aid me. The reason I want you to leave is so that you can take away both Zou Yan as well as those two twin serving girls of mine to a safe place. That way, I can scheme without fear."

Ji Yanran's pretty face returned to its original color. Letting out a sigh, she said, "As you wish!" Then she mumbled, "The best excuse is to return to Wei for a funeral. By chance, I just received a letter informing me that Empress Wei, who has always treated me like her own daughter, has just passed away due to illness. I will use this as an excuse to immediately head back towards Wei two days from now. When I reach the boundaries of Wei, I will alter my

path towards Han. But as far as how to secretly enter Qin and then return to Han, you will have to make the arrangements. Oh! I'm so happy! Not only would I be able to stay with you day and night, I'll be able to stay with you at all times as one of your 'soldiers'."

After an ardent kiss, they discussed various stratagems for leaving Zhao before Xiang Shaolong urged her away.

When Teng Yi saw him, he said, "Han Chuang sent someone here to look for you. He says he has urgent business."

Xiang Shaolong secretly pondered how wonderful it would be if he could create multiple copies of himself like Sun Wukong. His heart suddenly stirred, he pulled Teng Yi off to one side. "Tonight, I am going to burglarize Zhao Mu's mansion. At that time, if you dress up as me, then we can keep everything safe and hidden."

Teng Yi frowned. "The oaths of loyalty?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded.

Teng Yi was silent for some time, then said, "In order to defend against the real Xiang Shaolong, Zhao Mu must have prepared tight, cautious rings of defenses. Must you take this risk?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly. "In order to understand Zhao Mu's plot so as to prevent our boat from sinking in the sewer, there's no better alternatives."

Teng Yi sighed along with him. "No one would be a better fit for disguising themselves as you as Wu Guo. That fellow is especially skilled at playing tricks, and is even more skilled at imitating others' voices and intonations. With me helping to conceal any flaws, I guarantee that no one will be able to tell. Hey! Why don't we have young Jing Jun go with you tonight as well!"

Xiang Shaolong said, "I have received information from Pu Bu which thoroughly details Zhao Mu's defenses. The fewer people who know about this matter, the better. Oh well! I will go visit Han Chuang first. We can discuss things more in depth when I return." When he thought about the placement of guards in the garden, he became all the more cheerless.

Teng Yi, knowing that he had made up his mind, did not speak further.

They arrived at Han Chuang's manor. The marquis' face was somber as he led them into his residence. Only after they arrived at a tightly closed door in an inner room did he speak. "Empress Jing wishes to see you again." Pushing the door open, he walked in.

The only person within the hall was Empress Jing herself. Her back facing towards them, she was staring outside the only window in the room at the garden below.

The rays of light shining past her from the window made this beautiful married woman appear all the more enchanting and graceful. For a moment, Xiang Shaolong found it difficult to link her to all of her stratagems.

The two gingerly walked behind her.

Empress Jing slowly turned around. First, she smiled slightly towards Xiang Shaolong. But when her gaze fell upon Han Chuang, she said with a cold humph, "If the person handling that affair had been anyone but Minister Dong, you would have exhausted me to death, you rash, impetuous man."

Han Chuang was a person of great personal standing. For Empress Jing to openly rebuke him in such a manner in front of Xiang Shaolong made him feel very awkward. His entire face turned red, but he didn't refute her remarks.

Xiang Shaolong soothingly said, "At least the affair is over with now. Empress Jing, please do not blame the Marquis."

Empress Jing's face was as cold as ice. After staring at Han Chuang for a while, she said, "There are still repercussions to come from this matter. I said long ago that considering the current circumstances, it isn't advisable to have any contact with Prince Xinling. And yet, you refused to listen to me and almost imperiled Minister Dong."

Han Chuang sighed, "Elder sister Jing! How else do you want me to pay for my transgressions before your anger will be appeased? I, too, didn't expect Yue Xing and his men to be so aggressive and cause such trouble."

Empress Jing suddenly laughed. Just as the two were feeling

confused, the beautiful married woman said, "The only benefit is that King Xiaocheng now trusts Commander Dong even more, and that that ****, Zhao Ya, feels extremely grateful to him as well. Fine! I want to speak with Minister Dong in private."

Han Chuang found it appropriate to leave, closing the door as he departed.

Empress Jing approached Xiang Shaolong. At a hand span away, she halted her footsteps. In a soft voice, she said, "Minister Dong, how should I thank you for performing such a meritorious deed?"

Although he knew very well that she was using her beauty to win him over and that her heart was filled with schemes, when he remembered that she held the lofty position of Empress of Zhao and saw how sensual and sexy she was, he couldn't help but feel extremely aroused. With a dry throat, he said, "Empress, you showed me great favor by promoting me. Naturally, I will serve you with all my effort and am willing to do anything."

Empress Jing took another step forward, almost touching Xiang Shaolong's bosom. She lifted her face up, eyes sparkling with light, as she said gently, "The people in this day and age all say one thing and do another. People like Minister Dong, who are willing to risk their own lives to carry out their promises to me, make me feel extremely grateful. I will never forget what you have done for me, Han Jing. I guarantee you riches and honor for every day I am in power."

If this were in the past, Xiang Shaolong's trusting nature would have caused him to feel extremely moved. But after having been

warned in advance by Lord Longyang, he was vigilant and only dared to tentatively listen to her words. But he allowed a look of gratitude to appear on his face as he said in a soft voice, "I, Dong Kuang, always pay my debts. And this was just a small matter besides..."

Empress Jing moved forward slightly one more time. Her tall, erect, firm breasts pressed firmly against his chest. Her breathing beginning to grow rapid, she said, "Regardless of whether or not I am the empress, I am a woman. I need a man to look after me. You also know the king's ugly secret. He's also agreed not to interfere with my affairs. His health has grown poorer by the day, especially in the past half year. He's sick and aching all day long. Hypothetically, if the prince, my son, were to become king, we will need outstanding talents like Minister Dong all the more to assist us. Minister Dong, do you understand the hidden meaning of my words?"

Xiang Shaolong could feel the alluring suppleness of her erect breasts. He secretly thought to himself that only a total idiot would not understand her 'hidden meaning'. He intentionally frowned, "Empress Jing, set your mind to rest. I am totally loyal to you. Ah! Empress Jing, please don't act in such a way! I'm almost unable to control myself any longer."

Empress Jing began to laugh, her face appearing like a blooming flower. She placed a soft kiss on his face before retreating to the windowsill. She smiled enchantingly towards him. "Who is telling you to control yourself? If a person cannot act as he desires, what joy is there in life? Unfortunately, right now, I don't have the time to test and see if you were being honest or just boasting when you claimed to be able to make women desire to never leave you. If you

have the chance to visit the imperial palace, try and take the time to visit me!"

After she finished speaking, she brushed past him, smiling as she left. Xiang Shaolong was left behind grinding his teeth, secretly hating her for arousing his lust and making him feel uncomfortably aroused. The worst thing was, he really did want to take a taste of this Empress.

When he thought of this, he suddenly remembered the aphrodisiac which Han Chuang had given him for the purpose of seducing Ji Yanran. If he were to use a little of it, it wouldn't be too unfair! Perhaps he could even flip the situation around and make the guest into the host, and instead control this powerful woman. This would save a lot of headaches.

When he thought of this, his heart couldn't help but start beating.

When he returned with Teng Yi to the manor, Wu Guo came and said, "Lady Ya has arrived. She's currently chatting with your two wives."

Xiang Shaolong signaled with his eyes towards Teng Yi. The latter understood and pulled Wu Guo off to the side to speak.

Upon entering the inner hall, he saw the three ladies seated in one corner, whispering quietly to each other. Xiang Shaolong felt very curious. Just as he was pondering why Shan Rou was acting on such good behavior, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng, off to one side,

chimed in unison, "Master Dong has returned!"

The three women all turned to look towards him as one. Smiles appeared on their faces, like flowers blooming beautifully. When adding in the faces of the Tian sisters, who definitely were not inferior to them in beauty, Xiang Shaolong felt his eyes going dizzy and almost lost track of place and time.

Zhao Ya laughed, "Ya'er brought some ornaments over as gifts for sister Rou, Zhizhi, little Zhuo, and little Feng. They all like it a lot!"

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed to himself, "So that's how it is!" He arrived by their side and sat down.

Tian Zhen came over as well. "Master Dong! Can we begin to eat?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded. "I'm about to die of hunger. Where did little Jun go?"

Zhao Ya said, "He went to the pastures this morning. He still hasn't come back."

Xiang Shaolong rose to his feet. "Ya'er! I have something to discuss with you."

Shan Rou unhappily said, "Are you treating the rest of us as outsiders? What do you have to hide?"

Xiang Shaolong felt unhappy. Just as his eyebrows began to rise, Shan Rou let out a giggling laugh. Pulling Zhao Zhi up by the hand, she said, "Don't be so serious, I was just joking!" After glancing at him sideways, she took her sister off to a corner to pore over the gifts they just received, full of joy.

Xiang Shaolong wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry. Sitting down, he shook his head and forced a smile. "A wild horse will remain a wild horse!"

Zhao Ya said, "I also have something to discuss with you. Just now, my imperial brother summoned me to the palace and asked if he could totally trust you. I replied, 'No matter what, Dong Kuang is at least more trustworthy than Guo Kai!'"

Xiang Shaolong's curiosity was aroused. "And how did he react?"

Zhao Ya said, "At first, he was very unhappy, but I asked him, who was it that risked his life to save Lord Longyang? Who retrieved Lu Gong's secret manual for him? This rendered him without any other arguments."

Thinking of Empress Jing, Xiang Shaolong offhandedly asked, "Does Guo Kai also have an affair with Empress Jing?"

Zhao Ya felt slightly astounded. "I don't know. I imagine it can't be possible! This woman has always treated the affections of men very lightly. If I recall correctly, she has only ever had sketchy relationships with Prince Xinling and Zhao Mu. Where did you

hear this from?"

Instead of answering, Xiang Shaolong asked, "King Xiaocheng really doesn't inquire into her affairs?"

Zhao Ya said, "My imperial brother only wants the Empress to not bother him. As long as she doesn't make her affairs public, my imperial brother is happy to let things be as they are. Oh! He's also a bit afraid of her! You still haven't told me where you got your news from!"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Lord Longyang told me. Logically speaking, he wouldn't lie to his savior and benefactor."

Zhao Ya was briefly stunned. Slowly, her face became imposing. "If my guess is correct, Guo Kai must have sought out Lord Longyang to try and discern whether or not, in the event of a rebellion, Wei would support that woman. That must be why Lord Longyang would make such a guess."

Feeling a hint of fear, Xiang Shaolong said, "Does this mean Empress Jing and Guo Kai have their own separate scheme?"

Worried, Zhao Ya replied, "Imperial brother's health has been declining with each passing day. Right now, everyone is scheming to benefit themselves. At times, even I'm not sure who is in league with who, much less you."

Shan Rou's voice drifted over. "Come eat! The rice and dishes are

growing cold!"

Zhao Ya stood up. "You need to be cautious of Zhao Mu. That traitor is an expert at using deceit and poison, and his techniques are strange and unfathomable. You'll be in trouble before you even know it."

Xiang Shaolong's tall frame rose as well. With one arm, he pulled her into his embrace. He whispered into her ear, "Ya'er, do you have any way to depart from Zhao's borders before Lord Longyang's farewell dinner? Afterwards, I'll meet up with you. This will make my plan of retreat much simpler."

Zhao Ya's fragrant body trembled. Biting her lip, she lowered her head and quietly said, "Can you give me some time to think?"

Xiang Shaolong couldn't bear to press her. Nodding, he agreed. He pulled her to the dinner table. When Teng Yi entered, he waited until Xiang Shaolong gestured him in before going to the table and seating himself on a sitting mat as well.

Tian Zhen was just about to pour Xiang Shaolong some wine, when he said, "I'm not drinking tonight."

Shan Rou glanced at him, revealing a pondering look in her eyes.

Xiang Shaolong reached out and curled his arm around Tian Zhen's pretty little waist. "Zhen'er, are you familiar with Zhao Mu's Reclining Traveler's Veranda?"

Tian Zhen obediently knelt down as well, nodding.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Is there any place within the veranda where one might be able to hide something around the size of a silk manuscript?"

After deeply pondering for a moment, Tian Zhen replied, "That room is filled with gifts others have given to that traitor. He doesn't put any documents or manuscripts there."

Tian Feng interjected, "That place didn't even have a cupboard. But we have been gone for such a long time that I don't know if it's still the same."

Zhao Ya worriedly said, "Do you want to go there to secretly read those oaths of loyalty? Right now, Zhao Mu's nerves are as tight as a bird startled by the twang of a bow. At night, he has vicious dogs patrolling. Please don't go, alright?"

Teng Yi said, "There must be a series of tunnels installed in his manor. Do any of you know about such a thing?"

Zhao Ya and the others all shook their head unknowingly.

Tian Zhen suddenly let out a tender cry. "I remember! Beneath the main building, there's a cellar which is used to store weapons. But I don't know if the Reclining Traveler's Veranda also has such a cellar."

Upon hearing her words have no bearing on any tunnels, everyone's excitement, which had just been lit, was doused promptly.

Shan Rou sneered, "Even if you knew where the exit to the tunnel is, if I were Zhao Mu, I would have people guarding them, as well as have installed copper tubes to listen to any noise. I would know if so much as a fly entered the tunnels."

Zhao Zhi laughed, "Shaolong, ask sister Rou and see what ideas she can come up with for entering the manor!"

Everyone was stunned. They suddenly remembered that Shan Rou had once attempted to assassinate Zhao Mu within his own palace before safely escaping.

Shan Rou pouted her little lips. "He's a peerless hero who travels alone and does as he pleases. How could he use the help of a woman like myself? Moreover, I, Shan Rou, don't have any part in his magnificent undertaking. I might as well save my breath and take a good nap instead."

Zhao Ya was the first to burst out laughing. "Dear sister Rou, how can our Master Dong not have you take good care of him tonight, after seeing how full of resentment you are? Sister Rou, don't think too much on it." Turning, she winked towards Xiang Shaolong. "Isn't that right, Master Dong?"

Xiang Shaolong helplessly forced out a smile. "Of course! I would

like to ask Miss Rou to take this humble little soldier to the marquis' residence for a stroll tonight."

Shan Rou's anger and resentment turned into excitement. Glancing at him, she said, "Oh, so you're begging me now? Don't act as though you've been forced into it. Even though I'm slightly inferior to you in lowly tricks such as stealing hens and dogs, if we are to compare our skills in infiltrating houses and assassinating people, who in the world is a match for me, Shan Rou? Otherwise, why is it that Tian Dan must tread so cautiously and carefully?"

Zhao Zhi's face changed. "Sister Rou! Now is not the time for assassination!"

Shan Rou impatiently said, "That's just a metaphor." Standing up, she said, "I need to go prepare." As she walked away, she saw that Xiang Shaolong was still staring stupidly at her. She loudly shouted, "Why aren't you scrambling? Go and get prepared! I still have to dress you with a special 'water cloth'!"

Not paying any attention to all the people who were staring at her in amazement, she went into her room.

Book 10 Chapter 4 - Exploring The Marquis' Residence At Night

Dusk is approaching.

A carriage headed out of the residence.

Both Wu Guo, who was masquerading as a fake Dong Kuang, and Teng Yi, surrounded with a group of guards and Lady Ya's bodyguards, rode out escorting the carriage.

The real Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou were hiding inside the carriage. Both had changed into their water-resistant deer skin cloth, only revealing an opening in the face, fists and feet, looking slightly like the 21st century's diving suit.

The one that Xiang Shaolong wears was originally made for Zhao Zhi by Shan Rou. Fortunately, Zhao Zhi's built tall and big, and deer skin is also flexible so he could still wear it with a little bit of difficulty.

Beside their climbing tools, weapons and secret weapons, they also each brought a copper pipe, in case they need to breathe under the water.

But until now, Shan Rou was still reluctant to reveal the secret entrance to the resident. This left Xiang Shaolong feeling very vexed.

Zhao Ya was watching Xiang Shaolong's beautifully shaped body wearing the tight deer skin suit. His imposing and invigorate body were shining with charms. Bewitched, she didn't care that there was other people around. She rushed into his embrace, panting with an enchanting expression.

Xiang Shaolong stroked her shoulder with one hand, while opening the other hand wide and said towards Shan Rou, "Sister Rou, why don't you come and join us?"

Shan Rou glared at him then purposely moved away towards the window and gazed outside.

Xiang Shaolong had known from early on that she wouldn't be submit and be obedient to anyone. He leaned towards Zhao Ya's ear, "Have Ya'er thought about it?"

Zhao Ya knew that he was talking about her leaving Zhao first, in a pleading tone requested, "How about this? How about you leave first then after awhile, I will come out and meet you. Ai! If you want me to leave without knowing that you'll be safe, Ya'er will be worried sick of you."

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "If your brother suddenly passed away and the power falls onto Empress Jing, would she let go off you? By that time, I've already returned to Xianyang. It'll be beyond the reach of my power to help you."

Zhao Ya disdainfully answered, "Her position won't be stable immediately. She won't have the time to take care of me. Besides she is after all a Han, if after she just gained her position, she tried

to get rid of the royal clan, the nobility and ministers would put a stop to it. At that time, if I would like to leave, she would be more than happy to let me go! Ai! Shaolong! What I'm afraid of is another thing!" After she had spoken these words, she grew silent.

Shan Rou didn't hear it clearly, annoyed, "Zhao Ya, can you please speak louder?"

Both of them didn't know whether to cry or laugh.

Xiang Shaolong ignored her and turned towards Zhao Ya, "What are you afraid of, Ya'er?"

Zhao Ya hugged him tightly, dejected, "I'm afraid that other people wouldn't be able to forgive me."

Xiang Shaolong had long been worried over this. He tried to console her, "Once we returned to Xianyang, I will help you to speak with Tingfang and Princess Qian. They have a big heart. They wouldn't hold a grudge against you. Don't worry about the others! This is what you call atone for a crime by good deeds!"

At this time, Teng Yi shouted from outside the carriage, "Get ready! We're approaching the Marquis Resident. Oh! What a coincidence! Tian Dan's carriage is moving towards us."

All conversation stopped inside the carriage. Both Xiang and Shan hid in the corner, while Lady Ya lifted up the curtain and looked outside.

As Tian Dan's carriage was slowly approaching, both carriages slowly came to a full stop.

The fake Dong Kuang, Wu Guo, whipped his horse, with Teng Yi approached Tian Dan to greet him.

Tian Dan stood near the open carriage's window, laughed, "General Dong is so hard working. While we are out drinking wine and having fun, you are working non-stop all day all night. But there's a limit to how much you can push your body. General Dong, please make sure that you don't exhaust yourself."

Wu Guo imitated Xiang Shaolong's voice, blandly smiled, "I was born as a hard worker. The busier I am, the more spirited I become. Thank you for your concern, Prime Minister Tian." No matter the voice, tone or attitude, all unbelievably resemble him, which makes other people shake their heads at this.

Under the bickering light from the lantern, even with Tian Dan's sharp eyes, there wasn't any flaw. After nodding and smiling, he turned towards Zhao Ya, "Lady's countenance is glowing and Lady's expression is very spirited these last few days. Can Lady tell me what the secret to this is?"

Everyone was frozen in fear. They all knew there was a hidden meaning behind this question at Zhao Ya.

Zhao Ya, of course, had her own way, grinned, "Zhao Ya won't let off that easily! Prime Minister Tian is just teasing me." After

she said, she quickly closed the curtain.

Tian Dan laughed out loud. After greeting both 'Dong Kuang' and Teng Yi, he gave order to move out.

Both carriages crossed each other.

Xiang Shaolong gestured towards Shan Rou.

It's time to get off the carriage.

Both of them took advantage of the night to sneak into the Marquis resident through the dense forest in the southwest.

Xiang Shaolong didn't understand what Shan Rou brought inside the gourd up till they've arrived on the small river.

Shan Rou pulled him to squat down with her, "Any mansion, that has a pond, will always has an entrance and an exit for the water. This is Shan Rou's big secret. Last time, this is how I sneaked into the pool inside that traitor's resident. If we're lucky, it might even take us straight to Jade Peach Garden."

After saying this, she looked proudly at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong said, "It's around 100zhang (333m) from here to Marquis Resident, how do we breathe?"

Shan Rou raised an eyebrow at him, annoyed, “Idiot! I can go in. Naturally, there’s a way to breathe. What do you think the copper tube is for? Unless it is after a heavy rain, otherwise there is always a small gap between the river’s water height and the tunnel’s height. As long as we breathe from one end of the copper tube and the other reaches out of the water, wouldn’t that solve the problem?”

Xiang Shaolong gasped in admiration, his heart was trembling in excitement. Suddenly he reached over and passionately kissed her, the other hand grabbed her waist tightly. Shan Rou was caught unaware allowing him to steal a kiss off her, after struggling in vain briefly, she kissed him back passionately. To show his gratitude, Xiang Shaolong kneaded her breast shortly before releasing her, “This is my award!”

Shan Rou was blushing till her face and ears are red, after all she was still young. She glared at him and then leapt first into the river.

In an instant, both have dived a metre deep and have seen that the tunnel ahead is dark. They persisted and swam deeper into the tunnel slowly.

Xiang Shaolong was filled with strange feeling.

Every time he performed a task at night, he always felt this change from light to dark feelings.

Just like the light and dark world, both existed together.

Common people generally only knows about living during daylight, but they have no idea whatsoever towards this demonic darkness world.

This time working at night, he can only rely on his tactile sense. In this quiet and still tunnel, his senses have grown stronger.

This caused people to step with caution, another world filled with danger and excitement. It is truly a luring world.

After a short awhile, they both came out of the exit and arrived at the lotus pond at the center of the garden at the back of the resident under the bridge.

Within this ringed courtyard, the stars could be seen cascading across the night sky. A misty beam of moonlight shone down, as the sound of the pond frogs croaking could be heard. It was truly an entirely different world.

From afar, a pair of sentries strolled towards them. As the two peered towards the sentries, two extremely strange-looking large green spots of light attracted their especial attention.

Alarmed, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly grabbed Shan Rou by the hand and pulled her down into the water.

His heart was thumping wildly.

It seemed as though those two large green spots of light came

from lamp light reflected off of the pupils of giant dogs. These enormous dogs normally would only be allowed to roam around freely late at night, but had been released early in order to heighten the security of the area.

After the sentries passed by the bridge and walked far away, the two lifted their heads up from the water. Shan Rou softly said, "Damn! With those beasts patrolling the land, the only option we have is to slowly make our way via the water. If the Reclining Traveler's Veranda is also protected by two giant hounds, we'll have no choice but to go home and go sleep."

Xiang Shaolong also could not help but feel extremely discouraged, but to give up midway through would be even more of a shame. He forcefully roused himself and headed confidently with Shan Rou in the direction of the Jade Peach Garden, as they separately swam through the pool.

Xiang Shaolong had received strict, intensive underwater training, and agilely glided through the water like a fish. Based on the minute eddies and flows of the current, he discovered a place the water flowed out towards. As both he and Shan Rou raised their heads up out of the water, they both exultantly said, "Found it!" But then, both of them silently called out in dismay.

Which of the two flowed to the Jade Peach Garden? Or did both flow somewhere else? Neither of them could be certain. What was even more frustrating was that both of the secret underwater passages were hidden at the bottom of the pond, and neither had any breathing spaces whatsoever. If one was not able to swim all the way through the passage in a single breath, they would

suffocate and die. What a rotten, unfair death that would be!

Xiang Shaolong was quick-witted. Nibbling at Shan Rou's ear, he said, "Let's each take a separate passage. As soon as we figure out where it leaves, both of us need to immediately return. No matter what, we can't try to show off."

Agreeing, Shan Rou left.

Letting out a deep sigh, Xiang Shaolong dove deep into the water. Entering the underwater passageway, he advanced ten feet and discovered that the water was winding towards the left. He hurriedly retreated back the way he came, moving backwards. Within the narrow corridor, it was very difficult to actually turn around.

Shan Rou said, "I swam at least twenty feet forward. The path forward seems to be safe, but we are extremely far from the Jade Peach Garden. How can we possibly swim across without taking any breaths?"

Xiang Shaolong was already recalling and meditating on the cloth map which Pu Bu gave him. "There's yet another pond between this place and the Jade Peach Garden. I think the underwater passage would first pass through that pond."

Even as stalwart a person as Shan Rou couldn't help but feel discouraged. "Even if the pond was placed directly in the middle, it has to be at least a hundred or so feet away. We won't be able to make it that far."

Xiang Shaolong had a brilliant idea. "I have a solution. If we plug one end of our copper tubes, and cover the other end with our hands, it should be more than enough to give us two or three extra 'breaths' of air. Wouldn't that allow us to get to the pond?"

A look of astonishment appeared in Shan Rou's eyes. "Looks like you aren't a total idiot after all. But what will we use to plug one end?"

Xiang Shaolong had a wicked idea in mind. "All I'm wearing underneath this skin-suit is a pair of shorts. Are you wearing anything underneath yours?"

Extremely embarrassed, Shan Rou said, "You are such a lecher. Eek!"

Xiang Shaolong pulled Shan Rou to the artificial man-made 'mountain' in the middle of the pond and unbuttoned her swim suit. Only after allowing his hand to explore and roam freely for a while did he tear off a large piece of her underskirt.

Shan Rou was unusually docile, not attacking him with words as usual. Perhaps it was because she knew that this was unavoidable and so she was resigned to it. Or perhaps it was that she was willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of killing Zhao Mu and Tian Dan. And, after all, Xiang Shaolong had already 'taken full advantage' of her long ago!

As she watched Xiang Shaolong tear the silk apart and use it to

stuff the tubes, she dubiously said, "Will it leak out air?" She couldn't help but being concerned over her fate.

Filled with confidence, Xiang Shaolong said, "With three layers of cloth wrapped around it, after the cloth becomes wet, it might let out a little bit of air, but by then, we'll have surfaced long ago. Come!"

The two swam to the passageway entrance, took a deep breath, covered one end of the tube with their hands, and moved into the passageway, with Shan Rou leading the way.

The two rapidly moved in deeper.

After taking about thirty or so steps, the two had to take their first 'breath'. By their 'second breath', the two of them had long ago become light-headed and dizzy. They felt as though the air in the tubes had become exhausted. Without caring about anything else, the two advanced as quickly as possible.

The exit appeared up ahead of them, faintly glimmering.

Overjoyed, the two made their way to it. Rising to the surface, the two rested against the shore and gulped in the precious commodity, air, which they normally paid no attention to.

They were surrounded by trees in all directions. Flowers and trees surrounded the pond, and a house jutted up on top of a stone 'mountain'. It was a very small garden, but the decorations were

extremely exquisite.

Each time Xiang Shaolong had previously come to the manor, his movements had been restricted to a few main buildings. He had never imagined that it would also have such an exquisite place as this.

The garden was very lonely. No voices could be heard, and only a few lonely lanterns were lit, immersing the pond in pale, yellow moonlight.

Panting, Shan Rou said, "The situation is even worse. We haven't swam more than a hundred or so feet, and this place has to be at least two hundred feet away from the Jade Peach Garden. How will the air in the tubes be enough?"

Xiang Shaolong was just thinking the same thing. As he blankly stared at Shan Rou, he suddenly had a brainstorm. "Give me a kiss, and I'll be able to think of something."

Shan Rou was stunned for quite some time. Lowering her head, she said in a quiet voice, "If you're lying to me, I'll butcher you." Wrapping her hand around the back of his neck, she gave him a scorching, savory kiss."

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps could be heard. The two of them immediately sank down beneath the water, but their tongues continued to intertwine with one another's.

Only after they could no longer hold their breaths did they rise to the surface. The sentries were long gone by now.

The two of them were both filled with an emotion which would be etched into their bones and which they would remember for the rest of their days, especially considering it came about in such a dangerous, crisis-laden situation.

Not able to bear being separated from him, Shan Rou tightly clasped herself to him. Panting, she said, "Tell!"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Let's take off our headgear and use it to cover the tubes. Wouldn't that give us a few extra breaths?"

Shan Rou jubilantly placed kisses on both of his cheeks. "You really are worthy of having been my first man! Only, I'll be in charge of the manufacturing. I don't trust your handiwork."

Xiang Shaolong frowned. "What do you mean, your 'first' man? Miss, are you planning on having a second and a third?"

Shan Rou naturally and easily replied, "If you men can have multiple women, why can't us women have multiple men?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. "Then who would dare marry you?"

Shan Rou wrinkled her nose, making a ghastly face. "Who says I have to marry? The world is such a huge place. If we manage to kill Zhao Mu and Tian Dan, I'll wander around the world. If I get tired,

maybe I'll come find you one day! By that time, it'll be your choice whether or not to accept me."

Xiang Shaolong discovered that he really liked this woman. Compared to others, she was much more similar to the staunch, independent ladies of the 21st century.

Shan Rou paid him no more mind. Pulling out a small dagger from her suit, she went to work.

Because of their previous experience, this time, they were much more cautious when it came to taking breaths. They easily passed another two hundred or so feet of underwater passageways before arriving at the man-made creek of the Jade Peach Garden. They stealthily made their way to the Reclining Traveler's Veranda.

The man-made creek was roughly ten feet wide. The water wove around in a stream like a dragonfly, as beautiful houses, trees, and flowers unfolded in their path, one after another.

The security presence became much tighter as well. Lanterns were hung up on every major road passing through the Reclining Traveler's Veranda. Guards were everywhere, and there were people leading giant hounds on leashes as well. If it weren't for this underwater route, even if Xiang Shaolong had access to his 21st century accessories and tools, it would be harder than ascending to heaven for him to have gotten so far without attracting any notice.

The closest the creek came to the Reclining Traveler's Veranda was around ten or so feet. The two observed the situation for quite

some time before they located the position of each and every hidden observer. They emerged from the water, underneath a bridge.

After ascertaining that there were no vicious hounds nearby, Xiang Shaolong waved towards Shan Rou as he scurried out from underneath the bridge. Using a row of flowers as cover, he quickly rushed over to stand next to a tightly closed window. Pulling out a steel needle, Xiang Shaolong inserted the needle into an aperture in the window and undid the lock.

The two nimbly flipped inside the veranda, then closed the window and re-bolted it. Both of them felt utterly exhausted and sat down next to a corner of the wall.

Shan Rou lit a match. Xiang Shaolong quickly used his hands to cover it, preventing the fire light from seeping outwards.

The reflected light from the flame gradually lit up the inside of the veranda.

The inside was decorated elegantly, with twenty or so exquisitely made wooden cabinets held within its spacious bowels, each of which was filled with all sorts of rare treasures.

The center of the veranda was covered with a felt carpet. Surrounding the carpet were four comfortable, spacious sitting-mattresses which were covered with animal-skin.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was secretly praising Zhao Mu for knowing how to enjoy himself, Shan Rou excitedly said, "Look!"

Xiang Shaolong looked towards where she pointed. Resting on top of two of the treasure cabinets lay a large metal chest, roughly five feet tall. It looked totally out of place.

Shan Rou stroked the giant lock on top of the metal chest. Vexed, she said, "This is the first time I've seen a lock like this. How do you open it?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "I'm a grandmaster lock picker. Let me try."

Just as he grasped the lock, and before he had a chance to take a close look at it, voices could suddenly be heard coming from the main door.

Shan Rou swept a glance across the room. In a low voice, she said, "Onto the roof beams!" She pulled out a grappling hook.

The sound of the door opening could be heard.

Xiang Shaolong extinguished the match she was holding as Shan Rou shot out the grappling hook. She accurately and precisely hooked the crossbeam pillars in the ceiling of the room.

In the darkness, Xiang Shaolong did not dare to rashly shoot out his own hook. Grinding his teeth fiercely, he said, "Hold on to me!"

Grabbing the rope tightly, he began to climb up.

Shan Rou knew that the situation was critical. She tightly clasped her arms around his broad waist and put her life in his hands.

The main door opened. Someone shouted out, "Light the lanterns, and open the windows! The Marquis and his guest are about to arrive."

Xiang Shaolong secretly groaned in dismay. Exhausting every bit of strength he had, he clambered up frantically, as Shan Rou quickly pulled the dangling rope up along with them.

A lantern by the door was lit.

Ten or so sentries walked in. If any of them raised their head up at this moment, there would be no place for them to escape to.

Fortunately, at this moment, the only things on the sentries' minds were to light the lamps and open the windows. For the moment, no one had the leisure to stare at the ceiling for no good reason.

The two were extremely alarmed. As they huddled in the space between the roof beams and the roof, the space below them grew brightened, and fresh air rushed in, taking away the previous, stuffy air.

Shan Rou moved her dainty lips and gave him a kiss, expressing

her admiration.

The sound of footsteps could be heard, followed by Zhao Mu's voice. "All of you get out, now."

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou's hearts were both thumping wildly. They knew that Zhao Mu was about to bring Tian Dan and Li Yuan here. Without question, he must be intending to let them take a look at those 'oaths of loyalty' as a demonstration of his power and influence. Maybe they even had important business to discuss. They couldn't help but grow tense.

Book 10 Chapter 5 – A Shocking Revelation

Ka Cha!

The sound of a giant lock opening reverberated in the quiet chamber, sending fear into the hearts.

With their heads side by side, Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou were prone on a ceiling beam. They locked themselves in that position by inserting their daggers into the beam for support. Unless someone climbs up the supporting round pillar for a look, this is the best hiding spot.

The horizontal beam is supported by eight vertical pillars which formed the foundation for the roof and is thirty feet above the ground.

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou had a quick glimpse below and saw Tian Dan and Li Yuan seated at two small coffee tables. Zhao Mu is reaching out to a giant metal chest to retrieve an object.

The Liu Brothers are kneeling behind Tian Dan submissively. One of them even scanned the ceiling which caused them to shrink their heads in fear.

Zhao Mu returned to his own desk and placed the whole stack of loyalty letters on it. There were sounds of flipping.

Li Yuan laughed: “Marquis is indeed brilliant to think of such an

exciting method to control your spies.”

Tian Dan added in laughter: “Is this your own inspiration or were you enlightened by your subordinates?”

Zhao Mu laughed back: “Who cares!” He took credit for Xiang Shaolong’s creativity without a tinge of guilt.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved that Zhao Mu did not show Tian Dan his own loyalty letter or Tian Dan would start to suspect him.

Zhao Mu is extremely guarded against Li Yuan. If he divulged Dong Kuang’s real identity, it would be as good as letting Li Yuan know about his relationship with Lord Chunshen.

Li Yuan expressed in admiration: “To think that even Zhao Ming Xiong is in your payroll. I have always thought that he is loyal to Li Mu and Lian Po. You are truly a genius!”

Up in the beam, Xiang Shaolong almost fell down in shock. Zhao Ming Xiong is his assistant General. He and Teng Yi have nothing but praise for his work. He cannot imagine him to be a traitor as well.

Zhao Mu proudly state: “He is not only my men but also my relative. When I got him to join Li Mu, it is to plot against him. Unexpectedly, Lian Po made him the assistant General to Le Cheng. I purposely sidelined him and Zhao Ya that foolish slut even spoke up for him in front of King Xiaocheng. This is

hilarious!”

Xiang Shaolong was bathed in cold sweat. What a close shave! He felt like he is the owner of a pet tiger. If he did not take precautions, he may even die without knowing why. At the same time, he could relate to the power of Zhao Mu’s hidden weapons.

He thought about his morning conversation with King Xiaocheng regarding the issue of the palace guards. If something happens to Cheng Xu, Zhao Mu can promote Zhao Ming Xiong to be head of the palace guards. With this, Zhao Mu will indirectly control both the City guards and the palace guards.

(So sorry everyone, Cheng Dan and Cheng Xu are the same person. My limited vocabulary got his name wrong before. Please make the correction. Thanks.)

As Xiang Shaolong was hoping Li Yuan will continue with the loyalty letter name list, Tian Dan interrupted: “How is Empress Jing’s situation?”

Zhao Mu arrogantly replied: “Who can guess our real relationship? Not to mention Xiaocheng, even Guo Kai and Zhao Ya have been deceived by us. Han Jing (Empress Jing is Han royalty) acts cold but she is full of passion inside. When she falls in love, she has no reservations. It is my great fortune that she is devoted to me and kept dissuading King Xiaocheng from recalling Li Mu or Lian Po. Otherwise, I would not be able to sit here and talk to both of you.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted and could not believe what he has just heard.

Are they putting up an act or is it just wishfully thinking on Zhao Mu's part?

Li Yuan implored: "Can Empress Jing really control Dong Kuang?"

On the beam, Xiang Shaolong's heart is thumping wildly and even Shan Rou can sense his palpitation.

Tian Dan concluded: "Dong Kuang appears to be straightforward and uneducated but he is full of strategies and knows how to pander to those in power. He helped Empress Jing settled the plot between Han Chuang and Prince Xinling while keeping Xiaocheng in the dark. He has laid his bets on Empress Jing, hoping that when Xiaocheng is dead, he will be able to spread his wings. This man must not live."

Li Yuan coldly promised: "I must kill him myself."

Zhao Mu plainly said: "This man is of great use now. Luckily, he did not know that Empress Jing is my woman. Humph! This man forgets his principles when he identifies gains. Even if Imperial Uncle does not act, I will not let him go."

Xiang Shaolong finally calmed down and did his analysis. He screwed up on Han Chuang's incident. The most hateful is

Empress Jing who had betrayed him to Zhao Mu. They are definitely a pair of scheming adulterers.

Tian Dan suddenly mentioned: “Both gentlemen have neglected an important figure.”

Zhao Mu and Li Yuan were taken aback.

Tian Dan explained: “That person is Xiang Shaolong. He is definitely connected to Le Cheng’s death. We are still puzzled about why he chose to kill Le Cheng first.”

He paused and continued: “If Xiaocheng is behind this, there will be some traces of evidence. There will be injuries, deaths, or missing people in his trusted troops. We did not see any of these so he is not involved. This is getting more and more interesting.”

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou were petrified.

Tian Dan revealed: “I did remind Dong Kuang to search Le Cheng’s men for spies. Apparently, he did not investigate or could not find any evidence. We cannot interfere ourselves or we will expose our intentions.”

Li Yuan suggested: “Dong Kuang is the main beneficiary in his death. Could it be done by him?”

Zhao Mu cut in: “He had no idea he can be the City Commander. If not for my instruction to Empress Jing to recommend him to

Xiaocheng, he will be dead before it is his turn.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed as he finally understood why Empress Jing looked up to him.

Tonight’s extraordinary opportunity to eavesdrop in their meeting is a godsend. Otherwise he will end up as a muddle-headed ghost.

Tian Dan observed: “Dong Kuang can pretend to be sick but none of his men are injured or dead. He has nothing to do with Le Cheng’s death.”

Zhao Mu sighed: “Le Cheng has numerous enemies. It is hard to judge who the killer is. As long as they leave the city quickly, we cannot determine who they are.”

Tian Dan resolutely swore: “It must be Xiang Shaolong. I know he is here. Otherwise, Zhao Ya will not regain her energetic lifestyle. I met her and Dong Kuang outside the residence. Her carefree and graceful disposition can only come from a woman who has reignited the love of her life.”

Li Yuan joked: “Can she be in love with Dong Kuang?”

Zhao Mu’s countenance changed: “Chancellor Tian is right. Xiang Shaolong must be in town. I am familiar with her behaviour. Dong Kuang is just a playmate. The only man in her heart is Xiang Shaolong. Xiang Shaolong may even be hiding out in her

residence.”

Tian Dan emotionally recommended: “This is highly probable. Regardless of whether it is true or not, we can still get Zhao Ya into trouble. Once we find evidence of Xiang Shaolong’s existence, there is no way she can talk herself out of trouble. Now, Guo Kai and Cheng Xu are trying to outperform Dong Kuang and they will leap at this opportunity to prove themselves. Does Marquis understand my meaning?”

Zhao Mu laughed out in admiration: “Chancellor Tian is a master strategist who offers great plans. I have a better suggestion. We get Empress Jing to command Dong Kuang to carry out this matter. By putting some flying needles and bloodied clothes in her personal room, Zhao Ya can never redeem herself; This can also test Dong Kuang’s loyalty to Empress Jing. Hng! I have long wanted to deal with this slut.”

On the beam, both persons looked at each other and were wet with cold sweat.

The three devils below them are full of evil schemes. Even if they are aware of what is coming, they are unable to counteract them in such a short time.

Tian Dan stood up and commented: “We should not stay for too long or this banquet will arouse suspicions. When Marquis ascend the throne, do not forget about Chancellor and Imperial Uncle.”

Zhao Mu hurriedly expressed his gratitude.

With the sound of the metal chest being locked, the trio left the chamber.

After the residence guards came in to secure the windows and doors and extinguish the candles, Shan Rou whispered into her ear: “What shall we do!”

Xiang Shaolong is filled with deathly calm and softly replied: “The loyalty letters are not urgent. If we can return safely, we will win the battle.”

Xiang Shaolong looks enlightened and is full of vigour.

The lethargy from last night has completely vanished and so has all the doubts in his mind. He is now fully aware about the entire situation ahead of him and the connection between Zhao Mu and Empress Jing.

Tian Zhen had just stepped into his bedroom and noticed that he is awake. She happily scrambled to his side and greeted: “Master Dong! Let me wait on you.”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased and he got up and washed up. He went to the main hall where Teng Yi, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou were having their breakfast.

Teng Yi and Wu Guo masquerading as Dong Kuang purposely stayed at the Command Centre until the third watch. This is the

first time they met since he spied on Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Rou Rou should have told you about all that has transpired!”

Teng Yi nodded: “She was very clear. Regarding scheming, we are nowhere near Zhao Mu and Tian Dan’s level. If not for the eavesdropping last night, none of us will return to Xianyang alive.”

Zhao Zhi was worried: “How should we handle their plan to make you harm Lady Ya?”

Xiang Shaolong thought that last night’s episode is like gathering intelligence in 21st century. He smiled: “We can counter every attack they throw at us. The most favourable condition is that they did not suspect my identity as Dong Kuang and mistaken me as an apple-polisher. Even Zhao Mu dare not reveal our secret relationship. Based on this, we can fight them till the end.”

Teng Yi sighed: “To think that Zhao Ming Xiong is Zhao Mu’s lackey. I have had high hopes for him.”

Xiang Shaolong straightened his neck and solemnly said: “I did not believe that Empress Jing is devoted to Zhao Mu. This vicious woman is likely to use Zhao Mu to achieve her own means. If I can understand her true motives, everything will be fantastic.”

Shan Rou frowned: “You have spoken so much and are unafraid. Do you have a good plan? Empress Jing may summon you anytime

to harm Zhao Ya!”

Without restrain, Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders and ate the bun in his hand. He patted Teng Yi on the shoulder and stood up: “We are off to see Lady Ya. Both of you wait here for my return.”

Under Shan Rou’s cursing and Zhao Zhi’s whining, they left the residence.

Riding side by side along the long street, Teng Yi checked: “Should we make new arrangements to the City defences?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and answered: “Nope. This will raise Zhao Ming Xiong and Zhao Mu’s alarm. Please fetch Little Jun back and see what he has to report on the Qi army.”

As they spoke, Zhao Ya’s residence came into view. Xiang Shaolong went into her place while Teng Yi returned to the Command Centre.

At noon, Zhao Mu sent someone to fetch him. Xiang Shaolong knew about the upcoming plot and expected this.

Inside the secret chamber of the Marquis residence, Zhao Mu put on a look of trust and confidence before declaring: “Li Yuan is tricked and thought that I will cooperate with him. Hng! I will not let him leave Handan City alive.”

Xiang Shaolong did not believe a single word that he said but acted delighted instead.

Zhao Mu revealed a sinister smile and inquired: “We can talk about that later. How are you managing Empress Jing and Zhao Ya? Tian Dan mentioned that he met you and Zhao Ya in the same horse carriage last night.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a grin: “Zhao Ya is a born slut. As long as I please her on bed, there is nothing she will not do for me. I am also getting into the good books of Empress Jing. There is something I have yet to report to you. I have killed all the assassins of Prince Xinling. They were hiding with Han Chuang. With this, I have gained the trust of Xiaocheng and gain the favour of Empress Jing, killing two birds with one stone. When we take further actions, there will be fewer hindrances from these two. I am now trying to persuade Xiaocheng to give me the other half of the army seal. Once I have it, I will have full powers to deploy the entire army. Marquis will not have any worry about the rebellion by then.”

Zhao Mu was touched as he did not expect this report from Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing to himself.

This traitor has suspected his loyalty as he had kept this incident from him, thinking that he has submitted to Empress Jing. Now that he has been fully honest about the palace robbery, Zhao Mu is at a dilemma and became indecisive.

Zhao Mu stared at him for a while and asked in a deep voice: “Why have you not reported this to me as early as you could?”

Xiang Shaolong innocently responded: “This is a small matter and I have never thought of reporting to you. Only when you asked me about Empress Jing’s progress that it came to my mind. The two crucial fixtures are Empress Jing and Zhao Ya. With their full support, Xiaocheng will grant me full military command even with Guo Kai’s objection. Then, Handan City will be our playground. Ai! As long as I can repay the gratitude Lord Chunshen has bestowed on me, I, Dong Kuang, am willing to undergo any danger without the slightest hesitation.”

Zhao Mu’s colour changed and frowned: “Is Xiaocheng behind Le Cheng’s death?”

Xiang Shaolong almost burst out laughing: “Definitely not! Tian Dan got me to investigate the personal guards of Le Cheng to see if anyone backed out of his escort on that fateful night. My investigations have yet to be concluded but from what I see, the killer is likely to be Xiang Shaolong.”

Zhao Mu can no longer hide his fear and lowered his head in deep thought.

Xiang Shaolong is puzzled. He has said everything that he could to gain Zhao Mu’s former trust but it is not working. With a quick inspiration, he roughly guessed what is missing. He mysteriously lowered his voice and whispered: “Does Marquis want Cheng Xu

out of the way? I have a marvellous scheme within a scheme.”

Zhao Mu raised his head in astonishment: “What scheme within a scheme?”

Xiang Shaolong simply visualized: “I have told Xiaocheng about the loyalty letters and bluffed him that I can steal them. As long as Marquis provides me a fake copy with Cheng Xu’s name, Xiaocheng will sack him immediately to protect himself.”

When Zhao Mu heard about the leak of the loyalty letters to Xiaocheng, there is no change in his expression. Xiaocheng must have told Empress Jing about the letters who then leaked it to Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief. If he had not made this move, Zhao Mu will never trust him.

Sure enough, Zhao Mu’s suspicions gradually dissipated. He sighed: “Wang Zhuo, in the future, you must report everything you did to avoid misunderstandings.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be flustered: “What! Marquis suspects my loyalty?”

Zhao Mu regained his composure and patted his shoulder before adding: “The storm is over and the weather is good. Do not have any doubts in your heart. As long as you do as I command, you will have a great and prosperous future.”

Pausing for a moment, he continued: “The most important thing now is to retrieve the other half of the army seal and the imperial decree. You can then have full authority to deploy the army anyway you wish...” he stopped halfway.

Xiang Shaolong predicted that he has instructed Empress Jing to use him to harm Zhao Ya but could not say it out from his own mouth or risk exposing their relationship. He sincerely pleaded: “Marquis, please feel free to give any instructions!”

Zhao Mu removed his hand from Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and nodded: “Whatever you plan to do in the future, please discuss with me first. Never forget this.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that Zhao Mu is still having some doubts. Using Empress Jing to command him, he wants to see if Xiang Shaolong will report to him as promised. Xiang Shaolong agreed to Zhao Mu’s request and asked: “Does Marquis have any instructions for summoning me here?”

Zhao Mu looked awkward and forcefully said: “Just to ask how you have been. Oh! We can talk about the rest another time.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that they have each achieved their goals and bade farewell.

Back at the command centre, he attended to his duties first before having a discussion with Teng Yi about Zhao Mu’s meeting.

Teng Yi is full of praise: “If the City Guards and the Palace Guards are indirectly controlled by Zhao Mu and Empress Jing at his beck and call, Zhao Mu can rebel without Tian Dan’s assistance. I am confused why he had not made his move yet. Is it so difficult to get Empress Jing to poison Xiaocheng?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “I am confused too. The only explanation must be Li Mu. If Xiaocheng died suddenly, Li Mu will be suspicious and send his army into Handan City against Zhao Mu. Even Tian Dan will not dare to face Li Mu’s army. Zhao Mu’s fantasy will be short-lived. Ai! I still do not believe Empress Jing will be satisfied to be under Zhao Mu’s control. She is tasked to unite the three states and knows that Zhao Mu is a Chu spy. There is no way she will submit to him whole-heartedly.”

Teng Yi shuddered: “Women like her who are enclosed in the palace for years cannot be judged by the common yardstick. From her looks, even when she is speaking with a smile on her face, you can feel the chill in her heart. Maybe Zhao Mu has an excellent way of fulfilling her desires that she is willing to do everything for him!”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken when he heard this. He has a faint idea of how to deal with Empress Jing but could not put it in words.

Changing the topic, he enquired: “How are the City defences?”

Teng Yi took a deep breath: “Luckily we found out who he is

working for. He handed me a name list this morning about his suggestion to deploy the various military leaders. In the past, I would have no suspicions as he is more familiar with the troops and I trusted him. It is a different matter now.”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that it is a close shave and commented: “Zhao Mu did mention that he has four colonels who are his lackeys. This must be another trick. We will purposely make full use of these four men so that Zhao Mu can only suffer in silence.”

Teng Yi slapped the table and cried: “Suffer in silence. What a suitable quote! Third Brother you are full of wise proverbs. No wonder Talented Lady Ji has fallen for you.”

A subordinate came to report that Han Chuang is looking for him.

They could guess what is coming and share a laugh before Xiang Shaolong left.

As predicted, it was Empress Jing who is looking for him.

This time, she is alone in a small hut deep inside the residence. There is food and wine on the table and she is chatting happily.

Reminded by Teng Yi, Xiang Shaolong paid attention to her eyes. Despite her joyful expressions, her eyes are expressionless and give people an icy cold feeling.

Is she a cold-blooded animal?

Recalling the times when she teased him and rejected him at the end confirmed this view.

If that is the case, what did Zhao Mu do to conquer her?

Pondering, his hand reached into his waist pockets and retrieves the aphrodisiac Han Chuang gave him that was meant for Ji Yanran and finally understood what Zhao Mu did.

On the last encounter, it did cross his mind to use this tool but it is a fantasy that is limited to one's imagination and would not be put to use. Under the present circumstances, his mindset regarding the use of this drug is different from the past.

His heartbeat uncontrollably quickened.

Empress Jing misunderstood his reaction and jested: "I cause you to be so nervous?"

Using one hand, he swiftly hid a small amount of the drug in his sleeve. Wondering how he could deliver this drug into the lips of this voluptuous beauty, he coughed: "Empress looks especially stunning and mesmerizing today."

Empress Jing eyes flashed. In the past, Xiang Shaolong would

never detect this flashing. Now, things are different and she can no longer hide anything from him.

She personally lifted the wine flask and leaned forward, filling his cup. Batting an eye, she sighed: “All guys are the same. After you get used to looking, there will be nothing extraordinary!”

Deep inside, Xiang Shaolong cursed this lady for using this method to seduce him. He had an idea and lifted the cup to his nose proclaiming: “The wine poured by Empress Jing is especially aromatic!” He moved the cup beyond her sight and smoothly added the drug. Raising the cup again with both hands, he toasted: “Let subject toast to the everlasting beauty and youth of Empress.”

Which woman does not enjoy men’s praising of their beauty? Even Empress Jing is not an exception. Elated, she raised her own cup and toasted: “I bless General Dong with a successful military career and never losing a single battle.”

Xiang Shaolong deliberately laugh in a rough manner and explained: “Does Empress know that for tribesmen like us, we must cross our arms to drink during toasting so that our wishes will come true.”

Empress Jing held her wine cup in surprise and asked: “What is cross-arm drinking?”

Xiang Shaolong moved forward right to her side and lean ahead slightly. He delivered his wine cup to her lips and grinned: “We cross our arms and drink each other’s wine. Not a single drop must

be left. Thereby, our wishes will come true.”

Empress Jing’s face reddened slightly and admired his daring act. If she refused to drink, she would be insincere. Helplessly putting on a smile on her face, she crossed her arms and shot him a look, admonishing: “Watch yourself. I like men who take it slowly. Oh!”

Afraid of choking her, Xiang Shaolong gently poured the wine into her small mouth and drank from her cup at the same time.

After the cups have been emptied, Xiang Shaolong switched the cups on the table and wiped his lips of any remaining wine. He laughed: “Great! In the future, no matter what I have to do for Empress, it will all be worth it.”

Empress Jing seldom drank an entire cup of wine in one go. With the effects of alcohol taking over, two red patches appeared on the cheeks of her smooth and well-defined face. She took out a silk handkerchief and covered her face with her sleeve and wiped away the remaining wine from her lips. Lowering her sleeve, she batted an eye at Xiang Shaolong protesting: “I had not drunk wine in such a rush for a long time, you are really ... Oh!”

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to sit down right beside her. He is most afraid that she will slip away and some other guy will benefit from her present state. He interrupted: “Does Empress enjoy drinking in the past?”

For a while, there is a sense of loss in her eyes like she is recalling a sad incident. Sighing softly and yet maintaining her silence, her

eyes turned frosty and revealed poisonous anger.

Xiang Shaolong remembered that she had an affair with Prince Xinling. He guessed that their love must have transformed into hate. Therefore, she had that interesting expression.

He had no inkling about the potency of Han Chuang's aphrodisiac or how long it takes for the drug to take effect. He also did not know what the symptoms of the drug taking effect are. Full of questions, he kept quiet.

For some time the little hut is in complete silence. On the sounds of magpies playing and fluttering their wings can be heard from the garden.

Finally, Empress Jing coldly started: "Are you thinking about another woman?"

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and raised his head to face her. He tested: "Empress is brilliant. I am really thinking about women. But it is not another woman, it is Empress Jing."

Empress Jing's face turned red again and gazed at him. She proceeds to face the sun-filled woods beyond the window.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the drug is taking effect. Otherwise, her complexion will not change as easily.

Sliding to her back, he had wanted to hold her shoulders. Afraid

of retaliation, he softly spoke: “Does Empress have something on her mind?”

This Queen of Zhao unhappily sighed: “Sometimes, I have no idea what I am doing. Why am I expending so much effort on an insignificant issue? Look at the trees and flowers outside. They remain so carefree under the rays of the sun. If I can abandon all my worries, life will be a paradise.”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. She has just taken an aphrodisiac and should be full of passion and be begging him for sex. Why is she expressing all her woes instead? Could it be that Han Chuang gave him the wrong medication or the drug has expired and cause a different reaction? Thinking back, he realised his error.

If Zhao Mu has been feeding her constantly with sex drugs to keep her passion up, she would have developed some immunity to it. Like a common drug abuser, they need to increase the dosage to keep them ‘high’. He kicked himself for only doping her with a small amount. There is no way he can get her to drink another cup of his wine. What shall he do?

Book 10 Chapter 6 – The Deciding Factor

While Xiang Shaolong is still undecided, Empress Jing stood up. He was expecting her to storm out in a huff; instead, she walked slowly to the window and released a long breath, gazing at the trees and flowers. Xiang Shaolong followed her lead and leaned on the window sill, scrutinizing her chiseled face.

Although her face is peach-red, her mesmerizing eyes show that she is still dwelling on her past. Switching between happiness, anger, sadness and pain is all alternating on her face.

Xiang Shaolong is sure that the drug is taking effect, causing her to reveal her hidden and suppressed expressions. She has even forgotten her original intention to get Xiang Shaolong to harm Zhao Ya.

This Queen of Zhao seems to be in a trance as if she has taken some mind-altering medication. Exhibiting an unusual side of her, she seems to have lost her normal will power and sense of preparedness.

Xiang Shaolong plucked up his courage and reached out with his hand around her soft and tender shoulder. “What is Her Majesty thinking about?” he soothingly asked.

Empress Jing appears to be immune to his touch. Shaking her head, she cried: “I hate him!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and coaxed: “Who dares to

offend Your Majesty? Hei! Do you want another cup of wine?”

Irritated, Empress Jing scowled: “Wouldn’t drinking wine make me feel even worse than before?!” She did not even turn her head and stared at him through the corner of her eye.

Xiang Shaolong has a guilty conscience and dare not incur her wrath. Releasing his grip on her shoulder, he nodded: “Yes! If you cut water with a knife, the water will still flow on. If you drink, the alcohol entering your upset liver will be transformed into tears.”

Unknowingly, he sprouted a line from Li Bai, the great Tang Dynasty Poet. Due to his limited memory, the verse is modified and doesn’t make any sense.

Empress Jing muttered: “If you cut water with a knife, the water will still flow on. If you drink, the alcohol entering your upset liver will be transformed into tears.” Her curvy figure started to shake and she faced him with her eyes shining with coldness.

Xiang Shaolong is so nervous that his hands and feet turned into ice. He cursed himself for acting like an unrefined boor and yet came up with a fantastic line like that.

The chill in her eyes faded rapidly as Empress Jing sighed: “What a moving verse! It is subtle but yet pleasing to the ear. For so many years, this is the first time I am touched by poetry.” Ending, her face became even more reddish.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved. He is certain that she was recollecting her past with Prince Xinling, causing her pretty eyes to turn cold. It appears that Prince Xinling has dealt her such a heavy blow that she is still unable to let go after so many years. Her tryst with Zhao Mu is likely to be a form of revenge. In this case, she must be ignorant about Han Chuang's and Prince Xinling's conspiracy.

Prince Xinling gained her true love while Zhao Mu is all about perverted satisfaction and excitement.

After they gazed at each other for some time, Empress Jing warmed up and state in a low voice: "Dong Kuang! You are a special man."

Xiang Shaolong tested the waters by reaching over and holding her snow white jade hands. Her hands are well-manicured with long fingernails.

Empress Jing rotated slightly and allowed her precious hand to land in this man's grasp.

Just as Xiang Shaolong is about to pull her into his embrace, Empress Jing retracted her hand. Her delicate eyes show signs of awakening as she coldly snorted: "Does General Dong know why I have summoned you?"

Xiang Shaolong was dismayed that the effects of the drug are subsidizing and this woman is recovering her usual clarity. He nodded: "Please give your orders and I will not fail you."

Xiang Shaolong left Han Chuang's residence and headed to Zhao Mu's residence at once. The traitor is not at home and he left a message and head back to the Command Centre to liaise with Teng Yi. After his report, he sighed: "There are bound to be some setbacks. Now, we can only rely on military might. I thought that we can seduce her and break Zhao Mu's sexual control over her. Who knows...! Ai!"

Teng Yi reassured: "She has not given you the 'evidence' to plant in Lady Ya's residence. When you meet up again, just increase the dosage."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "First, we may not be drinking. Second, I am not used to such methods to deal with women. Forget it! It is better than Ya'er leave Handan City and we have one less consideration."

Teng Yi informed: "Talented Lady Ji just sent word that she has informed Xiaocheng that she will return to Wei tomorrow. From what I see, her departure will stir up some debates and speculation, especially from Li Yuan and Lord Longyang."

Xiang Shaolong could understand his meaning.

This selfish and devious Li Yuan will not give up on an opportunity that is within his reach. Lord Longyang will suspect that she is leaving to rendezvous with Xiang Shaolong.

Her leaving of Handan City will not be as smooth as expected.

Teng Ti added; “You need not fret over Yanran. I have made arrangements. Earlier, I have sent someone to move the Tian sisters secretly to the farm. Tomorrow, they can escape to Xianyang with Mister Zou (Yan).”

Xiang Shaolong is still worried: “How will you deal with Lord Longyang and Li Yuan?”

Teng Yi explained: “Lord Longyang will not resort to force with Talented Lady. He will only send spies to observe in secret. He will also notify the Wei border guards to track her movement. As long as we do not allow his men to reach Wei, everything will be taken care of.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded at his brilliance. With him controlling the City Guards, killing Lord Longyang’s spies is a piece of cake.

Teng Yi continued: “From my estimates, Li Yuan may resort to force when necessary. He cannot send his own men to attack her and can only ask Tian Dan for assistance. I will personally escort Talented Lady Ji and Zou Yan with an army of Zhao soldiers. We will lay down a decoy and send them to Han instead. This will take care of Li Yuan’s ploy.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Yanran is not a common and weak woman. She is full of wisdom and strength to protect herself. Let Big Brother see to this. I still need you her to watch over Zhao Ming Xiong and company. We must pay extra attention to the men on Zhao Ming Xiong’s name list.”

Teng Yi asked: “There is something that I still do not comprehend. Why would Zhao Mu want to get the Qi army involved? With Xiaocheng’s death, he will be in power. Killing Li Mu and Lian Po will be easy, not to mention idiots like Guo Kai and Cheng Xu. I am certain that he still suspects Empress Jing and treats you like a pawn. His real trust should lie with Zhao Ming Xiong and not an outsider like you. He can even blame you for opening the gates to the Qi army and killed Tian Dan and Li Yuan at the same time. No one is better than Zhao Mu in understanding the ambitions of Qi and Chu against the Three State Ally.”

Xiang Shaolong ran these thoughts in his head and nodded: “Second Brother is right. Zhao Mu will never be satisfied with our independent attitude. But things are too complicated and Tian Dan, Li Yuan will surely have a plot against Zhao Mu. We can only react to whatever situations that arises and wait for a golden opportunity to whisk away Zhao Mu. The most pressing thing is to get Zhao Ya to leave Handan City and all will be better.”

An attendant reported that Zhao Mu is here personally to see him and both men were stunned.

Teng Yi excused himself as the guards brought Zhao Mu in. Escorting him were the leader of Zhao Mohism Juzi Yan Ping and eight other elite warriors that Xiang Shaolong has seen before.

Xiang Shaolong gave them a warm welcome and paid his respects to Yan Ping like he is seeing him for the first time. Recalling their first encounter in Zhao Mu’s residence, he guessed that Yan Ping is now allied with Zhao Mu.

This Zhao Mohism Juzi has lost some weight and his eyes are more sharper. It looks like after his loss to Xiang Shaolong, he made a lot of effort to train. Not only has he regained his wounded pride, his skills are at a higher level now.

Xiang Shaolong was in agony. If Yan Ping and his men are Zhao Mu's bodyguards, dealing with this traitor will be so much harder.

The three men were seated as tea is served and Zhao Mu's personal escorts guarded the four directions.

Zhao Mu gave a dry cough: "Juzi is my esteemed guest who will be dealing with Xiang Shaolong. He has brought three hundred followers who are all formidable people. If Xiang Shaolong did not come, so be it. If he is here, he will not leave Handan City intact."

Xiang Shaolong feigned happiness and said: "If Juzi needs any assistance, please let me know."

Yan Ping let out a solemn chuckle and commented in a low voice: "After Marquis heard of his return, we have been guarding every pass and waiting for him to fall into our traps. We did not even catch his shadow, which is extremely strange. From our sources, he is definitely not in Xianyang."

Zhao Mu interrupted: "Xiang Shaolong injured some people near Handan City and escaped. Juzi led his men in pursuit to the vicinity of Wei but did not discover any tracks. Juzi concluded that Xiang Shaolong is still in the city and is linked to Le Cheng's

assassination.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken. No wonder Zhao Mu is generally unworried about Xiang Shaolong returning to Handan City. He has Yan Ping as his secret weapon against Xiang Shaolong. It is fortunate that he has regained Zhao Mu’s trust so that Zhao Mu revealed Yan Ping’s presence to him.

He has been too careless and neglected Yan Ping this huge foe.

With his eyes brimming with chill, Yan Ping coldly added: “We have searched all the nearby forests and villages and there is no sign of him. The only explanation is he is hiding in the city under someone’s protection.”

Xiang Shaolong acted aghast: “Juzi’s theories make good sense! Who does Juzi suspect to be hiding him?”

Yan Ping looked at Zhao Mu before divulging: “Only Zhao Ya has the ability to hide Xiang Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong declared: “Let me send some men to watch her around the clock. We will surely find a loophole. Hai! She says I am the only man in her heart. So I am only a cover while she is really with her old sweetheart.”

Zhao Mu reasoned: “Juzi has the same analysis. Let him handle Zhao Ya’s supervision. If you send your men, they will not be able to hide from Zhao Ya’s family warriors.”

Yan Ping stood up and bade: "Excuse me General Dong; I have some matters to attend to."

As Xiang Shaolong escorted him to the main gate, Yan Ping lowered his voice saying: "Xiang Shaolong would not dare to spend too much time here. I believe he will attack Marquis within a few days. If we are well prepared, we need not fear him."

Xiang Shaolong could only agree but is actually full of misery. Yan Ping's presence will only add to the burden of his mission.

After seeing Yan Ping off, Xiang Shaolong returned to Zhao Mu and reported Empress Jing's ploy to harm Zhao Ya. He frowned: "We can easily dispose of this slut. The issue is she recommended my promotion to City Commander. In a twist of events, or because she is not there to put in a good word for me, Xiaocheng may not give me the army seal. This will affect our grand plan."

Zhao Mu is satisfied that Xiang Shaolong reported his session with Empress Jing and smiled: "When we get the army seal, we will dispose of Zhao Ya. You can delay Empress Jing's orders. Hng! I have laid my plans well and can succeed the Zhao empire anytime. The present issue is Xiaocheng's precautions. The palace guards are all controlled by him. If we cannot use trickery, we shall have to use force. Before Li Mu returns, we must send him to heaven."

Hearing this update, Xiang Shaolong understood Zhao Mu's schemes.

Trickery is to use poison. Xiaocheng will die because of illness and this is the best outcome.

Zhao Mu and Empress Jing must have been trying to poison him but they have been unsuccessful. Xiaocheng knew that Zhao Mu is a poisons expert and will take due precautions.

Force is to use the Zhao army and force their way into the palace. After killing Xiaocheng, they will install the crown prince on the throne.

This is the worst outcome as he needs to rely on the Qi army to deflect the returning army of Li Mu.

Zhao Mu lowered his voice: “No matter what, I have covered all the details of either scheme. Let’s talk more the next time. You should spend more time talking to Xiaocheng. He is easily persuaded. Who knows he might give you the army seal after you chatted more with him.”

Pausing, he asked: “I heard that Talented Lady Ji is heading back to Wei, even before Lord Longyang. Have you heard about this?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be astounded and cried: “What!?”

Zhao Mu chuckled: “That is a piece of great news. Li Yuan will not let go of the heavenly maiden. If he chased after her and resort to force, we can use this excuse to kill him. We can even push the

blame to Ji Yanran and let Li Yuan be an horny ghost!”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. It is no wonder Xiaocheng dare not act against Zhao Mu. This latter does have his cruel methods that act as a deterrent.

Arriving at Lady Ya’s residence, Zhao Ya brought him to the unforgettable loft.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that her eyes were bloodshot and appeared to have been crying. “What is wrong?” He curiously asked.

Zhao Ya fell into his embrace whining: “I just had a big fight with Xiaocheng.”

After Xiang Shaolong got her to calm down, she recounted: “This morning, you spoke to me about Empress Jing and Zhao Mu’s conspiracy. I could not tolerate it and enter the palace, telling Xiaocheng to watch the people around him. He mistaken me for badmouthing Guo Kai and blew his top. I screwed him for misusing his talents and he cursed me for loving you.”

Xiang Shaolong felt uneasy and anxiously asked: “Did you tell him about Empress Jing?”

Zhao Ya shook her head: “What is the use of saying it? I have no evidence and he will mistake me for wanting to harm her.”

Xiang Shaolong had wanted to persuade Zhao Ya to leave Zhao. In her pitiful state, how he can bring this matter up? In that instance, he did not know what to say.

Zhao Ya raised her head and smiled bitterly: “It is a good quarrel nonetheless. As soon as I came home, the imperial decree came. I was ordered to leave for Daliang (Wei Capital) immediately and will be traveling with Miss Yanran.”

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: “What is your mission to Daliang? Are you not frightened of Prince Xinling?”

Zhao Ya felt his face with her hand and loving cooed: “Luckily you still care for me or I’ll be better off dead. My current mission is to bring the fourth princess to marry the Crown Prince of Wei. On the surface, it is to replace your Qian’er but it is really a transaction. The dowry is the original copy of Lu Gong’s Secret Manual. Lord Longyang’s current trip is also to discuss this marriage.”

Xiang Shaolong just couldn’t figure out. “Why did your brother agree?” He asked.

Zhao Ya sighed: “He has no choice. Qi and Chu are giving him a lot of pressure. Without Wei’s support, what can Zhao and Han achieve? He had long wanted to send me over but I know that you are coming back so I refused to go. Now that we have such a bitter fight, he no longer cares if I am willing or unwilling to go.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “This is great! You can slip over to

Xianyang while traveling.”

Zhao Ya shook her head strongly: “I want my life too but this matter is of great importance. I must finish it at all costs before I can leave for Xianyang in peace. After that, I will not owe Xiaocheng anything. Ai! Xiaocheng is not like this in the past. After Lady Ni’s tragic death, he became very bad-tempered.”

Remembering the exquisite Lady Ni, Xiang Shaolong’s spirits took a beating and he sighed: “Prince Xinling hates you to the core and will try to harm you.”

Zhao Ya kept quiet for a while and softly said: “Does hubby know what Empress Jing and I are on such bad terms?”

Xiang Shaolong guessed: “Because of Prince Xinling?”

A guilty Zhao Ya nodded and faintly remarked: “I do not wish to bring up the past. Prince Xinling still has feelings for me. That is why his men attacked the palace when they knew I was away. Moreover, Lord Longyang guaranteed my safety. He will be traveling with us.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished. “Isn’t your brother sending him off with a banquet on the day after tomorrow? How can he leave before that?”

Zhao Ya bitterly smiled: “Are you that simple-minded? He does not believe that Talented Lady Ji is really returning to Daliang. He

sensed that she is taking the chance to flee and meet up with Xiang Shaolong. Miss Ji does not know about this yet. Ai! Shaolong! What should Yanran do?”

Xiang Shaolong's brain is throbbing with pain. A simple departure has made everything so complicated. If Yanran knows about this, she will be furious.

His responsibilities are overwhelming and he struggles to handle them all.

Zhao Ya sighed again: “We have to be apart for some time and may not even see each other again. Ya'er does not wish to live anymore. Why is life so difficult?”

Xiang Shaolong forced his headaches aside and raises his energy, asking: “Does Xiaocheng have another son?”

Zhao Ya shook her head: “There is only a crown prince. Therefore, no matter who badmouths that woman (Empress Jing), Xiaocheng will not be affected.”

Xiang Shaolong continued to probe: “Does Xiaocheng have any siblings?”

Zhao Ya was surprised as she stared at him. After a moment, she replied: “There is Prince of Wu City. Wu City is just a few days traveling away from Qi. You can reach there in two days if you rush the trip. Are you suspecting that he is conspiring with Tian

Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong's face is full of suspicions as he assessed: “I definitely do not trust Tian Dan to help Zhao Mu ascend the throne without his own benefits. If I am Tian Dan, I will not believe that Zhao Mu can control Empress Jing. And Empress Jing is not likely to get rid of Zhao's supporting pillars Lian Po and Li Mu. The best way is to tempt Prince Wu and get rid of Zhao Mu, Empress Jing and the Crown Prince in one swoop. Zhao Mu will be the scapegoat. He will then kill Li Mu and Lian Po through Prince Wu. Zhao will then be in his hands. Therefore, he needs to kill me first to highlight his brilliance. He surely does not believe that I will work for him.”

Zhao Ya thought about his words. Her face changed colour and uttered: “Shaolong, you are right. This brother (Prince Wu) of mine is a greedy fellow and does harbour thoughts of rebellion. What can we do?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Regardless, Tian Dan can plot against you; we can plot against him too. Do not let anyone know about this. I naturally will have a plan to counter this. Forget all your worries and leave this place tomorrow. Wait for my news in Daliang and never come back to Handan City.”

Zhao Ya bit her lips: “You are not keeping me company tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her petite face and smiled: “There are many opportunities in the future. These few days are crucial to our success and I cannot indulge in pleasures of the flesh. Do you know there are people watching you?”

He shared about the presence of Yan Ping and reassured her at the same time. He then left to visit Xiaocheng in the palace.

The palace attendant reported that Xiaocheng is unwell and has retired early. Xiang Shaolong decided to see Empress Jing since he was here.

All of a sudden, he came to realise that the success or failure of his mission in Handan City lies solely in the hands of this cunning Queen of Zhao.

Book 10 Chapter 7 - Filled With Plans From Head To Toe

Empress Jing received Dong Kuang in that secluded pavilion in the imperial gardens. After being seated, Xiang Shaolong said, "Lady Ya has informed me that she is headed to Daliang tomorrow, so tonight is the only chance to make our move against her. All I need to do is find a valid excuse to head to her residence and I will carry out the task. Empress Jing, have you prepared the necessary materials?"

A poisonous look flashed across the Empress of Zhao's eyes. After hesitating for a moment, she finally sighed. "She should consider herself lucky. We'll consider this matter to have come to an end now."

Xiang Shaolong's heart trembled slightly. He realized that this noble lady and Zhao Mu must have some sort of secretive yet effective system of communication between them. That's why she was able to find out so quickly that there has been a change in the situation.

Just as he was considering the best way to awaken her to the possibility of Prince Wucheng's rebellion, Empress Jing mournfully sighed, "'When wine passes through worries, it transforms into tears.' Today, I've been incessantly thinking about this moving line. I can't motivate myself to do anything."

Based upon all the information he had gathered, Xiang Shaolong was now capable of drawing a rough sketch of the history and person of this First Lady of Zhao.

After being married off to the country of Zhao and becoming the Empress, her task was to maintain and strengthen the alliance of the three countries. In addition, she faithfully gave the people of Zhao their one and only Crown Prince.

Everything should have been perfect, but a problem appeared in the form of King Xiaocheng. Because of his love for other men, he neglected her.

Empress Jing definitely was not a promiscuous woman. Although King Xiaocheng didn't keep a tight watch on her, she nonetheless followed all the rules of propriety, living a lonely life at court. This sort of woman, once she truly falls in love, becomes an even more hopeless case when compared to how promiscuous women act.

The person who made her truly fall in love was Prince Xinling. The latter was just putting on an act to gain personal benefit for himself. For the sake of politics, he put on a show for her, while the person he really cared for was Zhao Ya. Naturally, after Empress Jing discovered this, she suffered a wound which, to this very day, had not yet been healed.

Zhao Mu, seeing the opportunity, used King Xiaocheng's indulgence for all sorts of 'games' to acquire a stockpile of many different medicines, which he used to arouse her sexual desire. He caused herself to wallow in wanton despair and become willing to do anything for him.

Empress Jing harbored a deep hatred towards King Xiaocheng,

and in addition, she wasn't a woman without ambition. The powerful and yet subtle relationships which develop between male and female caused her and Zhao Mu to use each other for mutual benefit, spurring each other on to greater depravities.

No one can deny that Zhao Mu is a very attractive, mesmerizing man. He had ways for seducing both men and women. Otherwise, before Zhao Ya fell in love with Xiang Shaolong, she wouldn't have found herself unable to resist Zhao Mu's seductions and teases.

If, hypothetically, he, Xiang Shaolong, was able to win over Empress Jing to his side, Zhao Mu's biggest supporter would be gone, and the task of capturing him would become much easier as well. When he thought of this, he couldn't help but let out a sigh. To have a happy, peaceful life in this era, the only option was to stop at nothing and use any methods available to achieve his goal.

Staring at him, Empress Jing said, "Why are you sighing?"

Xiang Shaolong, when thinking of the unscrupulous, underhanded tactics he was going to have to use, felt no desire for her at the moment. He dully said, "I don't know either."

Empress Jing didn't expect him to reply in such a manner. Astounded, she said, "You are very frank."

Both of them were silent for some time. After the two stared at each other for some time, Empress Jing found herself somewhat unable to withstand his scorching gaze. Lowering her head, she said, "You really are willing to listen to my orders to frame Zhao

Ya? I thought you liked her? All men like women like her, who know how to satisfy them in bed."

Xiang Shaolong understand what she was thinking. He ruggedly replied, "To ask me to frame the innocent really is something I am reluctant to do. I'd rather kill her with a chop of the sword and do things neatly and cleanly. At worst, I would have to flee from Handan afterwards and in such a manner, repay you, Empress Jing, for the kindness you showed in promoting me."

Empress Jing's entire body trembled as she stared at him. Her phoenix-like eyes quivering with a fierce look in them, she replied with cold formality, "So you have the audacity to act against my instructions?"

Xiang Shaolong used the technique of using 'soft' to overcome 'hard'. He let out another sigh. "I, Dong Kuang, am willing to sacrifice my livelihood and even my very life for you, Empress Jing. Empress, are you still not satisfied? Why is there such deep hatred between yourself and Lady Ya?"

Empress Jing's face turned icy. "You aren't qualified to get involved in the grudge between myself and her."

Seeing that she was no longer criticizing him over resisting her orders, Xiang Shaolong knew that she had already softened towards him. At this moment, he was riding on the tiger's back, with no way to get off. If he didn't use extraordinary measures to subdue her, it would be very difficult to anticipate the consequences. Zhao Ya was an excellent example of how difficult it is to fathom and understand the minds of these women, who have

lived in the palace for so long. Suddenly, she issued an order of expulsion. "General Dong, if you have no further business here, you have my leave to depart!"

Xiang Shaolong rose to his feet. Taking two angry steps away, he spoke to her with his back turned, "Empress Jing, do you know that disaster is so near that it is pressing at your eyelashes?"

Empress Jing's tender body trembled slightly. Laughing coldly, she said, "General Dong, if you are just saying frightening words to try and scare me, I definitely will not let you off."

Xiang Shaolong casually shrugged his shoulders, not appearing to care in the slightest. "If that's the case, please allow me to take back the words I said earlier. Starting today, I, Dong Kuang, no longer owe you, Empress Jing, anything further. If the Empress wishes to take Dong Kuang's life, go ahead and give the order!"

Empress Jing exploded with anger. Rising to her feet, her lovable voice shouted, "What audacity! How dare you speak to me with that sort of attitude? Do you believe me when I tell you that I will immediately call for someone to come and pull your tongue out by the roots?"

Xiang Shaolong swiftly turned around and stared at her, shooting her a gaze filled with cold electricity. His appearance suddenly became powerful without compare. He replied, "I, Dong Kuang, have never considered life or death to be a matter of great importance. If all I wanted to do was make you happy, it would be very easy for me to ignore my conscience and just say words pleasing to the ear. But no matter who I am willing to lie to, I,

Dong Kuang, am not willing to deceived my beloved Empress Jing. That's the reason why I spoke those words from the heart. I didn't expect that I would gain only your disfavor. Forget it! It's no big deal if I can no longer be the city commander. At first, I was able to carry out some things on your behalf. It is a pity that things are the way they are. I'm going to go to the King now and return to him the imperial seal for commanding troops. I no longer wish to concern myself with the affairs of Handan."

When had Empress Jing ever been rebuked directly in such a way by anyone before? For the moment, she was stunned and speechless. But upon hearing the overbearing power of his impassioned speech, her heart actually softened. She only tightened her tender face and said, "Fine! Since you are so straightforward, go ahead and tell me these words from the depths of your heart. I will respectfully listen to them."

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt great joy. Deciding to stop while he was ahead, he disappointedly sighed, "Right now, your servant's heart is dejected and downcast. I don't wish to say anything at all. Empress Jing, call for someone to come take me away! I definitely will not resist."

Empress Jing was briefly stunned. Leaving the table, she came to his side. After her slender, beautiful face closely examined his own for a moment, she let out a light sigh. "Why do you have to be so angry with me? Even if you don't care about your own life, you should think about the needs of your followers in Handan! Even the King cannot protect you from being punished for offending your betters."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the time was right. Deep emotion flowing from his eyes, he shook his head. "I don't know why I was unable to control myself either. I only felt that if Empress Jing were to wrongly think badly of me, that I would...bah! I don't know what to say."

Empress Jing was stunned at first. Then, she let out a tinkling laugh, the sound of silver bells chiming. Stretching her hands out, she pressed them against his broad chest. In a low voice, she said, "No need for you to explain. Of course I understand what you mean."

Feeling her precious hands gently touch and stroke him, Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a surge of desire. He comfortably closed his eyes. In a soft voice, he said, "Empress Jing, please don't be like this. Otherwise, I won't be able to control myself and will violate you."

Giggling with laughter, Empress Jing said, "Just now, weren't you acting so mean and ferocious that you looked as though you were going to devour me whole? Why are you now trembling with fear? Eek! No!"

Xiang Shaolong had waited for just such a good opportunity. It felt like he had been waiting for centuries. Why be polite for any longer? He roughly pulled her into his embrace and pressed his lips against her fragrant neck and shoulder.

How could Empress Jing have imagined that he would be so rough and daring? She thought that he would be as proper as he had been in the past. By the time she thought to try and struggle

free, she found herself lost within this man's charisma and his depredations of her.

Xiang Shaolong ardently and fiercely kissed this 'First Lady' as his hands roamed across her buttocks without any scruple or reservation, holding her so tightly that she almost found herself unable to breathe.

Only by breaking down the barriers between man and woman would he be able to break down Zhao Mu's control over her. This was similar to how Zhao Mu himself subdued her. These arrogant palace noblewomen lacked for nothing at all, but it was precisely because they lacked no material goods that they couldn't help but feel that their hearts were empty. If he could compensate for this defect in her heart, it would be the same as winning her affection. His freedom of action would become much greater, with the difference between as great as that between the clouds of heaven and the mud of the earth. Although there was some deception involved, how many times had she used the same sort of seductive deception against him? To him, this was just another battlefield!

In the blink of an eye, Empress Jing began to react ardently.

Xiang Shaolong's lust was tremendous, especially when he thought about her high and lofty status, as the Empress of the nation. But, knowing that she had suffered a deep psychological wound in the past, it wouldn't do to proceed with undue haste. When both of them were out of breathe from each other's kisses, he said in a low voice, "Empress Jing, do you know about the conspiracy between Prince Wucheng, Tian Dan, and Zhao Mu?"

Empress Jing, whose body was still ensconced in his arms, suddenly trembled violently. The lust in her phoenix-like eyes suddenly dissipated. Staring at him, she cried out involuntarily, "What?!"

Xiang Shaolong's arms around her tightened. In a soft voice, he said, "Empress Ding, you really underestimated Tian Dan and Zhao Mu. Do you think that it never crossed their minds that after the Crown Prince ascends to the throne, all power would be concentrated in your hands? In addition, everyone knows that you won't be so stupid as to destroy the base of your military security by executing Li Mu and Lian Po, the pillars supporting the country of Zhao. At that point in time, wouldn't Tian Dan have wasted all of his efforts for no gain? It is precisely because they have ulterior motives that they find themselves 100% confident in their actions."

Their two bodies were still entangled with one another's, but Empress Jing had already totally recovered her normal clarity of thought. She calmly said, "Where did you get this news from?"

Rousing his own spirit, Xiang Shaolong said, "From the first time Tian Dan met me, he wanted to win me over to his side. After you promoted me to the rank of City Commander, I sought him out and held secret talks with him. I pretended to be loyal to him, to see what secrets and plans he had. That is how I heard about this secret."

A sharp light shone out of Empress Jing's eyes as she stared at him without blinking. Xiang Shaolong matched the intensity of her gaze, not budging in the slightest. A slightly ridiculing tone to her voice, the beautiful woman replied, "I didn't realize that Horse

Fanatic Dong was so very skilled at deceiving people. Mmph!"

Xiang Shaolong once again sealed off her lips with his own.

This time, Xiang Shaolong stopped after only a quick taste. He boldly said, "For the sake of Empress Jing, it's no big deal if I deceive someone. But there is one thing I do not understand. The King is not in the best of health. I'm afraid that he doesn't have much time left to him. Empress Jing, why don't you just wait for a short period of time longer, instead of taking on such a risk?"

Empress Jing had been kissed by him until her entire body went limp. Panting, she said, "If I were to wait a few more years, the country of Zhao will have been lost because of this blockhead."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly saw the light, realizing that she had the same line of thought as him. No wonder she was willing to collude with Zhao Mu.

With a slightly begging tone to her voice, Empress Jing said, "Let go of me, alright? There's a lot of things I need to discuss with you!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself that he might as well go all out. If he didn't seize this opportunity to conquer her, he feared that he wouldn't have such a good opportunity again. Just as he was about to launch a fierce 'attack', a palace lady's voice came from the staircase. "The palace servant, Zhang Jiguang has come to report that the King is waiting for General Dong in the inner palace."

The two were feeling guilty due to their sordid actions. They hurriedly separated.

Forcing herself to calm down, Empress Jing said, "General Dong will go immediately. Have him wait just a moment." Giving him a glance, she said in a low voice, "No matter what, don't let the King know what just happened. When dusk falls, go to Han Chuang's residence. I have business to discuss with you."

Xiang Shaolong found it unimaginable that he once again lost the chance to taste the Empress of Zhao, despite her having been literally at his lips. Lamenting at the situation, he left disappointed.

The palace servant, Zhang Jiguang, led him into a sturdy building within the inner palace. In a low voice, he said, "The King just woke up. When he heard that you came to visit him, he immediately ordered me to bring you to him."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the servant had covered up his visit to Empress Jing. He immediately expressed his gratitude.

Jiguang said, "Right now, everyone in the palace holds General Dong in the utmost esteem. If it wasn't for you quickly capturing those villains, who knows how many more of us would have met with disaster."

Xiang Shaolong made a few modest remarks, before seizing the opportunity to ask, "Aside from General Cheng, who amongst the

palace guards holds the most authority?"

Upon hearing Cheng Xu's name, Jiguang revealed a look of disdain. "It would of course be the chief guard, General Zhao Lingpian. His popularity, prestige, and record of service all surpass that of General Cheng. But because he doesn't know how to curry favor with Chief Advisor Guo, he's never been given great authority."

Xiang Shaolong didn't expect him to speak so openly about internal affairs. Staring at him in astonishment, he nodded. "Palace servant Zhang, you really speak boldly and forthrightly!"

Jiguang smiled. "I speak based on my judgment of the person I am speaking with. Right now, everyone in Handan knows that Horse Fanatic Dong is an amazing hero who does not tremble at the sight of power and influence. If our country of Great Zhao had a few more heroes like General Dong, why would we fear the rapacious, predator-like Qin?"

Xiang Shaolong clapped him on the shoulder. "I simply must make a friend of you, palace servant Zhang! I'll probably have favors that I need you to help me with over the next two days as well."

They stopped talking as they crossed over the threshold of the door. Passing by two palace guardians, they entered the room to meet with King Xiaocheng.

After paying respects to the monarch, each of them seated

themselves. Before he had a chance to speak, King Xiaocheng ordered all the guards to leave before saying in a low voice, "Do you have any good news to report on the oaths of loyalty?"

Xiang Shaolong closely examined his face. Although he looked a bit tired, he didn't look as bad as he had imagined. "The number of guards patrolling the Marquis' residence suddenly increased dramatically, and Tian Dan gifted him with ten giant hounds that are particularly sharp of eye and keen of nose. Aside from forcibly entering the residence, there's really no way in. If my guess is correct, someone has leaked the news out to him, causing Zhao Mu to become wary of me."

King Xiaocheng was stunned for a moment, before revealing a pondering look in his eyes. After a long time, he said, "There's only a very few number of people who know about this, and We have ordered them to guard this secret carefully. Who would dare to disobey Our commands?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Maybe I'm being overly suspicious. Perhaps Zhao Mu is simply increasing his guards due to the critical time about to come to pass."

King Xiaocheng's expression changed quickly. In a heavy voice, he said, "The great general is about to return in a few days' time. If Zhao Mu wishes to rebel, he must make his move in these next few days. General Dong, have you received any intelligence on this front?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "He once mentioned that he will need to borrow support from the men of Qi to accomplish the deed. Based

on this, I imagine he has a full and complete set of plans to allow the men of Qi to easily enter the city. Oh! Not good!"

King Xiaocheng was alarmed. "General Dong, what did you just think of?"

What Xiang Shaolong had suddenly thought of was Zhao Mingxiong, that internal traitor. With him acting as cover, it wouldn't be hard at all to sneak a group of men from under the walls through the Wu family tunnels. No wonder that Zhao Mu, when he suspected 'Dong Kuang' of betraying him, still appeared so confident and unconcerned. This really was not good at all. Although he thought of this, he dared not say it. He lied, "I believe that this very night, Zhao Mu will initiate the first of his chain-plans of attack. He will assassinate the ministers and generals opposed to him to cause confusion in the hearts of the soldiers and the civilians. I must make preparations."

This was also very much a possibility. When he thought of this, he suddenly felt very uneasy. But before they had concluded their talks, he dared not rashly depart.

King Xiaocheng's face turned white. Gasping with astonishment, he said, "Make the first strike to seize the initiative! Right now, we can't hold too many scruples. General Dong, order your men to go and capture or kill Zhao Mu. If he is going to be disloyal to me, there's no need for me to be faithful to him. No one can blame Us for being ruthless to him."

Although Xiang Shaolong's heart was burning with anxiety, he forced himself to be calm as he explained, "Highness, you are

absolutely correct. That is the most direct, straightforward way to deal with things. But right now, we still don't know how many of the palace or city guards are traitors. If Zhao Mu gets a wind of the plan and makes his move first, launching an attack in unison with Tian Dan and Li Yuan's forces, it will be very hard to determine who will win and who will lose. Today, Zhao Mu introduced me to the Mohist Juzi, Yan Ping. This extremely talented Mohist swordsman alone will be very difficult for us to deal with. When combined with the thousands of men Zhao Mu has under him, the situation looks very grim.

Upon hearing the names Tian Dan, Li Yuan, and Yan Ping, King Xiaocheng's face turned ashen. At a loss as to what to do, he complained, "Are you saying we should just sit here and do nothing until he calls up his men and revolts?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly grumbled to himself that all of Zhao Mu's resources and power were nurtured by the King himself. And now, the King wants to blame him? He calmly replied, "Although your humble servant has become the City Commander, I only have the authority to command the troops in dealing with routine matters of city security. I cannot deploy the troops as I see fit, much less command the troops stationed outside of the capital. If, theoretically, you were to give me the army seal, I would be able to strengthen our defenses and concentrate our forces within the city, while having all of the critical choke points and passageways manned by people I trust. At that point in time, we would no longer need to fear the forces outside of the city. Perhaps we would even be able to slaughter Tian Dan and Li Yuan at the same time."

King Xiaocheng hesitated for a long while, before saying in a trembling voice, "Tian Dan and Li Yuan are important officials of

the kingdoms of Qi and Chu. Do not take any rash actions before I consult with generals Lian Po and Li Mu."

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed to himself that this was such a pity. He knew that the King was just finding an excuse. He now better understood why Empress Jing said that the kingdom of Zhao would be lost under his rule. If you wish to accomplish great things, how can you be so full of misgivings and vacillate on what to do?

King Xiaocheng suddenly rose to his feet. "Fine! We will give you the army seal, so that you can act with full authority!"

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly knelt down to thank him.

At this point in time, the hatred he felt for the King of Zhao had already become very dull and light. It had been replaced with pity and sorrow.

Book 10 Chapter 8 – Sufficient Evidence

Xiang Shaolong rushed back to the Command Centre and caught Jing Jun and Teng Yi in a secret discussion. Jing Jun has just come in from the farm. Teng Yi has a serious look on his face. Witnessing his entry, he called out: “Third Brother, please listen to Little Jun’s report!”

Xiang Shaolong had the impression that Jing Jun slipped out to accompany his pretty village girl but is actually hard at work. Pleased, he remarked: “Let’s see what his observations are.”

Jing Jun produced a rolled map and spread it open on the table. Although the map is slightly worn, you can catch a bird’s eye view of the Qi Army formation, the surrounding forests and hills.

Teng Yi scrutinised the map shortly and praised: “Dan Chu lives up to his reputation of being Qi’s famed general. Tall mountains covered his back and his camps lined up on two high grounds. From this, you can tell that he has substance.” Pointing to the central camp, he added: “A source of water is crucial to a good campsite. They are camped near the water source...” Moving his hand down to the pastures and woods between three border camps and continued: “And they have grass to feed the warhorses. If they lay appropriate formations in the woods, it will be hard-pressed to attack them even with a much larger force. There are multiple rock formations within the camp and can be used for both attack and defence. Dan Chu is more than meets the eye. We must never let down our guard on them.”

Xiang Shaolong inquired: “Did we discover any tunneling?”

Jing Jun proudly reported: “Negative. I did question the neighbouring hunters. They told me the mountain behind the camp is named Back-Wind Mountain. It nicely blocks off the cold wind blowing from the north. Just beyond the camp, there is a natural cave that goes deep into the mountain. The exit is a secret hole at the mountain side. After my investigations, I detected Qi sentries at the exit. It is no wonder that the nearby Zhao soldiers have no idea about this.”

Teng Yi pointed to a dense forest beside the mountain and checked: “Is it here? Have you entered the forest to see for yourself?”

Jing Jun answered: “It is right there. The forest runs for ten over miles straight to a point five miles north-west of Handan City. For those who are unaware of the cave, people can arrive at the city border without your detection.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up: “Come! Let’s observe from the city wall. This beats talking over a piece of paper.”

As the trio ascended the north tower sentry, city guards paid their respects. Chen Shi, the major in charge rushed over to accept his orders.

Xiang Shaolong acted uninterested and scanned the surroundings once. He made an excuse and got Chen Shi to leave. Lowering his voice, he told the two: “It will be too risky if the Qi army is relying on internal traitors to open the City gates. The majority of the City

guards are loyal men and the Qi army will be at a disadvantage if they queue up to enter the city. While the ten thousand of them is wasting time coming in, the border guards and the city guards can attack them on both sides. I believe that the Qi army has a secret way of entering the city. As long as they secure a few strategic locations and attack the palace, Handan City will belong to Tian Dan.”

Teng Yi is moved: “Third Brother speaks with reason. If they come in head to head, it will earn the spite of Handan’s army and population. Everyone will sacrifice their lives to defend the city. The Qi army of ten thousand soldiers is insufficient to deal with such a situation.”

Jing Jun imagined: “If I am Tian Dan, I will disguise my men as Zhao citizens. When they enter the city, I will dress them as palace guards. Collaborating with Zhao Mu, I will spread the rumour that Guo Kai and Cheng Xu rebelled. Zhao Mu and Empress Jing will rise to take over the court affairs. By then, Xiaocheng is dead and Third Brother is his subordinate. Other officials can only accept this takeover obediently.”

Teng Yi became even more agitated.

Xiang Shaolong watched the dense forests beyond the city and plainly said: “Tian Dan will not be so foolish to help Zhao Mu and Empress Jing fulfill their fantasy. In addition, he will not trust this Dong Horse Fanatic or the Crown Prince. Caught off-guard, the border guards may not be able to return in time. Thus, he will control the entire situation. When the army is in chaos and Handan’s troops are mostly the old, weak or handicapped, there

will not be a strong resistance.”

Teng Yi frowned: “On what grounds can he prolong his control over Handan City? Will Li Mu let him off?”

Xiang Shaolong revealed his guess about Prince Wu Chen. He continued: “It will fall to Prince Wu’s responsibility. All he needs to do is to lead his men and the Qi army masquerading as Zhao army. He can kill Zhao Mu with a good reason and even push the death of Empress Jing and Crown Prince to him. When Li Mu is back, Prince Wu Chen is sitting on the throne with the backing of Qi and Chu. What can Li Mu do? If there is an internal strife, Tian Dan the conqueror will lead his huge army to attack Handan City. When that occurs, Lian Po is busy fighting Yan and Li Mu is fighting alone. Eliminating Zhao will be a piece of cake and Tian Dan will realise his ambition.”

The sun setting the west sends out millions of rays across the wide grasslands and forests.

Teng Yi heaved a deep breath: “It is good that we have figured out the intricacies or we might be annihilated. Even when we are in hell, we have no idea what brought us there.” Pointing to a building in the city, he proposed: “That is the North Command Centre under the command of Zhao Ming Xiong. If I am not mistaken, there might be a tunnel which leads outside the city, Why don’t Little Jun conduct some investigations on the tunnel’s entrance and exit?” To Xiang Shaolong, he enquired: “How you gotten the complete army seal?”

Xiang Shaolong patted his waist pouch happily: “Both the seal

and decree are here! Let us deploy our troops now and fight to the last with Tian Dan and Zhao Mu. They may even act tonight!”

Teng Yi shook his head: “I can foresee that they are still working on the tunnel day and night. They must keep their silence when digging or they may leak out their activities. Otherwise, they need not drag for another day. The earlier they control Handan City, the better can they prepare for Li Mu’s return. When we can predict the day they complete the tunnel, we can predict the time when they will attack.”

Jing Jun suddenly warned: “Careful! Someone is here!”

Zhao Ming Xiong’s voice drifted over the stone steps of the city wall behind them: “Assistant General pays his respects to City Commander. May I ask what instructions does City Commander have?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “The King has given me the complete army seal. With such a heavy responsibility, I have to patrol personally and give my orders.”

Xiang Shaolong passed the burden of handling Zhao Ming Xiong to Teng Yi. Chatting for a few more seconds, he left with Jing Jun.

Leaving the city wall, Jing Jun made use of the darkness to conduct his investigations. He himself rushed to Han Chuang’s residence to liaise with Empress Jing.

Both parties are racing for time. Whoever can set their traps earlier will be the winner.

This time round, Han Chuang did not bring him into the inner chamber but through the garden. They passed the rice granary where Prince Xinling's men used to be hiding and reached a hut that is used to store gardening tools.

Han Chuang gave him a mysterious smile. Clapping his shoulder, he promised: "General Dong will understand everything once he enters."

As the wooden door was dragged open against the floor, Xiang Shaolong could see that the interior was dimly lit and the shadows are unclear.

Empress Jing is actually inside. Surrounding her on all fours are her personal guards as well as Han Chuang's personal escorts.

Under the light, there is a man who is tied to the wall. He appears to be in a daze and his clothes are bloodied and his face and head are full of scars. His body has burn marks which show that he has just been tortured.

Empress Jing did not even turn her head and coldly said: "Except for Marquis and General Dong, the rest of you can scram."

Everyone left in an instance.

Empress Jing simply asked: “General Dong, do you know who he is?”

Xiang Shaolong advanced to her side. Shaking his head, he answered: “Who is he?”

Behind him, Han Chuang cut in: “He is one of the family warriors of Prince Wu Chen. He came to Handan City the day before yesterday. He came here to deliver weapon-grade copper to Guo Zhong.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by a wave of realization. He suppressed his pity and asked in a deep voice: “Has he revealed anything?” His heart could not stop thumping. If this guy refuses to say anything, it is the same as not catching him.

Empress Jing let slips: “General Dong is right. Prince Wu Chen the idiot does not know what is good for him. He has conspired with Tian Dan to revolt.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed with relief and thanked his lucky stars. Han Chuang started: “In the beginning, he is tight-lipped. We called his bluff that Prince Wu Chen was sighted in the Qi army camp that he starts to reveal everything.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling relieved when he became anxious again. He frowned: “Wouldn’t this put them on the alert? He must people who are helping him.” Empress Jing’s voice softened as she turned around and look at him. With her eyes full of gratitude, she said: “Relax. We will put on an act that he chickened out and dare

not participate in the rebellion and has escaped in secret. Dong Kuang! What should I do next?”

Han Chuang suggested: “Sister and General Dong can return to the inner hall first. Leave this man to me.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is going to kill him to shut his mouth. Sighing, he escorted Empress Jing into the inner hall.

Arriving at the room where they last met; the personal guards stayed outside and even closed the door.

Empress Jing’s expression is cold like ice. She stood like a statue in the centre of the room. Xiang Shaolong snaked to her back and stuck his body onto hers. He reached out with his strong hand and held onto her abdomen tightly.

Empress Jing sighed and her icy demeanour begin to thaw. She leaned into his embrace and faintly asked: “Dong Kuang! Will you deceive me?”

Xiang Shaolong can understand her position. Her two lovers, Prince Xinling and Zhao Mu, have both deceived her, causing her to lose confidence in herself.

Zhao Mu is actually ignorant about Prince Wu Chen. Under such circumstances, how could Empress Jing tell the difference? She could only believe Xiang Shaolong’s lie.

Empress Jing displayed her weak feminine side and cooed: “Kiss me!”

Xiang Shaolong will not be shy about such matters. After a hot kiss, Empress Jing resumed her usual resolute self and withdrew from his embrace. Pulling him to sit down at a corner, she asked in a deep voice: “How do they plan to deal with us Mother and Son? Should we report this to His Majesty?”

After a short thinking session, Xiang Shaolong managed to arrange all the complicated issues into a single train of thought. He shook his head: “If you want to tell him, it should be done before the torture of Prince Wu Chen’s man. Moreover, there is no difference whether you tell him or not. If word gets to Zhao Mu, there will only be disadvantages and no benefits. The most pressing thing is to understand Tian Dan and Zhao Mu’s plot. We must predict when they will act. After they make their move, we will react and wipe out the rebels in one shot.”

Empress Jing lowered her head and shyly mentioned: “From your tone, you seemed to be aware of my relationship with Zhao Mu.”

Xiang Shaolong reached and held onto her clothes, gently coaxing: “Do not think too much. Empress Jing must act like everything is normal and continue to work with Zhao Mu. Leave the other problems to me.”

Empress Jing was worried: “Are you confident of handling Tian Dan? I have yet to see a man more devious than him. If I am Tian Dan, you will be the one I wish to kill first.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Now, I can feel your true concern for me.”

Empress Jing’s face reddened slightly. Shooting him a look, she stood up saying: “I will contact you via Ji Guang. He is not linked to Zhao Mu or Guo Kai and pledges his loyalty to the Crown Prince. He is definitely reliable.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that she cannot stay for too long and he himself needed a break too. He advised: “I’ll make a move first. If Zhao Mu has any news, no matter how insignificant it is, please drop me a note.”

Empress Jing threw herself into his arms and softly asked: “Do you want to check out the loyalty letter name list? I may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse. After all, I am from the royal family and Zhao Mu will not dare to offend me.”

Xiang Shaolong gave her a light hug and kiss: “Then I will have more confidence. Do you trust me?”

Empress Jing nodded her head.

Pleased, Xiang Shaolong left. Having her on his side is truly a deciding factor in this battle.

Before he could return to the Command Centre, he was detained by Pu Bu. With him are ten over warriors of the Marquis’s

residence. They only winked at each other before he went on to meet Zhao Mu.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that Tian Dan and Zhao Mu will act within these few days. As a result, he is also busy arranging his countermeasures. He is unsure of Zhao Mu's confidence in himself. Scanning around, he did notice Yan Ping's followers within the residence. They are easily identified as they all dress in hemp clothing and are bare-footed.

If he had not be promoted to become the City Commander, or become the confidante of Xiaocheng, or Empress Jing's lover, based on his own abilities, he will hardly be Zhao Mu's match. He can only thank his good fortune.

Zhao Mu personally came to meet him and led him into the secret chamber. He is cheerful and full of colour. He congratulated: "Xiaocheng has issued an imperial decree that he has given the other half of the army seal to you. You have complete authority over the army now and you are tasked to improve the city defences."

Xiang Shaolong modestly said: "It is due to Marquis's good fortune that I do not lead a disgraceful life."

Zhao Mu ordered: "We mustn't delay. Li Mu will arrive in a few days. We must achieve control first or we will lose this golden opportunity."

Xiang Shaolong agreed: "As you instruct."

The corner of Zhao Mu's mouth curled in a cold smile as he simply said: "Guo Kai and Cheng Xu have been scrutinizing your every move in secret, hoping to find a weak spot ..."

Xiang Shaolong purposely state: "Why not I deal with them. I will make it a clean job with no witnesses."

Zhao Mu disagreed; "I have more important duties for you. I still have misgivings about Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong was aghast: "Marquis is not thinking of opening the city gates for the Qi army to assist the rebellion?!"

Zhao Mu clarified: "Once the rebellion is over, Tian Dan wants me to cede Wu Chen, Guan Jin, Wu Sui, Wu Heng, Chu Zhou and Fu Liu to him. These are our six provinces east of the river. How can these terms be accepted? Therefore, I have decided to act alone. With your input, I can still succeed without Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong could not tell if he is lying or telling the truth. He frowned: "After discounting the old, weak and handicapped soldiers, there are only about ten thousand soldiers in the City guards. Not everyone is willing to rebel with us. How can we handle Cheng Xu's palace guards?"

Zhao Mu ordered: "There are many ways to kill Xiaocheng. You can leave this to me. I want you to use your new authority to focus your troops on the movements of the Qi army. I do not trust anyone else. Long Shan (Teng Yi) and yourself must see to this

personally.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed in secret. He figured out that Zhao Mu is still suspicious of him and is only making use of him for the time being. He nodded: “I will follow your orders. If I leave the city, it may arouse suspicions. Who will the City Guards depend on for their orders?”

Zhao Mu laughed: “I have the perfect excuse. I will get a fake Xiang Shaolong to make an appearance nearby. You will have the best excuse to leave and pursue him. It is only for one night. By morning, Xiaocheng will be in heaven.”

He continued: “Regarding the city guards, you can hand them over to Zhao Ming Xiong. He is with Zhao Ya and Li Mu and is friendly with Guo Kai and Cheng Xu. With the both of you away, he will naturally take over your duties. No one will be suspect anything”

Xiang Shaolong admires his handiwork. If he did not know that Zhao Ming Xiong is a traitor or that the Qi army is digging a tunnel, he may really fall into Zhao Mu’s trap.

From all this, Zhao Mu must have been uneasy about himself. It could also be due to his character that arouses misgivings. This traitor is only using him all the time.

Zhao Mu lowered his voice and sniggered: “If something happens to Xiaocheng and you are not around, you will not be suspected of having a part to play in his death.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “You are confident of controlling Empress Jing?”

Zhao Mu nodded in appreciation: “Your thinking is very thorough. For her own sake, Empress Jing must cooperate with me. She will personally poison Xiaocheng while I kill Guo Kai and Cheng Xu. We will replace them with our own men and no one will dare to go against us.”

The sound of knocking was heard.

Zhao Mu was annoyed: “Who dares to disturb me at such an hour!”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “It must something urgent.” And went to open the door.

An attendant frantically came to Zhao Mu’s side and whispered a few words. The traitor was taken by surprise and stood up commanding: “Follow my instructions to the letter. General Dong, please return first!”

As Xiang Shaolong left the Marquis’s residence, he is very puzzled. What is the event that could cause Zhao Mu to react personally and immediately?

Book 10 Chapter 9 – Eloquence

Upon his arrival at the Command Centre, Xiang Shaolong's stomach is rumbling. He recollected that he hasn't had any dinner yet. He notified Teng Yi to get someone to cook a meal for him.

Instead, Teng Yi pulled him back to the main gate advising: "Third Brother, please suffer in hunger for a while longer. Your wives have sent word on more than one occasion for you to go home for dinner. From now till tomorrow night, you better be careful of what you put in your mouth. If you died from Zhao Mu's poison, it will be a great injustice! I have got men to monitor our food and drink and place some fish in the well to test if the water is pure. It is better to be safe than sorry."

Xiang Shaolong was astounded by his advice and nodded in agreement. He took the opportunity to ask: "Any news from Little Jun?"

Teng Yi praised: "There is no better spy than him. Within four hours, he has located the tunnel. It runs from Zhao Ming Xiong's camp all the way to the North City Wall. It is about a hundred metres long. Both sides are ready to be used. They are now finishing the tunnel by reinforcing it with wooden panels and pillars. It should be put to use tomorrow night."

They arrived at the assembly ground and their horses were brought to them.

Riding forward, they were escorted by nearly five hundred

soldiers, putting on an impressive display.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that only ten over escorts are their own elite troops while the rest are ordinary Zhao soldiers. He is uncomfortable and enquired: “Where did these men come from?”

Teng Yi smiled: “I have sent our brothers to the various strategic locations to strengthen the power of the city defences. These men are from different departments and I have avoided using those who are linked to Zhao Ming Xiong. The background checks have been carried out and they are loyal to us. Handan City is full of hidden dangers and it is better to strengthen ourselves.”

Xiang Shaolong updated Teng Yi about Zhao Mu in a low voice. Teng Yi assessed: “With such precise intelligence, it will be easier to deal with Zhao Mu and Tian Dan. The challenge is how to kill Tian Dan, capture Zhao Mu and escape back to Xianyang.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Frankly, I don’t think I can accomplish both of them. Tian Dan will never take part personally. Xiaocheng that muddle-headed king has cowered at the last moment, ordering me not to touch Li Yuan and Tian Dan. We need his cooperation for tomorrow’s night operations. If we have the same strength as the enemy, we will be in trouble.” Teng Yi nodded in agreement: “I realize your difficult position. Thank heavens we still have one night’s time to go through our plans. Little Jun is monitoring their situation. If there are any changes, we can react in the shortest time. I have investigated the surroundings. The North Wall is the only entrance to the tunnel. If the enemy is entering the city via the tunnel, only three or four thousand can enter no matter how quickly they move within those hours. If we can prevent Zhao Mu

from meeting the Qi people, I have confidence of annihilating them.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “If not for your input, I will be busy like hell!”

As they spoke, they eventually reached home.

Stepping into the inner hall, he saw Zhao Ya and Ji Yanran were present and are chatting with Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi.

The girls saw him entering and all eyes were fixated on him.

Zhao Zhi asked: “Where is Second Brother?”

Xiang Shaolong sat between Zhao Ya and Ji Yanran, answering: “He went off to deploy our men to defend our residence. This is to prevent wild bees and romantic butterflies from coming in to pick these beautiful flowers.”

Everyone is amused by his refreshing talk on the bees and butterflies and could not help laughing. The stress and depressing mood is gone immediately.

Xiang Shaolong looked over to Ji Yanran: “Yanran is aware?”

Ji Yanran’s jade-liked face turn cold as she promised: “If Lord Longyang is brave enough to follow me, I will kill him at once.”

Shan Rou asked: “Do you want to steal the loyalty letters again?”

Zhao Ya implored: “Have you verified Prince Wu Chen’s rebellion? Does that woman believe you?”

As the three girls grilled him incessantly, he can only update them on all the latest developments. After he finished, they were all confused by the complicated and overlapping issues.

Xiang Shaolong continued: “Ya’er must head to Daliang for sure. Lord Longyang has promised to accompany her so Yanran only needs to leave after they have set off and Lord Longyang will be unable to trail you.”

Zhao Ya giggled: “I told Yanran to rest easy. You are not the City Commander for nothing. I am sure that Lord Longyang will invite you to keep an eye on Ji Yanran and capture Xiang Shaolong on his behalf.” She bowled over in laughter.

Xiang Shaolong is bewildered: “Why are you so cheerful?”

Zhao Ya exclaimed: “You are winning the battle with Zhao Mu and Tian Dan, why shouldn’t I be happy for you! Moreover, I have a nice bodyguard going to Daliang with me!”

Xiang Shaolong faced Shan Rou in alarm while Shan Rou hurriedly pointed at her sister clarifying: “Not me! It’s Zhi Zhi!”

Zhao Mu happily explained: “Sister Ya has to go to Daliang alone so I volunteered to keep her company.”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “That’s very nice of you. Initially, I had wanted you to leave with Mister Zou”

Facing Yanran again, he asked: “Does Li Yuan have any concern regarding your return to Daliang?”

Full of disdain, Ji Yanran chided: “Who is he to hinder my way? All he can say are the same old stuff. I am sick of his ranting!”

Xiang Shaolong informed: “We rather erred on the side of caution. I will increase the defences of Ji Yanran’s residence. Yanran must instruct your men to be extra cautious. Big Brother Wu Zhuo will escort you personally. Yanran will be a beautiful soldier and slip back to Handan City. I have an important task for you!”

Ji Yanran twinkled with smiles as she teased: “”What task? I am eager to know!”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “It is to join Shan Rou and myself in bed. Aiyah!”

Shan Rou had kicked him below the table.

Zhao Ya sighed: “I am so jealous.”

This is the first time Ji Yanran has been teased in front of so many people. Her face turned fire-red and her eyes shot daggers at him but she is secretly joyful.

Shan Rou pointed at him in annoyance: “Who is sleeping with you? Hugging a pillow is better than hugging you!” She continues to giggle and her charm was overwhelming.

Teng Yi came in and reported: “The keeper of the inner palace Ji Guang is here to look for you.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken. In that moment, he realised what caused Zhao Mu to react in such a frantic manner. It is Empress Jing.

In front of Ji Guang, Xiang Shaolong opened the wooden container that is sealed with wax. He retrieve a secret document that is written beautifully but is unsigned. There are over twenty names on the document and even states their official position.

The first name is naturally City Commander Dong Kuang, followed by Zhao Ming Xiong. The third name was a stunner as it is Zhao Ling, Cheng Xu’s assistant general whom Ji Guang just mentioned this morning.

Xiang Shaolong read the list in one go and passed it to Teng Yi. Looking at Ji Guang, he checked: “How is the security of the palace?”

Ji Guang replied: “Since the burglary, arson and murder by Prince Xinling’s men, the King has held onto the palace guards army seal himself. Cheng Xu is only the person who passes on the orders. Any deployment of ten men and above must go through the King. The eighteen thousand palace guards are camped inside and outside the palace awaiting their orders to protect the palace in shifts. Defence shouldn’t be a problem.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that Prince Xinling has indirectly caused more problems for Zhao Mu, causing him to borrow the strength of the Qi army. He continued to ask: “What about His Majesty’s personal safety?”

Ji Guang answered: “You can put your mind at ease. The King has reorganized his personal escorts. Most of them are the family warriors of the royal family and there is no doubt about their loyalty. Some areas of the palace have been restricted to a kill-zone. Whoever that intrudes will be killed without questions asked. His food and drink is also protected. The kitchen well is heavily guarded at all times.”

Ji Guang stared at the name list and state: “Empress Jing has ordered that this name list must be destroyed before our very eyes. Not a single shred must be left behind.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised Empress Jing’s thorough thinking. He gave the list a second look before throwing it into the fireplace and burning it.

As Ji Guang saw the name list burning, he sincerely offered: “I am aware of the dangerous period we are going through. If you have any duties that require my help, I am willing to do my best.”

Xiang Shaolong glanced over to Teng Yi. Teng Yi caught his meaning and nodded: “I can manage the City guards. Regarding the palace guards, we have to bother General Dong to speak to the King personally.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up and smiled at Ji Guang: “Of course we will need your assistance as the keeper of the inner palace. Let us enter the palace and seek an audience with the King. We can chat more on the road!”

Xiaocheng got word that Xiang Shaolong is coming and hurriedly receive him in the hall behind the sleeping chambers. He anxiously asked: “Do you bring good news?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “It is not only good news, it is the best news. I have full confidence in routing all the traitors.”

Xiaocheng happily cried: “Have you stolen the loyalty letters?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “The King has great foresight. If I can bring the loyalty letters here, Zhao Mu will know that the secret has been leaked.”

Xiaocheng is in high spirits and did not take offence. He laughed: “I am so happy I forgot.” He then frowned: “Didn’t you mentioned

that his security is very tight and that there is no way to burgle his residence? How did you get hold of the loyalty letters?”

Xiang Shaolong has a story ready. He explained how he used the waterway to enter the Marquis residence. He added: “I manage to contact some people in Zhao Mu’s residence who are loyal to His Majesty. They told me Zhao Mu is always hanging around this particular room so I guessed that is where the loyalty letters have been hidden. Blessed by His Majesty’s good fortune, I found the loyalty letters. After reading most of them, I was interrupted by the patrols and have to leave.”

Xiaocheng frowned: “What hasn’t this traitor made his move?”

Xiang Shaolong was laughing to himself. If he had acted earlier, he will not be tricked by me. He officially stated: “Zhao Mu is well-prepared right now. If we grab him just like that, there will be serious injuries and deaths on both sides. The best strategy is to wait for him to strike. When he begins his rebellion, we will ambush him and minimise our losses.” Xiaocheng considered his statement and nodded: “What General said is reasonable. And who are the traitors?”

Xiang Shaolong retrieve a name list from his bosom. It is a duplicate list that was written by Teng Yi before he left. He kneeled down and present it to Xiaocheng. Xiaocheng anxiously opened the list for a look and his face colour changed immediately. “What?” he groaned: “Zhao Ming Xiong is also with Zhao Mu? He is one of my potential candidates for City Commander. Is General Dong mistaken?”

Xiang Shaolong confidently said: “I am similarly concerned that the name list is a fake to throw us off the trail. Thus, I rummaged his most prized possessions to be sure. In the process, I discovered that he has dug a tunnel underneath the north command centre which leads outside the north city wall. This matter can be verified. His Majesty can send your men to follow my men to the perimeters of the tunnel. Inserting copper pipes into the ground, one can hear the sounds coming from the tunnel. Please issue the order now.”

Xiaocheng eyed him with suspicion before speaking: “It is not that I do not trust you. This matter is of great complications. If you can prove your words, I will be relieved. This matter must be executed with utmost care and not alert our enemies.”

Finishing, he waved two of his personal escorts over. Xiang Shaolong led them outside the palace and got a waiting Wu Guo to bring them to the tunnel grounds.

When he came back, Xiaocheng has finished reading the name list and was letting out a long sigh: “This name list should be correct. Except for Zhao Ming Xiong and Zhao Ling, the rest of them are people that I have already suspected to have links to Zhao Mu. General Dong has accomplished a noteworthy mission. I will keep this in mind.”

His ferocious eyes glittered as he commanded: “The tunnel is definitely dug for the sake of the Qi army. General Dong, please seal it at once. Next, in the fastest and most quiet fashion, round up all the traitors and lay siege to the Marquis Residence. When Li Mu is back, he shall lead the attack on Zhao Mu and everything

will come to an end.”

Xiang Shaolong could guess this coming from Xiaocheng. He lowered his voice: “Your Majesty, there is another important news. To gain my trust, Zhao Mu has revealed to me that he is conspiring to Prince Wu Chen. Right now, Prince Wu Chen is at the Qi army camps.”

Xiaocheng’s countenance changed: “What?!”

Xiang Shaolong continued: “Now I realise why Zhao Mu wants to rebel, as soon as he.... Hei! That Prince Wu Chen will be able to succeed the throne and the state of Qi will gain our Zhao territories east of the river.”

Xiaocheng impatiently interrupted him: “I understand. What brilliant counter measure do you have?”

Using his most solid and confident tone, Xiang Shaolong proposed: “If we acted first against the rebels, it is hard to determine victory. The biggest problem is we cannot attack them at this point in time. If someone opens the City gates for the Qi army, we can still win but it will be at the expense of the citizens. We have to protect the palace and lay siege to the Marquis Residence at the same time. It will be difficult to fight on so many fronts and is unfavourable to us. If we allow the Qi army to come in from the tunnel instead, I have a brilliant trap waiting for them.”

He added in a deep voice: “While Tian Dan is in the palace, we

should kill him once and for all!”

Xiaocheng slowly said: “This news came too late. Tian Dan made an excuse to inspect his camp and has left Handan City in the evening.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “How come I have no idea at all?”

Xiaocheng bitterly laughed: “He left by the North Gate and Zhao Ming Xiong naturally will not inform you!”

Suddenly, the two spies of Xiaocheng came back and present their findings to him.

Xiaocheng is even more trusting of Xiang Shaolong. After another hour of discussion did he finally leave the palace.

As he stepped out of the palace, he knows that the key to victory is in his hands. No matter how formidable Tian Dan, Zhao Mu or Li Yuan are, they cannot escape from his grasp.

Book 10 Chapter 10 – Detailed Arrangements

Back at the Command Centre, Teng Yi was nowhere to be found. Instead, Lord Longyang was waiting for him. Both of them are on good terms already so there was no need for the usual courtesies. After dispensing his men, Lord Longyang commented: “I am relieved that my King has sent an army of five thousand soldiers, led by my good friend General Wei Bai Nian. They will arrive at Fan Wu tonight at meet up with us tomorrow. We will no longer be afraid of Tian Dan or Li Yuan’s mischief.”

Xiang Shaolong began: “I have a favour to ask of Lord.”

Lord Longyang happily agreed: “Brother Dong please speak your mind. I will do my best to help you.”

Xiang Shaolong requested: “Please take good care of Lady Ya and make sure she can return safely.”

Lord Longyang was taken aback and cried: “Brother Dong, you are really in love with her!”

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: “I am not sure too but after a night of passion, she promised to be loyal to me. Thus, I do not want her to come to any harm.”

Lord Longyang was incensed as he shot an eye at him before faintly sighing with helplessness: “Rest assured Brother Dong!

Because you asked, I will guarantee her safety and well-being.”

He continues to sigh: “How is Brother Dong going to handle Tian Dan, Li Yuan and Zhao Mu?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Men can plan but Heaven can interfere. I will do my best.”

Lord Longyang frowned deeply and unhappily said: “I know I cannot persuade General to abandon Handan City. However, do not forget my invitation. If you can succeed, please escape to Wei. I will inform the border guards to receive you.”

Xiang Shaolong is moved and gave his thanks.

This beautiful man changed topic: “Does Brother Dong wants to score a big merit? From my calculations, Talented Lady Ji is pretending to return to Wei. In reality, she is rendezvousing with Xiang Shaolong. I cannot even protect myself and have to escort Lady Ya back to Daliang. So I simply cannot afford any energy or time to keep my eye on her.”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave and checked: “Does Lord know this man called Yan Ping?”

Lord Longyang exclaimed: “You must be talking about Mohist Juzi Yan Ping! Not only do I know him, we are well-acquainted. This man is good at military warfare and is a rare talent. Too bad he is too arrogant and difficult to get along with.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong can sense that Lord Longyang has sought to recruit Yan Ping as well. This shows that Wei do harbour ambitions against Zhao. He smiled: “Why don’t you tell Yan Ping about Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran. This man hates Xiang Shaolong deeply and will pursue him at all costs. I can also focus on my original work.”

Lord Longyang smiled: “Not only can you can focus on your work, this will lower Zhao Mu’s prowess at the same time!”

Exposed by him, Xiang Shaolong awkwardly laughed: “It is really hard to hide anything from you!”

Lord Longyang cheerfully said: “I’ll see to it and even exaggerated my words to lend you this helping hand. Ai! After this separation, I wonder if I’ll ever see you again.”

Xiang Shaolong gracefully mentioned: “Nobody will know what will happen tomorrow. Life is only a few decades long. As long as we have shared a life and death experience together, who cares about what the future holds.”

Delighted, Lord Longyang stood up grinning: “Brother Dong is one in a million and so is your thinking.”

Xiang Shaolong personally sent him to the door. As he is turning back, Zhao Ba had come to see him.

After a few words of courtesy, Zhao Ba revealed: “The King has ordered me to see you and do whatever I can to help.”

Xiang Shaolong is glad that Xiaocheng is doing his best to cooperate with him and execute his plan. After some talks, he praised Zhao Ba to the skies. While Zhao Ba is feeling high and mighty, he warned: “Our conversation must remain top secret! Headmaster must not let a third party know, especially Guo Zhong. Headmaster should understand his connection to Li Yuan!”

Zhao Ba vehemently cursed: “Old Guo is getting muddle-headed, desiring to be the father-in-law of that cold blooded thief Li Yuan. I am so pissed that I haven’t seen him for a while. General can put your mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong start off: “Today, we require Headmaster’s help as Zhao Mu has secretly conspired with Tian Dan and Li Yuan against our King.”

Zhao Ba’s face changed colour as he uttered: “What! Tian Dan and Li Yuan are so daring!?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “The King has forbid me to give you all the details. Can I enquire as to how many top fighters do you have at the Martial School and whose loyalty is beyond question?”

Zhao Ba puffed his chest: “At least five or six hundred elite fighters. Are we attacking the Marquis Residence?”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “It depends. Can headmaster find an excuse like an (army field) exercise? Using this cover, secretly assemble your men at Lady Ya’s residence. Once you enter, prevent anyone from leaving so that your location will not be leaked out.”

Zhao Ba is a man who loves fighting and action. He happily consented and left after further discussion.

It is almost midnight. Just as Xiang Shaolong was deciding to go home and sleep or not, Teng Yi came back. In a relaxed mood, he updated: “Lucky we had that name list or we will be in peril. Major Gan Zhu and Major Li Ming who are guarding the South gate are Zhao Mu’s spies as well. Zhao Ming Xiong has deployed them there with ulterior motives.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered these two names but had no idea they were in charge of the South gate. Thinking what a close shave they had, he analyzed: “Zhao Mu is a top schemer. First, he let Tian Dan’s army come in from the tunnel and create chaos. Then, he will open up both the North and South gates for the entire army to enter Handan City. Their attack is focused and well-planned. Even with the entire Zhao population attacking them, it is of little use. This is truly a top battle strategy.”

Teng Yi laughed: “A pity he is not your match. Otherwise, the loyalty letters will not have appeared.” Patting his shoulder, he added: “Third Brother should return first. Leave this to me. Little Jun and his men are actively spying on the Qi army. You can relax and keep your wives company.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “This upcoming battle, we will use

our elite brothers exclusively for Zhao Mu. Does Second Brother have any method of assembling a force of elite City guards and plant them in strategic locations inside the city. I want them to limit the power of the Qi forces.”

Teng Yi replied: “All thanks to your Army Seal. Earlier, I was discussing the deployment with Zhao Ming Xiong. He tried to trick me with various recommendations. I allowed myself to be tricked and accept all his suggestions. Now that he has deployed all those loyal to him at the north and south gate, I am free to choose my elite city guards from the remaining forces. In fact, I have assembled an elite force of two thousand city guards. The rest of the old, weak or handicapped soldiers will be sent to spy on the Qi army as Zhao Mu requested. Better to let them leave than to hamper our progress in Handan City.”

Catching each other’s eyes, they held their bellies and filled the room with laughter.

At home, Ji Yanran had led the Tian sisters away while Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi had gone back to her residence. Barely awake, Shan Rou is still waiting for his return. She roared: “Why are you back so late! I have something to say to you!”

Due to her lack of sleep, Shan Rou is slightly not in full control of herself.

Xiang Shaolong carried her with both hands into his bedroom.

Before he could step over the door ledge, Shan Rou displayed her

prowess and bit him on the shoulder.

Xiang Shaolong bore with the pain and threw her onto his bed.

Shan Rou proudly giggled and flipped to one side. She comfortably lay down and closed both her eyes. She seems to be offering herself for his pleasure.

Xiang Shaolong is in need of a beauty to soothe his tense nerves. Removing his shoes, he climbed onto Shan Rou.

She is strangely cooperative and passionate, letting Xiang Shaolong enjoy her tenderness.

After the stormy affair, they hug each other to sleep.

Shan Rou whispered: "This is our last night together. In the future, you need not tolerate my tantrums."

An exhausted Xiang Shaolong was almost asleep but was fully awoken after hearing these words. He sighed: "So you are not joking and is leaving me for good."

Shan Rou sighed: "I am in a dilemma too. From what I see, Tian Dan will survive this episode..."

Xiang Shaolong butt in: "If you risk your life to assassinate him again, I will be worried."

Shan Rou intimately cooed: “I will be extra cautious and will not die in vain. If I fail, I will commit suicide. Who is afraid of death?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that her mind is made up. He gently advised: “Do not pressure yourself too much. If you know you cannot succeed, look for me in Xianyang. Don’t you wish to see Shan Lan?”

Shan Rou kissed him: “Got it, you long-winded man! Aren’t you going to make love with me one more time?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “The Queen has ordered. No matter how difficult it is, your servant will oblige.”

Before the sun is up, Xiang Shaolong was roused by Shan Rou. “Get up quickly! As the City Commander, how can you be so lazy?” she scolded.

Today is her ‘D-Day’ so she is highly excited. Under her teasing, he forced himself to get out of bed.

Shan Rou disguised as his escort and seriously state: “Today, I will break all traditions and listen to your every command obediently. However, I must be at your side all the time.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled getting Lord Longyang to deceive Yan Ping. He dared not be complacent and hurriedly washed up and got dressed. In between bites, he led Wu Guo and his entourage back to

the Command Centre.

It was daybreak when he arrived at the Command Centre. Teng Yi is busy like a bee but he is still as energetic and fresh. Xiang Shaolong is amazed at this Ironman.

Teng Yi noticed how serious Shan Rou looked and teased her. He then proceeds to report to Xiang Shaolong about last night's deployment: "I have assembled three thousand men internally and externally. They will be the main force against the enemy. I have analyzed the attacking and retreating routes of the enemy and I guarantee that the ambush will be successful and we will make a killing. Zhao Ba's men are an added advantage as the enemy will never think that we will have this bonus."

Xiang Shaolong added: "At that time, Xiaocheng will transfer another five thousand elite palace guards under our command. With this, we will have over ten thousand elite troops which can mop up the rebels. Divide the remaining City guards into two groups. Group A will be responsible for guarding the city and patrolling the streets. Group B will switch from monitoring the Qi army to guarding Handan City's borders. Let Tian Dan know that we are ready and not make any reckless attacks."

Shan Rou could not help but ask: "How are we going to escape?"

Xiang Shaolong teased her: "Aren't you a simple and obedient soldier? Your general is talking and who are you to interrupt?"

Shan Rou was annoyed and pouted, staring hardly at Wu Guo

who is trying to hold his laughter at the side. ‘I’ll get even with you later!’ her body language displayed.

As relax as possible, Teng Yi held his laughter and replied: “It couldn’t be easier. During the attack on Zhao Mu’s residence, all of us died in the fight. Wouldn’t that be a good closure?”

Shan Rou and Wu Guo were bowled over and did not know what to say.

Xiang Shaolong assessed: “Today’s first task is to contact Pu Bu. Without his intelligence reports, there are many things we cannot do.”

Teng Yi agreed and Xiang Shaolong continued to speak about Yan Ping.

Teng Yi joked: “He did not learn his lesson the first time round. We will annihilate him and take revenge for Mister Yuan Zong.”

After a detailed discussion, Xiang Shaolong led Shan Rou to the palace to send of Lord Longyang and Zhao Ya.

Palace security is extremely tight. Ji Guang noticed them and welcomed: “The King, Empress Jing, Lord Longyang, Princess Ya, Miss Zhi and Master Guo are having breakfast. The King asked me to send you to see him immediately if you should show up.”

Xiang Shaolong winked at Shan Rou and Wu Guo, asking them to

wait for him outside the palace. With Ji Guang's company, he entered the palace.

In a low voice, Ji Guang warned; "General Cheng Xu knows that there is something between the King and you. He appears to be very upset. You have to be careful when you see him."

Xiang Shaolong realised that it is erroneous to neglect him and it may cause some trouble.

Although this kid is snobbish, he is not evil. As he thought about it, Cheng Xu appeared at the end of a long corridor under the escort of some palace guards.

Ji Guang gave a dry cough and stop speaking.

Xiang Shaolong waved to Cheng Xu from afar and Cheng Xu reluctantly returned the gesture. When they are nearly facing each other, Xiang Shaolong winked at Ji Guang before approaching the uncertain Cheng Xu: "General Cheng, can I have a private word with you?"

Cheng Xu anxiously nodded in consent and they left the corridor and entered the garden.

Xiang Shaolong asked in a low voice: "The traitors are rebelling. What plans does General Cheng have?"

Cheng Xu coldly retorted: "General Dong is handling this well.

What do I have to worry about?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “General Cheng is too serious. I have a suggestion. If we work together and resolve this danger, it will only be beneficial to both of us either personally or officially. What does General Cheng think?”

Cheng Xu appears to be tempted but after a reality check, he bitterly laughed: “Although I am the leader of the palace guards, I have no real authority. Everything has to be agreed by the King. I think General Dong had better speak directly to the King instead.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “The King cannot wear his armour and fight the war personally. In the end, General Cheng is still required to manage the palace guards. Let me speak to the King first and discuss with you again.”

He added after a sigh: “I, Dong Horse Fanatic, is not used to an official position. After this episode, I will quit my post as City Commander and focus on horse-breeding. If General Cheng can score some merit later, you will be the new City Commander.”

He stretched his hand towards a disbelieving Cheng Xu: “If I do not honour my words, may I die a horrible death and bring shame to my ancestors.”

Recalling the days when they went through thick and thin, his eyes became shining with sincerity.

(Note: Cheng Xu is with Xiang Shaolong on his trip to Daliang to steal the Lu Gong Secret Manual)

Cheng Xu was moved and reached out with a great force, grabbing Xiang Shaolong's hand tightly. He embarrassedly confessed: "General Dong is more generous than I can imagine, I..."

Xiang Shaolong held his hand for a while before letting go. Patting his shoulder, he returned to Ji Guang and waved with confidence.

Cheng Xu continued to daze in the sun, amazed that there are such people who love animals more than power. No wonder he is called Horse Fanatic.

Reaching the inner palace, breakfast is over. Xiaocheng and Empress Jing are accompanying Lord Longyang towards a large group of men on horseback.

Xiang Shaolong caught up to them. Zhao Ya, Zhao Zhi and Empress Jing stared at him with different expressions.

Empress Jing is full of love and warmth while the two other ladies are full of sadness at the thought of separation.

Xiang Shaolong knew that it is not a good time to talk in confidence. He appeared in front of Xiaocheng and Longyang, bowing deeply and bade farewell to Lord Longyang.

The sadness in Lord Longyang's is not lesser than the two girls. Standing beside Xiaocheng, Guo Kai sniggered: "If General Dong visits Daliang, he will be Lord's most esteemed guest."

Xiaocheng appears to be ignorant about their relationship and look over to Xiang Shaolong when he heard this.

Although he knows that he will not see Xiaocheng after tonight, Xiang Shaolong still feels uneasy under his stares.

After some fanfare, everyone board their carriages. His old friend, Zha Yuan, has been promoted to a captain of the palace guards. Leading five hundred palace guards, he is tasked to protect the convoy. When they leave the city, Xiang Shaolong will assign another group of city guards to protect them till they arrive in Wei. Halfway, they will meet up with the Wei army. As a result, safety shouldn't be an issue. Tian Dan and company will not stir up trouble and attack Lord Longyang at such a critical juncture.

While boarding, Lord Longyang chance upon a short moment of privacy and informed Xiang Shaolong: "Yan Ping has been tricked. When I told him that Talented Lady Ji refused to travel together, he left at once."

Xiang Shaolong dare not reply and bade his farewell to the two ladies. When he was about to leave, Xiaocheng summoned him into the library and Guo Kai was left out in the cold.

After the attendants have left, Xiaocheng revealed; "Prince Wu

Chen is really rebelling. I brought in Lady Li for questioning and she confessed that Prince Wu Chen came to Handan secretly a month ago. After a few days, he left. He must have been liaising with his spies.”

Xiang Shaolong has no idea who is Lady Li and guessed that she must be from the royal family. Because of her close ties with Prince Wu Chen, she was embroiled in the scandal.

Xiang Shaolong is glad that Xiaocheng has personally verified this matter. He remembered his promise to Cheng Xu and added: “Presently, spies will be watching every move you make. If there are any slips, they will be alerted at once. Due to these circumstances, General Cheng Xu becomes valuable as he is not under observation. If you can secretly bestow some military authority to him and get him to work closely with me, we can destroy the enemies’ plot together.”

Xiaocheng was surprised: “Are you sure he will not mess things up?”

Xiang Shaolong reassured: “At least he is not connected to Zhao Mu or else Zhao Mu will not get me to harm him. Zhao Mu wants Cheng Xu out of the way so that Zhao Ling can take over his position. Put your mind at ease, my King! General Cheng is a talented man. His last mistake is not made on the battlefield. Who knows, it may even be Zhao Mu who leaked the secret of the palace tunnels to Prince Xinling’s men so that you will remove Cheng Xu from his post.”

Xiaocheng pondered and agreed that it makes perfect sense.

Summoning Cheng Xu, he gave him fresh instructions and ordered him to work closely with Xiang Shaolong. If they succeed, huge rewards await them.

Cheng Xu was moved to tears. The three of them had a detailed meeting regarding tonight's counterattack after which Xiang Shaolong galloped non-stop to Liu Residence where Ji Yanran is staying.

Book 10 Chapter 11 – Attacking And Defending At The Same Time

Even before he could reach the Liu Residence, Xiang Shaolong and his men had a big surprise! Horse carriages were promptly lined up in front of the residence blockading the entire street. Any empty spaces were filled with Ji Yanran's well-wishers and common folks who there to witness the spectacle.

Upon his sighting, everyone began pointing at him and cheering: "That is Dong Horse Fanatic!" while others shouted: "That is a true hero."

Xiang Shaolong can only laugh bitterly and got down from his horse with the rest of his men. Shan Rou laid down her conditions first: "I am not waiting for you outside no matter what you say."

Xiang Shaolong cannot win her in an argument. Instructing Wu Guo to maintain order in the streets, he squeezed into residence with Shan Rou.

The servants of Liu Residence have been informed of his arrival. They welcomed Xiang Shaolong and led him into the inner chambers. The waiting Tian sisters saw him and their eyes shone with happiness. Leaping into his bosom, they wailed in tears.

As Xiang Shaolong was busy pacifying the two girls, like a magician, Ji Yanran managed to evade all the attention and slipped in. She angrily cursed: "I am bored to death!" Scrutinizing the escort soldier next to the three of them, she recognized Shan Rou.

Embarrassed. The Tian sisters left Xiang Shaolong's bosom with their eyes swollen with all the crying.

Shan Rou showed the gentle side of her, pulling the Tian sisters to a corner and continued to pacify them.

Xiang Shaolong joked: "How did you slip away?"

An annoyed Ji Yanran responded: "I got godfather (Zou Yan) to handle them. I am not interested in such activities."

She added in a low voice: "Han Chuang just notified me that Li Yuan is leading five hundred of his family warriors to escort me back to Wei. They are waiting for me outside the city wall. What should we do?"

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: "Relax! He is simply using this as an excuse to leave Handan to avoid any connections with tonight's event. After tonight, he will come back to check on the end result." He went on to share about Yan Ping.

An attendant came to report that it is time to set off.

Ji Yanran got her men to send the Tian sisters secretly into one of the horse carriage. Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo and hundreds of city guards were leading and protecting the convoy as they rode towards the east gate.

Before noon, the entourage has left the city and proceed east towards the State of Han. The number of city guards has been boosted to over a thousand.

Xiang Shaolong instructed Wu Guo on how to deal with Li Yuan before hiding with Shan Rou in the same carriage as the Tian sisters. Together, they traveled with Ji Yanran.

After traveling for half a mile, Li Yuan and his five hundred family warriors rushed over from the west gate where they had been waiting.

Ji Yanran commanded the entourage to stop. When Li Yuan reached her carriage side, she asked with discontent: "Why is Imperial Uncle chasing me?"

Li Yuan jumped down from his horse and went to her carriage window asking: "There are many bandits on these roads and Li Yuan cannot help but be worried for Miss. Therefore, I wish to personally send you to Wei. Ai! Aren't you going back to Wei? You seemed to be traveling in the wrong direction!"

Behind Ji Yanran's carriage, Xiang Shaolong peeped out from his carriage. Li Yuan has an incensed look on his face and must be thinking that Yanran is deceiving him.

Ji Yanran's sweet and gentle voice sounded from within the carriage: "Imperial Uncle is mistaken. Yanran is sending Mister Zou back to Han before going home to Wei. Imperial Uncle, please do not send us any further. Yanran is capable of taking care of

herself.”

Li Yuan coldly smiled: “Is Miss Ji really going home to Daliang?”

Ji Yanran’s voice turned cold and she hissed: “None of your business. Men!”

Wu Guo gave a loud reply and rode over to her carriage.

Ji Yanran calmly ordered: “Kill whoever that follows us!”

Li Yuan was ashen faced, exclaiming: “Miss!”

Wu Guo shouted his command and gestured with his hands. The carriage convoy continued to move forward while he led his men and detained Li Yuan with the family warriors.

Mad with anger, Li Yuan flew up his horse and swore: “Even if your King sees me, he has to show me some courtesy and respect. Who dares to block my way?!”

Wu Guo cannot be bothered with his antics and icily challenged: “Feel free to try your luck. But if you continue to follow us, do not blame my weapon for being merciless.”

Li Yuan is so incensed that his face is turning red. He could see that Wu Guo is very determined and his army is twice as big as his own. He has no confidence of winning. After Ji Yanran and the

carriages have gone far, Wu Guo yelled a new command and chased the entourage with his army, leaving Li Yuan and his men dazed at the same spot, watching the dust kicked up by the galloping horses.

Out of a sudden, Li Yuan knew that he has lost this top beauty forever.

Initially, there are grasslands on the two sides of the official road to Han. After an hour on the road, the grasslands are replaced by forests. Hugging the Tian sisters, Xiang Shaolong coaxed: “Be obedient and listen to Mister Zou on the road. Very soon, both of you will be back at Xianyang. From then on, we can live happily together!”

The two girls held their tears and nodded in consent.

As he spoke, the horse carriages began to slow down and came to a complete stop eventually.

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou got out of their carriage. Under Wu Guo’s cover, Ji Yanran is now disguised as an escort soldier and got out of her carriage as well.

Xiang Shaolong went over to Zou Yan’s side and wished: “Mister, please take care.”

Opening the curtains, Zou Yan laughed: “There is nothing under the sky that cannot be accomplished by you.”

The entourage started to move off again under the leadership of another elite brother. Another fifty elite brothers continue to protect the carriages back to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong has prepared all the necessary travel documents for them. Without needing to go through Han, they can easily cross the border between Zhao and Qin. As long as they avoid the military passes, they can return to Xianyang effortlessly.

Even in the 21st century, it is easy to enter a country illegally. In this age where the land is plentiful and the population is small, it is not worth mentioning how simple it can be for people to move around.

Under Wu Guo's command, the remaining army of one thousand city guards entered the thick forest and based themselves in various strategic points.

They had barely concealed themselves when Wu Zhou appeared and reported: "Third brother's guess is correct. Yan Ping was tricked when Yanran unexpectedly exited Handan City via the east gate. They are trying the best to rush here and should be arriving soon."

Ji Yanran laughed: "In their wildest dreams, they will never imagine that they will be attacked by the Zhao army with the consent of Xiaocheng."

Shan Rou asked: "Did Li Yuan return to Handan City?"

Wu Zhuo smiled: “He left for the Qi army camp but got ten over spies to continue to follow Yanran. I have killed all of them.”

Sounds of urgent hoof beats can be heard from the grasslands. Xiang Shaolong swore in a deep voice: “We will not hold back and kill every single one of them.”

Wu Zhuo reassured: “Relax! We have one thousand men against three hundred of them. Moreover, we have the element of surprise. They have no chance of surviving. Even if anyone manages to get away, they will still be killed if they go back to Handan City.”

“They’re here!” Shan Rou signaled.

Wu Zhuo left their company and gave fresh instructions.

Everyone prepared their strong bows and their sharp arrows. Hiding in the forest, they await Yan Ping and his Mohist followers.

Ji Yanran whispered into his ears with delight: “My torment is over. From today onwards, I will fight alongside hubby and share every joy and sorrow until our deaths.”

Xiang Shaolong has gained her true love and replied with sweet words. Grateful for her love, he did not hold back and kissed her pretty face.

With the sun high above them, the landscape shone like a scene from a movie.

A huge troop of riders came into their view, stirring up clouds of dust.

When all of them entered the ambush area, a horn sounded and a thousand arrows left their strong bows and shot out like rain towards the enemy. Men and horses alike began to tumble down and there was blood and flesh everywhere. In this first attack, over half of the enemies were felled from their horses.

After the second volley of arrows, there was nobody on horseback any more.

More than half of Yan Ping's men had been killed by now. Their forces were in a state of disarray and panic.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this is best time. Pulling out Bloodwave, he charged at the enemies. Shan Rou and Ji Yanran were like two tigresses on his left and right, killing whoever that is in their way.

A peaceful forest has transformed into a slaughterhouse.

The city guards have been specially trained by Teng Yi day and night. Every Zhao citizen admires a hero. Everyone is bravely using a shield to protect themselves and viciously attacking the enemy with lances and heavy swords. Although the Mohist warriors are

highly-skilled, they have lost their morale and most of them are injured. With the smaller numbers, how can they withstand their attacks?

Xiang Shaolong evaded a thrust of an enemy sword and flipped his wrist, chopping down on the attacker. He caught sight of Yan Ping under the protection of several of his followers. They were trying the best to retreat into the centre of the forest to escape from the City guards.

Energised by the thought of Yuan Zong's revenge, Xiang Shaolong signaled to the two girls and charged forward like a wild tiger, chopping down at the outermost man surrounding Yan Ping.

The man forcefully met his chop and was shaken by the strong arm strength behind Xiang Shaolong's sword. His entire arm went numb and he staggered to hold onto his sword. Shan Rou took this break to kill him with a strike of her long sword.

On the other side was Ji Yanran. Unlike her usual gentle self, Ji Yanran let out a shrill cry and advanced with her sword flashing with brilliance. Another two men were felled by her.

Xiang Shaolong broke the sword of another man and sent him off with a flying kick and turned to face Yan Ping.

Yan Ping roared: "Dong Kuang! What the hell is going on?!"

In this sentence, another three of Yan Ping's men fell down with

their clothes soaked with blood, showing the intensity of the fight.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Juzi does not know what is good for him. The King has ordered me to kill you for conspiring with Zhao Mu.”

Yan Ping defended himself from the two swords on his left and right. He then realised that he is the only one standing from his side. Fully surrounded on all sides, he knows that his time is up. He roared: “Dong Kuang! If you are a hero, kill me with your own sword in a duel!”

Xiang Shaolong agreed to his ploy and got his men to step back. Raising his sword, he promised: “Let me grant your death wish!” His sword flashing, he zoomed forward like a wild madman.

Yan Ping is exhausted and cannot handle his strong blows. Whenever their blades meet, he will step back to maintain his balance.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong stood completely still and his hands, Bloodwave is vibrating slightly. Everyone present can sense that he is at one with his sword and the forest is filled with his killing aura.

After all, Yan Ping is a master swordsman. Taking this chance to catch his breath, he advanced and swept over with his sword. The sharp whistling of the sword as it cuts through the air penetrates the ears of everyone.

Xiang Shaolong is aware of his swordplay and remains calm. He counter attacked with the third supreme killing skill of Mozi – Attacking and Defending at the same time.

In their last duel, Yan Ping lost out to this stroke.

It may be due to Yuan Zong's divine intervention. When Yan Ping saw this move, he felt somewhat familiar. His spirit is shaken and he seemed to have guessed that Dong Horse Fanatic is in fact Xiang Shaolong. When he was about to call out, a white flash of Xiang Shaolong's sword sped towards him, crushing him like a brick wall.

Yan Ping held his tongue and defended himself. Just as he barely deflected the blow, he felt great pain in his stomach. Xiang Shaolong has taken the opportunity to kneel him in the stomach.

Yan Ping steadied himself and did not retreat. Gritting his teeth, he attacked Xiang Shaolong without any reservations.

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh and deflected the blow. Dang! A loud noise was made when the weapons clashed and rang in everyone's ears.

Making use of this opening, Bloodwave shot forward like lightning and embedded itself in Yan Ping's chest.

Yan Ping's sword fell to the ground and he in shaking uncontrollably. He cannot believe his own eyes. Buried in his chest

is the enemy's sword and fresh blood is pouring out from his wound. He groaned: "You are..."

Xiang Shaolong could not afford to have him call out his real name. He replied in a low voice: "This is for Yuan Zong!"

He ferociously pulled out his long sword.

The forest is full of cheering and morale is sky high.

As Yan Ping fell down in front of him, Xiang Shaolong looked up to heaven and silently prayed: "Brother Yuan! If you can hear me, you can rest in peace now." In his heart, he is feeling ironic. He has completely uprooted the Mohist organization from Zhao. Will it really make Yuan Zong happy?

When Xiang Shaolong is back at the Command Centre, there is only an hour to sunset. Every street is peaceful and on the surface, one cannot sense the turbulent and rough undercurrents.

Everybody gathered in the quiet army study to listen to Teng Yi's latest update.

Teng Yi started with Pu Bu and has successfully communicated with him to act according to the grand plan. He added: "There are many redeployments among the city guards. I purposely messed things up but actually, only Zhao Ming Xiong's army is in a mess. Our men have already been assembled at the strategic locations. I have also purposely situated huge numbers of our soldiers outside

the city. Besides myself, there is no one who knows what is going on.”

Ji Yanran laughed: “With Second Brother in charge, everyone can put their mind at ease.”

Teng Yi described: “When the sky is dark, we will take immediate action and capture all the rebel leaders. Using Third Brother’s appearance as an excuse, we will impose a city-wide curfew so as to avoid harming any innocent citizens.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “When am I supposed to appear?”

Everyone was tickled and had a good laugh.

Teng Yi laughed: “Jing Jun has a clear picture of the North tunnel. Zhao Ming Xiong has removed all the city guards at the tunnel exit and replaced them with his personal escort guards. He is sitting alone in the North Command Centre. Even if we killed him, cooked him and finished eating him, none of his men will have the slightest idea.”

In these ancient times, the City gates are of utmost military importance. The city gates will also house barracks, offices of military leaders and Command Centres. They are well-defended at all times.

Handan City’s biggest Command Centre is situated at the East gate which is where they are based at.

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “What news does Little Jun has?”

Teng Yi answered: “After lunch, the Qi army has started to move through the cave in Back Wind Mountain and secretly entered the forest. Little Jun dare not enter the forest to spy as it is too risky. However, we can imagine that at nightfall, Zhao Ming Xiong will cover their advance. The Qi army will first cross the moat and enter Handan City through the tunnel.”

Ji Yanran joked: “If the Qi army discovered that their cover is actually our spy, how will they feel?”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “They should feel honoured!”

Wu Guo entered the room at this point, exclaiming: “The Zhao lieutenants have spotted Xiang Shaolong’s tracks!”

Everybody was initially shocked by his outburst before having a good laugh again.

Book 10 Chapter 12 – In Complete Control

The huge army left Handan City via the east gate. Under the glowing rays of the setting sun, the grasslands shimmered with their brilliance.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi personally led the army to investigate the sighting of Xiang Shaolong at a village fifteen miles away.

This army of five thousand city guards is just a cover. When they reached a thick forest with adequate hiding places, they will stay hidden until night time. Wu Guo will assume command and march them to the appointed spot where they will engage the Qi army who are trying to enter Handan City through the South Gate.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi slipped back into the city and resumed control of the city guards.

Hiding in the study, they receive intelligence reports from their spies.

After the sun eventually disappeared into the horizon of this ancient city, Handan City is soon filled with lights and everything is as per normal.

When Xiaocheng got word of Xiang Shaolong's sighting, he acted accordingly to the plan and commanded Zhao Ming Xiong to assume Xiang Shaolong's responsibilities at the Command Centre. Cheng Xu and the palace guards went on to impose a city-wide

curfew. Everyone knew that Xiaocheng is terrified of Xiang Shaolong and no one suspected that it is a ploy.

From this moment, Zhao Mu is cut off from the outside world. Neither Zhao Ming Xiong nor anyone could communicate with him.

Zhao Ming Xiong did not suspect foul play as he led hundreds of his personal escorts to the main Command Centre. When he stepped into the main hall, he was surprised that all of his escorts have been locked out. With a 'Bang!' the huge door was closed behind him.

Zhao Ming Xiong was alarmed and he cried: "What is going on!?"

The city guards on two sides walked towards him in one smooth movement. Lowering their lances, they held him in position.

On the other side of the door, bows were heard firing and tragic shouting can be heard.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi came out from a side door and faced him.

Zhao Ming Xiong's face is drained of any colour. He angrily yelled: "General Dong! Why are you making things difficult for me? I did not commit any wrongdoings!"

Teng Yi coldly hissed: "Does conspiring with Zhao Mu to rebel

count as a wrongdoing?”

Zhao Ming Xiong’s expression became more deathly white. His voice shook: “How dare you slander me!”

Adopting a sit-and-wait attitude, Xiang Shaolong interrogated: “A grand tunnel was newly constructed right under your command centre. Don’t tell me you know nothing about it!”

Zhao Ming Xiong thought of his pretty wife and his lovely son at home. Both his legs turned soft and he kneeled down.

Teng Yi detested men without backbone. He called: “Tie him up!”

The city guards put their weapons aside and surged forward, tying him up.

Xiang Shaolong went up to this kneeling figure and promised: “If you will obediently cooperate with me, I will spare your life and send you and your family away from Handan City. If I speak a word of untruth, may I die a tragic death.”

Zhao Ming Xiong was trembling and raised his head, disbelieving what he had just heard from this towering god-like hero.

Teng Yi cautioned: “But you must first tell us how to communicate with Zhao Mu. Once we verified your information, we will send you out from the east gate and supply you with horses, provisions and travel documents. Men! Open the door!”

As the giant door opened, Zhao Ming Xiong's entire household of over a hundred people were herded into the hall. His immediate family and servants were all present and panic is written on their faces. Amazingly, they were all dressed in traveling attire and carrying their own luggage.

Zhao Ming Xiong is extremely touched. He gratefully thanked: "I do not know how to repay you. I am convinced to carry out all your orders."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has won the psychological battle and ordered: "Release Brother Zhao at once!"

The ropes binding Zhao Ming Xiong were severed immediately.

Zhao Ming Xiong stood up and Teng Yi smiled: "Escort Madam Zhao, Young Master Zhao and the rest into the horse carriages first and send them into the forests outside the city first. Do not be impolite and cause any worry to Madam."

The City guards received the order and herd the Zhao family out.

Xiang Shaolong took out the travel documents he had prepared and handed them to Zhao Ming Xiong. He sincerely advised: "Handan City will be in peril in these coming days. As long as Brother Zhao can travel day and night, he can leave Zhao and spend his remaining days in peace. Brother Zhao surely knows this better than me."

Zhao Ming Xiong is moved to tears: “I will tell you everything I know.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi smiled at each other. With the full cooperation of Zhao Ming Xiong who is knowledgeable about Zhao Mu’s rebellion plans, the Qi army and Zhao Mu will fall into their well-planned trap.

Accompanied by Xiang Shaolong and his men, Zhao Ming Xiong made his way to the North Command Centre. Gathering all his conspirators in the main hall, he proclaimed his new loyalty to Xiang Shaolong.

These men knew that their rebellion has failed. Kneeling all over the place, they beg for forgiveness.

Xiang Shaolong announced: “If you can accumulate merits to atone your sins, I will not inform the King of your betrayal. No one will know about this. However, you must follow my instructions with absolute obedience. Otherwise, you will lose your head and cause trouble to your household.”

Everyone hurriedly pledged their loyalty.

Earlier as they rode to the north gate, Zhao Ming Xiong had divulged everything about the entire rebellion scheme. With the north gate under their control, victory is in their hands.

Realizing that their families are in the hands of Xiang Shaolong, and admiring their morale and thorough planning, they know that their rebellion has collapsed. Everyone did their best to cooperate and see to their duties under the command of Zhao Ming Xiong.

Xiang Shaolong got Teng Yi to assume command of the North Command Centre. Leading Ji Yanran, Shan Rou and his elite brothers, they left the north command centre. With Zhao Ming Xiong, they rode on Handan's long and lonely street. The air is tense with the anticipation of a big skirmish.

As they turned into another long street, Jing Jun and his army of a few hundred men met up with them.

The two forces merged together in the centre of the streets.

Jing Jun joyously reported: "Gan Zhu, Li Ming and Zhao Ming have been captured by Cheng Xu's palace guards. Now, we are in control of the entire city."

This is the brilliance of Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi. If they handled everything on their own, they may arouse Xiaocheng's suspicions. But if they distribute some of the tasks to his own palace guards, Xiaocheng will have less considerations.

Zhao Ming Xiong saw that they were one step ahead in every encounter and experienced deep regrets. He agreed to help Zhao Mu as he hated Xiang Shaolong for snatching the post of the City Commander from him. In addition, he is confident of Zhao Mu's rebellion. Now, the rebellion has failed miserably.

Xiang Shaolong spoke to Zhao Ming Xiong: “I will send someone to escort you to meet up with your family outside Handan City. When the rocket signal is shot into the sky, my men will release your party instantly.”

Zhao Ming Xiong shamefully sighed: “No being able to work with you is my greatest regret.”

Xiang Shaolong intimately patted his shoulder and smiled: “Please take care Brother Zhao and have a fruitful journey.”

He continued to ride forward.

Ji Yanran rode beside him and spoke with complete elation: “General Dong is full of creative and brilliant strategies. Yanran is bowled over by your extraordinary abilities. I fully submit to and admire your ingenuity.”

On the other side, Shan Rou pouted: “This man only has some simple tricks up his sleeve; why is Yanran so fascinated?”

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran exchanged a loving glance and smiled with mutual understanding.

Under the illumination of the street lamps, the long streets of this ancient city are filled with the blowing of cold winds. The singular galloping sounds of the horses added to the mysterious feel of the night.

With two great beauties at either side, Xiang Shaolong fantasized that this is indeed paradise as compared to the first time he came to Handan City. Even in his wildest dream, he would never have thought that the entire city will be at his beck and call. The future of this beautiful city is in his hands.

His thoughts drifted into the future 21st century. As he is busy day dreaming, the sound of footsteps brought him back to reality.

Zhao Ba stepped out of the shadows and greeted him.

Xiang Shaolong dismounted from his horse and greeted: “Hi Headmaster!”

Ji Yanran is afraid to be recognised and hid behind Xiang Shaolong. Zhao Ba gladly announced: “Everything is taking place as planned. The Marquis Residence is fully surrounded and not a soul is able to leave without running into our arms.”

Xiang Shaolong informed: “I shall have to trouble Headmaster with the attack on the Marquis’s residence. When the first rocket is shot from the City north command centre, Zhao Mu’s men will pour out from his residence to attack the palace with the Qi army. That will be the best time to ambush them. But no matter what happens, do not attack the Marquis residence until you have seen my personal rocket signal. I have special orders by the King to slip into the residence and capture Zhao Mu the traitor alive.”

Zhao Ba realised that he is fully in charge of the attack. It is

equivalent to Xiang Shaolong giving him full credit for this effort. He was jubilant and agreed to wait for the signal.

Xiang Shaolong added: “Tonight’s password has been changed from ‘The Qin shall fall’ to ‘Long live our King’, do not show any mercy to our enemies. Wonderful! It is almost time. Let’s put on our identification bands.”

He gestured and his men brought out pieces of red cloth from their pockets. The cloth is tied around the right hand of all their followers.

Zhao Ba agreed to his suggestion and left to distribute the red cloth bands to his men.

Xiang Shaolong and his men walked over to a site where he can overlook the entire Marquis Residence. His army of three thousand elite city guards and Zhao Ba’s martial warriors have fully surrounded the Marquis Residence and are in full battle mode. The point of contention will be on the main road that leads to the palace.

Everyone has a red cloth around their right arms to differentiate between friend and foe.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself: “Zhao Mu, you are trapped like a bird in a cage.”

Revitalised, he called: “Little Jun!”

Jing Jun bowed and answered: “At your service, City Commander!”

Xiang Shaolong could barely hold his laughter and smiled: “Go!”

Jing Jun muttered a reply and led several of his elite brothers away.

Zhao Ba has finished instructing his men and came to find Xiang Shaolong. Ji Yanran was shocked and hid herself within the crowd of elite brothers.

Zhao Ba arrogantly boasted: “I have brought two siege vehicles with me. I guarantee that Zhao Mu’s perimeter wall will fall in a few blows. By then, death will be too easy for them.”

Xiang Shaolong is wary of his thirst for action and repeatedly reminded him to act according to their battle plan.

Zhao Ba has always admired Xiang Shaolong since the duel at his martial school. He did not mind the nagging and promised to follow his plans strictly.

After a few hours, Xiang Shaolong estimated that the appropriate time has come. Giving his last order to Zhao Ba to hold his position, he personally led his elite brothers towards the water channel where he and Shan Rou had used to slip into the Marquis Residence before.

All these while, Jing Jun and his helpers have been using sandbags to divert the water source away from Zhao Mu's residence.

As Xiang Shaolong was visualizing about the sinking water levels within the residence, he heard a loud 'Bang!'. From the north of the city, a single rocket is shooting up into the sky and exploded into a burst of golden yellow fireworks. The fireworks continue to float down like a shower of rain, lighting up the sky in an enchanting manner.

Ji Yanran stared until the sky returns to darkness and sighed: "The Qi's vanguard is here."

A unique splashing sound is heard as a half-drenched Pu Bu emerged from the water channel.

Jing Jun hurriedly pulled him out of the water.

Pu Bu reported: "Zhao Mu is tricked. He is complete unaware of what is happening outside."

Xiang Shaolong quickly asked: "Will he personally lead the attack on the palace?"

Pu Bu despising replied: "This coward will not risk his own life. Otherwise, he need not hide in the inner chamber. There is a secret tunnel there that will bring him out of the residence."

Shan Rou inquired: “Are there any guards on the other side of the water channel?”

Pu Bu answered: “Everyone is assembled at the parade square and are ready to assault the palace. There is not a single guard anywhere near the pond.”

Xiang Shaolong checked: “How is our brothers’ situation?”

Jing Jun came over and gave Pu Bu a fresh change of clothes. As Pu Bu got undressed at the spot, the two girls quickly turned their backs to him.

As he changed, Pu Bu smiled: “They already knew what to do. The best thing is that Zhao Mu actually grouped them together and put Liu Chao and myself in charge. Therefore, we can attack and retreat as we liked.”

Although the Marquis Residence is complete quiet, everyone knows that Zhao Mu’s family warriors have set off to attack the nearby palace. The warriors have disguised themselves as palace guards and are well-trained. If not for Xiang Shaolong’s well-prepared counter attack and as well as reports from spies, they do have a high chance of success.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that the stream is fully diverted and the river bed is showing, he exclaimed: “Let’s go!”

Upon hearing his order, the impatient Jing Jun dived in first while the rest of the elite brothers swam after him.

Pu Bu could tell that every man is highly-skilled and expressed his admiration.

Shan Rou gave a short battle cry and squeezed in as well.

Xiang Shaolong wrapped his hand around the thin waist of Ji Yanran and joked: “Is Talented Lady Ji willing to accompany hubby to go swimming in the drain?”

Pu Bu then realised the real identity of this soldier. He was dumbfounded and could only stare stupidly at her.

This belle gently consented: “I will gladly accompany you to the ends of hell. A little cave like this is nothing to be afraid of.”

Xiang Shaolong checked his time and could foresee Zhao Mu’s men walking into Zhao Ba’s trap. This is the best time to sneak into the residence. He sighed with relief and sounded: “It’s our turn!”

Sounds of killing reverberated from the north of Handan City. It must be Cheng Xu’s palace guards and Teng Yi’s city guards ambushing the Qi army who are coming out from the tunnel. If the Qi army is led by Dan Chu, Tian Dan will have to lose his favourite general tonight.

Except for capturing Zhao Mu, his elite brothers are not involved in the fighting. To capture Zhao Mu back to Xianyang and not losing a single man in the process is a feat that he himself could not have imagined at the start of the mission.

Ji Yanran shoved him lightly and he snapped out of his mental reasoning. Focusing on the situation at hand, he jumped into the stream.

When Ji Yanran and Xiang Shaolong were pulled out of the dried pond, all the elite brothers have readied themselves for battle and all the crossbows are loaded.

Liu Chao and their band of fifty brothers were awaiting their arrival. Everyone is exceptionally happy.

Now, Xiang Shaolong is a world-famous character. To have such a good master, they are naturally over the moon.

Shan Rou impatiently hissed: “Hurry up!”

Xiang Shaolong was about to say something when battle cries and killing sounds can be heard from the direction of the palace. Like a tidal wave, the cries come in surges.

To keep it short, Xiang Shaolong commanded: “No one is to kill any servants, women or children. Pu Bu will lead the way. Let’s move!”

Pu Bu drew his long sword and charge ahead with Xiang Shaolong right behind him.

As they turned into a long corridor after passing through the garden, they ran into several family warriors who are guarding the inner chamber entrance with ferocious dogs. The warriors are astonished to see such a large number of trespassers. Before they could move a muscle, crossbow arrows fell like rain and there were no survivors.

Xiang Shaolong's forces grouped into an attacking formation and killed their way into the inner chamber.

Zhao Mu's family warriors are unable to defend themselves and are mainly killed by arrows even before they could draw their weapon.

The servants have been posted to other parts of the residence on Zhao Mu's instructions, making the assault easier than expected.

Every human they came across was killed like chopping vegetables. The speed of the operation is beyond imagination. In the blink of an eye, the two hundred family warriors guarding the inner chamber were slayed.

Anxiously waiting for news of the rebellion's success, Zhao Mu is still unaware of the impending danger. As he saw Pu Bu leading a pack of formidable intruders and forcing their way in, he stood up in panic. Under the stinging sound of the crossbow firing, the several family warriors in the same room collapsed to the floor. No

one was spared.

Zhao Mu frantically pulled out his sword. Seeing her arch enemy, Shan Rou's eyes reddened and she shot forward. While he is still in shock, she disarmed him and kicked him, sending him sprawling across the floor.

Six elite brothers leaped over and tied him up securely.

Pah! Pah!

Shan Rou slapped him on both cheeks and pointed at him scolding: "Traitor! Can you recognize who is your Mistress? I am the daughter of Qi's Master Shan. Do you remember how you wiped out my entire household?"

Both of Zhao Mu's cheeks turned swollen and red with marks of Shan Rou's palm. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as he looked at Shan Rou in a daze.

Xiang Shaolong came to him and joyfully greeted: "How is Marquis doing?"

Zhao Mu's entire body was shaking. He furiously cursed: "Dong Kuang, you are really good!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly said: "I am not Dong Kuang!"

“Aiyah!” Zhao Mu cried. Shan Rou gave him a hard kick and he looked really down and out.

“Wang Zhuo! I knew that you are an ungrateful traitor!”

Xiang Shaolong leisurely laughed. Using his normal voice, he states: “I am not Wang Zhuo!”

Zhao Mu was taken aback as he stared closely at him. His voice shaking, he said: “You are...”

Xiang Shaolong removed his mask and handed it to his men, instructing: “Proceed as planned.”

When Zhao Mu saw his real appearance. He tragically groaned and did not know what to say.

Xiang Shaolong icily laughed: “When you raped and killed my women, did you even dream that such a day will come?”

Jing Jun went up to him and punched him hard on the stomach. Zhao Mu knelt down in pain.

Ji Yanran shouted from afar: “We have found the tunnel entrance!”

Xiang Shaolong faced Jing Jun: “You check out the tunnel first. If it is unblocked, we will follow you. Aren’t you going to remove

your mask?”

Piak!

Zhao Mu received another kicked by Shan Rou and fell down. The look on his face is ferocious and fearful.

Jing Jun removed his mask and hand it to his men. Leading another group of elite brothers, he entered the secret tunnel.

Xiang Shaolong held onto Shan Rou to prevent her from beating Zhao Mu further.

Shan Rou mournfully wailed and fell into his arms and cried her heart out.

Xiang Shaolong could understand her state of mind and lovingly held her shoulder. At the same time, he told his men: “Fix the two masks onto two men whose build is similar to myself and Master Jun. Then set this place on fire. Be careful not to alert those men who are guarding the external halls of the residence.”

His men left to carry out his orders.

Shan Rou stopped sobbing and swore: “I want to kill Zhao Mu.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Shan Rou madly laughed: “Look at the sight of you. I am only trying to scare you.” She struggled and

left his embrace, her face red and awkward about losing her composure.

Ji Yanran returned to his side. Together, they can hear loud sounds of frantic killing from the direction of the palace.

Liu Chao and his men are familiar with the residence. In a short time, they have accumulated a large amount of wood and dry grass and placed them all over the place. Once a fire breaks out, no one can even think of coming in or even putting the fire out.

Jing Jun sent someone to report that the tunnel is usable.

Xiang Shaolong was elated. He got someone to stuff Zhao Mu's mouth and ship him into the tunnel.

Under his command, everyone threw their torches into the stacks of dry grass and wood. In these times, buildings are mainly constructed out of wood. When a building catches fire, even the immortals are powerless to intervene.

Before he entered the tunnel, Xiang Shaolong shot out the rocket signal.

It is time for Zhao Ba to attack the Marquis Residence.

When he reaches the inner parts of the Residence, he will discover that it has become a sea of fire. Countless corpses will be recovered and it will be a challenge to identify which body belongs

to Zhao Mu.

He may find Dong Kuang's and Little Jun's bodies and mistook them to be trapped in the fire and perished with Zhao Mu.

As to why the fire is so strong, it must be Zhao Mu who had placed these dry grass and firewood in the first place. If the rebellion fails, he will burn himself to death. Unexpectedly, he ran into Dong Kuang and his men and they are all consumed by the inferno.

Everyone in Handan will mourn him; not Xiang Shaolong but the Dong Horse Fanatic who enjoyed a short burst of fame.

If the people of Zhao ever learn that the real Dong Kuang is still in Chu, they will find it hard to believe.

With regards to Teng Yi, he will fake his death on the battlefield. Unless someone is disrespectful and tear at the face of his scapegoat, the truth will be hidden forever. The tunnel exit is at the back garden of an unoccupied villa nearby. Everyone joyfully followed the traveling directions and avoided the palace battleground and the area north of the city. Undetected, they arrived at the North gate.

Leading scores of their elite brothers, Teng Yi met them at the City gate. Catching sight of a bounded Zhao Mu, he laughed: "Marquis is indeed thoughtful to join us."

Leading everyone, he got on his horse and rode out of Handan City. He even commanded the leader of the City Guard as he left: “Keep a close watch on the City gates. I am bringing some men to search for more enemies.”

A huge force of riders galloped mightily onto the wide grasslands.

The sky is filled with stars and could only increase their high spirits. Only but shouting out loud can they express their extreme delight.

After riding through the grasslands, everyone looked to the west where Qin is.

Travelling for another five or six miles, Xiang Shaolong rode his horse up a little hill and looked back towards Handan City.

Many parts of the city are in fire, lighting up the sky.

Hoof beats can be heard as Wu Zhuo and Wu Guo caught up to them with the rest of the elite brothers.

They cheered upon witnessing Zhao Mu who is trussed up like a chicken on one of the horses.

Xiang Shaolong looked to his men smiling and roared: “Is everyone here?!”

Everyone reported that they are safe and well.

Xiang Shaolong gave a big laugh: “Then let’s go home!”

He raised his horse whip and gently smacked his horse.

The war horse reacted to the smack and galloped downhill.

Everyone cheered and rode after him.

Everyone speedily rode across the beautiful plains under the glittering stars.

Book 11 Chapter 01 – A Triumphant Return

The winding roads are prettily carpeted in a thick layer of grass and the river is flowing back to the east.

As Xiang Shaolong watched Shan Rou rode off alone and gradually disappear in the vast grasslands, he prayed silently for her safety.

On his left, Ji Yanran softly sighed: “Sister Rou is a very headstrong and brave lady. I confess that I am not as courageous as she is.”

On his right, Teng Yi nodded in agreement: “Let’s hope that she has a safe journey and will meet us at Xianyang in due time.”

On the other side of Ji Yanran, Jing Jun was worried: “Third Brother, why don’t you go after her? She may change her mind after your persuasion.”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Everyone should have the right to pursue their own dreams and their lifestyle. Otherwise, life will be meaningless.”

When Ji Yanran faced him in surprise, Xiang Shaolong let out a long howl. Reining his horse, he galloped towards the west.

Ji Yanran and the rest of the men rode after him, dragging the bounded traitor Zhao Mu.

Under their neat riding formation, the dust swirled up continuously like a tornado.

As they rode at breakneck speed, they caught up to Zou Yan's entourage within a day. Despite the short separation time, it felt like years have gone by.

The Tian sisters are mad with joy, not expecting to see Xiang Shaolong so soon. Recalling their emotional departure earlier, they felt slightly awkward.

The mission is a complete success and everyone is in great spirits. The air was filled with chatter and they seemed to be on a vacation. After two months, they finally returned to Xianyang.

Lu Buwei received word of their arrival and welcomed them with Master Tu and Xiao Yuetan. When he saw Zou Yan and Ji Yanran, he recognized them immediately. Lu Buwei used to be a business magnate and had business in every state. He traveled widely and loved meeting strange and exceptional people. Zou Yan the great philosopher and Talented Lady Ji the rare beauty are obviously famous people that he had made his acquaintance.

After the usual courtesies, they entered the city on horseback and carriages.

Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong shared a carriage where Xiang Shaolong reported his adventure with deep details.

As Xiang Shaolong was wondering why Wu Yingyuan and the rest of the family did not come to receive him, Lu Buwei remarked: “The most fantastic part is nobody managed to discover your true identity during the entire mission. This is very favourable if we lead an expedition to Eastern Zhou. While the six states are in turmoil, this is the best time to attack with the army.”

Xiang Shaolong asked with surprise: “So Premier Lu has intentions to attack them. Hei! Why didn’t I see any of my clansmen?”

Even more energetic than before, Lu Buwei confidently and mysteriously smiled: “Your return must remain a secret and so must Zhao Mu’s capture. We will only announce the arrival of Zou Yan and Talented Lady Ji. Otherwise, the six states will guess the relationship between you and them. Only when they are kept in the dark can we use the excuse of rebellion to get rid of Lord of Eastern Zhou at the speed of lightning.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that Qin values military achievements and Lu Buwei has nothing to show on his report card. Therefore, he is anxious for results and hoped to be made a Marquis in near future.

Eastern Zhou’s military strength is laughable. Even though it is an independent state, it’s ruler is considered the same level as the Marquises of the Seven States. If Lu Buwei officially led an expedition against Eastern Zhou, the six states may put aside their differences and join hands to protect Zhou from Qin. This will be highly disadvantageous. Thus, this war must be fought while the

enemy is unprepared and be as short as possible to avoid any counterattacks.

Lu Buwei added: “Eliminating Zhou is a small issue but there is still a potential misgiving – we may incite the six states to ally and attack Qin together. To enjoy true victory, we must handle the attack and the foreign relations equally well.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly admired his capabilities. Lu Buwei is a talented and wise man like no other. It is no surprise that he can control and strengthen Qin for the next ten odd years. He took the chance to ask about Xianyang and Qin developments.

Lu Buwei revealed a sinister smile and replied in a deep voice: “A group of men under Lord Yangquan are spreading rumours that I have poisoned you to death and that Prince Zheng (Xiao Pan) is my child with Empress Zhu Ji. They are doing this so that the King will change the order of succession. Humph! I will let them die with a burial place. All their wives, concubines and daughters will become courtesans and prostitutes to be ravaged by men in order for me to vent this hatred in my heart.”

Xiang Shaolong’s spine turned cold upon hearing this. Offending this man is not something trivial. But on the other hand, if Lu Buwei or himself has been captured by Lord Yangquan, the consequences will be the same. This is a dog-eat-dog world and whoever is soft-hearted will surely suffer.

Lu Buwei continued: “We are lucky to have the full support of King Zhuangxiang and Empress Zhu Ji to put in a good word for us. Now that you have captured Zhao Mu, I will take this

opportunity to annihilate Eastern Zhou and Lord Yangquan at the same time. By then, everyone in Qin will have to dance to my tune.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. It is because of this attitude that will force Xiao Pan the future Qin Shi Huang to kill him. When that happens, he has to turn his back to him as well. Presently, he is Lu Buwei’s confidante. In the future, they will be enemies. Thinking of this, Xiang Shaolong is full of emotions.

Lu Buwei mistook Xiang Shaolong to be worried for him. Pleased, he advised: “It has been hard on you. Please rest well at the farm and heal your soul. I have important missions waiting for your undertaking.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired about the missions but Lu Buwei refused to speak further. At this point, the entourage entered Xianyang City through the east gate.

Zou Yan and Ji Yanran were sent to Wu residence while they brought Zhao Mu straight into the Qin palace.

Xiang Shaolong is tired of politics but knew that he has been deeply embroiled into the power struggle of the Qin court. For Xiao Pan, he has to help Lu Buwei against Lord Yangquan.

Thinking of this, his homecoming happiness dropped drastically. The only comfort is that he will soon see Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian, Ting Fangshi and the rest of the girls.

Zhao Mu's complexion is dead white. His hands were tied behind him and his legs were locked in chains. Two burly Qin palace guards brought him in front of King Zhuangxiang and forced him to kneel down. At the same, they held his hair so that he has to lift his head and show his face.

King Zhuangxiang laughed: "How is Marquis doing?!"

On the right, Zhu Ji's eyes shone and besides her, Xiao Pan is burning with revenge.

Xiang Shaolong may have harboured a deep revenge for Zhao Mu but looking at his state of distress as compared to his usual grandeur, he can only sigh.

Zhao Mu did not say a single word but his eyes are shining with poisonous anger.

Zhu Ji laughed: "Marquis seems to have lost weight!"

Zhao Mu could not tolerate her insults and loudly scolded: "You slu..."

Xiang Shaolong is concerned that Zhao Mu will publicly announce that he (Zhao Mu) has slept with Zhu Ji before. Pressing against a table, he used it as a support and flew forward, his foot landing squarely on Zhao Mu's jaw. This traitor's teeth were broken and blood started to flow. His face begins to swell and the pain was so intense that he couldn't cry out.

Xiang Shaolong roared: “How dare you insult the Empress! Hng!”

Xiang Shaolong is so quick that the two guards have yet to react.

Zhu Ji is smart and sharp, knowing the real reason behind this kick. Gratefully looking at Xiang Shaolong, she pleaded King Zhuangxiang: “Your Majesty! I want to deal with this traitor personally.”

King Zhuangxiang appears to be smitten by her charms and happily promised: “As you wished. Get this traitor out of my sight and await the Empress’s punishment.”

The palace guards reacted to his order and dragged Zhao Mu out like an animal.

Xiang Shaolong took this break to assess Xiao Pan. In the six odd months of separation, he has become more well-built. His eyes are shining with vigour and his movements are full of spirits, developing an imposing and awe-inspiring aura that even Xiang Shaolong is a little afraid of.

Xiao Pan may be young but has undergone the pain of losing his mother. Moreover, he has to protect his secret identity so he has to develop some shrewdness.

Both of them caught each other’s eyes for a second and both looked away immediately.

King Zhuangxiang faced Xiang Shaolong and contently remarked: “Grand Tutor has brought us Le Cheng’s head and captured Zhao Mu alive, relieving the hate in my heart. Premier Lu, how should we reward him?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly intervened: “This mission is largely due to Premier Lu’s strategic planning and the four masks he provided. He is the one who truly deserves this credit. I am only following his orders!”

Lu Buwei saw that he is humble despite his accomplishments and even gave credit to himself. Delighted, he laughed: “Your Majesty! To have this talented Xiang Shaolong on our side is due to your good fortune and blessings. Le Cheng and Zhao Mu’s case must be kept confidential and we cannot reward Shaolong at this point. We even have to act offended and blame his incompetency to hide this truth. What does Your Majesty think?”

King Zhuangxiang frowned: “Although I agree with you, I have only good feelings for Shaolong. How can I bear to put this blame on him?”

Lu Buwei smiled: “Leave this to me! Your Majesty need not worry.”

Xiang Shaolong could tell that King Zhuangxiang is still unhappy about this arrangement and respected him even more.

Ai! It is a pity that he has only two odd years of lifespan left.

Zhu Ji interrupted: “Now that Grand Tutor is back, Prince Zheng is the happiest. He has refused to learn swordsmanship from anyone other than Grand Tutor.”

Xiang Shaolong is slight taken aback and looked over to Xiao Pan. As Xiao Pan looked over to him too, the chill in his eyes were slowly replaced by warm gratitude.

Lu Buwei sighed: “Prince Zheng may have to be disappointed. After Grand Tutor Xiang has taken his break, he has to leave Qin again.”

Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan were astounded.

King Zhuangxiang sighed: “I cannot bear to see him leave but Premier is right. To eliminate Zhou, the attack and foreign relations must be handled equally well to avoid any accidents.”

Zhu Ji frowned heavily and asked: “Does Your Majesty and Premier intend to make Grand Tutor Xiang work non-stop? What if his health suffers?”

Lu Buwei smiled: “Empress can rest easy. The attack will take place at least one month from now. He can take a good vacation.”

Xiang Shaolong could not understand and asked: “Qin is full of talented men and I lack actual experience. Furthermore, I am a wanted man in both Wei and Zhao. Maybe...”

Lu Buwei chuckled: “Experience has to be nurtured. Xiang Shaolong is well versed in both diplomacy and war and will rise to the occasion. Regarding their internal quarrels and bad blood, it is due to mutual suspicions. If we attack them, they will rush to ally with each other. This matter is final and Shaolong need not reject any further.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has no other choice. Sighing to himself, he pretended to be happy to have this mission. In reality, it is similar to forcing a bone down his throat.

Next, Xiang Shaolong elaborated on his Handan City encounters and communicated it like a thriller movie with action and sound effects. King Zhuangxiang was moved by his adventures and during the exciting parts, Zhu Ji is holding onto her chest with anticipation while Xiao Pan is simply amazed.

It is only until evening did they allow him to return to Wu Residence.

Lu Buwei personally sent him home.

Xiang Shaolong was looking out of the carriage window. Under the beautiful street lamps, he was lost in Xianyang City’s night view.

At his side, Lu Buwei commented: “Shaolong, do not fault me for making you run here and there. A good horse should not stop running. I am also working hard to make you my right hand man. I

have friends in all the six states. Even if you are the main guy, I will send men to carry out all the groundwork and the trips will be easy for you.”

Xiang Shaolong could only hypocritically answer: “I am honoured by your trust and will do my utmost best to repay your kind intentions.”

Satisfied, Lu Buwei nodded: “In my opinion, time is the most crucial factor. First, we will resolve our internal conflicts and then focus on external enemies. Once we are established, we can expand our influence all over the world. This new mission is of extreme importance. We must never allow the six states to increase their prejudice and eventually work together against Qin. Everyone under the sky is greedy and there are no exceptions. As long as we are generous and present numerous bribes to the various leaders of the enemy states, we will be able prevent them from plotting against us. Does Shaolong understand what I am trying to say?”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that the Wu Family has pledged their loyalty to him through this bribery as well, proving its effectiveness. No wonder Lu Buwei is dead confident of this bribery strategy. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong abhors these under-the-table methods and prefers to fight openly and win the battle with true capabilities.

After a short contemplation, Lu Buwei added: “Although there are different strategies to deal with different states, a simple summary will be to surround the three states (Zhao, Han, and Wei) while conspiring with Qi and Chu. We can disregard Yan for the time being. Once the three states are conquered, the other three

states are as good as ours. We will be able to unite the whole country and break the century-old deadlock of a leaderless nation.”

After he finished speaking, this merchant-who-rose-to-a-political leader sat back and his eyes were brimming with delight as he visualized the bright future that he is creating.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself – Your estimates are not far away from the truth but the person who unites China will be Xiao Pan and not Lu Buwei.

Lu Buwei’s strategy is an extension of Fan Yao’s ‘Making friends with those far away and conquering those who are nearby’. This is the crux of expanding one’s territory by taking over the neighbouring land. The first casualty will be Lord of Eastern Zhou.

History has proven this to be an ingenious tactic.

By now, the entourage of horse carriages have reached the Wu Residence. Lu Buwei clapped his hand on Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and intimately said: “I will not accompany you in. Have a good rest and visit me tomorrow night. We shall have a feast to celebrate your victorious return.”

Under the protection of his personal escorts, Lu Buwei left.

Before he could step into the residence, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian ran out of the house crying and leapt into his embrace. Behind them are Wu Yingyuan, Tao Fang, Teng Yi and the rest.

Everyone has a serious look on their faces and smiled at him forcefully.

Hugging his two wives, a perplexed Xiang Shaolong asked: “Where is Ting Fangshi?”

The two girls cried even harder.

Xiang Shaolong’s limbs turned cold and he could sense that something unpleasant has occurred. He looked to his father-in-law.

Wu Yingyuan sighed: “Shaolong must learn to let go. Ting Fangshi died of illness three days ago! Ai! She did not even see you for the last time.”

Xiang Shaolong stood in a daze besides Ting Fangshi’s corpse. She was dressed in burial clothing. Except for her face which is thinner, she looked like she was asleep. Xiang Shaolong’s heart is filled with deep grief.

Wu Yingyuan continued to sigh: “After you left, she became very restless and pined for your return. In addition, her constitution has not been very good. Within a month, she fell sick and her health fluctuated.”

Hot tears rushed out of Xiang Shaolong’s eyes and his vision became blurred.

This unfortunate beauty has suffered abuses all her life and her life ended before she could enjoy many happy days with him

Pain and regret began to overwhelm him.

What is the meaning of life?

Three days ago, she is alive and kicking. Now, she is just a lifeless corpse.

Teng Yi came to him and put his hand around his shoulder. He persuaded: "Don't be so depressed. It will affect your health."

Xiang Shaolong tried his best to maintain his composure and slowly mentioned: "I wish to bury her near the courtyard of the Hidden Dragon Abode. That is her favourite spot. At the same time, I want to erect graves for Zhao Ni, Su'er and Su Nu..."

Before he could finish, he began to sob.

The funeral is held three days later. Lu Buwei and General Meng Ao personally came to the funeral while King Zhuangxiang sent a top official to represent him.

Xiang Shaolong did not shed another tear. Every day, he visited the graves first thing in the morning and prayed in silence.

After ten days, he began to regain his usual demeanour.

On this morning, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qin accompanied him as usual to present flowers to the graves.

After they have paid their respects, Xiang Shaolong led the three girls and went strolling in residence grounds. Still filled with strong emotions, he was visibly upset.

Ji Yanran gently advised: “Shaolong! Please don’t be so upset!”

After a short embrace, Xiang Shaolong released her from his grip and sigh: “With each death, there is someone less to talk to. Everyone who is born will die one day. Why is my life filled with calamities? Is it because I have taken too many lives?”

On his other side, Wu Tingfang was shaken: “Hubby! Do not say such things anymore! You are frightening me!”

Remembering that he has to leave them soon, he sighed: “Lu Buwei wants me to head out again and execute his foreign relations strategy.”

The three girls were alarmed at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong is even more agitated after witnessing their reactions. Determined, he vowed: “Don’t worry. Whatever I do, I must bring all of you with me. We will be inseparable.”

The three girls are relieved and became happy once again.

Ji Yanran teased: “There is news from Handan City. Is Shaolong interested?”

Xiang Shaolong led the girls to a nearby valley. Sitting down beside a stream, he forced himself to pay attention.

Ji Yanran reported: “After we left, Handan City deteriorated into chaos. Tian Dan and Li Yuan knew that they had failed and escaped back to Qi and Chu. King Xiaocheng thought that all of us have been sacrificed and was terribly upset. When he saw your corpse, he fainted on the spot. Now, he is bedridden and ill. Empress Jing and Guo Kai are taking charge of Zhao in his absence.”

Xiang Shaolong looked towards Zhao Qian. This Third Princess of Zhao is very quiet and her head is lowered. She seems to harbour feelings for her father Xiaocheng, having a worried expression on her face.

Xiang Shaolong released a long sigh. Looking up, he saw the slopes of the valley were dotted with trees that were hundreds of years old. All of them have extremely thick trunks and they stood upright against the blowing wind. With their thick leaves and branches, they seemed to cover half the sky. Even in this cold winter season, they did not lose a single bit of their majestic appearance.

Behind the green trees and their shade is a protruding mountain

peak. It is the highest mountain peak within their compound and is widely known as the Moon Prayer Peak. It has an imposing grandeur and dazzles whoever that sets their eyes on it.

Xiang Shaolong could feel his heart stirring and suggested: “I am keen to climb Moon Prayer Peak. Can Qian’er make it?” He needs to break out of his limbo and give himself a fresh goal so as to shake himself free from the chains of sorrow.

Initially, the three girls reacted with surprise. Zhao Qian then nodded: “Qian’er has been practising horse riding and archery with Tingfang every day. I am very athletic now! I do not see any problems in climbing Moon Prayer Peak.”

For the first time since he returned, Xiang Shaolong is motivated to do something out of the ordinary. Wu Tingfang is delighted with his change and jumped up with joy, cheering: “Fang’er will get some horses so as to preserve our energy.” She then left for the valley entrance.

As the sun was shining right above their heads, they have made their way up Moon Prayer Peak. Half a mile from the highest point of the peak, the mountain has become too steep to ascend and they have to stop climbing.

From their position, they could view the entire Wu Family farm. The landscape is mainly flat grasslands with the occasional streams running through the territory. Horses, cows and goats were scattered all over the farm. Some of them animals are alone while some are grazing together in a group.

The various buildings of the Wu Family can be seen as well. Some are fully visible while some are partially visible, just like a landscape painting. With such a mesmerizing picture before them, they felt like they were on top of the world.

As the winter wind blows, the hills are nicely stacked up in different heights and the farms occupy the flatlands near and far. What a memorable experience!

Xiang Shaolong shouted with all his might, venting all the frustration in his heart. Feeling way better, he asked: “Is Dan Chu dead?”

An intoxicated Ji Yanran was gazing at him. She laughed: “He is not the one leading the tunneling army and managed to keep his worthless life. I also have word that Empress Jing was heartbroken after learning about your death. In fact, she was so affected that she refused to eat anything for three days.”

Xiang Shaolong stirred slightly. After another few seconds of thinking, he continued to ask: “Any news of Ya’er and Zhi Zhi?”

Ji Yanran replied: “Not yet. Second Brother Teng has sent someone to contact them in Daliang. If our first stop is Wei, we will be able to see them very soon!”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and laughed bitterly. He recalled the time when he had to flee from Daliang. If someone had told him he could swagger back to Daliang without a single worry, he

would not believe it at all.

Ji Yanran added: “Premier Lu has officially invited godfather and myself to stay over at his place for a few days. I want to accompany you and have rejected him. Godfather has gone ahead on his own.”

Zhao Qian mentioned: “Little Jun is very active. After a few days of returning, he led Liu Chao and Pu Bu all over the city to have fun. I am really concerned that he may get into trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Even if we do not invite trouble, trouble will look for us. There is no way to avoid it.”

Wu Tingfang happily remarked; “Fourth Brother (Wang Jian) sent you a top quality herb from the north, wanting you to enjoy it with wine. I heard from Dad that he recently defeated the Xiong Nu. His military achievements are outstanding!”

Xiang Shaolong consoled himself that there is finally one piece of good news after all.

He is highly confident about Wang Jian. During the warring states period, there are four famous generals: Qi, Jian, Po, and Mu. They are respectively Bai Qi, Wang Jian, Lian Po and Li Mu. Zhao and Qin each possess two of these generals.

If not for King Xiaocheng’s mistake during the battle of Changping, using Zhao Kuo who is only good with military theory to replace Lian Po, it will be hard to tell who will win the battle of

Changping.

Now, age is catching up to Lian Po. Although the highly-talented Li Mu is around to hold the fort, he has two major obstacles. First, there are hardly any soldiers in Zhao to make a decent army. Second, Zhao's politics has fallen into the hands of the cunning and narrow-minded schemer Guo Kai. With these restrictions, he cannot fully display his prowess. Under these circumstances, what hope does Zhao have?

Bai Qi has passed away already. Now, the world belongs to Wang Jian.

Book 11 Chapter 02 – Powerless

On the way back, Xiang Shaolong is feeling extremely good about himself.

With the dead buried, every living human must continue to live on courageously and to strive against the never ending challenges of life.

One day, he will also die in this ancient warring period and no one will ever know that he is from the future 21st century.

Ji Yanran could sense that his mood is improving. She took the opportunity to ask: “Yanran’s clansmen are all experts in forging swords and stringing bows. Can Shaolong make arrangements for them to build a weapons manufacturing facility and eke out a living?”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that Ji Yanran and her clansmen came from the conquered state of Yue. During the ancient warring period, the sword forging techniques of Yue is the best among all the states. Famous swords like Yue Nu, Gan Jiang and Mo Ye were forged by the sword smiths of Yue. To discontinue such a skilful practice is a loss so Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Count on me. I will highlight this to Father-in-law at once. With such a big farm, mining should not be an issue.”

Ji Yanran joyously thanked: “Shaolong is also a gifted artisan. If you require any special tools, feel free to get them to produce it for you. Do you wish to speak to Uncle Qing? Throughout the

generations, his family has been our country's most outstanding artisan."

Xiang Shaolong was excited as he recollected the training he had in the 21st century. He had attended some basic training about the construction of weapons and gunpowder. Although he has forgotten about the majority of them, he still has a vague idea. It would be impossible to produce a gun but as long as he can produce a rough idea such as creating a new alloy of various metals, it is still possible to come up with a sword that is even sharper than Gan Jiang or Mo Ye. Pleased, he invited: "Please tell Uncle Qing to see me tonight and we can have a good chat."

Ji Yanran smiled like a blossoming flower: "Shaolong! You are so good to me. I love you."

Xiang Shaolong unshackled himself from the depressed and dispirited man he used to be and walked towards the Hidden Dragon Abode.

At dinner time, the main hall was filled with laughter for the first time since their return.

Teng Yi, Wu Zhuo, Wu Guo and Tao Fang were all present.

Xiang Shaolong told Tao Fang about Ji Yanran's suggestion and got him to be in charge of the entire affair. When he enquired about Jing Jun, Teng Yi smiled: "This kid loves to hang around Premier Lu's men. Premier Lu's residence has now become the playground for all the interesting characters all over the world.

Every day, there will be some famous person who will be invited to stay with him. Now, he has over four thousand guests and it looks like this will go on for some time.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Lu Buwei’s continued invitation of outsiders will incur the jealousy of Qin’s population. Without King Zhuangxiang’s support, he will not even last one day.

The Tian sisters came in to fill his wine cup.

Xiang Shaolong roped his hand around Tian Zhen’s slender waist and asked: “Are you used to life here?”

Tian Zhen shyly nodded: “This place is quiet and beautiful. All the mistresses have been very nice to me. Very good... Zhen Zhen is very happy.”

Chun Ying, who is attending to Tao Fang, laughed: “Zhen Zhen has just learnt how to ride a horse and is enjoying herself very much!”

Xiang Shaolong was again reminded of Ting Fangshi. Luckily, Tao Fang coincidentally interrupted his train of thought: “Master has instructed that when Shaolong is feeling better to return to Xianyang City. King Zhuangxiang and Premier Lu are eager to see you.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed reluctantly. When dinner ended,

everyone left as well. Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner chamber and found Ji Yanran chatting with Zhao Qian. After introducing each other further, he intentionally left them to chat on their own.

Two hours later when Ji Yanran came to find him, she witnessed her Uncle Qing listening with complete bewilderment. “How can we add this chromium into the sword forging metal?” he asked.

Xiang Shaolong was frowning heavily: “You must use another metal to combine the both of them. It can be done. Let me do the trial forging!”

Surprised, Ji Yanran commented: “Shaolong is unpredictable. I have never seen Uncle Qing so taken aback.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that it is fortunate that he is an amateur at this craft or he would have caused Uncle Qing to faint with shock.

Over the next five days, Xiang Shaolong abandoned all his work and spent his days having fun and touring with his wives and maids. Together, they had the most wonderful and fulfilling time. When he was about to leave the farm, he was still melancholic but his energy is vastly different from before.

On the second night in Xianyang City, Lu Buwei hosted a banquet for them. Wu Yingyuan, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran were all present.

The co-hosts are Meng Ao and his two sons, Master Tu, Xiao Yuetan and guest Zou Yan.

Beauties are welcomed everywhere they go, not to mention this is the talented and crowd pleasing first class beauty. The moment she stepped into the hall, she captured the attention of everyone present and was given the best seat.

Meng Ao's two sons Meng Wu and Meng Tian are slightly younger than Jing Jun but both of them possess a sturdily built body with nicely formed muscles. For their age, they were awe-inspiring.

A few rounds of drinks later, Meng Ao got his two sons to fight with real swords to add to the celebratory mood. Energetically leaping around with their swords brandishing, they exchanged strong blows as heard from the heavy clashing of their weapons. Ten over rounds later, they separated and bowed to the audience. Despite the intense fight sequence, their faces are not red and they are breathing normally as they returned to their seats besides their father.

Everyone cheered at this magnificent display. Jing Jun has been hanging out with them and cheered louder than the rest.

Xiang Shaolong recollected that Meng Tian will be another famous Qin General other than father and son team Wang Jian and Wang Ben so he paid extra attention.

Seated opposite Ji Yanran, Lu Buwei smiled: "What does

Shaolong think of these two kids?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely praised: “General Meng’s sons are brave and highly skilled. They will succeed General to become another famous General. I personally guarantee with my own head.”

Meng Ao is extremely pleased when he heard this and bellowed to his sons: “Quickly give your thanks to Grand Tutor!”

Meng Wu and Meng Tian immediately stood up and kowtowed towards Xiang Shaolong. Xiang Shaolong got up hurriedly and helped them up. In his heart, he was thinking that it is not as easy as it looks.

Back in his seat, Lu Buwei expectedly suggested: “Since they were thirteen, they have been going into war with General Meng but General Meng regards them as only suitable for weapons demonstration as they lack real experience. Moreover, they lack familiarity in leading soldiers into battle. We hope Shaolong can take them under your care.”

Meng Ao asked with complete earnestness: “I have seen countless men all my life but have never come across anyone as extraordinary as Grand Tutor. If you don’t mind, I hope you can bring my two boys with you on your foreign relations mission.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he could never decline and laughed: “General Meng has been a true friend and I will gladly accept.” He secretly analyzed that Lu Buwei is doing his best to cultivate

talents and it appears that he is not satisfied with only being the Premier of Qin.

As Meng Wu and Meng Tian kowtow with thanks, this arrangement is decided.

Lu Buwei was about to speak when a family warrior rushed in out of a sudden. He came to Lu Buwei's side and whispered a few words, attracting everyone's attention.

Lu Buwei was greatly agitated and cried: "Zhao's King Xiaocheng is dead!"

The entire hall quietened down.

When everyone is home at Wu residence after the banquet, Zou Yan got Xiang Shaolong to a corner and began chatting.

In the tranquil side room, Zou Yan spoke about a few unimportant topics before inquiring: "Lu Buwei has placed a lot of emphasis on Shaolong. What does Shaolong think?"

Xiang Shaolong accepted the Zou Yan is exceedingly intelligent and his observation skill is second to none. If he says something, there has to be a good reason behind. After a brief contemplation, he sighed: "I am in a dilemma too... Ai! It's snowing."

Outside the window and against the backdrop of the black night, snowflakes are fluttering gently.

Zou Yan stood up and slowly walked to the window sill. Clasping his hands and admiring the later-than-expected first snowfall, he resembles an immortal from heaven.

Xiang Shaolong joined him at the window. Zou Yan is thrilled by the snowfall and suggested that they proceed to admire the snowflakes more clearly at the garden pavilion.

Amidst the falling snow, they strolled to the pavilion and stood erected side by side.

Zou Yan sighed deeply: “For the past eight days, Lu Buwei has been pestering me about Fengshui. He wants to find an auspicious burial plot for his deceased father. This man is exceedingly ambitious and Shaolong should be careful.”

Xiang Shaolong is full of respect for this philosopher.

Lu Buwei’s countless conversations with Zou Yan are simply out to determine if he is the new saint. Zou Yan could tell that he is not the real deal and issued this warning to prevent Xiang Shaolong from becoming too deeply embroiled with him.

Zou Yan spontaneously added: “On numerous occasions, Lu Buwei wanted me to endorse his <<The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu>>. I have rejected his offer on the excuse that the contents are preposterous. Does Shaolong know why?”

Xiang Shaolong could guess that this philosopher is using himself as an analogy to enlighten him. He humbly asked: “Please continue, Godfather.”

Zou Yan laughed: “This is the first time you addressed me as godfather. Are you used to it?”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled with embarrassment as Zou Yan continued: “Lu Buwei is a person who has his own mind. Even if he heavily emphasizes on you, in actual fact, you are just another tool to help him achieve his beautiful dream. Using the example of <<The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu>>, he is trying to impose his will onto others.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered hearing Li Si mention about letting Xiao Pan study the contents of the ancient encyclopaedias. He did not have the details and took this chance to ask: “Does his annals make sense?”

Zou Yan despising ranted: “What ‘Rule by benevolence’ as the mainstay and ‘Rewards and punishment’ as a support. They are all impractical stuff by Confucius. It is taking a step back, not a step forward. We can only excel if we keep moving forward. Since Shang Yang’s reforms, Qin has been governed by military law. Lu Buwei’s theories are the exact opposite. There will be trouble in the future and Shaolong has to take note.”

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice: “Godfather has great foresight. If my estimates are not incorrect, Lu Buwei will get into trouble sooner or later and die a horrible death.”

Zou Yan was shaken and glanced at him, realising: “So Shaolong has seen it coming. I have been worried over nothing.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed. It is because he knew of such a future that he cannot really relax and enjoy his current wealth and lifestyle. Maybe it is better to be ignorant about the future.

It is starting to snow heavily.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong was summoned to Lu Buwei's residence. Receiving him in his study, Lu Buwei exclaimed: “Later, Shaolong must enter the palace with me to visit His Majesty. Ai! I have been making excuses for you for ten over days and Empress Ji almost lost her temper.” He proceeded to advise: “Empress Ji seems to be concerned about you. Do not get into any trouble with her or even I will not be able to protect you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Rest assured Premier!”

Lu Buwei nodded: “I trust that you can resist her as well. I am concerned about you and just wanted to share this advice.”

Lu Buwei thought for a few seconds and revealed: “I have decided to lead the expedition to Eastern Zhou personally with Meng Ao as my assistant general. By the time Shaolong arrived in Han, Eastern Zhou should be eliminated and the Zhou legacy will end. From this moment, it will be a battle of the world's best heroes.”

A short pause later, he added: “With Xiaocheng’s death, Empress Jing and Guo Kai will be in power. Their political scene will be in chaos. I need to adjust my strategies to take advantage of this opportunity. The day I get rid of Lord Yangquan will be the day we expand our Qin operations. Before this happens, Shaolong must assist me in managing the six states. If they join forces against us because of our attack on Zhou, we will be at a disadvantage.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed helplessly. Whoever is anti-Lu Buwei is also anti-Xiang Shaolong. Presently, the fate of Wu Family and himself are intertwined with Lu Buwei’s. If Lu Buwei meets with a calamity, they will be affected as well. If Lord Yangquan manages to change the succession order, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan may lose their lives. Xiang Shaolong can only nod his head in agreement.

Digging deeper, everyone is only working for their personal benefits. If you talk about moral ethics, you will suffer at the hands of the rest of the unscrupulous people.

Lu Buwei’s eyes were shining sharply while he detailed: “On this trip, you will have a mask to hide your real identity as well. We must have different men accompanying you. Otherwise, when one man gets recognized, they will link you to Dong Horse Fanatic and everything will be even more complicated. Luckily, we have no shortage of manpower. From my own family warriors, I will select a band of loyal and expert swordsmen to be your personal escorts. We will add another thousand elite cavalry (soldiers on horseback) to accompany you. This arrangement should be able to protect you from any potential dangers during the trip. Xiao Yuetan will be joining you as your personal assistant.”

Xiang Shaolong is alarmed. From another point of view, these family warriors of Lu Buwei can be spying on him as well. Inspired, he checked: “Can Premier Lu add Li Si to my team?”

Puzzled, Lu Buwei stared at him and hesitated for a while before consenting: “Since Shaolong has such a request, I will see to it! Come! Let’s enter the palace and see the King!”

On the surface, things appear to be fine but from his hesitation, Lu Buwei is actually unhappy. It is hard to decide if he is unhappy over Xiang Shaolong’s independent mindset or that he does not think very highly of Li Si.

Beyond the carriage window, Xianyang has transformed into a pure white wonderland as it snowed non-stop.

The first snow is always the most delightful. In addition, the weather is not freezing cold. Some kids are running along the streets playing snow games. When the horse carriage turned into the main road leading to the palace, Xiang Shaolong could see some young girls making snowballs. He noticed that women are not confined to their homes, a practice which began after the Han Dynasty. During the warring states period, the State of Qin is the most open-minded as they are descendants of barbarians.

Lu Buwei did not say a word during the journey as both men are deep in their thoughts.

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong grasped the deep meaning behind Lu Buwei’s conquest.

Snow and heavy wind is disadvantageous for an attacking army but in this case, it brings two benefits instead.

Firstly, this move is unanticipated by common people. Under the cover of the snow, the invaders can make their way to the city wall undetected.

It is difficult to travel during winter season and communications is as good as non-existent. By the time the six states know about the attack, Eastern Zhou would have been conquered. Even if they knew about the attack at the earliest instance, they can only watch helplessly as it is an uphill task to intercede.

From this strategy, Lu Buwei has displayed his courage and risk-taking appetite. When they become enemies in the future, Xiang Shaolong must guard against his characteristic or he may stand to lose out.

Lu Buwei entered the Qin palace and went straight into the inner chambers as if it is his own residence. He alighted from his carriage at the garden bordering the inner chambers. Without reporting his presence, he swaggered into the back palace surrounded by his personal escorts.

Compared to six months ago when Xiang Shaolong first came to Qin, Lu Buwei's standing has been raised dramatically.

King Zhuangxiang emphasizes on relationships and trust while Lu Buwei is an ambitious and crafty schemer. Together, King

Zhuangxiang will only be manipulated and controlled by Lu Buwei.

Sounds of wooden swords clashing can be heard ahead of them.

Lu Buwei has a comforted smile on his face and remarked: “The Crown Prince is practising his swordsmanship.”

Viewing his expression, Xiang Shaolong wanted to tell him that Xiao Pan is not his son and see his reaction.

Moving forward, the corridor that they were walking along opened up into a bigger area.

Between two palace buildings is a small courtyard. Under the fluttering snowflakes, Xiao Pan is dueling with another child of around the same age.

Watching at the side are King Zhuangxiang, Zhu Ji, Lady Xiuli and Prince Cheng. There are also ten over palace attendants, two sword fighting coaches and one minister. They are surrounded by palace guards and the atmosphere is very strict and solemn.

King Zhuangxiang and the rest of them did not see them coming in. Lu Buwei whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “The boy dueling with the Crown Prince is Wang Jian’s son Wang Ben. Within the palace, he is the best fighter in his age group.”

Xiang Shaolong was excited and carefully assessed this future invincible general. He is indeed stocky and he has an alert

expression on his face just like Wang Jian. He knows when is the best time to attack and defend and is always one step ahead. If you can forecast an adult's success by analyzing his childhood, this 13 year old is already resembling a great general.

He still possesses some queries regarding the palace rules. How did Wang Ben get the rare honour to be Xiao Pan's practice partner? This must be Lu Buwei's idea to get Wang Jian over to his side.

King Zhuangxiang caught sight of them and joyfully waved them over.

Xiang Shaolong observed the pure bliss on his face and could not help asking himself: Do nice guys really finish last?

King Zhuangxiang whole heartedly received this benefactor who had helped him ascend the throne. Did he ever think that he is actually keeping a tiger as a pet?

This is not a time for deep thinking. Collecting his thoughts, he strode over to King Zhuangxiang.

Pack! Xiao Pan's wooden sword has been swept aside by Little Wang Ben, leaving him exposed.

Little Wang Ben frantically kept his sword and retreated. Kneeling on the floor, he pleaded: "Prince Zheng, please forgive Little Ben for being rash."

Xiao Pan saw Xiang Shaolong and is not interested in the duel anymore. However, he actually went forward and helped Little Ben up. He then whispered some nice words into Wang Ben ears.

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be happy or fearful. This teenager Qin Shi Huang has already learnt how to curry favour.

Book 11 Chapter 03 – Lady Hua Yang

Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei went ahead to pay their respects to King Zhuangxiang and the rest of his companions. Lu Buwei chuckled: “Shaolong has never met General Xu Xian!”

Xu Xian has the body of a typical Qin, tall and stocky. Just slightly shorter than Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei, he is dressed simply in official robes. If he puts on his combat armour, he will become the prestigious and fear-inducing Qin general.

Xu Xian’s eyes are lively but his cheekbones are too high and run in contrast with his straight nose, making his face slightly disorganised. Around thirty, he radiates calm and steadiness. After a few general exchanges with Xiang Shaolong, he plainly said: “I have heard of Grand Tutor’s fame a long time ago. Unfortunately, I was guarding the border and can only meet you today.”

Xiang Shaolong sensed that Xu Xian’s tone is icy and carry a hint of disdain. He did not seem to hold any respect for Lu Buwei at all. Xiang Shaolong could guess what has transpired and dare not extend the conversation.

Before Zhu Ji has a chance to speak up, the less enchanting and less graceful Lady Xiuli smiled: “General Xu is our famous general. Together with General Wang and Lu Gong, they are known as the three tiger generals of Qin!”

Xu Xian quickly expressed his modesty but no happiness can be seen from his face.

Xiang Shaolong analyzed the situation and committed it to memory. However, he still has no idea who Lu Gong is.

Xu Xian is on Lord Yangquan and Lady Xiuli's side and obviously has no good feelings for Lu Buwei. He had even mistaken Xiang Shaolong to be Lu Buwei's follower.

On the surface, Lu Buwei appears to be respectful and invited: "Only heroes can relate to heroes. Why don't you have a drink at my residence and exchange pointers with Shaolong?"

Xu Xian smiled: "Premier is too generous!" Turning around, he bade farewell to King Zhuangxiang and left without giving a definite answer to Lu Buwei's invitation.

Xiang Shaolong has a good impression of this gentleman who places his principles above his fear of authority.

Xiao Pan led Little Ben and greeted Grand Tutor Xiang. After paying obeisance, Little Ben asked: "Father is full of praises for Grand Tutor. When Grand Tutor is teaching Prince Zheng, can I watch at the side?"

Everyone burst out laughing after hearing him. Only Prince Chen glimpsed briefly at Xiang Shaolong before looking away. Prince Chen must have been influenced by the rumours spread by Lu Buwei's enemies.

An attendant came to report that the Empress Dowager wishes to see Xiao Pan.

King Zhuangxiang immediately instructed Xiao Pan to visit Lady Hua Yang under the escort of the attendant and other palace guards. Although Xiao Pan is unwilling to leave, he does not have a choice and departed with disappointment.

King Zhuangxiang made some comments to Empress Zhu Ji and concubine Lady Xiuli before bringing Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong into the imperial study. It then dawned upon Xiang Shaolong that this is not an ordinary visit.

In the study, the King and the two men took their respective seats. All the palace guards were dismissed, leaving the three of them in total privacy.

Seated higher, King Zhuangxiang looked to Xiang Shaolong who is seated on his lower left and smiled: “Shaolong is an appreciative family man and a great friend as well. I wished to have a longer chat with you but that will have to wait. Have you rested well?”

Xiang Shaolong is full of appreciation for King Zhuangxiang and his genuine caring nature. Among all the Kings of the seven states, this nature hardly exists. He hurriedly gave his thanks and affirmation.

Lu Buwei is surprisingly quiet and giggled at Xiang Shaolong.

King Zhuangxiang's eyes are shining with reflection as he softly sighed: "I have been held hostage in Zhao for a prolonged period and I had a rough time. Despite this, I managed to experience the sufferings of the commoners. As the King today, I still remind myself to understand what the common people are going through and create laws that benefit them. Ai! I also do not wish to start a war after I barely ascended the throne. However, Premier Lu is right. Offence is the best defence. If you do not attack others, others will eventually attack you. During these turbulent times, the only way to survive is to fight power with power. Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. If not for Lu Buwei's fanning the flames, King Zhuangxiang will not send his army against Eastern Zhou. In order to fully convince King Zhuangxiang, Lu Buwei must have proven that Eastern Zhou is collaborating with the other six states against Qin.

Unknowingly, he had lent Lu Buwei a big helping hand.

Lu Buwei intercepted: "This cannot be helped. The six states have ulterior motives towards Qin and are keen to limit our progress. Although Eastern Zhou is only made up of seven small provinces Henan, Luoyang, Guchen, Pingying, Yanshi, Gonghe and Zhongshi; we have to pass by their cities in order to reach the six states. Rather than let the six states occupy them and blockade us, it is better to attack first."

The corner of King Zhuangxiang's mouth curled up in a bitter smile and he did not reply at once. The atmosphere is filled with tension.

Lu Buwei officially state: “A single wrong step can cause the whole country to be annihilated. Please do not hesitate. Xiaocheng has just passed away and Han is at its weakest point. This is a golden opportunity which must not be missed. Otherwise, the consequences will unbearable.”

King Zhuangxiang simply said: “I understand. Premier, please proceed to attack Zhou!”

Facing Xiang Shaolong, he added: “I have discussed with Premier Lu. The elimination of Zhou is akin to chopping off an arm for Han’s King Huan Hui. There is not much we can do to appease him. Instead, we will focus on the other states. I know that Shaolong is an intelligent man. Therefore, we will leave everything to your discretion.”

Lu Buwei reminded: “Among the five states, Zhao and Yan are at war and we can ignore them for the time being. Regarding the other three states, we must not neglect Qi and Chu. We must wholeheartedly convince them that the attack on Zhou is an act of deterrent and not expansion. Between these two states, it is much easier to negotiate with Chu. Shaolong can present our good intentions to King Xiaolie. If you can sign an alliance treaty, it will be even better. Our Prince Zheng is growing up and it will be good to find a wife for him. I heard that King Xiaolie’s teenage daughter is a great beauty and is only slightly older than Crown Prince. If you can fix a marriage agreement for them, the Chu will definitely be appeased.”

Xiang Shaolong is nodding his head but his heart is groaning; Isn’t this bringing calamity to Chu’s little princess? Moreover,

Xiang Shaolong has to lie through his teeth and bring harm to the other party. Although he is not so innocent that he has never cause harm to others but whenever he plots against someone, he had a valid reason and a strong motive. Take Zhao Mu's capture as an example. It is for personal revenge and also self-preservation, unlike this mission which is to strike the potential enemy first.

To console himself, he thought: Tian Dan, Li Yuan, Prince Xinling, Han Chuang and Lord Longyang are all plotting and harming people every day to benefit themselves and their own countries.

He could not help but smiled bitterly.

King Zhuangxiang has been scrutinising his facial expressions. Understandingly, he commented with a tinge of guilt: "I can tell that Shaolong is a hero and does not employ dirty tricks and schemes. Like you, I hated these trying times where you have to kill or be killed. Ai! There are many things I am doing against my will but they have to be done." Ending, he sighed loudly.

Lu Buwei frowned: "Is Your Majesty referring to Lord Yangquan?"

Helplessly, King Zhuangxiang nodded: "After all, he is the younger brother of the Empress Dowager. If not for his past effort in getting the Emperor to acknowledge me as his successor, the Empress Dowager may refuse to accept me. Now that I have to confront him, the Empress Dowager will be very upset."

Lu Buwei left his seat and kneeled down, promising: “Rest assured Your Majesty. I will do my utmost best to handle this matter. Unless the Left Premier is really staging a rebellion, I will not act. We can try to hide this matter from Empress Dowager and not disturb her peaceful lifestyle.”

Witnessing this, Xiang Shaolong could only join Lu Buwei in kneeling in front of King Zhuangxiang. In his heart, he admired Lu Buwei’s tactic. Lu Buwei is highly versatile and knows how to please King Zhuangxiang. No wonder he can remain in his good books for so long.

He naturally knew that Lu Buwei is lying. Given his treacherous methods, he can easily force Lord Yangquan to rebel. By then, he will have acquired Lord Yangquan’s authority and killing him or not is inconsequential.

King Zhuangxiang is expectedly happy. When the two men have returned to their seats, he joyfully proclaim: “With Premier Lu’s promise, I can put my mind at ease.”

Lu Buwei informed Xiang Shaolong: “Although you have been here for almost a year, the time spent at Xianyang is limited and there are many things you are unaware of. Nonetheless, you need not be distracted with these matters. I have prepared everything for you. In three days, you will leave for Wei in order to coincide with our plan to attack Eastern Zhou.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself and consented.

An attendant came to report that Empress Dowager Lady Hua Yang wishes to see Xiang Shaolong. The three men are equally shocked.

Under the attendant guidance, Xiang Shaolong arrived at the giant palace on the east. Stepping into one of her chambers, he noticed that besides Xiao Pan, Qin Qing whose beauty rivalled Ji Yanran is also present and is seated on the right of Lady Hua Yang. He hurriedly kneeled down to pay his respects.

Dressed in luxurious and glamorous clothes, Lady Hua Yang is in her mid forties and she glows with a unique royal charm. Age is catching up to her and her makeup cannot conceal all her wrinkles. Despite all this, Xiang Shaolong can easily visualize the days when she is the favourite woman of King Zhuangxiang's father and her beauty was envied by all.

On her right, the widow Qin Qing is as emotionless as ever. She appears to be unconcerned about everything under the sky. Even Xiang Shaolong's presence did not draw a single reaction from her.

In a gentle and peaceful voice, Lady Hua Yang hailed: "Grand Tutor please rise!"

Xiang Shaolong stood up nervously. He does not know what this powerful Qin Empress Dowager has summoned him for. Respectfully lowering his head, he dare not face her straight on.

After an uncomfortable silence, Lady Hua Yang gently said: "Grand Tutor, please raise your head."

Xiang Shaolong obeyed and raised his head to face this Lady Hua Yang who is seated on a raised platform. He intentionally did not look at Qin Qing and Xiao Pan.

Their eyes met.

Lady Hua Yang's eyes lit up and sighed: "Such a talent, you are indeed a dragon among men. Do not mistake me for judging by appearances. If you are full of integrity, you will radiate a similar aura. If you have been upright all your life, your eyes will shine with righteousness. When I first saw His Majesty, I could tell that he has a kind heart and will be a good king who loves his followers. He is far better than the other willful and arrogant candidate to succeed the throne. I confessed to the late King that I was fortunate to enter the palace and serve him but did not have the luck to produce an heir for him. I wished for the late King to decree Zhuangxiang as my son to fulfill my dream. The late King granted my wish and I was officially appointed as his mother. Other people mistook me for being selfish but they have no idea that there is a deeper meaning to it."

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted as he could not imagine this Lady Hua Yang to be such a street smart heroine. She had chosen the right man to rule Qin. The only issue is that she has neglected Lu Buwei the ambitious man. After all, Lu Buwei's interest to dominate the whole world may not be in Qin's best interests.

Lady Hua Yang sighed: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please be seated. Ai! Three days later, it will be the late king's death anniversary so I am slightly emotional. Please do not take offence."

Xiang Shaolong sat down with uncertainty and he was served tea by an attendant. Within the chamber, the atmosphere was peaceful and tranquil. Outside the chamber, the landscape is ever changing as the white snow accumulates wherever they land.

Qin Qing the classic ancient beauty has her head lowered and remained silent throughout. She looks like she do not require anything more in life but still be very satisfied and at peace.

She resembles a white lotus that can only be admired from afar. If one has any evil thoughts about her, it will only ruin her perfect composure.

Until now, Xiang Shaolong did not have a single clue why Lady Hua Yang summoned him. Unable to hold back any longer, he glanced over to Xiao Pan. Xiao Pan has been staring at him and shook his head slightly to assure him that there is nothing to be worried about.

The chamber is so quiet that no one wants to be the first to destroy this stillness.

Just as Xiang Shaolong is preparing to spend his time admiring the lovely interior design of the chamber, Lady Hua Yang softly remarked: "Today, my main purpose to summon you is to see what kind of man would Ji Yanran, whose fame is equal to Qin Qing, will fall in love with. I have finally gotten a satisfactory answer!"

Xiang Shaolong was finally enlightened and expressed his

modesty.

The silent Qin Qing at last speak up in a voice that is more melodious than the singing of the forest birds: “Miss Ji has been here for some time but I have yet to meet her. Can Grand Tutor Xiang make an arrangement for us to meet? The Empress Dowager wishes to meet her as well. I heard that Mister Zou Yan is a top philosopher. If he has the time to make the journey here, I will receive them with sincerity.”

By hearing how she represented Lady Hua Yang to invite both persons shows Qin Qing’s high standing within the Empress Dowager’s palace.

Xiang Shaolong had to look over to her. The moment their eyes meet, this beauty tried to avoid his gaze.

Irritated, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Does Grand Tutor Qin’s guest list includes myself as well?”

Qin Qing was taken aback. A hint of displeasure can been seen on her face. She continued to avoid his gaze and kept her head lowered.

Lady Hua Yang laughed: “Grand Tutor Xiang, please excuse Qing’er. After losing her husband, she does not come into contact with any young men.”

Xiang Shaolong apologised: “I am really sorry for offending you.

Will Grand Tutor Qin please forgive me? I have to return home and prepare for my mission. If there is nothing else from Her Majesty, Shaolong hereby asks to take his leave.”

Lady Hua Yang was roused and asked: “When is Grand Tutor Xiang leaving?”

Xiang Shaolong told her accordingly. After a short contemplation, Lady Hua Yang checked: “Does Grand Tutor Xiang’s trip includes the State of Chu?”

Xiang Shaolong recalled that she is of Chu royalty. When King Zhuangxiang first met her, Lu Buwei dressed him up as a Chu citizen to remind Lady Hua Yang of her Chu origins. That is also the reason King Zhuangxiang changed his name to Zi Chu (Son of Chu). Xiang Shaolong reported that he will make a trip to Chu as well.

Lady Hua Yang sighed: “Within these two days, I will send someone to pass something to Grand Tutor. When Grand Tutor is in Chu, please help me to pass the item to Lady Xiu. Ai! If not for my health, I really hope to make a trip back to Chu personally.”

Xiang Shaolong consented and left without looking at Qin Qing anymore.

Ten odd steps away from the chamber entrance, Xiao Pan ran out of the chamber after him. The palace guards protecting him are running over as well.

Xiao Pan faced the palace guards and ordered: “Stand where you are and stop following me!”

All the palace guards instantly halted to a complete stop and remained motionless.

After Xiao Pan showed his authority, he pretended that nothing has happened and led Xiang Shaolong into the garden. With his two eyes turning red, he cried: “Master! I killed Zhao Mu! Please do not hold it against me. This is the last time I am addressing you as Master. I will not dare to do it in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong was getting worried about the power of the future Qin Shi Huang. He was taken by surprise at this news and he reconfirmed: “You killed Zhao Mu?”

Holding back his hot tears, Xiao Pan coldly revealed: “I whispered into his ear who I really am and that I am killing him to avenge my mother. With that, I stabbed him in the centre of his heart. Grand Tutor taught me that this is the surest way to kill somebody. Hng! The terrible way he died is really pleasing. Mum can finally rest in peace.”

Xiang Shaolong is freezing all over.

Xiao Pan was 13 when he left Handan City. As a 14 year old, not only does he have the guts to kill, he knows exactly how to kill a man for sure. Even though he is avenging his mother’s death, his cruelty and his indifferent attitude is chilling to the bone.

Xiao Pan noticed that Xiang Shaolong is keeping quiet. He thought that Xiang Shaolong is upset with him and hurriedly said: “Grand Tutor need not worry. After I killed him, I jumped into the Empress’s bosom and cried that I have taken revenge for her instead. I guarantee that nobody will find out. They all had the impression that I loved my Empress mother greatly.”

Xiang Shaolong was tongue-tied and could not find an appropriate reply.

Xiao Pan softly said: “But I really care for Empress!”

Xiang Shaolong finally uttered: “We must not be alone for too long. Your parents and Premier are waiting for us to have lunch together...”

Xiao Pan held onto his sleeve and pleaded: “Grand Tutor! Can you visit me before you leave?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement before they left the Empress Dowager palace.

Back in the Wu Residence, it is nearly evening.

As he alighted from the horse carriage, an attendant reported that Li Si is here to look for him. Presently, he is waiting in the guest hall. Xiang Shaolong rushed over to see Li Si.

After the usual courtesies, a seated Li Si gratefully thanked: “Due

to your recommendation, Li Si is able to accompany Grand Tutor to visit the six states. I do not know how I can repay your kindness. Ai! Life in the Premier residence is causing me to lose my sex appetite.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to sprout vulgarities. He smiled: “Brother Li need not thank me. It is me who will need to rely on Brother Li! When you are more familiar about the six states, it will help in the progress of your career.”

Li Si hesitated for while. Unable to endure any longer, he had to ask: “I had thought it over many times but I still do not know why Grand Tutor has such high aspirations for me? I have always been deprived of an opportunity to showcase my talent...”

Xiang Shaolong laughed and patted his shoulder: “I have never made a mistake in choosing the right people. Has Brother Li packed your luggage?”

Li Si’s face turned light red and he awkwardly replied: “The moment I received the order from Premier, I got everything ready for the trip.”

Both men look at each other in the eye and suddenly burst out laughing, knowing what each other is think about.

To this future Grand Premier of Qin, Xiang Shaolong invited: “Since you are here, why don’t Brother Li stay for dinner?”

Li Si chuckled: “There are many days ahead of us and we will certainly dine together during the trip.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that he wants to avoid raising Lu Buwei’s suspicions and did not repeat his offer. While sending him to the main door, he took the chance to ask: “Is Brother Li clear about the situation in Xianyang?”

Li Si answered in a low voice: “Let’s talk more on the road.”

Watching as he gradually disappeared from sight, Xiang Shaolong was feeling really ridiculous and crazy for him. The current Li Si is lowly regarded by everyone and down on his luck but who could have guessed that in the future, he will be the Grand Premier of Qin?

Book 11 Chapter 04 – Exhausted

Xiang Shaolong fetched Ji Yanran and Zou Yan to the Empress Dowager palace before he went to find Xiao Pan and Wang Ben. He got them to duel with each other first and then instructed them to attack him at the same time.

The two boys are thrilled to hear this and raised their wooden swords to attack him like in a real fight. Having inherited his father's strength coupled with a good martial arts foundation in swordsmanship, Little Ben is especially excited. Unless it is Xiang Shaolong, otherwise, it will be hard to fight both of them without hurting them.

Xiang Shaolong shifted to the side and evaded a thrust from Wang Ben. He returned a thrust which Wang Ben hastily avoided by retreating. It was a false retreat. As Xiang Shaolong parried a blow from Xiao Pan's wooden sword, Wang Ben leapt towards him and chopped down heavily on Xiang Shaolong's head.

“Good move!” Xiang Shaolong cried and met his blow head on. Piak! Wang Ben's entire arm went numb. Wang Ben was about to press on with another attack when Xiang Shaolong raised his right foot, pretending to kick out. A shocked Wang Ben fell back, sheathing his sword with his face full of indignation.

Xiang Shaolong stopped the fight and smiled at Wang Ben: “Are you angry that I did not follow the rules and tried to kick you?”

Wang Ben's face reddened. Lowering his head, he replied: “I dare

not!”

Xiang Shaolong softly asked: “If you are fighting a war, will you blame the enemy for kicking you?” His voice turned fierce at the last line.

Wang Ben quivered with fright. Kneeling down on the floor, he shouted: “I understand!” Xiang Shaolong is satisfied with his reply and roared: “Then you better get up and attack now!”

Wang Ben shot up from his kneeling position and advanced very quickly with his wooden sword thrusting at chest level.

Xiao Pan is spurned on and attacked Xiang Shaolong from the other side.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and kicked the blunt side of Xiao Pan’s wooden sword. He continued to evade Wang Ben’s powerful strike and tripped him. Wang Ben fell flat on his face and lost hold of his wooden sword.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that Xiao Pan is undefended and thrust his sword towards him.

Just when Xiao Pan is about to be stabbed, Wang Ben somersaulted up and used his body to shield Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong frantically withdrew his thrust. Staring at Wang Ben, he simply asked: “Is Little Ben planning to use his body to

absorb this blow?”

Wang Ben proudly declared: “Father has taught me to protect Crown Prince even at the cost of my life.”

Xiang Shaolong was very moved. Smiling, he asked again: “If you did not lose your sword, you can use it to deflect my attack right?”

Wang Ben excitedly praised: “Grand Tutor is great! Father will never kick me in a swordfight.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “This cannot be compared. Come! Let me teach you how to withstand blows.”

Xiao Pan recalled the days when he was tripped heavily by Xiang Shaolong. Losing his composure, he cheered: “Ah! That’s wonderful...”

Catching a stern glare from Xiang Shaolong, he quickly shut up.

A round of applause can be heard from the side. Under the escort of her palace maids, Zhu Ji came up to them and giggled: “Can Grand Tutor spare a few minutes to chat with me?”

Xiang Shaolong looked to the disappointed Xiao Pan and Wang Ben who had not fought to their heart’s content. Sighing to himself, he nodded: “I will not dare to disobey Empress.”

Sounds of Xiao Pan and Wang Ben's clashing and shouting can be heard from the practice grounds. Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji are seated in a pavilion within the royal gardens while the palace maids and palace guards are situated away from them.

Every time he faced this graceful, elegant, charming, cunning and intelligent Qin empress, Xiang Shaolong felt uneasy and anxious. He has to constantly remind himself to observe the boundaries of men and women and suppress his urge to disregard all the rules. Zhu Ji seems to be facing the same problems.

He is certain that Zhu Ji's devotion for King Zhuangxiang is a mixture of gratitude and love. Between himself and Zhu Ji is an exciting and wild passion. After all, they had met under extraordinary circumstances. Suppressing her emotions, Zhu Ji looks especially charming.

Zhu Ji plainly gazed at him and lightly sighed: "I have barely seen you a few times when you have to leave again, making me melancholic. Ai! How can I ever repay you? You have saved us both mother and son and taken revenge for me with Le Cheng and Zhao Mu!"

Xiang Shaolong dare not look straight at her. He respectfully said: "That is my responsibility! If Empress has other wishes that I cannot fulfill, it is my fault and not yours."

Zhu Ji reproached: "Even you are playing games with me. Everyone is respectful and fearful of me now. If you, my confidante, are really afraid of me, who else can I pour out my sorrows? Lu Buwei is avoiding me like the plague and you are

following his example!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “The most fearful place in the world in the royal palace. Doesn’t Empress know that someone is trying very hard to replace you mother and son?”

Zhu Ji’s mouth curled up in a smile. She casually mentioned: “In terms of scheming, I have my fair share of experience. Grand Tutor Xiang need not be worried.”

She giggled: “Do not behave as if I am always trying to seduce you! Although life in the palace is boring, I am satisfied to just watch Zheng’er grow up and do not care about other things.”

If this discussion carries on, something bad will happen. Xiang Shaolong changed the topic and asked: “Who is actually coveting this throne?”

Zhu Ji batted an eye at him. After a short moment of reflection, she replied with disdain: “Most of the Qin officials are amiable. Only those in Lord Gao Ling’s camp and Lord Yangquan’s camp are hostile towards us mother and son. The others are either bribed by Lu Buwei or just onlookers. I don’t believe they are capable of anything drastic.”

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Who is Lord Gao Ling?”

Zhu Ji replied: “Lord Gao Ling is Ying. Originally, he is supposed to be the next King of Qin. Due to Lady Hua Yang intervention,

Zhuangxiang was crowned King and Ying was conferred as the Lord of Gao Ling. The traitorous Du Cang has been fanning the hatred in his heart. Thus, Ying has been spreading rumours that Lu Buwei and Zhuangxiang caused the death of the late King. He possesses ulterior motives. At the end of the day, he just wants the throne for himself!”

An important meeting was held in the main hall of the Wu Residence before their departure.

Wu Yingyuan started: “This coming year shall be a challenging period for us since we come to Xianyang. Not only is Shaolong away, Premier Lu has to lead an expedition to Eastern Zhou. Only Master Tu is left to hold the fort in Premier Residence and he may be overwhelmed by work. Luckily, I have cultivated many supportive relationships over the past year. As long as we maintain a low profile, everything should be fine.”

Teng Yi updated Xiang Shaolong: “We have discussed this earlier. Big Brother Wu Zhuo and Wu Guo will stay behind and assist in managing the residence. In case of any trouble, we are not powerless. During this time, we will send most of our men back to the farms and avoid all the issues happening in Xianyang City.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Why don’t Second Brother stay back as well? Sister-in-law is giving birth soon and ...”

Teng Yi interrupted: “Speak no further. This trip seems simple but it is hard to predict the reactions of the six states. If I stay behind, how can I sleep peacefully at night?”

Hearing the two words 'giving birth', everyone has an uncomfortable expression on their face, especially Wu Yingyuan.

Xiang Shaolong is feeling bad that his failure to impregnate Wu Tingfang is becoming more and more obvious.

Back in the 21st century, he can undergo hospital checks to find out the real reason. During these ancient times, everyone is equally ignorant.

Wu Zhuo sighed: "I regret not being able to accompany Third Brother on this trip but there is no other choice. Ai!"

Tao Fang added: "Your elder brothers have selected twelve of the best fighters from the elite brothers to be your personal escorts. Every one of them can fight ten men and will be of great help to you. Shaolong must never travel anywhere alone. There are many people who cannot wait to get rid of you. I heard that Lord Yangquan has sent a top assassin to assassinate you during this trip. He wants to get rid of this thorn in his flesh and affect Lu Buwei's standing as well. Shaolong please be cautious."

Xiang Shaolong nodded. Wu Yingyuan sighed: "Is Shaolong really bringing Tingfang and Princess Qin with you?"

Tao Fang suggested: "Why don't you bring Chun Ying and her fellow maids with you? They can wait on the three madams.(WTF, ZQ, JYR)"

Xiang Shaolong happily agreed and reminded himself to guard against Lord Yangquan.

Wu Yingyuan remarked: “Premier Lu has spoken to me about this trip. He will present you with various valuables and three thousand pieces of gold as bribes for this trip. On our side, we will prepare a hundred top quality horses, a group of courtesans, and an additional three thousand pieces of gold. This should help Shaolong satisfy the appetite of those greedy men.”

Hearing this, Jing Jun was amazed: “This can feed me for ten lifetimes!”

Teng Yi was downcast when he heard about giving courtesans as gifts.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Any gift is fine but I am not comfortable with giving courtesans as gifts. Can Father-in-law exclude this item?”

Wu Yingyuan is slightly surprised. After staring at Xiang Shaolong for a while, he nodded: “Since Shaolong has such a weird dislike, I will not force you.”

More discussions are held and the meeting was concluded.

Ji Yanran happened to come back home and is received by Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian. They were chatting about the proud and

cold widow Qin Qing.

Somehow, Xiang Shaolong is not keen to hear anything that concerns her.

Ting Fangshi's early death has made him more conscious about the heavy burden of a serious relationship. From the viewpoint of a 21st century custom of monogamy, his three wives are making him feel like the luckiest man on earth. Moreover, there is still Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi waiting for him at Daliang.

Enough!

He does not want to be distracted by women anymore.

His only wish is to help Xiao Pan ascend the throne and control Qin. He will be able to retire and live the rest of his life in complete bliss.

Out of nowhere, he is beginning to feel exhausted.

When Xiang Shaolong got up, he entered the palace and taught Xiao Pan and Wang Ben how to fight with their bare hands. While he is away, they can continue to practise.

The snow has stopped the night before and the weather is beautiful. The winter wonderland is tremendously pleasing to look at.

Others may not find it special but he, Xiang Shaolong, is from another time zone. These snow-capped ancient looking palace constructions is causing him to immerse in his surrounding and forgetting who he is.

His past is like a dream. His present life is like another dream.

Sitting alone in the pavilion, he watched Xiao Pan and Wang Ben as they sparred. The boys were enjoying their session when Qin Qing's sweet voice sounded behind him: "Ai! Grand Tutor Xiang! Prince Zheng has forgotten the time again."

Xiang Shaolong was rudely awaken from his day dreaming. Turning back, he saw Qin Qing dressed in a yellowish-purple gown with a white and fluffy cloak. She gazed peacefully at Xiao Pan and Wang Ben.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up and greeted: "Good Morning Grand Tutor Qin. Let me fetch the Crown Prince."

Qin Qing's eyes turned to him and she greeted him in return. Shaking her head, she objected: "The Crown Prince is enjoying himself very much and Grand Tutor Xiang has made an effort to come all the way here. We shall let him skip today's lesson."

Xiang Shaolong remembered that more political infighting will take place tomorrow. He sat down and plainly invited: "Grand Tutor Qin, please have a seat!"

Surprisingly, Qin Qing obediently sat down on the other side of the stone table. She softly commented: “The Crown Prince seems to favour you. With you around, he is much happier. On normal days, he will be so quiet unlike kids of his age. He seems to carrying a lot of mental burden and I feel so sad for him.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Zhao Ni and was depressed so he kept his silence.

By now, Wang Ben is gaining the upper hand on Xiao Pan. He dare not defeat the Crown Prince and Xiao Pan tripped him instead. With Wang Ben flat on his face, the victorious Xiao Pan cheered loudly.

Xiang Shaolong roared: “Come here!”

Wang Ben flipped up agilely and went to the pavilion joyfully with Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong interrogated Wang Ben: “You were gaining the upper hand earlier, why did you miss the opportunity?”

Wang Ben looked at Xiao Pan awkwardly and lowered his head confessing: “I will get killed for offending the Crown Prince!”

Xiao Pan was astonished and exclaimed: “What! Why did you give in to me?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “What do you expect? You are the Crown Prince! But if you follow my method to practice, you will not get hurt easily. The next time you are fighting close combat, you can fight on a thick layer of straw mats. That will prevent any injuries. Before you practise, do plenty of warm-ups and you will be safe. Clear?”

Both boys expressed their affirmation and rushed off to practise with their swords.

Xiang Shaolong turned back to Qin Qing and smiled: “Kids are the most adorable. However, one day, they will be like us and lose the innocence they have to enjoy life to the fullest. Then, I will feel that reality is cruel.”

Qin Qing was in a daze. After a moment of thinking, she remarked: “Grand Tutor Xiang seems to be tired of life!”

Xiang Shaolong was becoming emotional. Sighing, he did not reply her.

Other the other hand, Qin Qing could not hold back and had to ask: “I have never seen anyone who dares to speak to the Crown Prince the way that you do. Most people could not wait to get into his good books instead. Does Grand Tutor Xiang not cherish the official position and power you have currently?”

Xiang Shaolong is secretly alarmed that Qin Qing is beginning to be interested in him. This love must not grow. He wonders if she sees him in a different light after meeting Ji Yanran yesterday.

Thinking of this, he casually commented: "Life is only a few decades long. I cannot be bothered and do whatever I think is correct. Otherwise, life will be boring." He stood up and paid his respects: "I have to pack my luggage. I'll see you next time."

Qin Qing cannot imagine that he will take the initiative to leave first. Fumbling, she stood up and returned the gesture.

Xiang Shaolong left the pavilion and had taken two steps towards Xiao Pan when Qin Qing yelled out behind him: "Grand Tutor Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong was astounded and turned around. Qin Qing lowered her beautiful head and wished: "The story about a drop of honey was brilliant. I understand the meaning of it. Have a safe journey!" Her face reddening, she turned around and left.

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly to himself. Later, he must interrogate Ji Yanran and find out what other secrets have she revealed to this lady who is as beautiful as herself.

Book 11 Chapter 05 – Analyzing the Situation

Three days before Lu Buwei is leading the army to invade Eastern Zhou; Xiang Shaolong left Xianyang with his team and traveled east towards the Yellow River. They were protected by one thousand elite Qin soldiers.

Except for Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian, Teng Yi and Jing Jun, the other representatives from the Wu Family are the twelve elite brothers. Despite their limited number, everyone is highly skilled and should not be taken lightly.

From Lu Buwei's side are Li Si, Xiao Yuetan and three hundred family warriors. These men report directly to Xiao Yuetan. Luckily, this talented man is on fantastic terms with Xiang Shaolong and there should be no conflict of power.

Of course there are Meng Ao's sons Meng Wu and Meng Tian. Despite their young age, they are full of respect for Xiang Shaolong. Teng Yi and the rest doted on them as well.

The leader of the soldiers is Major Lu Xiong, a relative of Lu Buwei. He appears to be respectful towards Xiang Shaolong but he has shifty eyes and Xiang Shaolong did not have a good impression of him. Since they are traveling together, he can only pretend to be courteous towards him as well.

Compared to the trip to Zhao, they have more men but Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi felt that they were less powerful instead.

They reached the west bank of the river and will soon cross into Han's border.

The river is flowing to the east and the surrounding hills are different in height. Overall, the scenery is mesmerizing.

The snow fall has resumed last night after stopping for five days. Everyone started to put on their fur coats. Dressed in their snow white fur coats, the three girls are as pretty as Barbie dolls.

They are happy to be part of the trip and pointed at the different sceneries and are chatting with enjoyment. Chun Ying and her three fellow maids are traveling behind them.

Along the way, Li Si mixed among the family warriors of Lu Buwei so as to avoid letting Xiao Yuetan learn about the special relationship he has with Xiang Shaolong.

At evening time, they camped on a high ground between the river and a red pine forest. They are prepared to cross the river tomorrow morning.

Lu Xiong sent a few hundred men to find wood to build rafts. Sounds of chopping wood and grunting can be heard from the forest.

While the maids are managing the tents, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi strolled along the river.

Although the weather is extremely cold, the river did not turn into ice. Since the air is cold and the water is warm, the river water evaporates and crystallizes into ice on the tree branches along the river. It is a miracle to see these silvery white crystals hanging like a Christmas decoration.

With a beautiful picture laid in front of them, neither of them wanted to say anything.

As they stepped onto the soft snow, a light squishing sound can be heard. Looking at the snowy forest and the snowflakes dancing in the air, all their worries are gone with the wind.

Unknowingly, they have left the camp boundaries.

Footsteps can be heard from behind. As they turned around, Li Si appeared among the white background.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi caught each other's eye, knowing that Li Si is not here for an idle chat.

Teng Yi laughed: "Is it cold?"

Li Si hands are hidden in the sleeves of his outer robe. When he breathes, the air leaving his mouth is whitish. He came directly in front of Xiang Shaolong. Looking up at the flying snow and looking back at the red pine forest, he shared: "This red pine tree is highly resistant to bugs and is very good for building houses or furniture. It can be made into turpentine as well and be used for lamps."

Surprised, Teng Yi stated: “I was born in the wilderness and naturally knew about this tree. I did not expect Brother Li to know this as well.”

Li Si smiled: “Travelling ten thousand miles is better than reading ten thousand books. Since young, I love to travel and learn at the same time. I also make friends with capable people and learn from them. The more you ask the more you know. Brother Teng, please don’t laugh at me.”

Xiang Shaolong was impressed with his elegant speech, knowledge and experience. No wonder he can help Xiao Pan unite the world. Clapping him lightly on his shoulder, he suggested: “Let’s continue to explore this area!”

Li Si nodded his head happily and they proceeded to walk upstream.

Teng Yi pointed at the icicles hanging on the trees and commented: “When the sun is up, these icicles will fall to the ground like flowers. That will be a rare sight.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that Li Si is unresponsive. After a quick contemplation, he is certain that Li Si has something to say. He sincerely asked: “We are all brothers of the same family. If Brother Li has anything on his mind, feel free to say it!”

Li Si smiled: “Both brothers are farsighted and knowledgeable. What is your opinion of the six states?”

Teng Yi laughed: “Brother Li is a scholar and we are unrefined boors. Why don’t you enlighten us instead?”

Li Si expressed his modesty and explained: “Both brothers must not laugh at me. I love to fantasize but there is something I cannot explain. The six states are Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei and Han. Except for Han who is always the weakest, the other five states have had a period of prosperity and power and many talented men in service. Why have they been unable to unite the world?”

Both Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are flabbergasted. This theory sounds simple; if you cannot defeat the other states, you cannot conquer their lands. But to find a really convincing reason is harder than it looks.

Li Si stopped speaking. Watching the river flow below him, his eyes shone with wisdom. Recollecting a memory, he leisurely said: “On an evening three years ago, I witnessed a strange event at the border of Wei and Chu. There was a bunch of frogs stuck in a dry well. For some reason, they begin to fight among themselves. There were some stronger frogs who won every fight. When all the weak frogs are dead, the strong frogs begin fighting among themselves. By then, all the frogs are weak and injured. Even the last frog died because of excessive bleeding. I was enlightened that the six states are like the frogs in the well. Limited by the environment and fighting relentlessly, they will be defeated and killed. I was motivated to relocate to Qin to try my luck. There was only one thing on my mind: Only Qin, the frog who is watching the fight outside the well, will be the last and final winner.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi nodded in agreement. This analogy explains why Qin can eventually catch up and annihilate the other six states. Qin is further away in the west and is unaffected by the constant inter-state battles.

Li Si has been deprived of a chance to showcase his talent. Now that he has started speaking, he continued to reveal: “Originally, Chu has the best chance to conquer all the lands. Chu is in the south where the land is the most fertile. After King Zi Hui conquered Chen, Cai, Qi and Ju province, they gained a huge amount of territory. But because they have plenty of resources, they lead very comfortable lives and the population became extravagant and rotten. Although they are rich, they lack quality. They have a huge army but neglect their training so the army cannot withstand a real war.”

Teng Yi nodded his head: “Well said, Brother Li. The people of Chu are arrogant and unrealistic. The recent generations of kings have been hugely unpopular and the Chu officials are always busy fighting or scheming among themselves. The citizens have lost confidence in their government and many parts of their city are in a state of disrepair.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen and sighed.

Li Si continued: “If we only focus on military competency, Zhao is the most promising among the six states. They have over two thousand miles of territory, thousands of chariots, tens of thousands of soldiers and horses. They are protected by mountains in the west, River Zheng in the south, River Qing in the east and

facing Yan in the north. When Zhao's King Wuling ascended the throne, he abolished traditions and revolutionised the army uniforms and methods of war. Zhao was invincible. Unfortunately, he is succeeded by incompetent leaders and Zhao can only rely on Lian Po and Li Mu to hold off the enemies. The battle of Changping is most regrettable. Like the frogs in the well, no matter how strong you are, once you have a bleeding wound, you will bleed to death."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are feeling perplexed. Is Li Si here to exhibit his observations?

Teng Yi spoke up: "Han has always been weak. Yan is facing the Xiong Nu in the north and Qi, Chu in the south. Although Prince Dan of Yan is highly talented, he's hands are still tied. Prince Xinling of Wei and Tian Dan of Qi are the remaining talents who can still pose a threat to us. What does Brother Li think?"

Li Si smiled: "No matter how strong they are, they are still two injured frogs in the well!"

Pausing for a while, he calmly explained: "Prince Xinling's injury is that the Wei King is prejudiced against him and limits his progress. Tian Dan's injury is the attitude of the Qi citizens."

Xiang Shaolong remembered that Li Si has studied under Qi's Xunzi, he was curious and requested: "Please elaborate!"

With his two hands behind his back, Li Si continued to walk upstream.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi caught each other's eyes. They felt that this down and out scholar seems to have become a different person who is on top of the whole world. They hurried to his two sides.

Li Si is unaware that he is now the centre of attention. Raising his head, he breathed heavily with pride and explained: "Qi is only good at boasting. Hei! Seriously, I used to indulge in some boasting as well. Don't even talk about the other schools; right in the place where I studied, there are thousands of scholars. If they debate about politics, arts, philosophy, etc, no one is their match. If we talk about fielding an army to fight a war, no one has the interests or the ability. Tian Dan may have risen to power and prevent the destruction of the country but circumstances have changed. Those empty-talkers are just not bothered to challenge him."

Turning to face Xiang Shaolong, he suggested: "Grand Tutor's mission is to prevent the six states from allying. If we focus on Qi first, it will be much more effective. As long as Qi cowers like a tortoise, Chu will not act rashly. With Qi and Chu out of the picture, Zhao and Yan embroiled in a war, what can Wei accomplish on its own?"

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are stunned. They finally understood the real intention of Li Si's words. He is hinting that the first target should be Qi instead of Wei.

They were anxious to meet up with Zhao Ya and Zhao Zhi but this matter is too important. Personal issues that do not affect the mission have to be put aside. With this turn of events, they have to

reassess their entire planning.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Brother Li is wise and farsighted. I am truly enlightened by your words. Let’s change our route to Qi and then to Chu and complete our mission.”

They proceed to discuss about Qi’s issues before returning back to camp.

Xiang Shaolong immediately summoned Xiao Yuetan and Lu Xiong into his tent. He instructed them to change the first destination to Qi but did not explain why.

Xiao Yuetan seriously stated: “In this case, I will immediately send someone to notify Qi about our arrival. Zhao is not as weak as Han. Shall we make ourselves known and ask for permission to cross their country? If we just cross without informing Zhao of our presence, we may incur their anger.”

This advice sounds reasonable. Xiang Shaolong has decided to change the journey without much consideration as there is limited time for him to think about all the details. Listening to Xiao Yuetan’s words, he could feel a headache coming and is momentarily undecided.

The relations between Zhao and Qi are strained. If he went ahead to conspire with Qi and ignored Zhao, Empress Jing may be annoyed and send Li Mu after them. Then they will be in deep shit.

Lu Xiong's countenance changed slightly and commented: "Premier Lu has indicated that the first destination should be Wei's capital of Daliang. The entire journey has been planned accordingly. If we just change our plans because of Grand Tutor, it may affect our strategies and the morale of our army. The roads ahead are treacherous. Can Grand Tutor stick to the original plan instead?" Xiang Shaolong thought that he is over sensitive but he does have some misgivings too. He did not know what to say and kept quiet.

Xiao Yuetan chose to side with Xiang Shaolong and reminded: "I am afraid that General has misunderstood Premier's intention. Premier has instructed us that when we leave Xianyang City, Grand Tutor will assume full leadership and responsibilities. Since Grand Tutor has decided to change the destination to Qi, there must be a deep meaning behind it. General Lu should make his arrangements accordingly."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were surprised that Xiao Yuetan is so harsh on Lu Xiong.

Lu Xiong's reaction is even stranger. Respectfully, he nodded: "I am muddle-headed. I will immediately discuss this with Qu Dou Qi. Once I have the initial arrangements, I will report to Grand Tutor and Mister Xiao again."

Xiao Yuetan watched as he left. His eyes full of disdain, he let out a cold snort.

Xiang Shaolong remarked: "Brother Xiao seems to be dissatisfied with this man!"

Shaking his head, Xiao Yuetan sighed again: “Given Premier Lu’s brilliance, I cannot understand why he has chosen this man to lead the army. Lu Xiong is incompetent and often takes short cuts to achieve his goals. As a result, many of us are not won over by his conduct and refuse to submit to him. In the past when Master Tu and I were running errands for Master Lu, this group of clansmen are nowhere to be seen. When Master Lu was appointed as Premier, they start to come forward to acknowledge him. Ironically, Master Lu gave them a good share of responsibilities.

Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended their relationships between one another.

Within Lu Buwei’s subordinates, there are generally divided into two camps. One camp is lead by Master Tu and Xiao Yuetan while the other camp consists of Lu Buwei’s clansmen, including Lu Xiong. They are bickering with each other for Lu Buwei’s recognition.

The earlier mentioned Qu Dou Qi is another army Major. A true-blue Qin citizen, he is Meng Ao’s trusted follower. Despite being Lu Xiong’s assistant, his prestige and accomplishments in the army are far better than what Lu Xiong can ever hope to achieve.

You cannot avoid confrontations.

Even a small faction of one thousand men can create such complicated issues.

Xiao Yuetan enquired in a low voice: “Shaolong, why did you suddenly change the traveling route? Are you concerned that Lord Yangquan has collaborated with Han to ambush us on the roads?”

Xiang Shaolong had not thought about that. If he told Xiao Yuetan about his secret conversation with Li Si, it may raise some suspicions. He took the chance to divulge: “This is one of the reasons. I went to find Mister Li earlier and questioned him about the situation in Qi. The people of Qi are easily persuaded so I decided to proceed to Qi first.”

Xiao Yuetan was jubilant: “I see. Shaolong is really good at judging people. Li Si has traveled widely and is well-informed about many people and places. It is too bad that he has not gained the favour of Premier nor given opportunities to perform.”

He added: “Now I understand why Shaolong requested that Li Si join us on this trip!”

Teng Yi interrupted: “Is Lu Xiong reliable?”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “This is hard to say. Basically, everything is going along well but if something happens, no one is above suspicion.”

Pausing for a while, he added: “Shaolong is my personal friend and I am not afraid to let you know about this. A big disagreement came about when we were planning our manpower for this trip. Master Tu and I wanted you to head this mission while Lu Xiong’s clansmen wanted Madam Lu’s brother Zhu Meng instead. After

Premier reconsidered the importance of this mission, he decided to follow our recommendation but the relationship has deteriorated already.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that he did not mind not being chosen for this trip. But it is too late now. He has already started his mission and wasted his energy. Sighing together with Xiao Yuetan, he smiled bitterly.

Xiao Yuetan sincerely pleaded: “Master Tu and I knew that Shaolong is no someone who hankers after fame or fortune. However, we are now at loggerheads with the clansmen headed by Zhu Meng. Shaolong must help us vent our frustrations.”

Xiang Shaolong realised that he is a hot favourite with Master Tu’s camp and found it hilarious.

Outside the tent, sounds of weapons clashing and cheering can be heard. Puzzled, the three men went outside to take a look.

On an open space outside the main tent, an armoured Ji Yanran was engaging Meng Tian in a spear duel. The fight is tremendously exhilarating.

Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian, Meng Wu, Jing Jun and the elite brothers are cheering at the side. The atmosphere is extremely lively.

Ji Yanran may have gained the upper hand but Meng Tian

persisted hard to deflect her blows.

Teng Yi could not imagine that this seventeen year-old is such a good fighter and cheered for him as well.

Meng Tian saw Xiang Shaolong watching the fight. Motivated, he attacked three times in succession and gained some advantages.

Ji Yanran parried his strong spear to the side. When Meng Tian lost his footing, she retreated and sheathes her spear on her back. She smiled charmingly: “In time to come, I will not be your match!”

Meng Tian hurriedly expressed his respects and modesty and everyone was exhilarated.

Sounds of footsteps can be heard. With a proud look on his face, Lu Xiong was leading an irritated Qu Dou Qi towards them.

The three men exchanged glances, knowing that Lu Xiong has stirred up trouble and instigated Qu Dou Qi to reject the changes.

The two of them came in front of Xiang Shaolong. Before they could speak, Xiang Shaolong intercepted with a smile: “Since the journey started, I have yet to know Major Qu better. Come! ”

He turned around and entered his tent.

Qu Dou Qi is taken by surprise and followed him in.

Just as Lu Xiong was about to enter the tent as well, he was detained by Teng Yi. He courteously invited: “General Lu must have some idea about the new travel plan. Grand Tutor has ordered me to go through the details with general. Why don’t we talk about it in my tent?”

Lu Xiong can only follow him helplessly to his tent.

Only Xiao Yuetan was left there smiling and stroking his beard.

Book 11 Chapter 06 – Panic

Inside the main tent.

When the two men are properly seated, Qu Dou Qi's face tightened as he inquired: "I heard Grand Tutor is making a last minute decision to alter the journey. May I know the reason?"

Xiang Shaolong thought: Even King Zhuangxiang has given him a free hand to do whatever he wants, why am I being questioned by a Major? He recognizes that he has no authority within the Qin army. He is at most a civil official and Lu Buwei's assistant.

Checking his temper, he turned the tables: "Has Major Qu heard about Lord Yangquan's plot against us?"

Qu Dou Qi pretended to realise what is going on and replied: "If this is your concern, Grand Tutor can rest assured. Master Meng Ao has given instructions. I have deployed riders over the past ten days to scout our surroundings. If there is anyone trailing us, I will be the first to know."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Has Major Qu know that this travel route has been fixed a long time ago?"

Qu Duo Qi is a smart man and knows the meaning behind this question. He answered: "Although the route has been fixed a long time ago, except for myself, General Lu and Grand Tutor, even Premier Lu has no idea about the details. So Grand Tutor need not worry about someone leaking out our travel route."

Xiang Shaolong wanted to tell Qu Dou Qi that he will do whatever he wants and it is not up to him to challenge. Ultimately, he swallowed his pride and plainly state: “All we need is a spy who will leave clues for the enemy to follow us. When they find a right spot, they will ambush us. These areas near the Han border are especially dangerous.”

Unaffected, Qu Dou Qi countered: “In this case, we will still be ambushed even if we change the route. They can also ambush us near the Zhao border. I suggest we stick to the old route. Even if we are defeated, we can still escape.”

Xiang Shaolong curiously mentioned: “Major Qu is strongly against my changing of the route. May I know the reason?”

This is a great move. If Qu Dou Qi cannot explain himself, Xiang Shaolong can punish him for disobeying martial law.

Qu Dou Qi was slightly taken aback. His eyes shining with anger, he coldly replied: “Master Meng has given me the responsibility of ensuring the safety of Grand Tutor. I will naturally put safety as my top priority.”

Xiang Shaolong was pissed and coldly smiled: “Now, I am not sure who is in charge, Major Lu or you? Earlier, he has received my command but now, you seemed to disregard it. Can you explain yourself?”

Qu Dou Qi was shaken, knowing the Xiang Shaolong is mad at

him. Softening his voice, he humbly said: “I dare not disobey your order, but...”

Xiang Shaolong impatiently cut him off: “We are crossing the river tomorrow. Have you sent someone to swim over and have a look?”

Qu Dou Qi was dumbfounded. He uttered: “The rafts are not ready and the water is so cold...”

Xiang Shaolong stood up in a huff and went to the opening of the tent. “Jing Jun!” He shouted.

Jing Jun stopped his swords duel with Meng Wu immediately. Walking over, he responded: “What orders does Grand Tutor have?”

Xiang Shaolong commanded: “Find a few brothers at once and swim opposite the river. Check on the surroundings and remain discreet. If there are any discoveries, do not alert the enemy. Clear?”

Jing Jun happily received the order and left to execute it.

Qu Dou Qi lowered his head with dissatisfaction. Xiang Shaolong’s action is to highlight his inadequacy and negligence.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. They came well prepared and one of their secret weapons is the waterproof wet suit made according to

Shan Rou's specifications. He did not expect to use it so soon.

Originally, he did not want to investigate what is opposite the river. He was reminded by Xiao Yuetan that Lord Yangquan may send someone to assassinate him. While bickering with this disrespectful Qu Dou Qi, he was inspired to use this method to put him down.

Since he will not accept reasoning, Xiang Shaolong will use hard tactics and force him to submit.

Insubordination is a big military taboo.

If Qu Dou Qi or Lu Xiong continue to create problems, he will make use of King Zhuangxiang military decree to dismiss both of them and put Teng Yi in charge.

He is no longer interested to argue with this man. He icily said: "That's all. Major Qu can continue to do whatever you are doing. Except for you and Lu Xiong, not a third person must know about the route change. Violators will be dealt according to military law. Tomorrow morning, I will tell you which path to take."

Qu Dou Qi kept quiet and stood up. Bowing to Xiang Shaolong, he left unhappily.

The sky is darkening

After Xiang Shaolong finished explaining the reason for changing the destination to Qi, Ji Yanran marvelled: “Mister Li Si is indeed extraordinary to analyze the six states so meticulously. He is especially experienced with the Qi people to know about their boasting and debating culture. I did not expect there to be such a man in Premier’s residence. Can Shaolong introduce him to me?”

Xiang Shaolong understood her character and is happy to have someone chat with her. He nodded: “I will invite him later to meet you.”

Ji Yanran joyfully cooed; “What surprised me even more was your foresight. You intentionally got him to join our trip.” Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty. What foresight does he possess?

Zhao Qian was worried: “But hubby has informed Lady Ya in Daliang and they are waiting for us. If we go to Qi and Chu first, wouldn’t they have to wait like an idiot for a long time?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “This cannot be helped. I will send Jing Jun to find them in Daliang first. When we are leaving Qi for Chu, we can meet them halfway. At most, it will be a three month wait!”

Zhao Qian thought that this is reasonable and kept quiet.

At this moment, Xia Ying added some rice for Xiang Shaolong. He

smiled and asked her if the journey is manageable.

Other the other side, Qui Ying laughed: “When we were in Xianyang City, Miss taught us to ride horses and practice archery. This trip is easy compared to what we do!”

Wu Tingfang smiled and proudly state: “Under my training, these ladies are doing very well.”

Abruptly, disturbing noises can be heard from outside the tent. Teng Yi shouted from outside: “Third Brother, please come out!”

Xiang Shaolong noticed that his tone is heavy. Sometime must be amiss and he dashed out from his tent.

A crowd is forming near the empty area near his tent. Even Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi were present.

Jing Jun had just come back from the spying and excitedly exclaimed: “Grand Tutor! We have captured an enemy soldier. Please do not hold it against me. The moment we got out of the water, we ran into this fellow relieving himself. We were forced to act.”

Xiang Shaolong was traumatized. He looked over to the crowd and everyone has a serious expression on their faces. Qu Dou Qi’s face is guilt-stricken.

Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu, leaders of the twelve elite brothers

brought a man before Xiang Shaolong and forced him to kneel down. The man is wearing farming clothes and his hands are bound behind him. Still dripping wet, his face is deathly grey due to the cold.

In a deep voice, Teng Yi questioned: “Who are you?”

His lips shivering, the spy lowered his head and rudely shot: “My name is Deng Jia, a Han farmer. I was just passing by. Why did you resort to force and imprison me?”

Still in his wet suit, Jing Jun countered: “Don’t believe him. He is armed with a sword, a bow and arrows. He is up to no good.”

Teng Yi passed a sword to Xiang Shaolong and commented: “From the design of the sword, this man is likely to be from Yan.”

On his side, Xiao Yuetan exclaimed: “What!?”

Xiang Shaolong was blown away as well. He did not forecast his enemy to be related to Yan. Puzzled, he thought hard and ordered: “Get him some dry clothes. I’ll personally interrogate him.”

Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu received the order and dragged the spy away.

Xiang Shaolong faced the onlooker soldiers and coldly snorted: “Get back to your posts and be extra alert. Will the two majors, please stay behind.” Turning to Ji Yanran and company, he

instructed: “Please wait for me in the tent.”

Only Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Xiao Yuetan, Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi were left. Xiang Shaolong simply mentioned: “If this man is really from Yan, we are in serious danger.”

Everyone is dead serious and kept quiet.

Under the illumination of the camp lanterns, the snow continue to fall and the atmosphere is solemn.

Qu Dou Qi gave a dry cough and kneeled down begging: “I have neglected my duties and am willing to accept Grand Tutor’s punishment.”

Lu Xiong could only helpless kneel down and beg for mercy as well.

Xiang Shaolong was glad at this turn of events. Unwittingly, he managed to put down these two men. However, they are in danger now and he cannot be as happy as he wanted. Stepping forward to help them up, he promised: “As long as we work together to manage this crisis, I will not begrudge you.”

His underlying meaning is: If you go against me, I will make sure you regret it.

Both men resembled the proud cock that has just lost the cock fight. They stood there crestfallen.

Xiao Yuetan advised: “Let’s discuss further after we have interrogated Deng Jia! But if I am in his shoes, I will not confess. If I confess, it is as good as signing my own death warrant.”

Teng Yi smiled: “Leave this to me. Fortunately, the weather has just turned cold. Let me go digging in the nearby burrows to see if I can find a helper.”

Finishing, he left the camp, leaving everyone bewildered.

As Xiao Yuetan had foretold, Deng Jia refused to admit that he is a spy.

Xiang Shaolong knew Teng Yi very well and is certain that he has a good plan. He prevented Qu Dou Qi and the rest from torturing him and tied him in one of the tents with an elite brother standing guard.

In a short while, Teng Yi returned with a cloth sack. The sack contains something soft.

Everyone in the tent including Xiang Shaolong was mystified. Only Jing Jun understood. Laughing, he left saying: “Let me get a small basket!”

Teng Yi ordered his men: “Get him to stand up!”

Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu supported Deng Jia up on two sides.

Deng Jia was horror-struck. Staring at Teng Yi holding the cloth sack in front of his face, he was also unsure about that animal moving in the cloth sack.

Qu Dou Qi enquired: “What does Mister Teng plan to do?”

Teng Yi put his hand into the sack without hesitation. His well-trained hands produced a black and flurry field rat. Holding the rat to Deng Jia’s face, he smiled: “Are you confessing or not?”

Watching the struggling and squealing giant field rat held up by Teng Yi, even the clever Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan had no idea how this will help in getting a confession.

Deng Jia arrogantly countered: “I am just a farmer. What is there to confess?”

Xiao Yuetan icily smiled: “You had better confess. You have a Yan accent when you speak. Moreover, a farmer in your shoes will be frightened to death and not arrogant like you. Who are you still trying to deceive?”

Deng Jia heard his words and realised that he has revealed his background. He persisted: “I have no idea what you are talking about. If you still do not believe me, feel free to check the Deng village opposite the river.”

In this instant, Jing Jun returned with the bamboo basket. “Take off his pants!” he cried.

Everyone present was stunned.

In a few quick movements, Wu Yan Zhu did as instructed. Deng Jia was half naked below the waist and everyone look on.

Jing Jun personally cover his groin area with the bamboo basket. Using a rope that goes behind to Deng Jia’s buttocks, he secured the basket.

Deng Jia was terrified: “What are you trying to do!?”

Teng Yi smiled: “You will know in a short while.” To Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu, he ordered: “Hold him in a seated position!”

Everyone finally understood and was convinced that his method is a hundred times more malicious than beating him up.

Teng Yi lifted a cover on the side of the basket. Putting the rat into the basket, he shut the cover.

As the rat was moving inside, the basket and Deng Jia started to shake violently.

Deng Jia screamed: “Xiang Shaolong, you are so vicious!”

Squatting down, Lu Xiong questioned: “How does Brother Deng Jia know that he is Xiang Shaolong?”

Deng Jia knew that he has let the cat out of the bag but he cannot be bothered to answer him. His eyes followed the rat as it moves around inside the basket.

Among those in the tent, he has the best experience in ‘interacting’ with the field rat.

Squatting down besides Lu Xiong, Xiang Shaolong patted his face and softly coaxed: “Why don’t you confess obediently. Once we have your confession, we will release you after we have left.”

Teng Yi observed his heaving chest and advised in a deep voice: “When the rat is tired of walking, it will start to look for food. Don’t tell you are waiting for that to happen!”

Jing Jun laughed: “By then it will be too late. The earlier you confessed, the higher chance your birth organ and urinating organ can remain intact.”

Without their hard and soft tactics, Deng Jia understood what is befalling him. Petrified, he groaned: “Get this thing away from me first!”

Qu Dou Qi shook his head: “If you do not start confessing, that

thing will stay inside the basket for good.”

Xiao Yuetan smiled: “You want to drag this further? idiot!”

Either as a result of Deng Jia being scratched or bitten, he tragically shouted: “I confess! We are here on the orders of the Prince. Get it out now!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has fully submitted. He winked at Teng Yi to retrieve the rat. Frankly, he himself is afraid of the rat. If he retrieves the rat himself, all his goose pimples will pop out.

Shaking his head, Teng Yi roared: “Speak!”

Without a choice, Deng Jia revealed everything he knows. Without a doubt, this is the fastest interrogation in the world.

By the time Teng Yi took out the rat, Deng Jia is totally soaked in his own sweat and urine despite the cold weather. This ‘torture’ strategy is truly marvellous.

From his confession, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi understood Yan’s plot as well as the assassination of Lord Longyang outside Handan City.

Yan’s Prince Dan has been besieged by Lian Po in the capital city. He can only hold his fort and cannot lift the siege. He was forced to send his famed general Xu Yi Luan and three thousand brave soldiers to break out of the siege. They entered Zhao secretly and

hope to create chaos to force Zhao to recall their soldiers.

For a start, they tried to assassinate Lord Longyang. When that failed, they killed the Qi spy and pushed the blame to Tian Dan.

When this plan failed as well, they conjured up another scheme.

Prince Dan has friends all over the world. With his well-thought strategies, he has spies in every state. He heard about Xiang Shaolong's mission to Wei and informed Xu Yi Luan to disguise as Zhao soldiers to kill Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong is representing King Zhuangxiang. If he is killed, Qin will not take it lying down. When Qin attacks Zhao, the siege of Yan's capital will be lifted. What a clever plan!

Xu Yi Luan is a wise and capable man. On Xiang Shaolong's journey to Wei, he deployed sentries and await the perfect opportunity. He decided to attack them as Han soldiers when they are crossing the river tomorrow. When the river crossing has failed, Xiang Shaolong will not dare to enter Han anymore. He will have to divert his route towards Zhao. In Zhao, Xu Yi Luan can utilise his full army strength to ambush them. Once Xiang Shaolong is dead, their mission will be accomplished.

Everyone is frowning deeply upon hearing this news.

These Yan soldiers are not in the own country and can behave recklessly. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to

alert Zhao and Han about their journey and create unnecessary trouble. He is very troubled about the current situation.

Besides Xu Yi Luan, Lord Yangquan may have conspired with Han to destroy them. They are traveling with over one thousand men in their party. With such a huge amount of travelers, they become an easy target for any attackers. Even escaping will be difficult.

If they come across any fortifications that they can use to defend themselves, they may stay alive for the time being but will likely be trapped like a caged animal. In the end, it will be worse as they cannot visit any of the states.

Xiang Shaolong and company had a long discussion outside the tent. Nobody could think of a good idea to handle this crisis.

Qu Dou Qi suggested: "Since we know that Xu Yi Luan is hiding in a mountain opposite the river, why don't we swim over under the cover of the night and eliminate them in a surprise attack?"

Xiao Yuetan rejected: "That is too risky. I have heard of this man. He is good at military warfare and must have soldiers spying on us in secret. The disappearance of Deng Jia will cause him to be suspicious. Moreover, their army is three times as big as ours. Rushing over now will only send us to our deaths."

Lu Xiong's face is turning green and his lips are turning white, he quavered: "Why don't we escape at once and leave our empty tents here. By the time the Yan army discovers this, we will be long

gone.”

Although Xiang Shaolong hated his guts, he had to agree with his plan. Nodding, he agreed: “We must definitely escape. However, we must plan how to escape. With only a thousand soldiers, we can move pretty quickly but it is only a river between us and them. They will catch up sooner or later.”

Qu Dou Qi nodded: “No matter whether it is Zhao or Han territory that we are entering, we must be extremely careful. We must send spies to scout the roads and avoid meeting Zhao and Han soldiers. Thus, our paths will not be as smooth as we want. This will slow down our speed. An intelligent man like Xu Yi Luan will catch up to us very soon.”

Keep quiet all this while, Teng Yi suddenly spoke up: “I have a suggestion. We will break up our formation and divide our soldiers into smaller groups and travel on different routes. This way, the enemy will not know which group to pursue. It will also make our escape more nimble.”

Everyone became quiet and digested what he had just recommended.

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “This is the best way. Let’s do it.”

The snow fall is getting heavier and heavier

The killing aura of the wilderness is becoming stronger and

stronger.

Book 11 Chapter 07 – Pine Forest Ambush

Snowflakes fell relentlessly from the sky.

On the dark snowy plains, everyone is silently packing up the tents and getting ready to leave.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Xiao Yuetan, Li Si as well as the twelve elite Wu family warriors are prone on the riverbank, scanning for any suspicious activity on the opposite shore.

Beyond the black pine forest, there was no other sign of life. If not for the capture of Deng Jia and knowing the enemies' ambush from his confession, it will be hard to imagine that there were three thousands enemies spying on them with ill intentions.

Xiao Yuetan coldly snorted: "Yan really stooped so low just to relieve the siege by the Zhao army." However, Xiang Shaolong thought that it is rather common for such despicable acts during these warring times.

Lu Xiong appeared and reported: "Grand Tutor! Everything is ready. We can set off anytime."

Xiang Shaolong gave the order to depart.

The one thousand Qin soldiers were split into two groups of five hundred each. Pulling their horses and carriages, one group went upstream while the other group went downstream. Lighting their

lamps, they resembled numerous fireflies.

Ji Yanran, the other girls and the three hundred Lu Family warriors retreated among the darkness into the red pine forest.

The stillness of the night was shattered by the galloping sounds of the horses and the movement of the carriages.

Teng Yi eyed the black forest opposite the river and laughed: "If I am Xu Yi Luan, I will be having a bad headache now."

Xiao Yuetan asked in a deep voice: "Will he be tricked?"

Jing Jun replied in a low voice: "We will know soon enough!"

It is difficult to navigate the paths in the dark and the armies moved at a snail's pace. It was only two hours later that both groups are considerable apart from each other.

As agreed, they will meet twenty days later at Mount Yangchang which is situated besides Qinshui and at the Zhao-Han border. If they did not meet up after three days of waiting, they will meet up again at Mount Wang Lung Ling at the Zhao-Qi border.

The Qin army has undergone strict training and everyone is highly skilled in archery and horse-riding. With a smaller force, it is much easier to escape in this uninhabited territory.

Teng Yi softly whistled: “The enemy is moving!”

Footsteps and hoof beats sounded from a hill on the opposite shore. Hundreds of torches were lit and two groups of men chased upstream and downstream like two fire dragons.

Xu Yi Luan guessed that he has been discovered that there is no more need to keep hiding.

When the two fire dragons have gone far, Xiang Shaolong ordered: “Little Jun, please investigate the opposite shore again. If everyone is really gone, we will cross the river at dawn tomorrow.”

Jing Jun grunted a reply and led the twelve elite Wu family warriors across the river on two hidden rafts. Li Si and Xiao Yuetan went along with them.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi returned to the red pine forest leisurely.

This surprise ambush by the Yan army has caused them some panic but everything is resolved for the moment.

Xiang Shaolong was about to say something but he interrupted by what he sees in front of him. Trembling, Teng Yi shouted: “Not good!”

The edge of the red pine forest is filled with a thousand red flaming torches. Closing in like a fan towards the centre of the

forest, the air is filled with battle cries and the attack is earth-shattering.

Both men thought of the assassination of Lord Longyang. The colour disappearing from their faces, they drew their swords and ran madly towards the red pine forest.

There were at least five hundred invaders and they had approached the forest in silence. When they were discovered by the sentries of the Lu Family Warriors, they charged straight into battle.

From the start, the Yan army has ambushed Xiang Shaolong's entourage from three sides – upstream, downstream and within the red pine forest. Even if they wish to escape now, the river will block their escape.

In such freezing weather, jumping into the river is as good as committing suicide.

Their opponent employs the most vicious, bloodthirsty and well-planned strategies to kill them all.

Killing sounds filled the air as men and horses fell alike. Ji Yanran was directing the family warriors and was protecting Wu Tingfang, Zhao Qian and the four maids. Together with the Meng brothers, they escaped towards the river.

Luckily, the forest is very dense, the ground is uneven and it is

dark at night. Otherwise, they would have perished under the arrows of the enemy.

However, they were being forced to the river by the attackers and they may not survive anyway.

Countless enemies are streaming over from all over. The Lu Family warriors may be top fighters and fought with their lives but the overwhelming majority of enemies soon overcome them.

Barely leaving the forest, Chun Ying gave a tragic cry. A long arrow has pierced her back and she died on the spot.

Wu Tingfang and the other maids wailed in agony.

Coolly, Ji Yanran pulled Zhao Qian and yelled: "Follow me!" Snaking through the edge of the forest, she advanced towards a small hill besides the river.

Only about a hundred warriors are with her. Half of them re-entered the forest to re-engage the enemy. The remaining sixty-odd men covered their retreat and rushed up the hill together. The snow-covered slopes only caused their ascent to take twice as long.

Behind them, torches can be seen everywhere and the forest is shining red like blood.

On the side, ten odd enemies disguised as hunters came assaulting. Mad on her killing spree, Ji Yanran pierced

continuously with her lance and killed several men in a row, creating an opening.

Another enemy chopped down at Zhao Qian who is behind Ji Yanran, disregarding the fact that she is female and powerless.

Ji Yanran's lance is embedded into another enemy's chest and cannot rescue her in time. Meng Tian who is on her right dashed over and his sword flashed, severing the man head from his body.

As they are about to reach the hilltop, a shower of arrows rained on them and another ten family warriors were felled.

The enemies scrambled over and chopped furiously at those hit by arrows to ensure their deaths.

Qiu Ying slipped and fell onto the ground.

Xia Ying and Dong Ying were as close to her as real sisters. They turned back to help her up. With this lapse, a gang of unscrupulous invaders broke through their defences and in the chaos, murdered all three of them. It was a heartbreaking sight.

Wu Tingfang nearly fainted upon seeing this. Supported by Meng Wu and Meng Tian, they reached the hilltop.

The remaining thirty family warriors utilise their advantageous terrain height and managed to hold the attackers at bay but not for long too.

At this crucial moment, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi arrived to help them. Noticing the maids' absence, they could guess what had happened.

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: "Get to the river. Jing Jun is there!"

Wu Tingfang wailed: "Hubby!" Meng Wu interrupted her and dragged her away.

Ji Yanran cried: "Don't get caught up in the fighting!" Leading the four persons, they ran down slope towards the river.

Teng Yi had reached the hilltop. Waving his heavy sword, he massacred everyone in his sight.

Xiang Shaolong cut off the pursuers of Ji Yanran and began his own killing spree. The fighting is simply horrendous.

As another hundred of attackers swarmed up the hill, someone shouted: "Xiang Shaolong is here!"

Xiang Shaolong just disembowelled two men. Scanning his surrounding, he can see more enemies advancing. Except for Teng Yi, there is no other survivor. He knew that if he still continued to fight, he will meet his end here. Roaring loudly, he brandished his sword and fought his way to Teng Yi, bellowing: "Go!"

By now, their bodies are filled with sword wounds. Teng Yi nodded and swept his sword, killing another two men.

Fighting as they retreat, they were hard pressed and found it hard to slip away.

Eyeing the countless fighters coming out of the red pine forest and climbing the hill to engage them, Xiang Shaolong called out: "Let's roll down!"

Pulling Teng Yi, they bend down and rolled down the hill slope.

Thanks to the heavy snowfall, the ground was wet and soft and they rolled safely to the bottom of the hill.

Like madmen, the Yan army chased down the hill.

As they got up, Teng Yi grunted. His right shoulder was pierced by an arrow.

Ten odd enemies are rushing over from both sides.

Xiang Shaolong pulled out his flying needles and shot them out in succession. Before they knew what happened seven men were strike dead. The remaining men scrambled to safety.

Suddenly, the fiery torches dimmed.

The snowy slope is extremely slippery. Several of the torch-bearers slipped and fell into the snow, extinguishing the flames.

Teng Yi reached behind him and held onto the arrow. Pulling the arrow out with some of his flesh and blood, he struck the arrowhead into the throat of another attacker.

With his armour protecting him, the arrow only entered his flesh by a few inches and his organs are unharmed. Otherwise, he may lose his life.

Taking advantage of the low visibility, they charged into a group of enemies and break out of the encirclement. Once freed, they sped towards the river.

Behind them, three groups of men carrying torches were trailing closely and battle cries filled their ears.

In an instance, they reached the river shore, Jing Jun leapt over and happily cried: "Let's go!"

Leading them, he ran along the river.

The first raft carrying Ji Yanran and the rest had just left. The other raft is waiting for them.

Jumping of the raft, they rowed towards the opposite shore.

As they reached the centre of the river, the pursuers came to the river bank. Taking out their bows, they rained arrows on Xiang Shaolong and company.

The twelve elite Wu Family Warriors formed a human wall and used their swords to deflect the incoming arrows.

Tragic calls were heard.

One man was hit and he fell onto Xiang Shaolong.

Grieved, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi yelled at the same time: “Get down!”

Another three men were hit by arrows.

The rafts finally left the firing range of the arrows and arrived at the opposite shore.

The enemies were cursing helpless. To think they let them escape even in such a disadvantageous situation.

Xiang Shaolong had just leapt onto shore when Wu Tingfang heartbreakingly leapt into his blood-stained embrace.

Jing Jun suddenly cry out: “Third Princess!”

Xiang Shaolong trembled uncontrollably as he looked over. Zhao Qian was in Ji Yanran's arms with an arrow protruding from her chest and she has breathed her last.

Although his wounds have been bandaged, Xiang Shaolong's heart is still bleeding. When he is fully confident about protecting his loved ones, they were killed right before his eyes. In these catastrophic times, the majority of women were dependent on men for their survival. If their men happened to be killed, they will be handed over to their conquerors. There, they will face abuses such as prostitution. Su Nu, Su'er, Zhao Ni and Ting Fangshi died first and Xiang Shaolong was informed later. He may be heart-broken but it is still better than personally witnessing Zhao Qian and the four maids dying while he stared helplessly. Recalling their usual happy demeanour, he could feel an intense hatred surging in his heart. If he had not insisted on bringing them along, they will not suffer such a terrible ending.

Lady luck has always been on his side. From the first time he came to Handan City, the trip to Daliang to steal the Lu Gong Manual, the Wu Family escape to Qin, the capture of Zhao Mu, he has always managed to gain the upper hand in all the dangerous situations. The death of the five girls has shattered his beautiful dream. This time, he did not lose to inferior battle strategies, he lost to luck.

Witnessing the fresh graves, he cannot help but think of the exposed corpse of the four maids, the four elite Wu Family warriors who were shot dead on the raft and the three hundred faithful warriors of the Lu Buwei. For the first time ever, Xiang Shaolong was filled with the most intense murderous hatred and revenge! He will not show any mercy to Lord Yangquan or Yan.

Only blood can wash away this debt of blood! Wu Tingfang is wailing loudly in the arms of the sobbing Ji Yanran, adding to his pain.

Xiao Yuetan approached Xiang Shaolong and swore in a low voice: “Grand Tutor Xiang must take it easy. When we get back to Xianyang, I will get Premier to seek revenge for us.”

In this moment, Jing Jun swiftly came to the gravesite and hissed in a frantic tone: “Enemies are sighted on the south-eastern direction. I detected Lord Yangquan’s men and Han soldiers. They numbered five hundred and are equipped with hunting dogs. We better leave as soon as possible.”

Filled with grief, Xiang Shaolong wondered aloud: “Where can we go?”

Teng Yi reasoned: “The road to Mount Yangchang is flat ground and rivers. We do not have any war horses and will not escape their pursuit. The best way is to go through the mountains to Jing Jun’s hometown, Jing village. There, we can obtain provisions and horses. We can even recruit some top hunters and add to our fighting strength. Jing Jun and I are familiar with the roads and can evade enemies’ on our trail.”

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to brighten up. Glancing at his two lovely wives Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang as well as the Meng brothers, Xiao Yuetan, Li Si, Jing Jun, Teng Yi and the remaining eight elite Wu Family warriors, he decided: “Great! Let’s go. As long as I, Xiang Shaolong, am alive, Lord Yangquan and his allies will not get away with this.”

They traveled day and night.

Twenty five days later, after enduring several hardships and hunger, they came to Jing village.

Hunting for food during winter is extremely tough. Fortunately, Teng Yi and Jing Jun are the best in this field. It is due to these two men that Xiang Shaolong and the rest did not die of hunger in the mountains.

On a few occasions, the pursuers nearly caught up to them. It was also due to Teng Yi and Jing Jun's familiarity of the mountains that they managed to slip away each time.

By the time they got to Jing village, even strong men like Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were on the verge of collapse, not mentioning normal people and girls like Xiao Yuetan, Li Si and Wu Tingfang. Luckily, they have achieved some fitness by practising swordplay or they will not be able to hold out. However, their zombie-like appearance is still heart-rending.

Jing village comprises of ten odd clusters of huts situated all over the mountains. Teng Yi has always been the most respected hunter in the eyes of the villagers. Every kid in this village has benefited from his horse-riding or archery lessons. Viewing his return, everyone was excited with happiness. They did their best to see to the needs of Xiang Shaolong's group and helped them to spy around for enemy activities.

After three days of rest and recuperation, everyone is fully rejuvenated and fresh. They have regained their confidence and fighting spirit.

Time can dilute everything, including burying all the unhappy events deep into the hearts.

Everyone is having lunch in the big hut of the village leader when Teng Yi brought Xiang Shaolong to the open area outside the house. Thirty eight young hunters were chatting excitedly with Jing Jun. Seeing the appearance of the two men; they stood at attention and seemed to be waiting to be selected to join them.

Xiang Shaolong asked in a low voice: “Second brother can decide for me.”

Teng Yi answered: “Isn’t it better for them to feel that they were selected by you the world-renowned hero?”

He continued: “None of them were originally surnamed Jing. The entire Jing village inhabitants are originally nomads from the north. They live a carefree life and do whatever they want. Due to Zhao’s expansion and the Xiong Nu’s harassment, they were forced to come south. After living here for hundreds of years, they were despised by the Han and were forced to change their names. Therefore, they have a great dislike for Zhao and Han.”

Anger can be seen on the faces of the young hunters.

Jing Jun added: “Everyone here practises martial arts to fight raiders from the Han soldiers, horse thieves and invaders from other villages.”

Teng Yi concluded: “These hunters were specially selected from a thousand hunters. They are the best. With additional training, I guarantee they will not be inferior to our elite Wu Family warriors.”

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Is everyone willing to throw in their lot with me Xiang Shaolong?”

The hunters agreed in unison.

Xiang Shaolong swore: “From today onwards, we will share wealth and woe.”

Everyone cheered wildly.

Back in the house, Teng Yi reminded: “We will set out for Huang Lung Ling tomorrow. We have lost all our precious cargo in the red pine forest. It seems inappropriate to continue our mission without any valuables.”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Those are secondary.”

That night, the terrible battles, the tragic cries and the intense feelings surfaced in their dreams once again.

Wu Tingfang woke up with a scream and her face is covered with tears.

Xiang Shaolong embraced her tightly and tried his best to comfort her. On the other side, Ji Yanran woke up too. She opened the window to allow more fresh air to enter the room.

After Wu Tingfang went back to sleep, Xiang Shaolong has lost all desire to sleep. He felt as if there was large boulder pressing down on his chest. “It is a beautiful night. Why don’t we take a stroll?” he suggested.

Ji Yanran replied in a pitiful tone: “Fang’er cannot sleep alone. You go ahead!”

Xiang Shaolong put on a coat and left the house. Stepping into the garden and under the bright moonlight, he noticed Xiao Yuetan looking at the sky mysteriously.

Xiang Shaolong was astonished and approached him asking: “Brother Xiao cannot sleep too?”

As if he was expecting Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan continued to stare at the black sky and sighed loudly: “I love to let my thoughts wander, especially at night. Therefore, I love to hug a beauty to sleep to prevent myself from thinking too much. My bad habit came back tonight!”

Xiang Shaolong did not feel good hearing this. He continued to ask: “What is Brother Xiao thinking of?”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head and bitterly laughed: “I am thinking about Master Lu. Ever since he became Premier, he has changed a lot. It is hard to link the present him to the previous him.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Regardless of any changes, the basic character remains the same. It is only due to different environments that people suppressed their basic nature to achieve a goal. When they no longer need to hide their true intentions, the suppressed basic nature will resurface and be dominant. This is the most obvious in people who suddenly rise to the top and are given plenty of authority. They will be beyond control as they no longer need to subject themselves to the will of others.”

Xiao Yuetan was shaken and looked to him. “From your tone, Shaolong seems to be unhappy with Master Lu!” he commented in a surprise tone.

Xiang Shaolong knew he had let the cat out of the bag. He hurriedly explained: “I am just causally mentioning from personal experience. It has nothing to do with Premier Lu.”

After a quick moment of contemplation, Xiao Yuetan reassured in a soft voice: “Shaolong need not deceive me. Master Lu and you are two different breeds of human. I can totally trust you but can I totally trust Master Lu? Master Tu and I may be his confidante but we still have to watch our tongue around him. We are afraid to offend him after all.”

Pausing, he added: “Moreover, he expanded his influence too quickly. When we first arrived at Xianyang, there were only seven hundred advisor-guests. Now, we have exceeded five thousand. How can we not incur the jealousy of the Qin population? This must be why we were assassinated in the pine forest.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered those who lost their lives and kept quiet.

Xiao Yuetan knew that he has reminded Xiang Shaolong about the unhappy incident. Sighing, he advised: “After we have been through this life-and-death incident, I will be frank with you. With your character that values human relationships and love, you will soon be unable to tolerate Premier Lu’s actions. Do you understand what I am trying to say?!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in silence.

For Xiao Pan, he will be Lu Buwei’s future enemy. This is his destiny!

The death of Zhao Qian and the maids has him fully convinced to help Xiao Pan unite the six states.

Only military might can eliminate military might.

Although the state of law is only seen two thousand years later, it will begin with him now.

“It is late!” he answered. “And we have to set off early tomorrow morning. Why don’t we retire to bed now?”

Xiao Yuetan invited: “You go ahead! I still want to stand here for a while longer.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Then let’s use this wonderful night to chat till morning. I wish to understand Xianyang City’s position to a greater extent.”

Xiao Yuetan was delighted: “I will be glad to share with you my knowledge!”

The night passed like this.

The next morning, the fifty odd persons rode off towards Huang Lung Ling.

Book 11 Chapter 08 – An Earth-Shaking Conspiracy

After journeying for more than twenty days, Huang Lung Ling was within sight. Situated on the Zhao-Qi border, the tall mountain protruded out of the flat plains surrounding it. The mountain peak is covered with thick layers of snow.

Everyone is feeling burdened emotionally and can hardly find any reason to be happy. They no longer enjoy the same energy as when they first left Xianyang City.

The only conversation going around was how to cover their tracks or counter the enemies' spying.

Halfway through the trip, they have shaken the pursuers off their trail.

Xiao Yuetan is surprisingly quiet and seems to have a lot on his mind.

After the night of chatting with Xiang Shaolong, he seems to be hiding something.

He may be oversensitive, but the closer he got to Hung Lung Ling, the more uneasy Xiang Shaolong feels.

Last night, he even had a dream. He dreamt about Zhao Qian and

the four maids. They were dressed up beautifully and were smiling like blossoming flowers. They insisted on bringing him back to Xianyang. When he woke up, his face is wet with tears and his heart was akin to being sliced apart.

So although Teng Yi wanted to cover more distance, Xiang Shaolong insisted on camping on a flatland with their backs to mountain. He wanted more time to rest and think.

Before evening, Jing Jun, the Meng brothers and the hunters came back with prey and cooked them over a burning fire. To evade detection, they put out the fire at nightfall. In winter, sleeping at night without fire in the open wilderness is most unbearable.

With their goal in sight, everyone is excited and was chatting with joy.

Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang were chatting secretly in their tents.

Xiao Yuetan got Li Si to chat with him at a nearby waterfall. They have a serious expression on their face.

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong were sitting among some scattered rocks near the campsite. Dazed, they watch the sun slowly set into the horizon.

Out of the blue, Li Si came over and invited them to join him.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged looks. Their heartbeat began to quicken at the same time. With Li Si, they approached Xiao Yuetan. Xiao Yuetan was staring blankly at the clear water falling down and his eyes are moist.

Li Si shook his head and sighed.

Even a patient man like Teng Yi could not hold back and questioned: “We are all close like family. Brother Xiao, please be straight forward about your thoughts.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed deeply. Glancing at both men, he replied emotionally: “That night, I told Shaolong I love to let my mind wander. Regrettably, I did not find my thoughts as meaningless as before. Now, I am seriously asking myself ‘What if’ and the answer lies there.”

He pointed strongly to Huang Lung Ling.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were trembling uncontrollably and their limbs turned ice-cold.

Li Si revealed: “Just now, Brother Xiao got me to analyze deeper regarding the red pine forest assassination. We discovered many suspicious points and came to a frightening conclusion. I am afraid we have become the sacrificial lambs for Premier Lu.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi looked at each other with their eyes full of surprise.

Xiao Yuetan started: “This trip should be extremely easy. The six states have always been fighting among themselves. With the recent Qi-Chu conspiracy against Zhao, it is harder for them to see eye-to-eye. This trip is actually unnecessary. In addition, Master Lu has been grooming his own clansmen and this will be a great opportunity to gain credit. However, this mission is given to Shaolong. Ai! There are many things I do not regard as important but now that we have suffered such a blow, I can find meaning in those things after deeper contemplation.”

Teng Yi’s face is completely white. In a deep voice, he commented: “I just could not understand how the enemy can attack us using the best opportunity and strategy. And it is just about the time when Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi had left with Yan in pursuit. Even if they are spying on us all the time, it is night time and snowing heavily. How can they be so sure we retreated into the forest and are letting our guard down? There must be a spy among us.”

Xiang Shaolong could feel his head becoming numb and his bones chilly. Taking a deep breath, he suppressed his emotions and asked: “How does it benefit Premier Lu? We are his men, and he has three hundred family warriors with us. If Meng Wu and Meng Tian perished as well, Meng Ao will be devastated too.”

Xiao Yuetan lifted his sleeve and wiped away some tears. Sighing, he declared: “I have been with Master Lu for almost twenty years. To attain his goal, he is completely ruthless. It is the same in his business and power mongering.”

Pausing, he threw back a question: “If it is really done by Lord Yangquan, how will he benefit?”

This should be an easy and straightforward question. But under these circumstances, no one could give a ready answer.

King Zhuangxiang has always been thankful for Lord Yangquan’s intervention. When he promoted Lu Buwei to be the Right Premier, he promoted him to be the Left Premier. He also prevented Lu Buwei from giving trouble to Lord Yangquan.

If Xiang Shaolong and his entourage were annihilated, with rumours circulating that Lord Yangquan is scheming against them and among those dead were Lu Buwei’s own family warriors, no one will suspect that the entire setup is masterminded by Lu Buwei.

King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji adored Xiang Shaolong. If they were led to believe that Lord Yangquan killed Xiang Shaolong, Lord Yangquan will be in trouble. Even Lady Hua Yang will not be able to protect his brother.

With that, Lu Buwei will get rid of this thorn in his flesh and dominate the Qin politics.

Who else is closer to King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji other than himself?

Looking at the ashen face of Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan state in

a deep voice: “Among all those that I have come across, there is none more scheming than Master Lu. If he succeeds, he can kill many birds with one stone.”

Quivering, he continued: “First, he can be rid of you Xiang Shaolong. You have been too outstanding. The King and Queen hang onto your every word and even the Crown Prince respects you greatly. With the grand Wu Family Farm behind you, you will soon take some shine away from him. The people of Qin love heroes and military contributions. They need men like you who are intelligent and courageous. How can Lu Buwei just watch by the side?”

He no longer addressed Lu Buwei as Master Lu and used his full name instead. The three of them can sense the transformation in his attitude and understood the pain of betrayal by his master.

Li Si added: “He can use the death of the Meng children to strengthen his partnership with Meng Ao against Lord Yangquan’s forces. He can also absorb the invincible elite Wu Family Warriors into his own residence, strengthening his forces. Sacrificing a few family warriors is nothing. Anyway, the three hundred family warriors came mainly from Master Tu and Master Xiao and are considered the senior generation. With their deaths, the Lu clansmen will increase in power.”

Piak!

Teng Yi vehemently broke a young tree that was beside him into two.

Everyone was quiet and just look blankly at one another.

The pain in their hearts only seems to increase more and more.

They did their best for Lu Buwei but were treated in such a manner.

Xiao Yuetan summarized: “We will soon know if this is the case. If Lu Buwei betrayed us, the people waiting for us at Huang Lung Ling will not be Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi but those who attacked us at the red pine forest. If I am not wrong, Zhu Meng will lead the attack personally to prevent any information leakages. Once this is over, they just have to house these men outside Xianyang and everyone will be kept in the dark.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the day when Lu Xiong refused to change the traveling path and his heart sank straight down.

Li Si warned: “Zhu Meng is extremely crafty. When we escaped, he disguised as Han soldiers to pursue us. We were deceived that it was Lord Yangquan conspiring with Han against us. What treachery!”

Unexpectedly, Teng Yi inquired in a peaceful manner: “Is Third Brother still going to Qi?”

Xiang Shaolong could not even force himself to smile. He slowly state: “I have only one interest now. I want to prove that it is really

Lu Buwei betraying us. Following that, I will try to kill Zhu Meng and redeem some of the blood debt that Lu Buwei owes me.”

The next evening, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun returned from Huang Lung Ling with grave expressions. They gathered Li Si and Xiao Yuetan to the waterfall for a meeting.

Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang knew about the matter and joined the discussion.

Before a word can be said, everyone knew the result.

Li Si asked in a deep voice: “How many of them are there?”

Teng Yi responded: “About a thousand. They were dressed as Qin soldiers and even put up Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi’s flag emblem. Mister Xiao is right. They were led by Zhu Meng. He has been identified by Jing Jun.”

Jing Jun nodded: “I have also identified some men from Lu Residence. Hng! They said they were my brothers and now they are waiting to kill me.”

Wu Tingfang let out a cry and sought comfort in Ji Yanran’s bosom. Ji Yanran’s beautiful eyes shone as she questioned: “How are we going to make them pay for our suffering?”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “I am afraid that Qu Dou Qi and the others are dead. This will naturally be blamed on Han so that the King

will be convinced to attack Han in return. After so many years, I finally realise I am committing crimes for a crime lord.”

Li Si reasoned: “You have to bear with it. Brother Xiao and I can leave anytime but Grand Tutor Xiang has the Wu Family burden on your shoulders and cannot leave just like that. Luckily, you have the support of the King and Queen. As long as you do not antagonize him, Lu Buwei cannot harm you for the time being.”

Xiao Yuetan added: “On the surface, Shaolong must pretend that you believe the attack was masterminded by Lord Yangquan and Han. You must deceive everyone, including Lu Buwei. Keep a low profile and everyone should be fine. When the opportunity arises, relocate your family far away from the capital and see how this heartless man will eventually get his retribution.”

Finishing, he could not help but tremble slightly.

Still embracing Wu Tingfang’s in her bosom, Ji Yanran frowned: “How should we deal with Zhu Meng’s forces now. If we left like this, we will raise suspicions. Meng Wu and Meng Tian are around. If they report to Meng Ao, Lu Buwei will know that we have discovered his ruse. He is expanding his influence every day. To topple Shaolong and Wu Family should not be too difficult.”

Teng Yi suggested: “I am not worried about that yet. Let’s lay our formation and prepare an escape route. We will use the normal communication to inform the enemies about our location. They will again attack us at night. We will lay waste to them before returning to Xianyang. Like what Shaolong said, we must take some sort of revenge on them.”

Jing Jun retrieved a map from his sleeve. The layout of Huang Lung Ling was briefly sketched. On the map were three flags which represent the enemies' positions. Pointing to a ridge, he recommended: "There is a steep area here surrounded by slopes on three sides. It is part of a thick forest. The back is Huang Lung Ling's tributary which is four hours walk from Zhu Meng's position. We can lay our trap there. While the sun is strong these few days and the snow has melted from the trees, we can apply oil onto the trees. With a fire attack, we will give Zhu Meng the biggest surprise of his life."

Teng Yi pointed to behind the mountain and concluded: "We have done our investigations. With proper ropes, we can easily descend the mountain from the back. With the plains on the other side, we can leave quickly. Brother Xiao and Brother Li can wait for us there with Tingfang and the Meng brothers. You can keep an eye on the horse and the provisions."

Xiang Shaolong stood up declaring: "It is decided. We must now race against time. With our work in these few days, we will put up a good show for Zhu Meng."

The sun is setting into the horizon and the wilderness became desolate once more.

Using a bronze mirror to reflect sunlight into Zhu Meng's camp in succession, Xiang Shaolong paused for a while. He repeated it three times again before he kept the mirror.

This is the signal Xiang Shaolong and Qu Dou Qi agreed on before they split. When Lu Xiong and Qu Dou Qi saw this signal, they will send men to receive them but of course, it is not going to happen in this case.

The three sworn brothers led the eight elite Wu Family Warriors and the thirty eight hunters up the back mountain. Carrying as much arrows as they could, they shield themselves behind the protruding rocks and waited for the fish to enter their net.

Under the mountain were several tents that were partially hidden in the woods. If the enemy spied on them, they will not be suspicious.

As they wait for the sun to set from the centre of the sky, Xiang Shaolong could feel different surges of emotions.

He knew that he will one day clash with Lu Buwei; but he did not expect it to come so soon.

He recollected that King Zhuangxiang will die soon and Lu Buwei will be in power for ten years, his heart begins to palpitate. Such a long period of time, can he and the Wu Family hang on till the end?

It will all depend on Empress Zhu Ji the future Dowager. As long as Lu Buwei does not fight him openly, he has a way to handle his family warriors.

Back in Xianyang, he will secretly train soldiers and input his 21st century knowledge into making better weapons. He has never thought about such issues in the past. Now, to preserve his own life, he must utilise all his skills and knowledge.

From this moment, he will fight an underground war with Lu Buwei. When Xiao Pan is in power, it will be time for Lu Buwei to die. Historians have concluded that Lu Buwei committed suicide but Xiang Shaolong knew a man like him will never do such a silly thing. It may even be him who will finish Lu Buwei off.

He hated Zhao Mu but they have been enemies from the very beginning, unlike Lu Buwei this devious man who hides a knife beneath his smile, making him extremely bitter.

Besides him, Ji Yanran leaned over and whispered: “What are you thinking of?”

Xiang Shaolong felt guilty and sighed: “It has been hard on you!”

Ji Yanran softly replied: “This is nothing. For people like you, you will incur jealousy wherever you go. When I decided to follow you, Mister Zou has long predicted this but I did not even have the least bit of hesitation.”

Filled with gratitude, Xiang Shaolong hugged her lightly.

This beautiful and intelligent woman gently commented: “When I heard that Empress Ji and you had many private conversations, I

thought it is highly inappropriate. Lu Buwei has such a strong influence over King Zhuangxiang and Prince Zheng is due to her input. She keeps doting on you, giving Lu Buwei the motive to get rid of you. Only through this can he make Empress Ji wholeheartedly help him to eliminate Lord Yangquan and gain power. I have seen so many examples. Everyone behaves exactly the same.”

Pausing, she added: “When I was a guest at Lu Residence, I can see that he is staring at me with a strange look in his eyes. I am very experienced with such a look. It is the look of jealousy.”

The sky begins to darken and the crescent moon rose up to replace the sun, shining down on the snow plains. The snow capped peak of Huang Lung Ling is even more mesmerizing.

On the other side, Teng Yi was scrutinizing the dense forest and warned: “Here they come!”

The enemies began climbing the slopes on the three sides. They did not light their lamps and were very quiet. Only the sound of breaking branches can be heard, showing that these are well-trained men.

Xiang Shaolong and his men were in total silence and their arrows were notched in their bows.

With their high ground and rock shields, they are invincible. The only question is how many enemies they can kill!

Traps have been laid all over the campsite. The slopes and trees have all been applied with pine oil extracted from pine trees. When it starts to burn, it is no laughing matter.

After two hours, the sound of branches breaking has completely stopped. On the north wind is heard blowing.

Teng Yi coldly laughed: “Here we go!”

His words had barely left his lips when countless torches were lit at the same time and battle cries can be heard. Hundreds of men rushed towards the tents and arrows fell like rain into the tents. The air is heavy with a killing aura.

What happened next was men falling into traps and tragic shouts can be heard. The traps were set up by the hunters. Even wild beasts will lose their lives, not to mention humans.

With their torches falling down, the forest started to catch fire.

With the north wind blowing strongly, the fire burned ferociously.

The enemies on lower ground were in chaos and trampled on one another.

Xiang Shaolong gave the order and fire arrows were shot towards other areas of the dense forest.

The entire mountain top was engulfed in flames. Cries and shouting were heard everywhere.

Xiang Shaolong and his men did not hold back. Fuelled by revenge, they rained arrows on their attackers.

Under the bright flames, the enemies could see everything around them. Everything except an escape path. Although the hundreds of men in the traps were not burned, they could not escape the arrows and death.

When the entire mountain is burning like a giant fireball, Xiang Shaolong and his men could not take it anymore too. Using the ropes they prepared, they slipped away via the mountain back.

The pain in their hearts was relieved to a certain extent.

Book 11 Chapter 09 – Return To Xianyang

Twenty days has passed and they arrived back at Han once again.

Not only has Xiang Shaolong lost the enthusiasm to carry out his mission; he has lost all his valuables in the red pine forest and lost contact with the Qin army escort. To visit the various Kings of the six states empty handed will be a big joke.

After pitching their tents and getting ready for dinner, everyone is surprised to see that Xiao Yuetan has not turned up. Li Si hastily rushed over and exclaimed: “Mister Xiao is sick!”

Everyone was surprised but it was not totally unexpected. For the past few days, Xiao Yuetan has been rather pale and quiet. Now, he has finally succumbed to his illness.

As everyone entered his tent, they were shocked.

Xiao Yuetan was gravely sick and he could hardly open his eyes. Forcing a smile, he groaned: “I don’t think I am going to make it!”

Wu Tingfang and the Meng brothers who have always been close to him could not help but begin to cry softly.

Ji Yanran advised: “Mister Xiao should be well after another two days of rest!”

When she was about to take his pulse, he rejected: “I am well-versed in medication and know my health better than anyone. I wish to speak in private with Shaolong.”

Everyone left the tent according to his wishes.

When Xiang Shaolong was left alone, Xiao Yuetan suddenly sat up and his eyes are brimming with energy. Although his face is still grey and deathly, it feels absolutely different.

As Xiang Shaolong was stunned by this dramatic transformation, he realised that he had put on make-up and faked his illness. Grasping his hand elatedly, he was lost for words.

Xiao Yuetan apologised: “I am so sorry to make Tingfang cry. But if I don’t resort to this, I cannot deceive Meng Wu and Meng Tian.”

Xiang Shaolong understood his meaning and softly asked: “Brother Xiao has decided not to return to Xianyang City.”

Xiao Yuetan nodded: “I can no longer work for that traitor. He seeks my death to weaken Master Tu’s forces and replace us with his clansmen. He dare not do so openly for fear of repercussions.” From under his pillow, he retrieved a sealed bamboo cylinder. Stuffing it into Xiang Shaolong’s hands, he instructed: “My fake death can only be revealed to Li Si, Teng Yi and Master Tu. Shaolong, please help me hand this to Master Tu. He will understand after reading it. Get him to dismiss my servants and assistants. It is fortunate that I am childless and can leave without any considerations.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that he is childless too. Seems like being childless may not be so bad after all.

After hearing these chilling words from this witty man, Xiang Shaolong thought about the days when he first came to Handan City. Feeling melancholic, he sighed: "Where does Brother Xiao plan to go?"

Xiao Yuetan smiled: "The world is so big and there will surely be a place that can accommodate me. I still have some abilities that can earn me a living. It is better than living with a tiger under the same roof."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in silence.

Xiao Yuetan promised: "Once I am settled down, I will send word to Shaolong. You must remember to act as if everything is normal when you get back. Although Lord Yangquan's ambitions have been exaggerated by Lu Buwei, he is still a threat to you. If you can eliminate him, it will still be good for you. How many people will be implicated in this issue is beyond our control."

Pausing, he added: "If Zhu Meng is killed at Huang Lung Ling, the Lu clansmen will be weakened. As long as Lu Buwei is dependent on Master Tu, Master Tu will protect you. When you return to Xianyang, keep a low profile and do not visit Empress Ji or Crown Prince if possible. This is to preserve your life."

Xiang Shaolong thought about Xiao Pan and was troubled. How can he leave him alone? He did not wish to tell Xiao Pan the reason too as it may be too much for him to bear.

Xiao Yuetan forced his voice to go even deeper and advised: “After I slipped away tonight, burn the whole tent and announce that it is my death wish. Shaolong! Take care! Li Si may be a small fry in Lu Buwei’s eyes and not get into trouble. However, this man is truly brilliant and will be of assistance to you in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong imagined the grandeur of Premier Li Si managing the Qin court in future and envisioned Qin engaging the six states. He visualized thousands of soldiers and horses in a fierce battle.

His heart is bursting with pride.

Xiang Shaolong! You must not sink into depression or you will not witness such a grand scene.

In a gloomy state, Xiang Shaolong returned to Xianyang City. Lu Buwei has received word and is waiting for them outside the city.

Everyone wish they could rip him into pieces there and then. But he is escorted by hundreds of elite bodyguards. Everyone is alert and fit. It appears that he has no idea about what has happened and is still taking prevention against them.

Meng Ao came along as well. Everyone has a look of defeat on their faces and there was no sign of Qu Dou Qi, Lu Xiong, Xiao

Yuetan, the one thousand Qin army and the three hundred Lu Family Warriors. Meng Ao was utterly shocked unlike Lu Buwei who is faking it. Meng Wu and Meng Tian made it back home after much difficulty. After all, they were still young. Catching sight of their father, they leapt down their horses and ran straight into his arms. Crying and telling the entire story, they saved Xiang Shaolong from a lengthy explanation.

Talking about Huang Lung Ling, Lu Buwei sighed with relief and thought that his scheme has not been exposed.

When he heard about Xiao Yuetan's death, Lu Buwei beat his chest and stomped on the ground wailing: "I will seek justice for Yuetan." Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he reassured: "Shaolong! This is not your fault. Let's enter the palace now and speak to Your Majesty."

In the past, Xiang Shaolong will be very thankful but it is a different matter now.

As everyone went on their way, Meng Ao expressed his deepest gratitude to Xiang Shaolong and led his two sons back home.

Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang and the rest returned to Wu residence.

Li Si and some bodyguards returned to Lu Residence while Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong rode towards the palace.

Among the galloping sounds, Xiang Shaolong wanted to find some words to comfort Lu Buwei. However, his heart is filled with revenge and he could not find the right words to say.

Lu Buwei thought that he is worried about King Zhuangxiang's censure. He pretended to assure him: "It is all my fault. I did not anticipate Yan's Xu Yi Luan to ambush us and cause Shaolong to suffer a setback. I will choose a few beauties from my residence to replace the wife and maids that perished. Forget about the past."

Still vengeful, Xiang Shaolong insisted: "Premier Lu, please don't bother. Hey! How is the campaign against Eastern Zhou?"

Lu Buwei was immediately exhilarated and replied in a pleased manner: "A measly Zhou is not worth a mention. Once conquered, His Majesty combined Eastern Zhou and Western Zhou into three provinces as I recommended. I am promoted to be Marquis Wenxing and am responsible for these provinces, the ten thousand households residing there as well as the three rivers – River He, River Luo and River Yi."

Pausing, he added happily: "We must not let Lord Yangquan off. His conspiracy with Han is unforgivable. Without Eastern Zhou hindering our path, I will recommend His Majesty to attack Han. While the six states are busy with their own affairs, we will overrun Han and then set our sights on Zhao and Wei."

Xiang Shaolong was filled with dread. Xiao Yuetan is right after all. This man is vicious and scheming. Not many people under the sky are his match.

Speaking until here, the majestic palace gates appear before their eyes.

Xiang Shaolong sighed. King Zhuangxiang had trusted him so much and yet he must deceive him. Why is life full of such helpless incidents?

King Zhuangxiang received them in the Imperial Study. After listening to his story, his face changed colour and he seems infuriated. For a while, he remained in silence.

Seated on his right with Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji wailed: "Lord Yangquan is so daring to cause the death of Shaolong's wife. We even lost soldiers and generals. Your Majesty must seek justice."

Fire was sprouting out of Xiao Pan's eyes as he clenched his fist. Zhao Qian has been close to him like a sister. Lu Buwei put on an act and sighed: "I have always obeyed Your Majesty and made peace with Left Premier. Who knew that he is such a person! Even if he is Your Majesty's benefactor, Your Majesty has been kind to him as well. How dare he repay kindness with evil intentions! Ai! I do not know what to say."

Xiang Shaolong lowered his head to prevent Lu Buwei from seeing his scornful expression.

After a moment of contemplation, King Zhuangxiang faced Xiang Shaolong and promised: "On this trip, the household of every casualty shall receive ten taels of gold. Ai! You cannot bring back

the dead and Shaolong must take it easy. First, Ting Fangshi died of illness and now Princess Qian is murdered. I can feel your pain. If Shaolong has any requests, feel free to speak your mind. I will do my best to grant your wish.”

Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei hurriedly winked at him to get Zhuangxiang to seek justice for him.

Xiang Shaolong pretended not to see the winks. Kneeling down, he kowtowed: “I have no wishes other than to move into seclusion and mourned for my dead wife.”

King Zhuangxiang, Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and Xiao Pan were in shock. Glancing at each other, they were dumbfounded.

Zhu Ji’s expression is different and she frowned, thinking hard for the real reason.

She knows that Xiang Shaolong is fair to those who have helped him and those who have harmed him. Why is he is not taking action against Lord Yangquan?

Lu Buwei did not know that his scheme is exposed. Witnessing his defeated expression, he was secretly delighted.

Xiao Pan was in a state of panic. He was afraid that Grand Tutor is ignoring him for good. Luckily, he knows that Xiang Shaolong is deeply in love with Zhao Qian. Even if he is unhappy, he forgives him

King Zhuangxiang thought that Xiang Shaolong did not want to put him in a difficult position and even put his personal revenge aside. He was touched and reassured: “Shaolong must take a good rest now. I will not let this matter rest like this. I will see Empress Dowager later and seek her opinion.”

Zhu Ji advised: “Your Majesty must not do so. Empress Dowager may not be on good terms with Lord Yangquan but they are siblings after all. If he receives word and create internal strife, the commoners will suffer.”

Lu Buwei left his seat and kowtowed: “We must look at the big picture. Please give the order. I will lead the army and annihilate the traitors to display the might of Your Majesty.”

King Zhuangxiang stared at Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong kneeling before him. Gritting his teeth, he committed: “Fine! Premier shall see to this matter. You must spare Left Premier’s life though. I will decide what to do with him after I speak to Empress Dowager.”

Lu Buwei could hardly hold back his glee and agreed.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: “Great! I will let you enjoy your short-lived victory. One day, I, the man from the future 21st Century, will kill you personally.”

Back in the Wu residence, everyone was grieved and depressed.

Tao Fang received him at the main door. Pulling him to the garden, he was panting heavily and could not utter a single word.

Xiang Shaolong felt that something was amiss. Quivering, he asked: "What is it?"

Tao Fang shook his head and replied: "A lot has happened in Zhao and Wei. I am afraid Lady Ya will not be coming."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: "She is dead?"

Tao Fang bitterly laughed: "She is not dead but has reignited her passion with Prince Xinling. This kind of wanton woman; you had better forget about her."

Xiang Shaolong was instead relieved. As long as it is her own wish, he will not hold it against her. Since he knew her, she has been a loose and passionate woman. Moreover, Prince Xinling is a very eligible bachelor. The only thing he could not understand was that they could still get together despite all the issues that stand between them.

Tao Fang's voice sounded in his ear once again: "Empress Jing has become the Empress Dowager and wield absolute power in Zhao. She sent an envoy to the King of Wei and asked for the head of Zhao Ya. It is fortunate that Lord Longyang helped Zhao Ya escape and seek refuge in Prince Xinling's residence. Receiving his protection, Zhao Ya repaid his gratitude by becoming his woman and will be based there for the time being. She has sent someone to

inform you that you are the only man she has ever loved and hope that you will forgive her.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that after all the trials and tribulations; Lord Longyang is the most trustworthy. He kept his promise to protect Zhao Ya even though Dong Horse Fanatic has ‘died’. In a serious tone, he questioned: “What about Zhao Zhi?”

Tao Fang replied: “Relax! She is back and waiting for you in the residence.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: “I thought it was something more serious. Master Tao, your solemn expression gave me a big fright. Ai! Why is your face still as pale?”

Tao Fang answered: “When Cui Lu and Cui Tong heard about Third Princess’s death, they secretly hanged themselves. When we found them, they had just lost their breaths and their body is still warm.”

These words struck him like a bolt from the sky. Xiang Shaolong was shaking non-stop and his tears flowed like two streams of water. He almost could not bear this cruel reality.

In a side room of the inner hall, with a wooden expression Xiang Shaolong gave Xiao Yuetan’s letter to Master Tu who is there to pay his last respects to Zhao Qian and the maids.

Master Tu did not say a word. Opening the sealed container, he

retrieved the scroll of paper within and read it in silence. Amazingly, there was no change in his expression.

Once finished, he set fire and burned the letter to ashes. He then plainly said: “For the past two decades, I have never regarded Xiao Yuetan as my subordinate. In fact, we were closer than brothers. We respected each other very much though we never openly voice it. He is the only man I will trust with my life. Even in such a time, he has left me a note, showing that I have not judged this good brother wrongly.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed but did not say anything in return.

Master Tu casually shrugged his shoulders and leisurely mentioned: “When the birds are gone, you keep your bow. This is a true saying since ancient times. It is easy to share woe but hard to share wealth. The disadvantage of old leaders like us is we know too much about Master Lu, especially the secret relationship between him and Zhu Ji. Before I read this letter, I have interrogated everything from Li Si so I am able to maintain my composure.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood how Master Tu can remain so emotionless.

Master Tu coldly state: “Lu Buwei may be powerful but I am not one to be trifled with either. Zhu Meng has yet to return and must have died. Lu Xiong has just come back though. You must be careful with Meng Ao. If he knows the truth, given his straightforward character, he will confront and be killed by Lu Buwei. Now that Lord Yangquan has been imprisoned with

another ten thousand people who are close to him. Over half of the Qin military leaders have thrown in their lot with Lu Buwei. If it is an open battle, we will not last an hour against him.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “What plans does Brother Tu have?”

The corner of Master Tu’s mouth curled up in a cold smile and replied in a low voice: “Like you, I am waiting for a good opportunity.”

Laughing, he left after having expressed the discomfort in his chest.

Xiang Shaolong continued to sit there in a daze. Until Wu Yingyuan sat down beside him did he snap back to reality.

Wu Yingyuan sighed: “Premier Lu got me to speak to you. He is in need of men and General Meng Ao is leaving to attack Han. Will Shaolong be his assistant general?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely asked: “Does Father-in-law trust me?”

Wu Yingyuan was taken aback and nodded: “Of course! I trust you more than my own son.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “In everything I do, the Wu family safety is my top most concern, including this moving into seclusion. One day, Father-in-law will understand why I did this. For now, please do not ask me for the reason.”

Wu Yingyuan was shaken. His face losing colour, he inquired: “What are you hiding from me?”

With giant tears flowing down his face, he slowly said: “Doesn’t Father-in-law wish to build a magnificent cenotaph for Grandfather Wu? If I, Xiang Shaolong, am still alive ten years later, I will fulfill your wish.”

Wu Yingyuan was dumbfounded for a while. Letting out a long sigh, he nodded: “I understand! Regardless of what may happen, we will leave Xianyang City tomorrow. Our father and son relationship will always remain the same.”

Book 11 Chapter 10 – Highly Trusted

Since his return to Qin from Zhao, fate has been torturing him.

If not for Ting Fangshi's sickness and eventual death, he will not be motivated to bring Wu Tingfang and Zhao Qian with him on his mission. Zhao Qian will be able to stay alive and so will Chunying and her fellow maids. In addition, Cui Tong and Cui Lu will not hang themselves to accompany Zhao Qian in death.

When he was in such extreme danger in Daliang, with some luck, he still managed to protect this pretty Third Princess of Zhao. But on the river beside the red pine forest, she died a horrible death. Ultimately, he wasn't sharp enough and was tricked by Lu Buwei.

He will not let Lu Buwei trick him again, for he will not be able to take it anymore.

Seven young and energetic ladies who are undergoing the prime of their lives were gone just like that, as if it was a wet dream.

He can never forget the stark difference between their usual enchanting appearances to the frightening and ugly look of their corpses.

After six months on the farms, his turbulent emotions has calmed down to a huge extent. He did not give a hoot to politics but focused all his energy on training his secret army. At the end, he produced an elite fighting unit that was five thousand strong. These men will help him to support Xiao Pan ascend the throne

and counter Lu Buwei's private army.

Three thousand of these warriors came from the Wu Family Warriors. The rest of them come from Pu Bu's men, Jing village hunters, and also from the Wu estates situated all over the six states.

They formed five armies with one thousand soldiers in each army. They are led by Wu Zhuo, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Pu Bu. They masquerade as farmers during the day and did their training at night. Because of this, they excelled in night missions.

The training was designed by Teng Yi and himself. Needless to say, most of the training content came from the 21st century that was modified to suit their current requirements.

To get something done, you need the right tools.

With Ji Yanran's blacksmiths from Yue coupled with Xiang Shaolong knowledge of alloys from the 21st century, they produced the best weapons known during those times.

The average swords used are three to four feet long. Any swords longer than that will break easily. However, they managed to produce a thin sword that was five feet long. Based on this advantage alone, they have increased their fighting prowess.

Wu Yingyuan sent men all over the country and cultivated a new breed of warhorses. Regardless of endurance or speed, they

surpassed the current standards by a huge margin.

Xiao Yuetan is right. With the Wu family wealth and expertise backing Xiang Shaolong, he will be a force to reckon with.

Xiang Shaolong has been trained in the art of espionage and intelligence gathering. He understood the need for spies and trained another hundred men in this field. Once they completed their training, Tao Fang was placed in charge of them.

After six months of hard work, they have succeeded in forming a self sufficient secret military organization.

On several occasions, Lu Buwei will send someone to check on them. With Master Tu's secret protection, they are unable to discover anything new.

The days passed peacefully on the surface but it is an intensive competition in hiding.

On this day, Tao Fang visited them from Xianyang City. He could not find Xiang Shaolong in the Hidden Dragon Abode. Escorted by Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi, he made his way to the Moon Prayer Peak military training ground to report the latest news to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong and Tao Fang proceeded to the army camps. Sitting down on some rocks in the middle of an open area, they begin to chat.

Tao Fang started: “Meng Ao has been victorious in attacking Zhao, conquering Chen Nie and Xinyang. Gaining the upper hand, he continued to set his sights on Yuci and Langmeng. The people of the six states are in panic and it was rumoured that King Anli and Prince Xinling have put aside their differences. Prince Xinling will personally visit the six states and get the support of everyone to counter the threat of Qin.”

His face losing colour, Xiang Shaolong commented: “Zhao Ya is in danger!”

Tao Fang was slightly stunned and replied with displeasure: “Such a loose woman; Shaolong should not be bothered with her.”

He understood where Shaolong was coming from. If Prince Xinling approached Zhao, it will be negotiating with Empress Dowager Jing rather than the young king. With the deep grudges between Zhao Ya and Empress Dowager Jing, Zhao Ya’s death will be the condition for them to work together.

After thinking for a moment, Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: “Are Zhao and Yan still fighting?”

Tao Fang answered: “Yan is fighting a losing battle. After Lian Po has eliminated Yan’s famed general Li Fu, Yan has called for a truce but will have to offer concessions to Zhao. The first goal of Prince Xinling is to get them to stop fighting.”

His expression turning ugly, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “How

long has it been since Prince Xinling went on this mission?”

Tao Fang guessed that he still has feelings for Zhao Ya. He sighed: “Till today, it would have been about five months. If Prince Xinling and Han Jing has a secret agreement to take Zhao Ya’s life, there is nothing we can do.”

Xiang Shaolong was flustered.

Tao Fang reminded: “We can hardly protect ourselves now. Lu Buwei’s influence is growing day by day. The advisor-guests in his residence have exceeded eight thousand and he has built another Premier residence that is three times bigger than the old one. He has purposely left the Left Premier post empty so that he may dominate Qin politics. With his military successes, everyone in Xianyang City is dancing to his tune.”

Xiang Shaolong put aside Zhao Ya’s issue and enquired: “Master Tao has come all the way here. Are there any more updates?”

Tao Fang’s expression grew more serious and added: “There is a strange matter indeed. His Majesty sent an attendant from the inner palace to look for me. He wants to summon you into the palace for a conference. That is the reason I came all the way here to inform you. The attendant who is named Teng Sheng is very secretive and I am sure there is more than meets the eye.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned by this development when Wu Tingfang’s voice jingled: “Hubby! Come and judge for us who is a better mountaineer, Zhi Zhi or me?”

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. His peaceful lifestyle is about to come to an end.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led eighteen of their men and traveled non-stop for one day and night, rushing back to Xianyang City. The moment they entered the city, they went straight into the palace for the royal audience.

These eighteen men has been named the Eighteen Guardians by Teng Yi. They include Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu who had accompanied him to red pine forest. Altogether, there were ten warriors from the Wu Family, six hunters from Jing Village, one man from Pu Bu's brothers and one man from Ji Yanran's family warriors.

Under the strictest training, the Eighteen Guardians have shown amazing resilience to be the best among the five thousand. As Xiang Shaolong's personal escorts, they are the best among the best and the cream among the cream.

Since the red pine forest incident, everyone went through a lot of mental suffering and realise the value of self-preservation. With strong forces, they can still escape any confrontation even if they cannot win.

King Zhuangxiang had given orders in advance. When the palace guards saw Xiang Shaolong coming, they held Teng Yi and the Guardians in the outer palace and brought Xiang Shaolong into the Imperial Study to meet King Zhuangxiang.

King Zhuangxiang looks as majestic as ever. Only his brows were slightly creased, betraying some signs of tiredness.

Dismissing his men, King Zhuangxiang and Xiang Shaolong were seated in order of authority. The door was closed for privacy.

This King of the most powerful state smiled broadly: “Six months has passed so fast. Two days ago, I had a strange inspiration. Wouldn’t it be great if Shaolong can be part of my court? Witnessing your energetic form, I am happy that you have let go of the past!”

Xiang Shaolong was touched. This prestigious man has not been corrupted by the vast amount of power he wields.

He was feeling hurt at the same time, remembering that he does not have many more days to live. At the same time, he is puzzled. King Zhuangxiang does not resemble someone whose life is about to end very soon.

Confused by his thoughts, he was overwhelmed with emotions and could not reply King Zhuangxiang for the time being.

King Zhuangxiang nodded: “Shaolong is a man who values love and relationships. I can see it from your eyes. Are you aware that Lord Yangquan has passed away three days ago? Your wife’s death has finally been avenged.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “Your Majesty sentenced him to death?”

King Zhuangxiang shook his head: “It was Buwei. He thought that I am still in the dark. After putting Lord Yangquan in house arrest, he provided him with beauties and strong liquor. This man has always been an alcoholic and pervert. I have once censured him for over-indulging in women and wine. Now that he is fully immersed in these sins for the past six months, his body finally broke down and he died! I guess it is better this way; only his death can redeem his sins.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. He may not have any appreciation for Lord Yangquan but ultimately, he is just a loser in the power struggle. Compared to Lu Buwei, he is far too inferior.

King Zhuangxiang may not have many confidantes. In a talkative mood, he revealed: “When I was imprisoned in Handan City, I thought that my troubles will be over when I am back in Xianyang City. I am mistaken. From being the Crown Prince till the King, I am besotted with endless troubles. If I heed Premier Lu’s advice to unite the world, that kind of burden will be unbearable. It is already very tough to govern Qin alone.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly that these burdens will be Xiao Pan’s, not yours. Remembering the constructions of Qin, he suggested: “There are ways to govern a village and there are ways to govern a country. You have to combine military strength and politics. There is internal military and external military. For external military, you can connect all the walls of various states and prevent the Xiong Nu invasion. For internal military, you can

disarm the military of the six states. Then apply strict regulations and the world will be peaceful.”

These are not his points of views but what truly happened in history.

King Zhuangxiang's eyes lit up and excitedly questioned: “What about politics?”

Like dictation, Xiang Shaolong rattled from memory: “To unite the world, you have to utilise the appropriate strategies. First, you must abolish the feudal system and split the country into provinces. They will report directly to Xianyang. You must create a system to standardise weights and measurement, currency, writings, languages and roads. Then you build bridges across all the rivers and stimulate the traffic and economy within the country. Peace will always come after chaos. Your Majesty need not burden yourself too much.”

King Zhuangxiang could not stop gaping: “Shaolong's casual words are full of foresight. You must be my new Left Premier.”

Xiang Shaolong was blown away. “What?” he stammered.

Pleased, King Zhuangxiang state: “Lord Yangquan has been the Left Premier of Qin. Now that he is gone, someone else must fill this vacancy. I have been troubled by this issue and I am worried about your lack of experience in politics. But having heard what you just mentioned, I no longer have any doubts in my mind.”

Xiang Shaolong was covered with sweat. He knows nothing about politics and just quoted what he read from history books to lighten King Zhuangxiang's burden. Who can imagine that it will create such a "horrible" result? He frantically kneeled down and kowtowed: "This cannot be. Will Your Majesty please retract your order!"

King Zhuangxiang was annoyed: "Shaolong is unwilling to help me govern my country?"

Xiang Shaolong was cursing inside. "Has Your Majesty spoken to Premier Lu?" he asked.

King Zhuangxiang replied: "Great General Meng has just conquered thirty-seven cities belonging to Zhao. Premier Lu has left yesterday to design a new province. Now, we command Sanchuan and Taiyuan two strategic locations and broke through Sanjin. It will not be long before we unite the world. Lu Buwei's responsibilities are increasing day by day and Shaolong is one of the men he regards highly. With you assisting him, he need not run about like a mad man."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: If I became the Left Premier, I will probably report to He11 before you. Trying to shun this responsibility, he was inspired and explained: "If I am promoted to Left Premier, it will bring disadvantages to Premier Lu."

King Zhuangxiang was taken aback and ordered: "Shaolong, return to your seat and explain yourself."

Back in his seat, Xiang Shaolong reported: “After all, I am Premier Lu’s follower and it is he who brought me to Xianyang City. If I take up this promotion, there will be rumours that Premier Lu puts his own men in key positions and has ill intentions. Moreover, I am not originally from Qin and has no political experience. The people will not submit to me.”

King Zhuangxiang frowned: “But I do not see anyone who is more suitable than you.”

Xiang Shaolong blurted the first name that came to his mind: “General Xu Xian is a talented man as well. Why don’t Your Majesty consider him?”

Although he had only met Xu Xian once, he was impressed that Xu Xian disregarded Lu Buwei’s invitation and mentioned his name.

King Zhuangxiang was moved. Nodding, he agreed: “Your suggestion is worth considering. Are you really uninterested?”

Xiang Shaolong quickly brought up all the disadvantages he could think of, even those that are not even real. At the same time, he highlighted the advantages of Xu Xian as the Left Premier. When King Zhuangxiang finally relented, he was extremely relieved and added: “Shaolong has a small suggestion.”

King Zhuangxiang accepted: “Shaolong, please speak your mind.”

Xiang Shaolong requested: “There is an advisor-guest named Li Si in Premier Lu’s residence. He accompanied me on my last mission and has displayed his extensive knowledge and talent. Can Your Majesty give him an official post?”

King Zhuangxiang smiled: “This is a small matter. I will give him a post immediately. Shaolong, you are always putting others before yourself. You are a rare breed.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly elated. He added: “Can this position be related to the Crown Prince? With this man around the Crown Prince, the Crown Prince will definitely benefit.”

King Zhuangxiang did not suspect that this is the most powerful move against Lu Buwei. Pleased, he consented: “Let him be a study attendant and accompany Prince Zheng in his studies. Oh! Please visit Empress Ji and Prince Zheng! They missed you a lot.”

Xiang Shaolong thanked the gods whom he has been hating for the past six months and excused himself.

Stepping out of the Imperial Study, two palace maids came up to him and brought him to visit Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong knew that visiting her is a bad idea but could not find a reason to reject her invitation.

In a luxuriously decorated room in the inner palace, Xiang Shaolong was looking out of the window and admiring the autumn

colours. Under the escorts of four palace maids, Zhu Ji came in and sat opposite him. Batting her curvy eye lashes and scrutinising him with her crystal clear eyes, she gleefully commented: “Shaolong is looking great and I am happy for you.”

After the four palace maids have retreated to one corner, Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “The dead have died. Survivors like us can only live on strongly.”

Zhu Ji quietly advised: “Shaolong, you must be strong. I am afraid whenever you speak like this.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed but did not reply her.

Zhu Ji was lost for words.

Finally, Xiang Shaolong spoke up. “Is Empress Ji happy?” he asked.

Pleased, Zhu Ji answered: “Without Lord Yangquan and his cronies distorting the truth and Buwei’s success coupled with Prince Zheng growing up to be a fine young man, there is nothing more I can ask for. If Shaolong can tutor Prince Zheng everyday like before, I will have no more regrets in life.”

Xiang Shaolong was moved by her words. But remembering King Zhuangxiang who is about to die soon and the ambitious Lu Buwei, he was undecided. “Can I think it over?” he pleaded.

Zhu Ji joyfully cooed: “I will not force you. I just hope that you will regain your former self. With you assisting Prince Zheng, the world will belong to him.”

Xiang Shaolong is simply afraid to continue the conversation with this charming and intelligent beauty. Taking the chance, he bade farewell.

Zhu Ji did not make it difficult for him and sent him to the door. In a low voice, she insisted: “Take another six months to think it over! When time is up, you must not reject His Majesty’s promotion.”

From these words, Xiang Shaolong realised that it was Zhu Ji who advised King Zhuangxiang to promote him to be the new Left Premier.

After all, he is Zhu Ji’s confidante and it will benefit Zhu Ji to have him in this important position.

Leaving her palace, Zhu Ji got an attendant to bring him to Xiao Pan.

To be honest, Xiang Shaolong missed this future Qin Shi Huang too. Despite knowing that he is coincidentally attending Qin Qing’s lesson, he insisted on waiting for him.

He is slightly afraid of Qin Qing. After suffering the blow from Zhao Qian’s and the maid’s deaths, he is not interested in women

anymore. This is unlike when he first came to this time frame and was laying every beauty he came across.

In the past, he will take every opportunity to seduce this virtuous Qin widow and get her onto his bed.

Now, if he can spend the rest of his days in peace with Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters, it will be more than what he can ask for.

Book 11 Chapter 11 – Meeting Qin Qing Again

Recalling the day when Xiao Pan came out in the middle of Qin Qing's lesson to look for him, causing Qin Qing to scold him as well, Xiang Shaolong told the attendant: "I will wait for Prince Zheng in the garden."

The attendant suggested: "Grand Tutor Xiang can wait outside the room. The lesson is about to end."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement and sat down on a bench at the side. Out of a sudden, he felt completely relaxed. Xianyang City without Lu Buwei is like a clear stream without man-eating crocodiles.

Out of all the people he came across in these ancient times, the talented and outstanding leaders include Prince Xinling, Tian Dan and Lu Buwei. However, in terms of scheming, Lu Buwei is the best.

This businessman single-handedly helped Zhuangxiang ascend the throne, got himself promoted to be Premier and annihilated his political enemies. He is truly formidable.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he himself is not his match but even so, Lu Buwei will never guess that his 'son' Xiao Pan is actually a replacement Xiang Shaolong conjured up.

When Xiao Pan ascend the throne, he will automatically win.

The question is - can he last until then?

Qin Qing's sweet voice rang out like music: "Grand Tutor Xiang! This is the first time we have met this year!"

Xiang Shaolong snapped out of his daydreaming and paid his respects.

This slender and charming widow returned his greetings. Her skin is glowing white and staring at her is a treat for his eyes.

Ji Yanran's beauty is enchanting but Qin Qing is a different flavour altogether. With her endless flow of appeal, her classy and well-proportioned figure, any man will be swept off his feet.

Qin Qing caught Xiang Shaolong staring at herself in a daze. Her face turning red, she shyly excused: "Grand Tutor Xiang, Prince Zheng is waiting for you inside. I take my leave first."

After a curtsy, she sashayed away.

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for losing control and entered Xiao Pan's room.

The kid has grown even taller and his features are even sharper than before. While he may not be handsome, he possesses thick eyebrows, sharp eyes and an imposing tall nose. With firm lips, he

gives the impression of strong determination. Adding to his rectangular shaped face and chiselled jaws, he resembles the conqueror who will one day rule the world.

Even when Xiang Shaolong entered the room, he was pretending to be engrossed in his books and dare not act loosely like before.

Somehow, Xiang Shaolong was feeling lost as if there is a much bigger gap between him and Xiao Pan.

After Xiang Shaolong paid his respects, Xiao Pan returned the greetings. At the same time, he gestured his two attendants to leave the room.

When both of them are seated, Xiao Pan's eyes shone with warmth. In a low voice, he commented: "Grand Tutor has lost weight!"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "How is Crown Prince doing?"

Xiao Pan nodded: "Everything is great! Hng! Lord Yangquan caused the death of Princess Qian and got his retribution. The people of Han will not have many days of happiness left."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling cold upon hearing his words. They do not seem to come from a fifteen year old.

Xiao Pan curiously asked: "Why does Grand Tutor seem to have a lot on his mind?"

At this time, Xiang Shaolong wished to hear him call himself ‘Master’, but remembering that he has forbid him from doing so in the first place, he gave up the idea. Forcing a smile, he replied: “There are many things that you will understand in the future.”

Xiao Pan was stunned and thought hard in silence.

Xiang Shaolong was beginning to believe that this future Emperor is going to be more than meets the eye. He instructed: “You are still young and must focus on your studies and gain more knowledge. Hei! Did you disturb the palace girls like in the past?”

Xiao Pan replied in a soft voice: “I am not interested in that ridiculous stuff anymore. Now, my only unhappiness comes from Grand Tutor being unable to teach me every day. Even Wang Ben misses you!”

At the last sentence, child-like innocence can be seen from Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong recalled the day when he was practising martial arts with them. Then, Zhao Qian and the maids are still living happily together. Filled with agony, he simply state: “I will take care of myself. Let me rest for six more months! All right?”

Xiao Pan’s eyes suddenly turned red. Lowering his head, he whispered: “I dreamt of Mum last night!”

Xiang Shaolong naturally knew that he is referring to Zhao Ni and his mood got worse. Patting him on the shoulder, he assured: “Don’t think too much. When you become a good King in the future, your mother’s spirit will be comforted.”

Xiao Pan nodded: “Not only must I be a good King, I must unite the world. Premier Lu often taught me this principle.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and smiled bitterly: “Fine! We will unite the world. I have arranged a talented man to tutor you. This man is named Li Si. As long as you make good use of him, you will be a great Emperor whose name will be remembered for centuries.”

Xiao Pan repeated Li Si’s name a few times before happily exclaiming: “Will Grand Tutor assist me in fighting the six states in the future? Ai! Thinking about war, I would love to be an adult right now and don my battle armour.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “We shall see! I must return to the farms. You need not send me off or you may arouse suspicions.” The palace is filled with Lu Buwei’s spies and it is better to be safe than sorry.

Xiao Pan grasped tightly onto his hand before releasing his grip. Nodding in agreement, his expression was filled with determination and strength.

Xiang Shaolong’s heart skipped a beat. Ai! It is truly Qin Shi Huang!

Stepping outside the room, two palace maids approached him greeting: “Empress Dowager wishes to meet Grand Tutor Xiang.”

Xiang Shaolong was not in favour of meeting Lady Hua Yang now. He is even afraid that she may bring up Lord Yangquan’s issue. He dare not turn down her invitation and was cursing at Qin Qing. If not for her, Empress Dowager will not know that he is in the palace.

Just like the last time, Empress Dowager Lady Hua Yang was accompanied by Qin Qing and they were waiting for him in her own palace. After paying his respects, Xiang Shaolong sat down. Lady Hua Yang started: “It is a nice coincidence that Grand Tutor Xiang is back. Another two days later and I will not be able to see you.”

Whether it is due to Lord Yangquan, her younger brother’s death or not, Lady Hua Yang seemed to have aged a few years since they last met. She still retain her comforting expression with some small signs of tiredness. Overall, she does not look happy.

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: “Where is Empress Dowager going?”

He recollected she had given him a valuable headdress to be given to her Chu relative. Not only has he failed to do so, he even lost it in the red pine forest. In addition, he did not even apologise to her for his failure. Guilt-ridden, he was grateful that she still appreciates him.

Lady Hua Yang's eyes had a dreamy look as she softly replied: "The day after tomorrow, I will leave for the Summer Palace at Bashu. I was told that the land is flat and fertile. Even if you scatter some seeds, they will grow into trees without further care. I am old and do not wish to witness all these infighting. I want to find a nice place and spend the rest of my life in peace."

Qin Qing interrupted: "Bashu has nice hills and streams, producing excellent livestock. The late king appointed Li Bin to govern the province. Li Bin has irrigated the place well and transformed wasteland into fertile farms. Empress Dowager will love the place."

Lady Hua Yang adoringly gazed at Qin Qing and softly asked: "So why are you not going with me? What is left in Xianyang City that is worth your time? I am still worried about you."

Qin Qing's pretty eyes turned to Xiang Shaolong and her face reddened immediately. Lowering her head, she replied in a low voice: "I am responsible to tutoring Prince Zheng and dared not leave."

Xiang Shaolong can sense the deep friendship between these two women. At the same time, he is secretly alarmed. He could not imagine the icy-cold Qin Qing has crossed her own line and fell in love with himself. Thinking deeper, he was sure that he is mistaken and it is his own wishful thinking.

Ai! Love is the world's greatest burden and he does not have the

courage to engage in a new relationship. Like his fleeting romance with Shan Rou, short but beautiful. A great experience is more than enough.

With each in their own thoughts, the room became very quiet.

Lady Hua Yang suddenly mentioned: “Shaolong, take care of Qing’er on my behalf. She is stubborn and headstrong, causing inconveniences to other people.” Qin Qing protested: “Empress Dowager! I can take care of myself.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Lady Hua Yang must have seen something coming to drop him these hints and words of encouragement.

Her face becoming weary, Lady Hua Yang softly said: “I will not hold Grand Tutor back any longer. Will Qing’er send Grand Tutor out for me?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly kowtowed in farewell.

As Qin Qing walked him out of the room, the atmosphere was awkward. Strolling in silence, both of them are lost for words.

Outside the Empress Dowager palace, Xiang Shaolong greeted: “Grand Tutor Qin can send me till here. Thanks for your company.”

Qin Qing’s expression was cold as she returned his greeting. She

plainly state: “Empress Dowager cares about me too much and said those words. Grand Tutor Xiang, please do not hold it against her.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I am still holding the memory of my late wife and does not have any interest in relationships. Grand Tutor Qin, please rest easy.” Finishing, he left in huge strides, leaving Qin Qing dazed on the spot, thinking about his broken spirit.

It was snowing.

Xiang Shaolong was seated at the pavilion at the Hidden Dragon Abode, witnessing the first snowfall.

He clearly remember that the same time last year, he was preparing for his mission.

Zhao Qian, Chunying and her fellow maids was delighted to be on the trip while Cui Lu and Cui Tong were annoyed that they cannot come along.

Life goes on!

A petite and buxom female body pressed on his back. As he smelt her fragrance, a pair of tender hands covered his eyes. Soft lips came into contact with his ear and giggled: “Guess who I am?”

This is Wu Tingfang’s favourite game. Xiang Shaolong pulled the hands apart and hugged the beauty laughing: “Talented Lady Ji

wants to deceive me by pretending to be Fang'er?"

Her face glowing red under her white skin, Ji Yanran cheekily teased: "Can't you pretend to be tricked and make me happy? Miser!"

Xiang Shaolong gazed at this beauty who has enjoyed a long romance with him. He gratefully kissed her before asking: "Where are the rest of them?"

Ji Yanran embraced his thick neck and whined: "They have gone to see Little Teng Yi learn how to walk. That little fella sure knows how to make us happy!"

Xiang Shaolong was reminded that he is unable to procreate and was downcast. Ji Yanran coaxed: "Hubby need not blame himself. Heaven's will is beyond us. Let it be. With hubby around, we are satisfied already."

Perplexed, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: "Any news of Godfather?"

Ji Yanran responded: "I received word from him three months ago and there hasn't been any updates. I am not worried about this old man! Touring the world without a single care or concern, he must be having a whale of a time."

She gladly added: "Second sister-in-law is pregnant again. If it is a boy, she will present him to us. We are mad with joy and cannot

wait for her to give birth.”

Xiang Shaolong thought about his close relationship with Teng Yi and his heart grew warm. He acknowledged that this is the best method since he came from a different time zone and lost the ability to conceive.

Ji Yanran teased: “Do you want to know the latest news?”

Since his return to Xianyang City, he has been trying to evade news reports. He is afraid to know what is happening outside, especially the potential news of Zhao Ya’s death.

Kissing her, he gently pleaded: “Sure! Quickly share with me what you know before I seal your lips.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Then I will purposely not say it and enjoy your punishment first.”

Xiang Shaolong reacted strongly and gave her a long French kiss. They shared a good kissing session.

After some time, Talented Lady Ji stopped to catch her breath, protesting: “I want to share good news with you! The issue you were worried about has materialised but only half of it. Empress Dowager Jing wanted Prince Xinling to kill Zhao Ya but Prince Xinling rejected her request and left for Qi. Empress Dowager Jing was incensed and was forced to accept Yan’s proposal to cede five cities to Zhao but she got Lian Po to take over Wei’s city of

Fanyang. Isn't she courting trouble? After losing thirty seven cities, she continued to provoke Wei."

Xiang Shaolong was contented: "In this case, Prince Xinling is really true to Ya'er."

Ji Yanran revealed: "It seems to be the case. Otherwise, why would Lady Ya give hubby up? Ai! She is in a dilemma too. She had betrayed Wu Family and is afraid to face everyone here in Xianyang City. She has been very upset over this issue and no one knows better than Zhi Zhi. But she dare not tell you!"

Instead, Xiang Shaolong was comforted that Zhao Ya was forced by circumstances rather than her wantonness.

Ji Yanran continued: "Lu Buwei will not let this opportunity pass. While Zhao and Wei are on bad terms, he ordered General Meng to invade Wei territory to share the spoils of war. They have succeeded in conquering Gaodu and Jixian. A pity that he was too ambitious and order Wang Ling to attack Zhao at the same time, forcing them to put aside their differences. I am sure with Prince Xinling's reputation, he can unite the six states against Qin."

Xiang Shaolong was confused: "I still do not understand why Lu Buwei is so anxious to fight Zhao. When I returned to Xianyang City, he told me he will attack Han and Zhao together. Now, he attacked Zhao but not Han. I wonder why."

Ji Yanran smiled: "When has my hubby suddenly become so stupid? This is a clever strategy. Empress Dowager Jing is from

Han. With her in charge of Zhao, she can ally with Han to become a new strong and powerful state. Lu Buwei will never allow such a thing to happen. That is why he is attacking Zhao with all his forces to weaken them. King Xiaocheng has just passed away, Li Mu is engaged with the Xiong Nu, and Lian Po is busy fighting Yan. This is a golden opportunity that Lu Buwei will make full use of.”

Xiang Shaolong slapped his forehead: “My brain is not as good as Talented Lady Ji’s. It may even be Empress Ji’s idea. She and King Zhuangxiang hated Zhao to the core and must take some revenge on them.”

Ji Yanran commented: “It is easy to lose your self-control when you are successful. If the six states joined hands, Lu Buwei will suffer a huge defeat and will come looking to you for help again.”

Xiang Shaolong stared at the falling snow but his mind is full of images of the six states combined army fighting a fierce war with the Qin army.

Winter has gone and Spring is here. For every day that passed, Xiang Shaolong was living a day of fear. He is afraid to receive news about King Zhuangxiang’s death. From historical records, he died three years after ascending the throne. Now, the three years is almost up.

On this day, Wu Yingyuan and Wu Zhuo came back from the North. At the farm, they gathered Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Pu Bu, Liu Chao, Wu Guo and Xiang Shaolong for a discussion. Even Wu Tingwei who came back from a purchasing trip in Guanzhong joined the discussion. Except for Tao Fang who is receiving news in

Xianyang City, Wu Yingjie and Wu Yingen are present as well. Yingjie and Yingen are Wu Yingyuan's younger brothers. Basically, everyone of importance in the Wu household have all been assembled.

Everyone present could guess that Wu Yingyuan has something important to announce.

They were seated in the main hall and every door and window is shut tight. Family warriors guarded the house perimeter strictly.

Wu Yingyuan, the leader of the Wu household let out a long sigh: "Wu Zhuo has told me about what has transpired between Shaolong and Lu Buwei. Shaolong must not blame him. Your eldest brother must still take orders from me as the head of the household."

Wu Zhuo gave Xiang Shaolong a helpless look.

Wu Tingwei and the other two relatives have a serious look on their faces, showing that they have some knowledge of the matter.

Strictly speaking, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are outsiders. However, Xiang Shaolong has married into the Wu family and Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Zhuo are sworn brothers and have accomplished worthy merits to be included as part of the Wu household. Pu Bu and Liu Chao are leaders of the family warriors and are equal to Wu Guo in rank.

Wu Yingyuan bitterly laughed: “Our Wu family is populated by strong men and fine horses and we are well-versed in farming. It is natural that we incur jealousy. At first, I thought that by returning to Qin, where our ancestors come from, we score a great merit. Unfortunately, we ran into this outsider Lu Buwei. What I despise most is that we have been loyal to him and assisted him on many occasions. In the end, all we got was his heartless treatment and trickery. If not for Shaolong’s abilities, he would have died by the river. Our late father has this advice passed down – if the enemy is too strong, we must flee.”

Wu Yingjie enquired: “Among all the states, Qin is the strongest. Where else can we go?”

Wu Yingen added: “Even if any state is willing to accommodate us, we will still be rejected for no one will want to give Lu Buwei an excuse to attack them.”

Wu Tingwei who has always been on loggerheads with Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Lu Buwei is only against Xiang Shaolong and not the Wu family. For the sake of everyone, why don’t...”

Wu Yingyuan’s face darkened and he furiously barked: “Shut up!”

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Zhuo exchanged a glance. Both felt that a leopard truly never changes its spots.

Wu Tingwei still does not know what is good for him. He protested: “I am only saying that Shaolong can leave here for the

time being, not ...”

Wu Yingyuan blew his top and slapped the table, roaring: “It is my greatest regret to have an ungrateful and short-sighted son like you. Get the hell out of here. If you do not change for the better, you will not be included in future meetings.”

Wu Tingwei’s face changed colour dramatically. Staring viciously at Xiang Shaolong, he left in a huff.

The main hall was filled with an awkward silence.

Wu Yingjie and Wu Yingen furrowed their brows. Despite their silence, they appear to be unhappy with Wu Yingyuan discarding Wu Tingwei’s suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong was filled with dread. His biggest support comes from the Wu Family. If this backing is gone, he will be helpless.

Normally, he will accept the suggestion and leave Qin. But with Xiao Pan’s unfinished business, he cannot leave as yet.

Wu Zhuo broke the uneasiness, revealing: “On this trip, Master and I went north to conduct a survey. We discovered that there is a bigger world out there. For thousands of miles, not a single man can be seen. If we can lay down our foundations there, we can even build our own state and need not bend ourselves to the will of others.”

Wu Yingen's countenance changed: "Eldest Brother must think over this carefully. Beyond the central plains are nomads and the Xiong Nu's territory. If we are unlucky, our entire family can be annihilated overnight."

Wu Yingyuan explained: "Our Wu Family's population is increasing every day. In fact, at least a child is born every day. In the long term, the best way out is to create our own state. Now that the seven states are fighting and not paying attention to the north, it will be the best time to move. Moreover, we have talented generals like Shaolong and Teng Yi. Who dares to mess with us?"

Wu Yingjie advised: "To build your own state is not done in one day. Eldest Brother, please reconsider. In Qin, the King and Queen favours Shaolong and Lu Buwei will not dare to do anything rash for the time being."

Wu Yingyuan's expression warmed up and smiled: "I am not suggesting that we leave straight away. On our trip, we met up with Shaolong's fourth brother Wang Jian and honestly told him about our situation. Wang Jian is a man who values relationships and has indicated that as long as he is fighting the Xiong Nu, he will do his best to protect us. We must look at the future. We can use a few years to look for fertile land in the north and lay our foundations first. When circumstances have changed, we still have a place to escape to. It will be disastrous if we do not have a backup plan and die empty-handed."

Wu Yingjie suggested: "Why not we let Shaolong take charge of this matter? It will be more appropriate."

Teng Yi and the rest sighed secretly. After all the hoo-hah, except for Wu Yingyuan who had great foresight, the rest of the Wu Family are hankering after wealth and enjoyment. No one wanted to leave this rich and prosperous state of Qin.

Wu Yingyuan's face became solemn and scolded: "Isn't that as good as telling Lu Buwei we are dissatisfied with him? In case we come into conflict and Shaolong is not around, wouldn't we be finished?"

Wu Zhuo interrupted: "Starting a new enterprise is always the hardest but once we have a breakthrough, we can live happily for generations. We may be forced to act according but it may be a blessing in disguise. I shall take charge of this investigation beyond the central plains. With my specially trained army of one thousand Wu Family warriors, we may be a small force compared to professional armies but we can definitely defend ourselves well. Everyone can set their mind at ease."

Wu Yingyuan concluded: "We shall proceed as such. Do not hesitate and keep this a top secret. Nothing must be leaked out or we will punish according to the house rules. There will be no exceptions!"

Turning to Wu Zhuo, he hissed: "Go and warn that bastard to keep his mouth shut or don't blame me for not regarding him as my son."

Knocking sound was heard and a family warrior entered, proclaiming: "Premier Lu summons Grand Tutor!"

Everyone present was stunned.

Why is Lu Buwei looking for Xiang Shaolong?

Book 11 Chapter 12 – Win-Win Situation

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians made their way to Xianyang City and proceeded straight to the Premier Residence. On their way, they ran into another slow moving carriage that was escorted by scores of Qin soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong was unaware of who is inside the carriage. He dare not be rude and rode slowly behind them.

The leader of the Qin soldiers in front suddenly ordered the entourage to move aside and waved to Xiang Shaolong's group to overtake them.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were surprised to experience such courtesy, However, the carriage blinds are down and they couldn't see who is inside.

Jing Jun knows best. Speaking to the Qin soldier at the end of the entourage, he rode up to them and whispered: "It is Xianyang City's number one beauty Qin Qing!"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and looked back at her carriage. He had a wondrous feeling in his heart.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to meet Master Tu first and find out more about the reason for Lu Buwei wanting to see him but luck was not on his side.

Meeting him in the study, this political behemoth questioned: “Shaolong, why are you so rash? Before you seek my advice, you proposed Xu Xian the idiot to be the Left Premier to King Zhuangxiang. You have ruined my grand plan. Can’t I even be away for a while without things screwing up?”

Xiang Shaolong had guessed that he could not deny this fact. With a ready answer, he smiled: “His Majesty wanted to pick someone on the spot and we are not sure when Premier will be back. My suggestion is meant to benefit you. By sharing some power with the Qin population, it shows that you are broad-minded and not a power-grabber. In this way, no one will dare to bad mouth you in the Qin court.”

Lu Buwei was taken aback. His sharp eyes shining, he scrutinized him for a while before asking: “Is this the same reason why you rejected the post?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is slightly convinced and hurriedly nodded: “Premier Lu has treated us most generously. What is personal glory?”

Lu Buwei stared at the ceiling beams in his house and seemed moved. He suddenly offered: “I have three daughters and the youngest one is named Lu Niang Rong. I shall now marry her to you as a form of replacement to Princess Qian.”

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is faced with the most difficult decision of his life.

If he agreed, Lu Buwei will regard him as family. He can then easily help Xiao Pan ascend the throne and be the new King of Qin. Then he will turn the tables and kill this traitor. The Wu family will be safe as well.

But if he consented, he will have to betray his conscience and serve this traitor. In addition, accepting this Lu Niang Rong will be unfair to Ji Yanran and the other wives.

Lu Buwei is the most ambitious and crafty businessman during these times. He will not strike a bargain unless he is sure that he will gain more at the end of the day.

He has eliminated his political adversary Lord Yangquan. Xiang Shaolong is the favourite of King Zhuangxiang and Empress Ji and cannot be killed. The best way is to absorb him into his own ranks by making him his son-in-law. A top strategy indeed!

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth and kneeled down, speaking with resolution: "Premier Lu, please retract your offer. Shaolong's heart is dead and does not wish to be involved in any relationship, causing a lifetime of unhappiness to Miss Lu."

Lu Buwei was incensed. As he was about to force him, heavy knocking was heard on the door. A family warrior came in and kneeled down, reporting: "Premier Lu, I bring bad news. Wei's Prince Xinling has led the combined armies of Yan, Zhao, Han, Wei and Chu. They have broken through our fortifications on the east of the river. General Meng has been defeated at Hangu Pass. The combined armies are now rallying outside the pass."

These words strike them like a bolt from the sky. Forgetting their topic, they faced each other in confusion.

Lu Buwei jumped up crying: "It is disastrous. I must see the King at once."

Watching his back, Xiang Shaolong remembered Ji Yanran's prophecy and cannot believe that it is really happening. It has indirectly helped him to avoid an open conflict with Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi left the Premier residence. In this turbulent period, they dare not leave and returned to the Wu family residence. There, they will receive the latest news.

The moment they stepped into the door, Tao Fang welcomed them. With a strange expression on his face, he informed: "Shaolong, there is a man waiting for you. He claims to be well-acquainted with you. It is funny how he would know that you will be coming today."

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed and went to receive this guest in the guest room.

The guest wore a bamboo hat to block out the sun. With his back facing the door, he sat upright and has a mysterious aura around him.

Xiang Shaolong found his back familiar but could not recognise

who it may be.

The guest heard footsteps but still did not turn back.

Xiang Shaolong sat down opposite him and noticed that his cheeks is covered with a nice beard but he cannot see the eyes underneath the bamboo hat.

Just as he was about to ask, the strange man slowly remove his hat.

Xiang Shaolong was blown away. “My Lord!” he exclaimed.

Lord Longyang’s pretty face may have been hidden by the beard and his eyelashes have become thicker but Xiang Shaolong will recognize those seductive eyes anywhere.

After they exchanged glances, Lord Longyang smiled: “Brother Dong is truly a passionate man who does not forget his friends.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: “In the end, I still cannot deceive you.”

Lord Longyang explained: “Dong Horse Fanatic will not die so easily and Xiang Shaolong will not return to Xianyang City without completing his mission. I even sent someone to Chu to verify this. Coincidentally, Dong Horse Fanatic’s family has just been wiped out by barbarians. Other people may think this is a trick but I believe the real Dong Horse Fanatic is dead while the fake Dong Horse

Fanatic is having a great time in Xianyang City. Otherwise, Zhao Zhi will not come all the way to Xianyang City.”

Xiang Shaolong guessed that he could no longer deceive him and sighed: “Prince Xinling has just defeated the Qin army. Does Lord know that it is dangerous to come all the way here?”

Lord Longyang replied: “Of course I know. I am here precisely because the Qin army is defeated.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Is Lady Ya doing well?”

Lord Longyang smiled bitterly and retrieved a clear jade bangle from his bosom. He gently disclosed: “Zhao Ya wanted me to give this to you, showing that her love for you will never change. The love will be external like jade. Due to circumstances and not to put you in a difficult position, she did not look for you in Xianyang City. She hope you will understand her difficulties.”

Xiang Shaolong held the bangle tightly in his hand and was grieved. After a while, he asked in a deep voice: “What can I do for you?”

Lord Longyang sighed: “It is all because of our Prince Zhen that was held hostage here in Xianyang City. With the defeat of the Qin army, he will be tortured and even killed as a form of revenge. My King dotes on this son and even I have to risk my life to save him.”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded that when a state loses the war,

they will normally give up an important member of the royal family as a hostage in the winning state. Qin has been victorious and must have several hostages in Xianyang City. Feeling a headache coming, he asked: “How does Lord want Shaolong to help him?”

Lord Longyang pleaded: “King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei regard Brother Xiang highly. If Brother Xiang can put in a few good words, you can keep Prince Zhen alive.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “Lord can put your mind at ease. Based on our friendship, I will do whatever I can.”

Despite his promise, he remembered that Lu Buwei was becoming more and more vicious and had no idea how to help him.

Lord Longyang was delighted and was about to give his thanks when Tao Fang came in and interrupted: “The King has summoned Shaolong to the palace.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up and advised: “Brother Long, please stay here and wait for my news.”

Instructing Tao Fang to take good care of his guest, he rode furiously to the palace.

For the first time ever, the leader of the palace guards, An Gu escorted him personally. He was brought to a Command Centre in the back palace. An Gu was extremely friendly and Xiang Shaolong

felt like he is trying to curry favour with him.

An Gu is tall, handsome and imposing. Around the age of twenty five, he is of royal blood despite not sharing the same surname. The leader of the palace guards is normally related to the royal family to ensure their loyalty. Even with Lu Buwei's manipulation, he cannot change this system. Otherwise, the safety of the Qin King will be in his hands.

An Gu seems to be trying to say something to Xiang Shaolong. When they cross the big courtyard between the palaces, he whispered: "We, the palace guards, are pleased that Grand Tutor Xiang promoted Xu Xian to be the Left Premier." Xiang Shaolong was finally enlightened on why he is receiving special treatment.

Xu Xian is a talented man but was discounted by Lu Buwei. With Xiang Shaolong supporting him, he naturally won the respect of the military.

As they walked down the long corridor, the palace guards saluted them on both sides. Xiang Shaolong felt extremely proud and prestigious. For a moment, he was intoxicated in all the attention.

An Gu delivered him straight to the Command Centre. The palace guards pushed open the giant door and he entered alone.

The moment he stepped inside, he had a great shock.

King Zhuangxiang was seated his dragon throne on a raised

platform. In front of him, there were two rows of important-looking officials.

On the right is Right Premier Lu Buwei and on the left is Left Premier Xu Xian. He also recognized Great General Wang Ling, Lord Guanzhong Cai Ze and General Du Bi. These are the men he met at the duel with Wang Jian. These three men are high-ranking officials and so must be the other five that he hasn't met before.

(Wang Ling - In Jean's translation it was Wang He. Must be a typo. In the later chapters, Meng Tian's name was somehow written as Meng Tin too. I will stick to Wang Ling.)

Xiang Shaolong paid his respects to the King and officials.

King Zhuangxiang was glad to see him and exclaimed: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please rise!"

When Xiang Shaolong got up, Lu Buwei quickly introduced him to the rest of the officials, taking the chance to illustrate their close relationship.

Among the three men that he knew, Wang Ling and Du Bi are important military leaders. They are of the same rank as Wang Jian and Xu Xian. Cai Ze is the Right Premier before Lu Buwei was promoted. Despite retiring from his post, his services are still very much sought after.

One of the newcomers is General Lu Gong who is one of the three

Tiger-Generals besides Wang Jian and Xu Xian. He was stocky and around the age of fifty. He has a long beard, thick eyebrows, glittering eyes and a tough built. When he saw Xiang Shaolong, he scrutinised him in an unfriendly manner.

The other four men are Left Marquis Wang Wan, Right Marquis Jia Gongcheng, Lord Yunyang Ying Ao and Lord Yiqu Ying Lou. The last two men are related to the King and are feudal lords.

Everyone has a wooden expression on their face and most of them regarded Xiang Shaolong coldly. Even Xu Xian who ought to be grateful is of no exception. Only Cai Ze and Wang Wan are more courteous.

This emergency meeting has gathered all the important officials in Xianyang City. From this point, Xiang Shaolong can guess how serious the situation is.

Qin's biggest fear is the unity of the six states. With only the armies of five states, Prince Xinling has defeated the Qin army. It shows that the Qin's fear is not without reason.

Xiang Shaolong naturally knew where he should stand. Moving to Lu Buwei's row, he copied the officials' posture and clasped his hands in front of him.

King Zhuangxiang was as composed as usual. He softly asked: "Does Shaolong know why I have summoned you so urgently?"

Xiang Shaolong could sense trouble coming.

This military meeting has been going on for at least four hours and a solution should have been found. To summon him urgently is to naturally get him to lead an army against Prince Xinling's forces.

He could also tell that Lu Buwei may be controlling the politics of Qin but in terms of military, he is still inexperienced. With Meng Ao's defeat, he can only rely on Xiang Shaolong to fight for him.

He may have won some skirmishes but has never led tens of thousands of soldiers in a ferocious battle with the enemy. No wonder the officials are dissatisfied with him.

Xiang Shaolong respectfully said: "I am ignorant!"

Xu Xian cut in: "Your Majesty, please reconsider!"

Lu Gong and the rest of the officials voiced their objections as well.

General Du Bi added: "The combined army is enjoying high morale after their victory. If we disregard Hangu Pass and attack them rashly, we will lose the Pass if we are defeated again. When that happens, the enemies can follow through and annihilate Qin. It is better to defend than to attack in this scenario. "

Lu Buwei's face darkened and he coldly said: "We suffered a

defeat because the enemy attacked us unexpectedly. This time, we are ready for them and the consequences will be different.”

Lu Gong retorted: “Prince Xinling is a clever and scheming person. That year, he destroyed our forces outside Handan City. History can always repeat itself. How can Right Premier assume that the battle will be so easy?”

Xu Xian added: “Our forces have just been defeated and their morale is low. Unless Sun Wu is reborn, we should retreat. Will Your Majesty please reconsider?”

This is his second time advising King Zhuangxiang to reconsider. This shows how strongly he objects to King Zhuangxiang’s decision.

Lu Buwei angrily state: “Taiyuan Province, Sanchuan Province and Shangdang Province are crucial to our expansion plans. If we allow the idiot Wuji to blockade us at the Pass, the three provinces will fall. This will strengthen the enemy and weaken us concurrently. Your Majesty, please think about it.”

King Zhuangxiang decided: “I have made up my mind. I hereby decree...”

In this decisive moment, an attendant announced: “Prince Zhen of Wei is here!”

Lu Buwei coldly hissed: “I must kill this man to appease my

anger!”

King Zhuangxiang was about to summon Prince Zhen to enter the Command Centre when Xiang Shaolong leapt out. Kneeling down, he kowtowed: “Your Majesty, I have something to say.”

Everyone present was taken aback at his outburst.

In actual fact, Xiang Shaolong did not know what to say as well. All he knew that if Prince Zhen came in and was sentenced to death by King Zhuangxiang, he would fail to keep his promise to Lord Longyang.

He has a complicated relationship with Lord Longyang but since he asked, he feels obligated to help him. Just based on his protection of Zhao Ya, Xiang Shaolong had to do his best.

Astonished, King Zhuangxiang questioned: “What does Shaolong wish to say?”

As Xiang Shaolong was thinking of an excuse, he had a brainwave and replied: “From what I just heard, we will suffer losses regardless of our decision to attack or defend. I have thought of a win-win situation where we can resolve the present danger without losing a single soldier.”

Everyone was amazed and wondered what brilliant plan he may have.

King Zhuangxiang has the most confidence in Xiang Shaolong. That is the reason he accepted Lu Buwei's recommendation to get Xiang Shaolong to fight Prince Xinling. Pleased, he implored: "Tell me what you have in mind."

Xiang Shaolong began: "The sole reason that the five states can work together and combine their armies is due to Prince Wuji. If this man is gone, the combined armies will disperse and the three provinces will be safe."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Even Lu Buwei wished he had a win-win solution too. He is fighting alone in this war and gambling his career on it. If he suffers another defeat, he will have to forfeit Hangu Pass and naturally, his control over it.

Xiang Shaolong explained: "On my trip to Daliang..." Without hiding any details, he revealed Prince Xinling's plot to kill King Anli. He concluded: "As long as I tell this story to Prince Zhen and let him tell this story to King Anli, King Anli's suspicions will be raised. He will fear that when Wei Wuji returns after his victory, he will take the opportunity to kill Anli and take the throne for himself. Therefore, he will summon Wuji back to Wei and confiscate his military seal. The combined armies will fall apart without him."

Everyone acknowledged that this is a good strategy.

Everyone knows that Prince Xinling is not on good terms with

the King of Wei. When Prince Xinling stole the military seal to save Zhao, he stayed in Handan City and dared not return to Wei. Only till Qin attacked Wei and Anli was forced to the corner did he summoned Prince Xinling home. No one will believe that Anli is not jealous of Prince Xinling.

The people of Qin love to sow discord among their enemies.

When Bai Qi attacked Changping, he sowed discord between Lian Po and King Xiaocheng. Eventually, King Xiaocheng replaced Lian Po with Zhao Kuo and they suffered heavy losses.

A small plot is sometimes more powerful than a huge army.

Xu Xian frowned: “Grand Tutor Xiang’s suggestion is brilliant but I am still puzzled. If we release Prince Zhen back to Wei with this story, wouldn’t they know that we are sowing discord?”

Du Bi agreed: “This is a good plan but it is hard to achieve the desired result.”

Xiang Shaolong is not surprised at Du Bi’s criticism. After all, he belongs to Prince Chengqiao’s camp. He must have been a powerful figure and was not dragged down with Lord Yangquan.

Lu Buwei will not show any mercy to his enemies. This man must be of some substance to be able to survive till today.

Xiang Shaolong lied: “Three days ago, Lord Longyang from Wei

sent someone to contact me. He wanted me to safeguard the life of Prince Zhen. If I pretend to work with them and helped the Prince escape and at the same time share my story with them, this strategy will succeed.”

King Zhuangxiang praised: “Shaolong lives up to my expectations. This is a wonderful plan. We shall do as you say. Please see to it immediately.”

Xu Xian wanted to avoid fighting at the Pass. Lu Buwei was relieved that he did not have to take any further risks. The discussion topic switched to how to communicate the story to Prince Zhen without arousing his suspicions.

After the discussion, King Zhuangxiang summoned Prince Zheng and gave him a thorough scolding. Lu Buwei suggested sentencing him to death.

Prince Zhen was terrified and fainted on the floor with his face pale with shock. Xiang Shaolong stepped forward and pleaded for mercy, cursing Prince Xinling. Under King Zhuangxiang’s interrogation, he revealed Prince Xinling’s plot.

At the end of the day, Prince Zheng was spared the gallows. He was placed under house arrest and to await further orders.

King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei continued to speak while Xiang Shaolong left with the other high-ranking officials.

Everyone's attitude towards him improved tremendously and heaped praises on him. Only Du Bi left without saying a single word.

Lu Gong and Xu Xian walked together with Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Gong suddenly asked: "Why did you propose General Xu Xian to King Zhuangxiang?"

Xiang Shaolong was moved by his frank question and replied awkwardly: "He is a hero who does not bend his principles. It is as simple as that."

Xu Xian seriously commented: "Xiang Shaolong is the real hero. I will never be able to reach Grand Tutor's level where you disregard power and authority. If you had said yes that day, you will be our Left Premier. If you said yes today, you will be our Commander in Chief."

Within a very short period, Xiang Shaolong has won the respect of the Qin military. He himself found it hard to believe.

When they are about to reach their carriages, a palace maid knelt at the side, greeting: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please hold your step."

Xu Xian and Lu Gong knew that he is close to Empress Ji and Prince Zheng. He may have been summoned by Empress Ji. They left first but not before promising to have dinner with him in the

near future.

Xiang Shaolong thought that it was Zhu Ji as well. Just as he groaned to himself, the palace maid presented him with an intricate and well-painted box. She left immediately after that.

When Xiang Shaolong opened the painted box, a whiff of fragrance filled his nose. Inside the box, there is a piece of silk paper that was neatly folded. When he opened the paper, he discovered that it was a letter written concisely and orderly. Consisting of a few sentences, it was written in Qin writing style and it was signed off as Qin Qing.

He was afraid and delighted at the same time, thinking that the beauty wanted to share her true feelings with him. After he finished reading, he realised that Qin Qing wanted to invite Ji Yanran to stay over at her place for a few days.

He sighed with relief but could feel some hint of disappointment. His emotions are clashing over this beauty.

Until he went back to join Teng Yi, his mind is still filled with her gracefulness, her charming ways and her warm expression.

Back at the Wu residence, he went to find Lord Longyang.

Xiang Shaolong told Lord Longyang the entire story without leaving any details out. Lord Longyang was astounded: “Since this is a trick, why are you telling me about it?”

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders: “Lord trusts me deeply and how can I lie to you?”

Lord Longyang asked again: “Is it really true that Prince Xinling wants to assassinate King Anli?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “That is really the truth.”

Lord Longyang predicted: “So be it. Although you meant to sow discord, but this is a true incident. If the Qin army holes up in the Pass, Prince Xinling will have to retreat sooner or later and it doesn’t make a difference to me. After this episode, the world will experience peace for a while. My mission is more urgent, which is to escort Prince Zhen back to Daliang. Shaolong must put up a convincing act and we will both stand to benefit.”

Xiang Shaolong naturally understood his meaning.

Lord Longyang has been on loggerheads with Prince Xinling, often plotting against each other. With this evidence to topple him, he will finally get his chance.

Prince Xinling is the mastermind behind the death of Xiao Zhao and the other maids. How he wished he could slice him into two. But on the other hand, he was concerned about Zhao Ya’s safety.

Lord Longyang is a true genius and saw right through him. He assured: “Rest easy. Prince Wuji is famed throughout the six states

and King Anli dared not take his life. It is not as simple as you thing. Anli will only confiscate his military seal and make him idle. No matter what, I will protect Zhao Ya.”

Xiang Shaolong could finally remove that burden on his mind. He continued to discuss the ‘rescue operation’ with Lord Longyang. That every night, they ‘easily’ rescued Prince Zhen and even provided travel documents to cross the Pass. Lord Longyang and Prince Zhen hurried back to Wei.

To evade Lu Buwei’s marriage proposal, he rushed back to the farm, riding non-stop even at night.

His mood is improving by leaps and bounds, finally resuming the cheerful days he had with his three wives and the Tian sisters.

Shan Lan gave birth to a baby boy and presented him to Xiang Shaolong. It was double happiness for him.

In the midst of all the celebrations, a unique visitor showed up at the farm. It was Master Tu Xian.

This General Manager of the Premier Residence has a serious look on his face. The minute he sat down, he sighed: “We are in trouble!”

end of book 11

Book 12 Chapter 01 – Internal And External Problems

Xiang Shaolong was terrified. If a composed and experienced man like Master Tu says we are in trouble, then we are really in big trouble. He quickly asked for an explanation.

Master Tu started: “Your brother-in-law came looking for Lu Buwei last night and they chatted for almost four hours. After their discussion, Lu Buwei ordered Lu Xiong and myself to spy on your activities. In addition, he threw a tantrum and cursed you, scolding that you do not know what is good for you and even helped Xu Xian become the Left Premier. I am certain that your brother-in-law betrayed you.”

Xiang Shaolong was mortified. In a state of panic, he summoned Teng Yi and his father-in-law and updated them on this development.

Wu Yingyuan slammed the table heavily and cursed: “How dare he betray his own family! I will sentence him to death according to the house rules.”

Teng Yi’s face was filled with dread as well. If Lu Buwei actively plots against them, they will be in deep trouble.

Xiang Shaolong deduced: “We are not sure what Tingwei has told Lu Buwei. If Lu Buwei knows everything, he will evade me or send an assassin after me immediately. He will not allow me to continue working for him.”

In the short span of time, Wu Yingyuan seemed to have aged a few years. He sighed: “Luckily, I did not say much to that bastard. I only mentioned that Lu Buwei is an accommodating man on the surface but is very jealous of people who are more capable than him. Therefore, he is not very dependable. With the King and Queen favouring Shaolong, he will be extremely envious. We must take early precautions and prepare an exit strategy for ourselves. It is really fortunate that I did not tell them the other details.”

Teng Yi commented in a deep voice: “From my point of view, Master Tingwei is not that brave. He must have had the backing of some of the other Wu Family members to act like this. We must not act rashly but conduct some investigations first.”

Master Tu nodded: “Brother Teng is right. If you do something harsh to Master Tingwei now, you will only raise Lu Buwei’s suspicions and he will know that you have a spy in his residence.”

Wu Yingyuan sighed and his eyes are shimmering with tears. After all, Wu Tingwei is his own flesh and blood. How can he not be heart-broken?

Master Tu added: “Lu Buwei is a genius. Seeing that Shaolong retreated to the farms after his mission and even prepared an exit strategy, he will guess that you have discovered his plot. If this matter is leaked out, it is highly detrimental to him. He will never let you off.”

Wu Yingyuan wiped away his tears and coldly snorted:

“Everyone in Qin has a good opinion of Shaolong and our farms are performing well. What can he do to us?”

Master Tu explained: “Recently, Lu Buwei recruited a famous swordsman. Like Lian Jin whom Shaolong killed, he is from Wei and is Lian Jin’s martial brother. Named Guan Zhongxie, his frame is even bigger than Shaolong and Brother Teng. I believe that he is stronger than Xiao Weimou. He possesses top sword skills, excellent riding skills and can fight against a hundred men. He is also gifted with sharp intelligence and has become Lu Buwei’s confidante. Now, he is responsible for training Lu Buwei’s family warriors, making Lu Buwei even more powerful. You must not let your guard down against him.”

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong could feel their goose pimples rising. If this man is stronger than Xiao Weimou, they will not be his match.

They managed to kill Xiao Weimou that fateful day because he was injured by their arrow. Otherwise, it will be hard to determine who will be the eventual winner.

Wu Yingyuan inquired: “Has Master Tu exchanged blows with him before?”

Master Tu bitterly smiled: “We exchanged a few stances. Although there was no clear victor, I know he is way better than me. Otherwise, I will not bring him up.”

Everyone was blown away.

Master Tu is the best swordsman in Lu Buwei's residence. If he says he is way behind Guan Zhongxie, then Guan Zhongxie is indeed formidable.

Teng Yi predicted; "With this man helping Lu Buwei, they may arrange a dinner with a friendly match for entertainment and force Shaolong to fight him. On this pretext, they can kill Shaolong and blame it on carelessness. This is not a private duel and it is common for Qin people to have friendly matches during dinner. By that time, Shaolong is dead and King Zhuangxiang cannot hold it against Lu Buwei."

Wu Yingyuan does not know much about Xiao Weimou. Thus, he is full of confidence in Xiang Shaolong. He coldly laughed: "Is Shaolong so easy to kill? But you must take extra care when you leave the farm."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself – Before he openly clash with Lu Buwei, there are many things he cannot avoid. He sighed: "Lu Buwei has been recruiting men of talent everywhere. Are there any others worth mentioning?"

Master Tu continued: "In terms of knowledge, there is a guy named Mo Ao. This man is awfully smart and is like a walking encyclopaedia. However, he has an evil heart and I am sure it was him who thought of the scheme to ambush you at the red pine forest. He is well-versed in poisons and he was suspected to have poisoned the late king."

Teng Yi frowned: “Even you have no idea?”

Master Tu sighed: “Mo Ao married Lu Buwei’s sister and is considered his relative. Such an important issue is only known to his own clansmen. Even I, who have been with him for almost two decades, am kept in the dark. Now, they are trying to restrict my followers. Ai!” Finishing, he has a hurt expression on his face.

Wu Yingyuan could not hold back, asking: “Why doesn’t Master Tu follow Mister Xiao’s example and leave his residence?”

Master Tu’s face darkened and he gritted his teeth: “Such a heartless man, I want to see what kind of retribution he will receive. Fortunately, I am still of value to him. As long as he does not know that I have seen through him, he will not make trouble for me. On the surface, he is still acting like someone who values brotherhood and relationships.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with him: “In terms of knowledge, there is Mo Ao. In terms of martial arts, who is a potential threat?”

Master Tu divulged: “There are three men. Although they are not as skilled as Guan Zhongxie, they are first rate fighters as well. They are Lu Chan, Zhou Zihen and Du (poison).”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: “Du?”

The other three men stared at him, astounded.

Master Tu was curious: “Do you know him? He may be from Zhao but has left Zhao three years ago. In the end, he went to Han and seduce Han Chuang’s wife. Han Chuang sent assassins after him and he was forced to come to Xianyang City. I don’t think Shaolong has met him before.”

Xiang Shaolong was tongue tied. In the Qin Shi Huang movie, Du was an important spy. He conspired with Zhu Ji and left Lu Buwei’s control. He cause chaos to the Qin court and even secretly rebelled. But how can he tell them about all these?

He lied: “Nothing. I just felt that his name sounds funny!”

The three men continue to eye him suspiciously.

Xiang Shaolong waved his hand and added: “Honestly, I don’t know why but when I heard this name, I do not feel comfortable. Hei! What kind of person is he?”

With his excuse, everyone was relieved and their suspicions disappeared.

Originally, Teng Yi is fearless. With a pretty wife and a beautiful son, his thinking is no longer the same as before.

Master Tu thought hard and replied: “Du is very good with psychological attacks. His flattery skill is second to none and is highly favoured by Lu Buwei. With dashing good looks, he attracts women like honey attracts ants. In Xianyang City, he is the most

popular guest in the brothels.”

Pausing, he added: “He is blessed by the heaven to have the best sexual stamina and his record is ten women in one sitting. Lu Buwei loves to use him to seduce the wives and maids of his enemies, gathering important intelligence. Hng! Nonetheless, he is another heartless cad and has destroyed countless marriages. If not for Lu Buwei shielding him, he will be murdered long ago.”

The four men quietened down.

Among Lu Buwei’s recruits, there are many ‘unorthodox’ people. Going against him will not be easy.

Wu Yingyuan sighed again: “Isn’t Master Tu afraid that Lu Buwei will suspect you for visiting us like this?”

Master Tu explained: “I came here on his orders to invite Shaolong to attend a banquet at his residence three days later. I have no idea why Shaolong is invited and Master Wu is left out. I am sure he is up to no good.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled Lu Buwei’s marriage proposal and sighed: “I will do my best to counter him. We shall see what the future will bring. After all, some things just cannot be avoided.”

Wu Yingyuan commented: “External threats are frightening but internal strife is worse. If I do not harden my heart and cleanse my household, I will regret it when we suffer in the future.”

Master Tu advised: “You must not act rashly or even let Master Tingwei know that he has been found out. In fact, you can use him to create a false impression in front of Lu Buwei.”

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he swore: “Lu Buwei is the most scheming man I have ever seen. In Xianyang City, you are the only one who can match up to him. He has Master Tingwei spying for him; you have me spying for you. Let’s see who will have the last laugh.”

Xiang Shaolong regained his composure and smiled: “I will not make big promises but as long as I am alive, I will seek justice for our dead brothers and Princess Qian.”

Back at his backyard, his three wives and the Tian sisters are playing with his son happily.

Despite his terrible mood, he picked up his son Bao’er, whom Ji Yanran named, and cuddled him. Witnessing the cheerfulness of the ladies and thinking about the danger that is upon them, he is experiencing mixed feelings.

The beautiful and clever Ji Yanran could tell that something is bothering him. Pulling him aside, she asked for the reason.

Xiang Shaolong updated her about Wu Tingwei’s betrayal and warned: “We must remind Tingfang not to tell this brat anything about our last mission.”

After thinking it over, Ji Yanran suggested: “I have a better plan. We will get Tingfang to create a false impression that Tingwei will believe with a doubt. When the word is passed to Lu Buwei, we may be able to trick him!”

Xiang Shaolong was hard-pressed and questioned: “What reason can we use for hiding in the farms and avoiding Lu Buwei?”

Ji Yanran detailed: “We can make use of Lu Xiong. We can say we guessed Lu Xiong and Lord Yangquan are communicating secretly. Therefore, we suspect Lu Buwei may be involved. This way, Lu Buwei’s greatest secret is still preserved. His greatest fear is that we know that it was not Lord Yangquan who ambushed us.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and kissed her, praising: “Great idea! With you this female Zhuge providing me with good strategies, what is there to fear?” Ji Yanran was stunned: “What is female Zhuge?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has a slip of the tongue. Zhuge Liang belongs to the era of the Three Kingdoms and will be born a few hundred years later. Of course Talented Lady Ji does not know who he is.

Coincidentally, Zhao Zhi came over and exclaimed: “Sister Rou is making me worried and did not even write us a single letter. Sister Lan is annoyed that she did not come to see her.”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded about Shan Rou and thought of

Zhao Ya at the same time. His mood just got better after Ji Yanran's suggestion but now it got worse again.

After coaxing Zhao Zhi, Xiang Shaolong faced Ji Yanran and informed: "We are going back to Xianyang City tomorrow. Didn't Qin Qing invite you to stay over at her place? Let's travel together."

Ji Yanran giggled in agreement. She went to get Wu Tingfang into their rooms and proceeded to tell her about their plan.

Xiang Shaolong could not bear to see Wu Tingfang upset over his own brother's betrayal. He went to find Teng Yi to practice their Mohist swordplay.

To face the incoming danger, he must be in top form.

In these tumultuous times, you must possess both brains and brawn.

The next ten years will be the most difficult time of their lives.

As they were leaving for Xianyang City, they discovered that Wu Yingyuan has fallen ill.

Xiang Shaolong's father-in-law has always been in the pink of health and is rarely sick. This sudden illness must have been created by his anger at his son's betrayal.

Xiang Shaolong instructed Wu Tingfang to take good care of him and left. Still worried about him, he rode towards Xianyang City with Ji Yanran, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians.

Wu Zhou and his elite army have left the farm for many months. Although there is no word from him, Xiang Shaolong is assured that they will be safe with Wang Jian's protection.

At dawn, they entered the city. Suppressing the desire to check out Qin Qing's home, he got a delighted Jing Jun to escort Ji Yanran to Qin Qing's residence near the palace. He returned to the Wu residence with Teng Yi.

The moment they stepped into the house, they saw Wu Tingwei quarreling with Tao Fang. Wu Tingwei saw them coming and coldly greeted them. He then left in a huff.

Tao Fang shook his head sighing: "He is beyond control!"

After they got seated, Tao Fang explained: "Two days ago, he wanted five taels of gold from me. Today, he wanted another five taels. I don't mind giving it to him but when Master Wu questions me about it, how am I supposed to reply him? Hng! I heard he is bewitched with the courtesan Dan Meimei from Drunken Wind brothel. No wonder he is spending uncontrollably. A nitwit will always be a nitwit. He gives his gold to the woman and the woman will give the gold to her gigolo."

Xiang Shaolong cannot imagine that this is already in practice

during these ancient times. He took the opportunity to ask: “Which gigolo has this ability to make the courtesan pay for his services?”

Tao Fang replied with disdain: “That handsome boy from Premier Lu Residence. He bragged that he can use his organ and block the wheel of a donkey cart. The cart will not be able to move at all despite the donkey pulling. Can you believe that?”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged glances, knowing that there is more to it than meets the eye.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: “Is it Du (poison)?”

Tao Fang was astounded: “You heard about him too?”

Tao Fang did not know about Wu Tingwei’s betrayal and Xiang Shaolong took this chance to tell him about it.

Tao Fang’s face was full of disappointment, sighing: “I should have seen this coming. Since Shaolong came into our family, you have outshone this arrogant bastard. He will not submit to you. Moreover, Xianyang City is full of nightlife and entertainment. For him to leave here and relocate to the wilderness is as good as killing him.”

Teng Yi cautioned: “It seems like Lu Buwei is controlling him via Du and Dan Meimei. We must be on high alert. If Lu Buwei manages to eliminate Master Wu, the family business and warriors

will fall into the hands of this nitwit. With the family elders supporting him, we can no longer stay in Wu Family!”

Tao Fang’s face was deathly white, quavering: “Young Master will not be so daring!”

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: “Bewitched by women and psychological coercion, there is nothing he will not do. There is actually no difference between betraying the family to Lu Buwei and killing his own father.”

Teng Yi recalled: “Do you remember Mo Ao whom Master Tu mentioned? He is a poisons expert and can kill people without a trace. We must guard against him.”

Tao Fang’s expression has become ugly beyond measure. He stood up and affirmed: “Let me make a trip back to the farm and have a good talk with Master Wu.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Father-in-law is sick and bedridden. It is a good time to visit him.”

Tao Fang and Wu Yingyuan share a close relationship. Upon hearing this, he left quickly.

The moment he left, a palace attendant came, summoning Xiang Shaolong to see King Zhuangxiang.

Before he can even finish his tea, Xiang Shaolong left with the

attendant.

At the palace, the leader of the palace guards An Gu welcomed: “The King was about to send someone to the farms. It was good that you are in the City and we did not have to make the trip.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “What is it that he summoned me so urgently?”

An Gu whispered into his ear: “Wei has retreated!”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded about his trick to sow discord and thought about Zhao Ya’s safety now that Prince Xinling is in trouble.

An Gu added: “After Grand Tutor has seen the King, please follow me to the Crown Prince palace. Study attendant Li wishes to have a good chat with you.”

For a while, Xiang Shaolong does not remember having such an acquaintance. Then he realised that it was Li Si and cheered: “I wish to see him too! Marshall An must be very familiar with him by now.”

As An Gu led him into the corridor that goes deeper into the inner palace, he smiled: “He is very knowledgeable and has earned our respect. Even King Zhuangxiang, Empress Ji and Prince Zheng are full of praise for his farsightedness.”

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused. In fact, he is the most ‘farsighted’ man during these ancient times. The people that he recommends can never go wrong. If Li Si cannot even impress these people, how can he be Qin’s second-in-command in the future?

This man is well-versed in legalism which is the same frequency as Shang Yang’s reforms. It suits the needs of Qin well.

A study attendant may be a lowly post but it is a post that gives him plenty of exposure to the Crown Prince. With genuine abilities and his support of Xiao Pan, his career will naturally soar in the future.

In the midst of his thoughts, he unknowingly came in front of a pair of majestic doors.

Entering the room, King Zhuangxiang’s joyous words were heard: “Come here Shaolong! You have scored a huge merit for Qin. I must reward you handsomely.”

Xiang Shaolong glanced at him and the officials assembled in front of him. The two Premiers Lu Buwei and Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Jia Gongcheng, Cai Ze, Ying Lou, Ying Ao and Wang Ling are all present. Compared to the previous session, only General Du Bi, who disliked him, is absent.

He hurriedly knelt down and declared: “It is my duty to do my best for Qin. Your Majesty need not give me any reward.”

King Zhuangxiang laughed: “You may rise! Without losing lives, we managed to resolve the situation. This kind of strategy is the best!”

Getting back on his feet, he peeped at Lu Buwei. A murderous look flashed across his eyes before he faked a smile: “Shaolong is a man who is humble about his achievements. He has yet to accumulate any military contributions. Your Majesty can let him lead an army into battle in near future. When he comes back victorious, we can reward him accordingly. Wouldn’t that be better?”

Xiang Shaolong had just sat down and was thinking hard about the murderous look. He must be extra careful about the banquet tomorrow night. Otherwise, he may be killed when invited to duel at the friendly match.

From King Zhuangxiang’s words, it proves that he does not like wars and deaths. This is the complete reverse of Lu Buwei’s wild ambitions.

Lu Gong laughed heartily: “Left Premier’s thinking is too rigid. Without losing a soldier, the army of Wei has retreated and the other four armies are in a state of disarray. Isn’t this a military contribution?”

King Zhuangxiang was thrilled: “My sentiments exactly. What suggestions do the rest of you have?”

Everyone pretended to be deaf and dumb. They already knew

that King Zhuangxiang has a favourable impression of Xiang Shaolong and will not bother objecting. After discussion, Xiang Shaolong was appointed as an Imperial Marshal serving to protect King Zhuangxiang. This is the same rank as An Gu. If King Zhuangxiang ever goes to war personally, he and An Gu will be his two bodyguards. However, it is only a title without any military authority.

Everyone offered their congratulations.

Under the present circumstances, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can reject him. At the same time, he realised that King Zhuangxiang's promotion has pushed him closer to a open conflict with Lu Buwei.

In the past when he was dealing with the formidable Zhao Mu, he did not have any reservations. However, it was stated in history that after King Zhuangxiang passed away, there will be ten solid years that Lu Buwei will dominate Qin politics and no one is his match. Also wondering if he will die under his treacherous hands, he was filled with dread and confusion.

His incomplete knowledge about his fate and the future is becoming a mental burden.

After further discussions, King Zhuangxiang invited Xiang Shaolong to have dinner with him and left happily. He returned to his bedroom for his afternoon nap.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling uneasy. King Zhuangxiang did not

invite Lu Buwei along, meaning that it was solely Xiang Shaolong's achievement.

Helplessly, he exchanged a few hypocritical words with Lu Buwei and left to look for Li Si.

Li Si has moved to a guest room beside the Crown Prince palace. The minute he saw Xiang Shaolong, he smiled sincerely and thanked An Gu profusely. He then led Xiang Shaolong into his small hall.

Xiang Shaolong could feel that he is no longer as downcast as before and was like a completely new and energised man. Happy for him, he exclaimed: "Brother Li must be having a good time here."

Li Si guffawed: "All thanks to Brother Xiang's recommendation. Compared to Premier's residence, it is as different as heaven and hell. If you want me to go back there, I will rather die."

From his words, Xiang Shaolong could guess that he has been discriminated against and thus, lived an unhappy existence in Premier Residence.

A pretty maid came up to them and served tea before retiring to the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that she was a lively and alluring young lady and could not resist taking a few more glances.

Li Si mentioned in a low voice: “This is a welcome gift from Prince Zheng. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling emotional. Xiao Pan used to violate ladies and was punished by his mother Zhao Ni. Now, he is giving them away.

But this kid is still quite obedient and treated Li Si well as he had requested. He even knew how to secure his loyalty by presenting him with a beauty. What a boy!

Xiang Shaolong had to know and asked: “What does Brother Li think of Prince Zheng?”

Li Si’s expression is full of respect, describing: “The Crown Prince is full of ambitions, highly observant and possesses the ability to learn very quickly. In the future, he will be the one who will unite the world. I am lucky to serve a capable King and it is all thanks to Brother Xiang.”

It is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to respect Li Si.

He is confident that Xiao Pan will be Qin Shi Huang as it says so in history. But Li Si is able to predict the same thing based on his intelligence. Therefore, Li Si had much greater foresight.

Li Si’s eyes continued to shine with respect at Xiang Shaolong, stated: “When I was studying with Prince Zheng the day before,

the King and Queen came to visit him. They told me about Brother Xiang's suggestion to unite the world. Externally, we can connect the walls of each state against the northern barbarians. Internally, we must have a common currency, set up provinces, open roads, build bridges, standardised the writing system and weights and measurement. Such a brilliant and farsighted vision! I respect you from the bottom of my heart."

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. He could not imagine the words he carelessly sprouted would become teaching material for Xiao Pan. When Xiao Pan executes these ideas, wouldn't it be history reflecting history? What a mess!

After chatting further, Li Si asked Xiang Shaolong about Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong told him the truth and Li Si assured: "Brother Xiang need not worry. From what I see, King Zhuangxiang is displeased with Lu Buwei's fighting and causing the combined armies to blockade the Pass. The traitor's honeymoon period is ending soon."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Even with your intelligence, you cannot guess that King Zhuangxiang is dying soon. He sincerely advised: "Heaven's plans are unfathomable. No matter what happens in the future, Brother Li only needs to focus on assisting the Crown Prince. Do not bother yourself with other issues."

Discontented, Li Si protested: "Who does Brother Xiang think I am? We are true friends and should share wealth and woe. In the

future, do not speak like this.”

Xiang Shaolong was smiling bitterly when Xiao Pan summoned him.

Both men felt that their meeting was too brief but they cannot ignore the order of the Crown Prince.

Xiang Shaolong may have plenty of enemies but he has made some friends as well.

Book 12 Chapter 02 – The Death Of Zhuangxiang

Xiao Pan was standing at the window with his arms folded. Staring at the sun setting at the garden below, he does look imposing. After the attendant came in with Xiang Shaolong and withdrew, he plainly invited: “Grand Tutor, please come to my side!”

Xiang Shaolong felt that he is starting to resemble a proper Crown Prince. Moving to his side, he joined him in watching the sunset.

Xiao Pan turned and watched him briefly before he resumed his gaze, sighing softly.

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Is something bothering Crown Prince?”

Xiao Pan revealed a bitter expression and sighed: “If I am bothered, no one should know better than Grand Tutor!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback.

This is the first time Xiao Pan is speaking to him in such an official manner. Xiang Shaolong can feel the distance widening between both of them. Emotional, he sighed as well.

After an unnatural minute of silence, Xiao Pan revealed: “Yesterday, Premier Lu told me something strange. He told me that in this world, there are only three persons who are really sincere to me. They are Father, Mother and himself. Among the three persons, only he can help me unite the whole world. He advised me not to trust anyone else. Anyone else besides the three of them are just stepping stones in helping me dominate the world. Ai! He really treats me like his own son and thought that I know it as well.”

Turning around, he stared straight at Xiang Shaolong and asked in a low voice: “Master! Why did he say something like that? Is he against you? I don’t even know when I’ll be King but he seems to be treating me like the King already. Isn’t it strange?”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling uncomfortable under his stare.

In the past, he will scold him for addressing himself as Master. But under his pressing gaze, he was lost for words. At the same time, from Lu Buwei’s words, he can deduce that Lu Buwei is not on good terms with him, highlighting his sensitivity and intelligence.

Xiao Pan realised his slip and recomposed himself, questioning: “From Grand Tutor’s expression, something unhappy must have happened between him and Premier Lu.”

His mood darkening slightly, he added: “Does Grand Tutor still wishes to hide something from me?”

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly alarmed at another problem that Xiao Pan has brought up.

Although he knew that Xiao Pan will soon be King after King Zhuangxiang's death as stated in history but how would Lu Buwei know this as well? Thinking deeper, his heart pumped madly.

Xiao Pan was surprised and inquired: "Why is Grand Tutor's expression so grave looking?"

Xiang Shaolong was thinking furiously. Historians mentioned that King Zhuangxiang died of illness three years after ascending the throne. But this is not true.

King Zhuangxiang is poisoned to death by Lu Buwei. Otherwise, he will not say these strange things to Xiao Pan.

How can he watch by the side as Lu Buwei carried out his murder plan?

His heart is beating even faster than ever.

He is really dumb and blindly believed history books and movies. He should have predicted this possibility.

If he told everything to King Zhuangxiang honestly, how will he think?

From his intimate relationship with King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji, they will believe what he says. Will history be changed?

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and decide to ignore all the consequences and save King Zhuangxiang's life. Otherwise, he will be guilt-ridden.

At this very moment, an attendant ran in crying: "Crown Prince. The King has fainted at the rear pavilion."

Xiao Pan's countenance changed immediately.

Xiang Shaolong's limbs turned ice-cold. He knows that he is too late and cannot change the wheels of fortune.

Recalling the murderous look in Lu Buwei's eyes, he realised that it was meant for King Zhuangxiang.

He lost again. But it was due to him being blinded by historical records.

Eight Imperial Physicians are trying their best to save King Zhuangxiang throughout the night. Despite regaining consciousness, he has lost the ability to speak. The Physicians concluded that he had a stroke.

Only Xiang Shaolong can see the pain and hatred in his eyes.

With his pulse becoming weaker and his heart stopping twice, he still managed to summon his adrenaline and continue fighting the devil trying to claim his soul

When Lu Buwei came before him, his eyes glowed with anger and his lips shook, being unable to say what is on his mind.

Zhu Ji was crying her eyes out. Thanks to a palace maid supporting her, she managed to remain standing.

Lady Xiuli and Prince Cheng Chongqiao cried hard as well. Lady Xiuli even fainted and was carried out.

Xiao Pan stood at the bedside and held tightly to King Zhuangxiang's hands. Completely silent, he was amazingly composed.

Only Lu Buwei, Xiang Shaolong, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Cai Ze, Du Bi and other important officials are allowed to enter his bedroom. The other officials are waiting for the latest news outside the palace.

King Zhuangxiang suddenly pulled Xiao Pan's hands away and pointed to Xiang Shaolong with much effort.

Lu Buwei's eyes shone with anger and faced Xiang Shaolong, exclaiming: "Your Majesty wishes to see you!" He stood aside, leaving Xiao Pan alone by his bedside.

Xiang Shaolong was filled with regret and hatred. If he had thought of Lu Buwei's plot to kill King Zhuangxiang, he will have exposed his scheme. Ultimately, he cannot win fate and lost by one stance.

He came to the bedside and kneeled down, grasping King Zhuangxiang's hand tightly.

Straining hard, King Zhuangxiang focused his dimming eyes on his face, sending out a mixture of emotions, including anger, pain and a plea for help.

Among all those present, only Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong would understand his meaning. Although he did not know how Lu Buwei got King Zhuangxiang to consume the poison, it is possible that he poisoned him personally due to their close relations.

Therefore, after regaining consciousness, King Zhuangxiang knew that it was Lu Buwei who poisoned him but is unable to say so because the poison has caused him to become dumb.

Lu Buwei's relative Mo Ao is truly a poisons expert. None of the Imperial Physician could detect the presence of poison.

Holding onto King Zhuangxiang's trembling hands, Xiang Shaolong could not stop his tears from coming out.

Even Xiao Pan who was expressionless all this while suddenly kneeled down and starting crying loudly.

The palace guards and maids were affected and began sobbing as well.

Xiang Shaolong could not bear to see him suffer in silence. He leaned forward and whispered so softly that only Xiao Pan can hear him: “Rest assured Your Majesty. I will kill Lu Buwei and avenge you.”

Xiao Pan was terribly shaken but maintained his silence.

King Zhuangxiang's eyes flickered, revealing surprise, comfort and gratitude. The look quickly subsided as he closed his eyes and his head leaned to one side, without any strength left. He passed away like that.

The bedroom was filled with loud crying. Everyone from the palace maid to the high-ranking officials kneeled all over the floor.

In name, Xiao Pan is now the King of Qin.

By the time Xiang Shaolong got home to Wu Residence, it was deep into the night.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun and himself are not in their best mood.

Without King Zhuangxiang, Lu Buwei is unstoppable. Before Xiao Pan is twenty one and officially crowned King, Lu Buwei the Left

Premier will dominate Qin politics.

Zhu Ji will become another influential person.

Unfortunately for her, she does not have her own organization and can only rely on Lu Buwei.

Supporting each other mutually, they form a powerful alliance.

To a certain degree, Xiang Shaolong knew that he is the reason Lu Buwei poisoned King Zhuangxiang.

As Li Si has observed, King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei's views are more and more divided. Adding fuel to fire is Wu Tingwei's betrayal. Lu Buwei is worried that Xiang Shaolong will report his plot to King Zhuangxiang and he will lose all his wealth, power, titles and men overnight. Also hoping for his own son to ascend the throne as soon as possible, he took the risk and carried out the poisoning.

Half of the Qin court is on his side.

His only lapse is that he will never imagine that Xiao Pan is not his real son.

The three men sat together in the main hall. Even though they are exhausted, they do not feel like sleeping.

Teng Yi asked in a deep voice: “Is Lu Buwei behind this?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “I am positive.”

Jing Jun was young and impulsive. Jumping up, he cried: “I am going to tell everyone I know and see how he can still lie through his teeth.”

But seeing the wooden expressions of his two elder brothers, he went back to his seat.

Teng Yi suggested: “Why don’t we leave Xianyang City now? While the King has just passed away and Lu Buwei is busy with the state funeral, we leave Qin as far behind us as possible.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. If not for Xiao Pan, he may do this. For the safety of the women and his men, he can put aside all his enmity. But right now, he just cannot leave.

Teng Yi advised: “It is never too late to take revenge. The opportunity to leave now is once in a lifetime. Lu Buwei hates you to the core. He just needs to find some lame excuse and he can annihilate us.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Can Second Brother leave first? And take everyone with you.”

Teng Yi was horrified: “What else is there in Xianyang City that is worth Third Brother’s attention?”

Jing Jun interceded: “Third Brother has to protect Empress Ji and Prince Zheng. I don’t think Lu Buwei dare to attack us openly. If he attacks us in secret, we can still counter him.”

Xiang Shaolong decided: “Little Jun, you get some rest first. I have something to discuss with Second Brother.”

Jing Jun thought that he wanted to persuade Teng Yi on his own and left.

Xiang Shaolong was quiet for a long while.

Teng Yi sighed: “Shaolong! Seriously speaking, we are closer than real brothers. What is it that you cannot say to me? If you are not leaving, neither am I. If we must die, we will die together.”

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and whispered: “Prince Zheng is actually Lady’s Ni son.”

Teng Yi was flabbergasted: “What!?”

Xiang Shaolong told him the whole story.

Teng Yi was upset: “Why didn’t you tell me earlier? Are you afraid that I will betray you?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely state: “Of course I trust you. Otherwise,

I will not reveal it now. Actually this secret is a heavy responsibility. I only wish to carry it alone.”

Teng Yi’s face warmed up and offered: “Since this is the case, we shall remain in Xianyang City and face off with Lu Buwei. But we must prepare an exit strategy and leave if necessary. With our elite army, as long as it is not fighting the Qin army, we can still keep our lives.”

Xiang Shaolong assured: “Little Jun is right. Lu Buwei dared not attack us openly. But hidden attacks are hard to detect. After King Zhuangxiang’s funeral, we will retreat to the farms and observe accordingly. It may be eight years before Xiao Pan’s coronation but he is still considered the King of Qin. His word is law. Even if Lu Buwei is daring, he will not ignore his instructions.”

Teng Yi cautioned: “Do not underestimate him. This man has all the guts in the world and love to take risks. He alone has caused the death of two generations of Qin Kings. That shows how formidable he is. Moreover, he has unorthodox people helping him. Even if he does not attack us openly, we must still have watertight precautions.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed: “Thanks for your pointers. I have been too complacent. Xiao Pan is still a child and let’s hope Empress Ji do not give him up for Lu Buwei.”

Teng Yi sighed: “That is my biggest worry.”

Frantic footsteps can be heard approaching them.

Both men looked at each other and felt uneasy at the same time.

An elite warrior named Wu Jie who is based at the farm came running in. Prostrating on the floor, he wailed: “Master Wu has passed away!”

Like a bolt from the blue, both men were stunned.

Xiang Shaolong felt like he was floating in the air without a care in the world. For a moment, all his sorrows are forgotten.

In a split second, he understood why Lu Buwei invited them to Xianyang City for a banquet. Luring them away from the farms, he got Wu Tingwei the traitor to carry out his devious plan and gain control of the farms.

Luckily, Tao Fang rushed back in time. Otherwise, the news of Wu Yingyuan’s death will not reach them so soon.

Jing Jun ran into the room and wondered what happened. After he was informed, his face was covered with hot tears. With an indignant face, he ran towards the main door.

Teng Yi barked: “Stand still!”

Jing Jun ran a few more steps before he fell onto the floor crying.

Teng Yi grabbed Wu Jie up from the floor and shake him, asking: “What did Master Tao say?”

Wu Jie added: “Master Tao ordered Master (Wu) Guo and Master (Pu) Bu to lead the family warriors and arrested Third Master, Fourth Master and Master Tingwei. He requested you three Masters to return to the farms at once.”

Teng Yi released his hold and the exhausted Wu Jie collapsed back to the floor. Going to a crestfallen Xiang Shaolong, he grabbed him by the shoulders and reminded: “This is a life and death situation. If Third Brother cannot be decisive, the entire Wu Family will be annihilated.”

Xiang Shaolong was at a loss: “What can I do? You want me to kill them?”

Teng Yi insisted: “That is right. If you don’t kill them, they will kill you. These idiots actually believe Lu Buwei, thinking that Lu Buwei will not kill them to seal their mouths. If I am not mistaken, Lu Buwei’s men are on their way to the farms right now. They will take advantage of the Wu family chaos to kill them once and for all.”

To Jing Jun, he roared: “Little Jun! If we are not dead, there are many opportunities for you to cry in the future. Get out there now and keep watch for suspicious people. At the same time, prepare our horses.”

Jing Jun jumped up and led the Eighteen Guardians, who had

just come in, out of Wu Residence.

Xiang Shaolong sobered up and suppressed his grief. He asked their informant Wu Jie: “Did you come in from the city gate?”

Wu Jie answered: “Master Tao instructed me to climb over the city wall and avoid detection.”

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances, impressed by Tao Fang steadiness in the face of danger.

Wu Jie added: “We have over a hundred men waiting for you three masters outside the city and we have prepared the best horses. Will the three masters please leave at once!”

In this instant, Wu Yan Zhu frantically ran in shouting: “The situation looks bad. There are hundreds of men approaching us among the darkness in the South-western and Eastern-north direction.”

Teng Yi ordered: “Set fire to the residence at once. This will attract people to save the fire and they will not dare to act rashly. This can also save the lives of the maids and servants.”

Wu Yan Zhu left to execute his order.

Teng Yi faced Xiang Shaolong and stated: “Has Third Brother made up his mind?”

Xiang Shaolong actually smiled: “I have no other choice. From today onwards, whoever tries to go against me will have a taste of their own medicine.”

In this era where fighting decides the fate of everyone, it is the only solution.

Xiang Shaolong finally understood this reality.

Teng Yi nodded: “That’s better. Are you ready to go?”

The sound of cackling fire is heard. The storeroom at the back garden has just caught fire.

The Wu Residence stood alone and away from the neighbouring houses. While the northern wind is strong, the fire will still not spread to the nearby buildings.

The air is filled with people shouting for help to save the fire.

The neighbours will not know about this fire so soon. Those shouting to save the fire are those who set the fire in the first place.

Xiang Shaolong regained his spirits and commanded: “Let’s rush back now.”

In this moment, he is officially against Lu Buwei.

Until now, Lu Buwei has been gaining the upper hand.

When is his nightmare going to end?

Book 12 Chapter 03 – Exposing The Plot

As everyone rode towards the city gates, the sky is beginning to brighten.

Xiang Shaolong just turned onto the road leading out of the city when he held his horse to a halt.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun, the Eighteen Guardians and Wu Jie, as well as some of the elite brothers hurriedly come to a stop as well.

The cold morning wind is blowing hard at their clothes.

The long road seems deserted but a killing aura can be felt in the air.

With the wind blowing and leaves falling, the trees on both sides rustled.

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly: “No matter what, I must fetch Yanran before I can leave in peace.”

Teng Yi was dazed and frowned: “She is with Qin Qing and should be safe.”

Xiang Shaolong insisted: “I understand but I still feel uneasy. Ai! I am sorry.”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun looked at each other and both of them have a helpless look on their face. The trip back to the farms must not be delayed and cannot afford this additional time lapse.

Wu Jie suggested: “Master Xiang! Why don’t you send someone to fetch her?”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged glances, both feeling nervous about this. They were reminded about the time when they left for Wei and wanted to change their traveling path but was strongly objected by Lu Xiong.

The elite squad members have been through the toughest training. When their superiors are talking, they are taught never to interrupt. Why is this Wu Jie so courageous? Would Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi be so dim witted to require his advice?

Xiang Shaolong’s suspicions are raised and he lied: “Shall Wu Jie and Master Jing fetch her on my behalf?”

Wu Jie was taken aback and protested: “That would be wrong! I still have to guide Master Xiang and Master Teng, Ao!”

Under Teng Yi’s gestures, Wu Yan Zhu and We Shu rode up from behind. Using their long swords, they held Wu Jie hostage.

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes are shining coldly and laughed icily: “Wu Jie, do you know where you went wrong and exposed yourself”

Wu Jie's countenance changed: "I did not! I am not a spy!" The moment he said these words, he knew that he has let the cat out of the bag.

Knowing that Xiang Shaolong has a high standing in the Wu Family and is exceedingly farsighted. In front of him, Wu Jie was psychologically affected and gave his game away.

Jing Jun blew his top and barked: "Pull him down the horse!"

Bang!

Wu Shu delivered a kick and sent Wu Jie falling down from his horse. Before he can stand up, Teng Yi jumped down his horse, held him up by his hair and punched him squarely in his abdomen.

Wu Jie was in so much pain his body curled up. Two of the Guardians held him up and forced him to stand straight.

Jing Jun came in front of him and drew out a dagger. Pressing it against his throat, he coldly promised: "One lie and this dagger will pierce your throat. I will only pierce a reasonable hole so that you will slowly bleed to death in about ten days."

Wu Jie's face turned as white as snow. Breaking down, he sobbed: "It is Young Master who forced me to do this. Ai! It is all my fault! I owe him a lot of money in the past."

Everyone was enlightened and thanked their lucky stars. If not

for Xiang Shaolong wanting to fetch Ji Yanran, they would be ambushed and died a wrongful death.

What a devious plot!

Xiang Shaolong regained some hope and interrogated: “Is Master Wu really dead?”

Wu Jie shook his head: “That is a lie. Everything is the same at the farms. Young Master only wanted to get rid of you three. Otherwise, I will not do it. Ya!”

Wu Shu hit him at the waist with his knee.

Xiang Shaolong could feel his spirits rising and ordered: “This chap shall be handed to Second Brother to be further interrogated. Little Jun and I are going over to Qin Qing’s residence. After we fetched Yanran, we will plan our next step.”

After fixing a place to meet, he rode with Jing Jun towards Qin Qing’s residence and was grateful for a narrow escape.

On the road, Xiang Shaolong felt like a brand new man.

If Lu Buwei’s plots all came from this man called Mo Ao, then this man is the most clever and devious man who is also well-versed with psychological attacks.

If this plan succeeded, he will only outlive King Zhuangxiang by two days.

This is a chain plot.

First, Lu Buwei could not kill Xiang Shaolong at the red pine forest. He turned his attention to Wu Tingwei who indulges in wine and women. Using Lao Ai and a courtesan, he made use of his unhappiness with Xiang Shaolong and got him to switch sides.

To gain Lu Buwei's favour, he disclosed the Wu Family plans to leave. This traitor was then determined to eliminate Xiang Shaolong for good.

The plan to poison King Zhuangxiang should have been prepared much earlier in order to consolidate his power.

So Lu Buwei used the banquet to lure him to Xianyang City. After King Zhuangxiang's death, he will lure him out of the city and assassinate him on the roads.

Now that Qin is in chaos over King Zhuangxiang's death and Xiang Shaolong is the sworn-enemy of the six states, no one will be bothered if he is killed.

The lie about Wu Yingyuan's death, chaos in the farm is not without loopholes.

From Wu Jie's words, Tao Fang seems to be overrated. But King

Zhuangxiang has just been poisoned to death. Already mentally unsettled, they will not be surprised if Lu Buwei poisoned Wu Yingyuan as well.

In reality, Wu Tingwei may be useless but he is only anti-Xiang Shaolong and not so heartless to take his own father's life.

With the potential threat of enemies attacking the farms, they do not have much time to think things over but to hastily rush back to the farm. This way, they will fall straight into Lu Buwei's well-thought trap.

If not for Xiang Shaolong's love for Ji Yanran, they will die without even knowing why.

Xiang Shaolong let out a long breath and gathered his courage. Whipping his horse, he and Jing Jun rode along the wide roads of Xianyang City towards Qin Qing's residence.

In white mourning clothes, Qin Qing received the two men in her main hall.

Without makeup, her original and enchanting beauty overwhelmed them. They dared not look straight at her but could not resist feasting their eyes on her appearance.

Jing Jun was completely awe-struck. When he was served tea by a maid, he held the cup foolishly in the hand and did not even take a few sips.

Qin Qing calmly asked: “Grand Tutor Xiang came here so early in the morning. Is there something urgent?”

Xiang Shaolong can sense the displeasure in her tone. He apologised: “It is nothing urgent. We wish to fetch Yanran back to the farms!”

Finished, he felt that his reason lacked strength. It was decided earlier than Yanran would stay for a few days but they are fetching her before three days has passed. In such a hurried fashion and so early in the morning, it is considered a rude gesture.

Qin Qing instructed someone to notify Ji Yanran and furrowed her long eyelashes in deep thought.

Xiang Shaolong sipped the hot tea and looked around him.

The hall was simply decorated without a hint of luxury. Its humbleness reflects the class and taste of its female owner.

Qin Qing plainly stated: “For Grand Tutor Xiang to change his mind so suddenly, don’t you think you owe me a proper explanation?”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling troubled and remained silent.

He could not bear to lie to her.

Qin Qing softly sighed: “Don’t feel bad. At least you will not tell lies like others. If you leave like this with the recent death of His Majesty, you will invite rumours and gossips.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I will come back shortly. Ai! There are many things in the world that is beyond our control.”

Qin Qing repeated ‘Beyond our control’ a few times. She suddenly asked in a soft voice: “Does Grand Tutor Xiang think that His Majesty’s death is rather unexpected?”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned that she has suspicions regarding King Zhuangxiang’s death. He is committed to mislead her or she will be harmed by Lu Buwei and frantically replied: “The Imperial Physicians will know what is going on.”

Qin Qing raised her petite face and eyed him with suspicion and coldly state: “I wish to know your personal thoughts.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is looking into her eyes without any reservations. Trying his best to suppress the guilt in his eyes, he sighed: “My brain is in a mess and I have not thought about that.”

Qin Qing’s eyes bore straight at him and continued her icy dialogue: “In that case, what did Grand Tutor Xiang say into His Majesty’s ears that caused him to put his mind at ease and die in peace. Only Prince Zheng heard what you said but he is unwilling to tell me and Empress Ji.”

Xiang Shaolong's limbs turned ice-cold, recognizing that he has committed a serious error.

The words he said were right but the problem is he did not fix a lie with Xiao Pan.

If someone questions and they said different things, it will show that one of them is lying.

He was only concerned about Lu Buwei and whispered to King Zhuangxiang. He forgot that on the other side of the bed, there were Zhu Ji, Lady Xiuli and a bunch of palace maids. Sooner or later, Lu Buwei may know about this as well.

Thanks to Qin Qing's reminder, he can try to salvage this via Li Si.

Qin Qing saw that his face is changing colour. When she was about to question further, Ji Yanran came in.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up and sighed: "Grand Tutor Qin's life has always been peaceful and does not meddle in worldly affairs. I do not wish to see Grand Tutor embroiled in complicated affair."

Leading Ji Yanran, he bade farewell and left.

Staring at Xiang Shaolong, Qin Qing's eyes revealed mixed feelings. Except arranging to meet up with Ji Yanran in the future, she did not say anything more to Xiang Shaolong. However, Xiang Shaolong could feel that she is beginning to understand him better.

When they met up with Teng Yi, Ji Yanran has been updated about everything that has happened.

The traitor Wu Jie is riding a horse but his legs are tied to the harness. Unless one looks carefully, he looks like any other horseman.

Everyone rode out of the city towards the farms.

Entering a dense forest, they stopped.

Jing Jun tied Wu Jie to a tree and instructed the Eighteen Guardians to keep watch.

Teng Yi's expression grows serious and detailed: "The people ambushing us are led by Lu Buwei's top guy Guan Zhongxie. Although with only a hundred and fifty warriors, they are the best fighters from Premier Residence. Master Tu did not even know about this at all. It appears to me that the balance of power is slowly shifting to Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie."

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Where are they planning to ambush us?"

Teng Yi pointed to a nearby valley named Plum Valley and state: “Of course they chose a place that is hard for us to escape. Based on our present strength, fighting them is like throwing an egg against a stone. A bigger issue is that Wu Jie has revealed our secrets to Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly. So Lu Buwei has identified Wu Tingwei as their weakest link a long time ago. Since they have no idea about his treachery, they are always one step slower than him.

Ji Yanran simply countered: “We need not panic yet. I am sure Brother-in-law and Wu Jie have limited knowledge about our real strength.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed that it was a close shave. While raising this army of five thousand elite warriors, he included the classification of secrets as well from his 21st century military training. Except for them, the core leaders of the elite army, their subordinates only react to orders. Any one of them alone will not have complete information about army strength, fighting prowess, armour and weapons. They will know things on a need to know basis. To further limit information outflow, they are strictly prohibited from discussing their training. As a result, Wu Jie’s knowledge is limited.

Teng Yi nodded: “It is fortunate that we have precautions in place. But Lu Buwei will be extra wary of us. Hng! What shall we do now?”

Ji Yanran implored: “Where is Brother-in-law now?”

Teng Yi replied: “Of course he is back at the farm waiting for good news and to avoid suspicions at the same time. Guan Zhongxie will naturally kill Wu Jie. Dead men tell no tales.”

Ji Yanran proposed: “That’s great. We will return to the farm now and force Brother-in-law and Wu Jie to verify each other’s words. We must find out if there are any other traitors in the family. After we have solved our internal problem, we will fight to the end with Lu Buwei. Worse come to worse, we simply die! We must take revenge for Princess Qian and those who died for us.”

Xiang Shaolong was agonized. Lu Buwei will enjoy at least another eight years of power and he does not know his own ending as it is not stated in history. The weather for the future looks gloomy indeed.

He nodded: “We will let Guan Zhongxie live a while longer. Let’s return to the farms!”

Silent all these while, Jing Jun signalled and summoned the Eighteen Guardians. Together with Wu Jie, they took a left detour back towards the farms.

As the traveling distance is much longer, they are still twenty miles from the farms at nightfall.

As everyone was preparing to pitch their tents, Xiang Shaolong

sounded: “Wait! Master Tu mentioned that Guan Zhongxie is both clever and highly-skilled. We took so much time to leave the city and will raise his suspicions. He will send spies and they will soon find out that we have changed our traveling path. It is better to play safe. Even if we have overestimated him, it is still better than to lose our lives.”

Jing Jun jumped up excitedly: “If he attacks us during the night, I will let them taste their own medicine.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “My sentiments exactly.”

The campsite was situated beside a small river.

Five tents are surrounding a weak fire and there are straw men asleep in the tents and standing guard. It looks just as real unless one looks closely.

Hiding in a dense forest uphill, their bows and arrows are prepared to give any invaders a surprise.

However, there is no activity even till late into the night.

Last night, they did not sleep at all and traveled the entire day. Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi could not hold back and started yawning.

Ji Yanran suggested: “Why don’t we take turns to sleep or we will all die of tiredness.”

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, he found Ji Yanran still in deep slumber in his arms. The sun is shining strongly and the birds are chirping, heralding Spring.

He could feel tranquility in his soul as he scrutinized the well-proportioned Ji Yanran sleeping.

Now that he is far away from Xianyang City, he is enjoying the fresh air and the love of this beauty whose body is being illuminated by the sun. All of a sudden, his tense emotions and burdened mind feels like they have been relieved and freed.

Like a Buddha who has gained enlightenment, he realised one thing. The reason why he is on the losing end is because Lu Buwei has been planning against him right from the start and he is burdened by his knowledge that Lu Buwei will remain unchallenged for eight years.

If he continues to remain passive, he will be at the losing end.

He may not be able to kill Lu Buwei in the coming eight years, but history has proven that he will be defeated by Xiao Pan, Li Si, Wang Jian, etc.

In other words, there is no way these people will come to harm.

Since this is the case, why doesn't he borrow their strength and fight till the end with Lu Buwei. King Zhuangxiang's death has

proven that no one can change history.

Even if he died, Xiao Pan will avenge him when he is crowned King on his twenty first birthday.

Thinking about this, he completely relaxed.

Teng Yi's voice rang out behind him: "Third Brother is awake!"

Xiang Shaolong tried to move Ji Yanran.

The beauty hummed and woke up. Shyly, she crawled up from Xiang Shaolong bosom and sat to the side. Still dazed from her sleep, she asked: "Guan Zhongxie is not here yet?"

Her lazy yet enchanting posture caused both men to stare blankly at her.

Ji Yanran shot them a dirty look and yelled: "I am going to wash up by the river!"

She was about to take a step when Xiang Shaolong stopped her, warning: "The smart Guan Zhongxie may have seen through our trap. Moreover, the campsite is near the river and it is easy to flee. If I am him, I will move my ambush further down the road or I will wait at the campsite until daybreak. If Yanran goes like this, you will fall into their trap."

Teng Yi came to his side and scrutinized him. Fascinated, he exclaimed: “Third Brother seems like a brand new man. Since the last mission, I have never seen you so full of confidence, fighting spirit and alertness.”

Ji Yanran happily added: “Second Brother is right. This is the hero Yanran loves.”

Xiang Shaolong knew what they meant. Since untying the dead knot in his heart, he has regained his ambition and heroic air. Summoning Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians, he told them his theory.

Jing Jun nodded: “This is easy. We, the Jing village hunters, spend long hours in the wild tracking animals. As long as Guan Zhongxie has his men come near the campsite, even if they just rode one round, we will be able to detect their existence.”

Under his command, the six hunters from the Eighteen Guardians left with him.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi further interrogated Wu Jie about Wu Tingwei and discovered that Lao Ai was involved as they suspected.

After they prepared breakfast, the two men went to another side of the slope and admired the beautiful scenery. As they ate their food, Teng Yi sighed: “It is not as bad as we thought. From Wu Jie’s confession. Only Wu Tingwei has betrayed us.”

Ji Yanran sighed: “He is Tingfang’s elder brother. What can we do to him?”

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: “There is no more relationships to talk about. If we don’t kill him, we will send him outside the central plains and let Big Brother imprison him there. He will never step into Qin for eternity.”

Teng Yi was pleased: “Second Brother has regained the composure you had as Dong Horse Fanatic in Handan City.”

Jing Jun was seen hurrying back. Full of respect, he reported: “Third Brother has excellent foresight. Two miles away from the camp, we discovered horse dropping and signs of grass that has been eaten by horses. Following the trail, we detected that the enemy has relocated the ambush further up north.”

Teng Yi was astonished: “He knows the place well. That is a path we must use to get home. Unless we turn back and use another route, we will have to climb over the mountains.”

Xiang Shaolong stared at the river below and concluded: “He will leave some men to continue spying on us. In this wilderness, he can do whatever he wants. The men he left behind should already be more than enough to eliminate us.”

Ji Yanran mused: “This Guan Zhongxie is so clever. He will leave some men behind as hubby had guessed. Thus, even if we slip away, they can still pursue us.”

Jing Jun showed the fearless side of him and cursed: “If they have split into two groups to attack us simultaneously from the front and the back, we can use this against them and attack them separately.”

Teng Yi dismissed: “You are young and reckless, only knowing how to fight. If the enemy surrounds us, how can we escape?”

Jing Jun was dumbfounded.

Xiang Shaolong lied down and stared at the tree branches and clouds above him. He leisurely mentioned: “Let’s have a good sleep first. When the enemy is confused over whether we have left last night or this morning, it will be time to go home.”

Everyone gazed at him with surprise, wondering how he plans to get out of this tight situation.

Book 12 Chapter 04 – An Escape Trick

It is evening time. The clouds in the sky begin to sink and the moisture in the air begins to rise. When they meet, they accumulate and form a thick fog.

On a hill three miles South west from where they are, sounds of men talking and horses neighing can be heard. It appears that the enemies have lost their patience and thought that they have left for the farm long ago.

Up till now, not only did both parties have not exchanged blows, they haven't even seen each other's shadow. But this intangible battle been fought by both parties competing in intelligence, training, patience, strength and strategy. A small error could cause Xiang Shaolong's smaller forces to be entirely wiped out.

Relying on the darkness and fog, Jing Jun and his hunters made sure that they were no spies nearby before pushing three rafts into the river. Securing them with rope, he hid the rafts among the reeds. Once accomplished, they returned to Xiang Shaolong's side and inquired: "What do we do next?"

Regaining his cool and determination as a top elite special forces commando, Xiang Shaolong replied: "It depends on the enemies' movement. Unless I am wrong, the men who were left behind will continue searching this area to confirm that we are not in hiding. Once confirmed, they will contact those men who have moved further down the road. That will be the time to retaliate."

Teng Yi nodded: “This is a brilliant move. Once the enemy suffers an ambush, they will retreat back to the path and seal our escape route. At the same time, they will use a flare to inform those men ahead of us. This way, they will surround us from the front and the back. That will be the best time we will use the rafts and leave this area quickly.”

Ji Yanran praised: “Fantastic! Even if Sun Wu is here, he may not be able to think of such an excellent plan.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his confidence and fighting will improve by leaps and bounds. Under his strict commands, Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians divide themselves into groups of threes and fours. Taking up advantageous spots around the campsite, they held their bows ready.

They may be smaller in numbers but every one of them is well-versed in night combat as well as jungle warfare. Their killing ability is not to be taken lightly.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Ji Yanran hid themselves behind some rocks near the hilltop. Their mind at ease, they await the enemies' appearance.

The new moon rises up slowly to take its place in the sky, surrounded by countless stars. As the fog begins to disperse, the enemies came into view.

They formed ten odd units and are conducting a search slowly along the river.

Opposite the river are another seventeen or eighteen men in three groups. They are the first to enter the firing range of Jing Jun and his three fellow hunters.

Xiang Shaolong and his two companions could sense ten odd men approaching their hiding place. The atmosphere was as tense as a drawn bowstring.

They held their breaths and continue to wait patiently.

As planned, one of their men deliberately provoked a warhorse hidden in the forest. The horse reacts with a loud neighing sound, breaking the silence of the forest.

The enemies begin to move quickly towards the sound of the neighing.

A series of tragic shouts can be heard. Needless to say, the enemies have fallen into animal traps set up by Jing Jun and the hunters. With sharp wooden stakes at the bottom of the pit, a number of men were killed or heavily injured.

Xiang Shaolong and his men knew that it is time. First, they shot out their burning fireballs all around the enemies. It was followed by an endless volley of arrows.

Under the glow of the fire, the attackers were caught unaware and descended into chaos. Cries of help and sound of people falling

filled the air. It was a pathetic sight.

The most formidable was of course Teng Yi. Arrows left his bow continuously with rest. The moment an enemy was sighted, his arrow will fly and embed itself in the enemy's body as if it can see.

Since they were hiding in several spots along the river, arrows were shot from different directions and the enemy could not find a safe hiding place at all.

In a short span of time, over ten enemies have been shot dead. Those surviving whistled urgently to retreat and they withdrew in panic.

A flare shot up the sky and exploded into silvery white sparks.

Xiang Shaolong charged downhill and trailed the retreating enemies, striking those in his reach. After he struck down seven or eight men, he returned to the forest. Everyone collected their horses, retrieved Wu Jie, boarded their three rafts and floated downstream.

Finally, they vented some of their suppressed anger.

In the main hall of the Wu Family Farm, like a defeated man, Wu Tingwei and Wu Jie knelt down in front of an incensed Wu Yingyuan.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Guo, Pu Bu, Liu Chao and

Tao Fang stood on both sides, staring icily at the two Wu family traitors.

Wu Tingwei continued to protest: “I am only thinking about the family. How can we hope to defeat Premier Lu?”

Wu Yingyuan furiously cursed: “To think that I have been successful all my life and yet give birth to a nitwit and unfilial son. If Lu Buwei manages to kill Shaolong, he will kill you next to seal your mouth. Tell me! Did anyone from Premier Residence arrange to meet you after the ambush?”

Wu Tingwei was taken aback, proving that there is indeed such an arrangement.

He may not be the brightest person around but will still understand a simple philosophy called dead men tell no tales.

Beside him, Wu Jie was shaking with fear, knowing that the house rules are extremely strict.

Wu Yingyuan sighed: “I do what I say. Not only have you disobeyed my order, you are worse than a beast. Men! Bring these two men out to be executed immediately.”

Wu Tingwei collapsed and shook with fear, exclaiming: “Father, I am wrong.”

Four family warriors came to their sides and restrained them.

Xiang Shaolong interceded: “Father-in-law, please listen to me. Why don’t we send him to the north and help Big Brother? This way, he can accumulate merits to compensate for his mistakes.”

Wu Yingyuan slowly sighed: “I understand your concern. But this concerns the survival of the whole family. If because he is my own son and I am lenient, the authority of our Wu Family house rules will be gone. Everyone will not submit and the other family elders will think that I practise favouritism. Originally, I have three sons but I’ll take it that I only have two sons. Come! Bring them to the ancestral hall and invite all the family heads to witness. I want everyone to know that family traitors will share the same punishment.”

Wu Tingwei realised that his father is not trying to frighten him. His legs turning soft like mud, he begged for mercy.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say something else.

Wu Yingyuan coldly decided: “I have made up my mind and nothing will change it. I have no hesitation in sacrificing a son and gaining everyone’s cooperation.”

Everyone was dumbfounded as Wu Tingwei and Wu Jie were dragged out.

Wu Yingyuan is right. His insistence in executing Wu Tingwei has everyone in shock. Nobody else within the family will dare to oppose him in fighting Lu Buwei to the end.

Even such an elaborate plot has failed to take Xiang Shaolong's life, giving hope and confidence to everyone.

The power and prestige of the Wu Family in Xianyang is no longer despised by the Qin population like before.

With the army favouring Xiang Shaolong, including Lu Buwei's general Meng Ao, they are in a much stronger position than before.

Since this plan has failed, Lu Buwei will naturally hatch another plot.

But Wu Tingwei's death has created some problems as well.

His mother Madam Wu and Wu Tingfang became very sick around the same time. Amazingly, Wu Yingyuan is surprising strong-willed and handled the daily affairs as per normal. He summoned his two sons who are doing business and sent them to the north to open up farmlands, focusing on expanding their influence there.

This has been approved by King Zhuangxiang and even Lu Buwei cannot interfere.

Xiang Shaolong busied himself with the training of his army and spent two months in peace and harmony. Today, Tao Fang showed up with the latest news from Xianyang City.

Listening to his report are Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Yingyuan's two brothers Wu Yingjie and Wu Yingen.

Tao Fang started: "According to Qin customs, after three and a half months since his death, King Zhuangxiang's funeral will be held at the Royal Temple. Every state has sent a representative to pay their respects. Tian Dan is representing Qi; I wonder what he is up to."

Xiang Shaolong was aroused: "For Tian Dan to come personally, he must be up to something. I am not surprised that Qi sent someone as they did not join the combined army fighting Qin six months ago. But aren't the five states still at war with Qin? Why did they send representatives as well?"

Tao Fang explained: "Prince Xinling's military seal has been confiscated and is spending his time aimlessly in Daliang. The four armies retreated one after another and made truce with Lu Buwei. Every state is afraid of Qin attacking them and are busy presenting gifts and bribes. Xianyang City will be the centre of attention once again."

Xiang Shaolong thought that Lord Longyang will definitely represent Wei but who will the other states send? He hates to see people like Li Yuan and Guo Kai again.

Wu Yingyuan questioned: "Anything from Lu Buwei?"

Tao Fang shrugged his shoulders: "I believe he is too busy to pay

attention to us. With the change of power, the most important task is to consolidate the country's authority. I heard that he made several changes to the high-ranking officials and generals with the support of Empress Ji. He did not touch Xu Xian's or Wang Ling's men as the official posts that they are occupying are irrelevant."

Wu Yingen mused: "He will carry out his plot step by step."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Teng Yi faced Xiang Shaolong and enquired: "If we can disrupt the relationship between Lu Buwei and Empress Ji, it will be as good as cutting of one of his limbs. What does Third Brother think?"

Everyone was eyeing him with high expectations. Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed and replied: "I will proceed accordingly."

Tao Fang suggested: "Shaolong should make a quick trip to Xianyang City. Empress Ji has tried to summon you three times but I have rejected them, saying that you are unwell. I don't think it is good to ignore her too many times."

Xiang Shaolong brightened up and resolved: "I will return to Xianyang City tomorrow."

Everyone cheered.

Xiang Shaolong was daydreaming about meeting Empress Ji.

Now that King Zhuangxiang is dead and if Zhu Ji wanted to get close to him, what shall he do?

He has the deepest respect for King Zhuangxiang and should not be getting close to his widow.

This is something unacceptable.

Back at the Hidden Dragon Abode, Ji Yanran is chatting with Wu Tingfang in private. Wu Tingfang is still sick and bedridden.

With his own brother executed according to the family rules, this beauty's face is dead white and she is so thin until her cheeks have sunk into her face. Xiang Shaolong was grieved.

Ji Yanran saw him coming and stood up, advising: "Have a good chat with Tingfang!" Winking at him, she left the bedroom.

Xiang Shaolong understood that Tingfang hates her own brother for betraying the family and her father for being heartless. With conflicting emotions affecting her mentally, she fell sick.

Sighing to himself, he sat at her bedside and lightly caressed her shoulder. He noticed a bowl in her hand that is still full of medicine and softly asked: "Not taking your medicine again?"

Wu Tingfang's eyes reddened and she lowered her head, sobbing silently.

No one knows her spoilt temper better than Xiang Shaolong. Once she throws a tantrum, no one can calm her down. Bending down to her ear, he whispered: "You are angry at father; but the real culprit is Lu Buwei. Everybody else is innocent. If you take it personally, not only will you remain sick, your mum will also be in bad health. Your father and I will be anxious about the two of you and cannot focus on fighting our real enemies. Do you understand?"

Wu Tingfang thought about it and nodded her head obediently.

Xiang Shaolong wiped away her tears and took this chance to feed her the bowl of medicine, coaxing: "That's my girl. You must get well soon and visit your mum."

Wu Tingfang protested: "The medicine is very bitter!"

Xiang Shaolong kissed her face and covered her with a blanket. He waited until she fell asleep and returned to the hall.

Zhao Zhi, Ji Yanran and the Tian sisters are playing with baby Bao'er. If Wu Tingfang is there as well, it would be perfect.

He received Bao'er from Ji Yanran and watched the sweet smile on his face. His heart swelled up with a strong will.

Lu Buwei can harm him and he can harm Lu Buwei as well.

The first man he must kill is not Lu Buwei but the devious and clever Mo Ao.

For every day he lives, one day, he will come up with a plot that will finally take Xiang Shaolong's life.

Wu Tingfang's health improved greatly. By the third day, she is strong enough to leave her bed and visit her mother.

She has become a quieter person and does not like to talk much or meet people outside the family. However, her eyes are glowing with never-seen-before determination. It seems that Xiang Shaolong's words have untied the knot in her heart, making her shift her hatred to Lu Buwei.

Now that she has recovered, Xiang Shaolong could finally put his mind at rest. With Teng Yi and Jing Jun, they left for Xianyang City.

The Eighteen Guardians have been increased to Eighty Guardians, increasing their might.

With everyone alert and traveling non-stop, they reached Xianyang City within a day.

Xiang Shaolong entered the palace and sought an audience with Empress Zhu Ji and the soon-to-be-king Xiao Pan.

Zhu Ji has lost considerable weight but Xiao Pan is looking great and energetic, contrasting the mourning clothes that don him.

They were overjoyed to see him. Dismissing their men, Zhu Ji went straight to the point: “Shaolong, what’s up with you? Out of the blue, you slipped back to the farm and I cannot even find someone to talk to.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly stunned. With her husband dead, Zhu Ji is like a phoenix that has been set free. Nothing can hold her down anymore. He paid his obeisance to them, took his seat and answered: “Please excuse me, Empress. I have my own troubles as well.”

Xiao Pan lowered his head, understanding what he meant.

Zhu Ji demanded: “Tell me about it or I will not let you leave.”

From her tone, she did not treat him like a subordinate but as a friend.

Xiao Pan interceded: “Mother, please spare Grand Tutor Xiang. If he can say it, he would have done so.”

Zhu Ji exclaimed: “The two of you are ganging up against me?”

Xiao Pan winked warmly at Xiang Shaolong, stating: “I take my

leave. Mother should have a good chat with Grand Tutor Xiang!”

Looking at him leaving, Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to pull him back. His biggest fear now is to be alone with Zhu Ji.

When they were alone, Zhu Ji became quiet instead. After some time, she lightly sighed: “Is there some differences between you and Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong kept quiet.

Zhu Ji scrutinized him for a while and slowly revealed: “When you returned from your last mission, I can tell that you have lost your bearings and seemed to have become a different person. Buwei has a funny look in his eyes when he looks at you. I know him too well. To achieve success, he will resort to all means. Isn’t it obvious when he presented me to Zhuangxiang? He told me he will never leave me in the morning and by night I am with another man. ”

She suddenly asked: “Will Shaolong blame me for not differentiating between good and evil?”

Only Xiang Shaolong will understand these words.

Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei’s fate are intertwined together.

Lu Buwei need Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan to continue his hold of power and run the country legitimately. Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan needs Lu

Buwei to manage the opposing court officials.

With rumours that Xiao Pan is Lu Buwei's son and if Zhu Ji eliminates Lu Buwei, they will be in danger. Without Lu Buwei, before Xiao Pan can be crowned King, they may be toppled down already.

Xiang Shaolong bowed: "How can I blame Empress?"

With an agonized smile, Zhu Ji softly reminded: "Remember the day when we left the Wu Family Fortress in Handan City? I promised Grandmaster Wu that as long as I am alive, Wu family will live in prosperity. I have never forgotten my promise; Shaolong can rest easy."

Xiang Shaolong was touched that Zhu Ji remembered her promise in times like this and was lost for words.

Zhu Ji brightened up and added: "Two days ago, Xu Xian, Lu Gong and Wang Ling proposed that you be promoted as the Imperial Cavalry Commander, leading ten thousand cavalry and securing the safety of Xianyang City. Lu Buwei objected strongly to their proposal. I did not know how would you feel and did not insist. I am surprised that the three most powerful men in the military are supporting you. Shaolong! You must not hide anymore. Little Zheng and I need you by our side!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Does Xu Xian and the rest know that he is opposing Lu Buwei?

Zhu Ji wailed: “You! Aren’t you concerned about the Wu family’s safety?”

Xiang Shaolong knew what she meant.

If she must choose between Lu Buwei and himself, she will choose him.

If he can replace Lu Buwei and protect her and Xiao Pan, then Lu Buwei will be unnecessary.

Hatefully, he knew that Lu Buwei will not be easily toppled. It is all recorded in history.

He nodded his head vigorously: “Thanks for Empress’s concern!”

Zhu Ji’s face reddened and she lowered her head, commenting: “As long as you do not treat me like an outsider, I will be satisfied.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I have never considered you as an outsider. But the King has treated me well, how can I... Ai!”

Zhu Ji’s eyes shone with anger, sighing: “How can I forget his love too? Shaolong spoke to him before he passed away. I think I can guess what it is. But please do not tell me because I do not want to know it now. I hope Shaolong can take pity on me and my unfavourable circumstances.”

Xiang Shaolong discovers that Zhu Ji is cleverer than he expected. Reminded about Lao Ai, he wonders if he should challenge fate and warn her beforehand. The attendant at the gate suddenly reports: “Right Premier Lu Buwei is here to seek an audience with Empress.”

Xiang Shaolong wished he could disappear into thin air. Of all people, he has to run into his arch enemy today.

Book 12 Chapter 05 – Grand Preparations

Dressed flamboyantly in his official robes, Lu Buwei strode in arrogantly into Zhu Ji's Hall of Kindness. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly got up and greeted him.

Even livelier than before, he scanned Xiang Shaolong and nodded with a smile: "I am so happy to see you again."

A simple sentence that hints strongly at many things! It hints at Xiang Shaolong's sudden disappearance, his 'disregard' of the Qin court and the fact that he is able to stay alive!

He continued to pay his respects to Zhu Ji but did not kneel down, showing the special relationship he shares with her. With her support, he does not see himself as a subordinate any more.

Lu Buwei sat opposite Xiang Shaolong and smiled: "With shameless individuals coming in with evil intentions and creating trouble, these are trying times for the Qin Court. If Shaolong has nothing urgent, why don't you stay in Xianyang City? I may have some tasks for you."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in consent but secretly admired Lu Buwei's psychological warfare. Using the present danger as an excuse, he forced Zhu Ji to cooperate with him.

Turning to Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei asked: "What are Empress and Shaolong talking about?"

A simple sentence like this betrayed Lu Buwei's proud attitude. After all, he is a subject of Empress Ji and who is he to question Empress Ji about her affairs?

Zhu Ji was not angry and plainly state: "I am just asking about his recent activities!"

Anger flashed his eyes as Lu Buwei coldly dismissed: "Shaolong, please leave us alone. I have something important to discuss with Empress."

Xiang Shaolong was annoyed at his comment, indicating that he is not fit to join in their discussion.

He was about to take his leave when Zhu Ji interrupted: "Shaolong, hold your step. How can Premier Lu treat Shaolong like an outsider?"

Lu Buwei was shocked but put on a smile: "It is not that. He has no interests in court affairs and I do not want to burden him!"

Zhu Ji nonchalantly asked: "Premier Lu is so impatient; what can be so important?"

Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei knew that Zhu Ji is throwing her temper and is obviously siding with Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei will not be so foolish to continue rebutting her and went along, smiling: "Empress, please do not take offence. I wanted to see you

as I have an excellent recommendation for the Imperial Cavalry Commander.”

The Imperial Cavalry Commander is the next post after An Gu to work closely with the royal family.

Xianyang City is protected by three armies. They are the palace guards protecting the palace and the Imperial Infantry and Imperial Cavalry defending the city. The Imperial Infantry are foot soldiers and Imperial Cavalry are soldiers on horseback.

If you combine both Imperial Infantry and Imperial Cavalry, it will be the same as Xiang Shaolong’s City Commander back at Handan City. It is just a separation of armies.

There are thirty thousand foot soldiers, three times more than the cavalry. But if you compare the honour and rank, the Imperial Cavalry Commander is more prestigious than the Imperial Infantry Commander.

Zhu Ji coldly concluded: “Premier Lu need not recommend anyone. I have decided to promote Shaolong to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander. Except for him, there is nobody else I will trust.”

Lu Buwei could not imagine the normally-obedient Zhu Ji decided on this matter and did not offer any room for discussion. His face changing colour slightly, he glanced at Xiang Shaolong with surprise and checked: “Shaolong has changed your mind?”

Xiang Shaolong understood where Zhu Ji is coming from and she is indeed formidable. She did not want to live in Lu Buwei's shadow forever. Now that Xiang Shaolong has gained the respect of the army and is the Imperial Cavalry Commander, he can check Lu Buwei's influence. Thus, Lu Buwei dare not act hastily and disregard her and Xiao Pan. Through Xiang Shaolong, she need not always bend her will and support Lu Buwei blindly.

Xiang Shaolong knew that Lu Buwei is pretending to be concerned but is actually forcing him to give up this promotion. Then he can recommend the person he has in mind. Xiang Shaolong smiled: "As Premier Lu mentioned, it is trying times for Qin. I can only put my personal responsibilities and accept this challenging position."

Anger shooting out of his eyes, Lu Buwei faked a smile and coughed: "Good. Since Empress thinks so highly of you, do not disappoint her!"

Zhu Ji plainly asked: "Does Premier Lu have anything else to say?"

Lu Buwei was infuriated but dare not argue with her, knowing that he has crossed the line earlier. He reported: "Qi Chancellor Tian Dan, Chu Imperial Uncle Li Yuan, Zhao General Pang Junyu arrived in Xianyang City yesterday. They hope to meet Empress and Crown Prince before attending the late king's funeral."

Zhu Ji coldly hissed: "We are still dressed in mourning clothes. What is there to see? Wait till the late king is buried first!"

This is the first time Lu Buwei is being admonished by Zhu Ji in such a manner and knew that it was due to Xiang Shaolong. He hid his feelings well and did not reveal any discontentment. After exchanging a few more words with Zhu Ji, he left.

The Hall of Kindness is completely noiseless.

After a long while, Zhu Ji sighed: “I have secretly ordered everyone who saw you speaking to King Zhuangxiang to keep it a secret. Violators will be sentenced to death. Buwei should be ignorant about this matter.”

Xiang Shaolong was grateful: “Thank you Empress!”

Zhu Ji sighed: “Shaolong! I am so tired. So what if I have everything? I just cannot bring myself to be happy.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that she is trying to get him to comfort her. He advised: “Empress must pull yourself together. The Crown Prince still needs your guidance and care.”

Under such circumstances, he cannot bring up Lao Ai’s issue.

Firstly, he cannot explain how he could forecast Lao Ai seducing her. Moreover, if Zhu Ji wants him to replace this future Lao Ai, he will be in trouble.

He knows that history can never be changed.

Zhu Ji was quiet for a while and softly added: “You must be careful of General Pang from Zhao. He is famous for his strategies and is very articulate. He is the new City Commander and is the most prestigious general in Zhao after Lian Po and Li Mu. For him to come personally, he must be here to spy on our army strength. Ai! I really do not know what Buwei is planning. Now, he is very close to the six states as if nothing has happened.”

Xiang Shaolong is not bothered with this General Pang that he has never heard before. If not for Guo Kai’s intimacy with Zhu Ji in the past and dare not come, this man will not even have the chance to come to Qin.

Both of them do not know what to say next.

After some unimportant exchanges, Xiang Shaolong bade his farewell. Zhu Ji is unwilling to let him go but is afraid of rumours and let him leave.

The moment he left the Empress palace, An Gu stepped up welcoming: “The Crown Prince wants to see Grand Tutor.”

Xiang Shaolong walked with him towards the Crown Prince palace.

This head of the palace guards whispered: “After Grand Tutor has seen the Crown Prince, can you make a trip to General Lu

Gong's residence?"

Xiang Shaolong understood his meaning and nodded in agreement.

An Gu did not say anything else. He escorted him to the Crown Prince study room and left.

With a heavy expression, Xiao Pan was seated on a long sofa north of the study room. Waving the usual courtesies aside, he got Xiang Shaolong to sit in front of him and viciously declare: "Grand Tutor! I want to kill Lu Buwei!"

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted and exclaimed: "What!?"

Xiao Pan detailed in a low voice: "This is a violent man who forgets about father's benevolence and is worse than wild beasts. He claims to be a pioneering official in the rebirth of Qin and even planted his own son to be the next King of Qin. Without his death, I cannot consolidate my power as King."

Xiang Shaolong had intended to contact Xiao Pan, Li Si and Wang Jian to make trouble for Lu Buwei. He was astounded that Xiao Pan brought this up before he could. Hesitating, he asked: "Have you spoken to Empress about this?"

Xiao Pan answered: "Empress and Lu Buwei are deeply embroiled. If I told her, I will be scolded instead. Grand Tutor! With your invincible sword skills and intelligence, killing him

should be easy right!”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Guan Zhongxie and felt that he is overrated by Xiao Pan but he could not say this to him. He sighed: “If we killed him, what will be the consequences?”

Showing the mature side of him, Xiao Pan detailed: “First, I will make you the Imperial Cavalry Commander. I will select a few loyal men and entrust them with important positions. If we can consolidate our power, we do not need that traitor. I am only afraid of Empress. If she works with him, we will be in trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Do you love Empress?”

Xiao Pan was stunned and nodded.

Only Xiang Shaolong can understand him. Xiao Pan has gradually shifted his love for Lady Ni to Zhu Ji.

Xiao Pan is right. Zhu Ji knew that King Zhuangxiang was poisoned by Lu Buwei but did not hold it against him.

Xiang Shaolong explained: “I want to kill him more than you do. You should have guessed that he was the real culprit who caused Princess Qian’s death. But before we have built up our strength, we should not act hastily. Moreover, the Qin military system is extremely complicated and it is hard to manage them. With a group of them supporting Prince Cheng Chongqiao, it is better for us to bear with him for the time being.”

Xiao Pan brightened up and asked: “So Grand Tutor has agreed to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I have just promised Empress!”

Xiao Pan was pleased: “I am relieved to have Master by my side.”

In this moment, he became a kid again.

His expression turning heavy again, he added: “Grand Tutor’s foresight is unparalleled. Study Attendant Li Si is the best example. His thinking is totally unlike other people and taught me that if we can grab hold of this opportunity and utilise our strengths well, we can expand out territories and eventually unite the world. So I must not let this heartless cad Lu Buwei control the Qin Court and affect my grand plan.”

Xiang Shaolong finally realised Li Si’s influence on Xiao Pan. He cannot regard Xiao Pan as a child anymore. Under the influence of the Qin Palace politics, he has become another person. And in the future, he shall be the first Emperor of China.

Xiao Pan coldly inquired: “How long to I have to wait?”

Xiang Shaolong calmly forecast: “The best time to act is at your coronation on your twenty-first birthday.”

This is right, because this is history.

Xiao Pan was mortified: “I would have to wait for another eight years!? Wouldn’t Lu Buwei be beyond control by then?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “During this time, we can use him to eliminate those men who oppose your rule and at the same time, we can nurture your own organization and weaken his at the same time.”

Pausing, he emphasized: “For politics, you can let Lu Buwei handle them as long as Xu Xian is there to keep him in check. You must do your best to gain the respect of the military. Let Lu Buwei be the bad guy and we remain as the good guys. With control of the military, Lu Buwei will not be able to escape your clutches. It has been proven time and time again that governing authority comes after military might.”

Xiao Pan’s body shook heavily as he repeated: “Authority after military.”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for saying too much and continued: “There are two men who are loyal to us. They are Wang Jian and Wang Ben. They are terrific generals whom every King wishes to possess. With them leading your army, Lu Buwei is nothing to be afraid of.”

In a daze, Xiao Pan asked: “What about you?”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “I will do my best to help you but in the end, I am still an outsider. You must win the hearts and minds of the Qin military and use them to consolidate your power.”

Xiao Pan frowned: “But Lu Buwei has Meng Ao fighting for him and has made his two sons Meng Wu and Meng Tian assistant generals to assist Meng Ao in his battles. What can I do to counter them?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “That is why Lu Buwei wanted to get rid of me. If Meng Ao discovers that his two sons nearly died under his scheming, how do you think he will feel? The two Meng brothers will eventually come to our side. You can use them to help you and it can even lessen Lu Buwei’s suspicions.”

Xiao Pan was delighted: “There is no one better than Grand Tutor. I know what to do.”

After further discussion, Xiang Shaolong took his leave.

Compared to Lu Buwei’s new Premier Residence that is still being constructed, Lu Gong’s residence is far from the Qin palace. Lu Gong invited Xiang Shaolong into a private chamber where an attendant served him tea and left them alone. Lu Gong smiled: “I heard that you are a descendant of Qin. However, there has never been anyone surnamed Xiang here. May I know which tribe do you belong to?”

Xiang Shaolong was in a dilemma and lied: “My surname came from my mother. I did not know who my father is, not to mention

which tribe he came from. All I know that he was a Qin soldier. Ai! What a mess.”

Lu Gong, the advocate of Qin, did not suspect anything and nodded: “The people of Zhao are not as imposing and powerfully built as you. Your type of figure is not even seen often in Qin. You must be a mixed blood. I am good at judging people. Hei! From the first time I met you, I know that you are a righteous man.”

Xiang Shaolong found himself understanding him better. Amused, he praised: “Lu Gong has great eyesight and I cannot hide anything from you.”

Lu Gong sighed: “It will be great if I can really see everything. But I have miscalculated many things, including the early death of the late king. Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong quietened down.

Lu Gong stared sharply at him but in a calm and slow manner, asked: “What is the relationship between Shaolong and Lu Buwei?”

Once again, Xiang Shaolong was taken aback at his frankness and replied: “Why is Lu Gong interested?”

Lu Gong plainly state: “Shaolong need not deceive me. Lu Buwei and you are not on the best of terms. Otherwise, the Wu family need not hide in the countryside farms. Speak your mind! The Wu

clan are the descendents of our Qin nobles. From our point of view, they are way better than Lu Buwei the outsider.”

After such a long time in Xianyang City, this is the first time Xiang Shaolong has experienced Qin’s racism. He sighed: “It’s a long story. After I propose Xu Xian to be the Premier, Premier Lu has been holding a grudge against me.”

Lu Gong smiled: “How can it be so simple? In Xianyang City, you are his number one enemy. Don’t tell me you have no idea!”

His eyes shining with deep thoughts, he slowly added: “All along, there have been rumours saying that the Crown Prince is not King Zhuangxiang’s son but Lu Buwei’s. At first, we discard them as lies spread by people who are opposing Lu Buwei and Empress Ji. Now, the healthy King Zhuangxiang suddenly died without a clear reason and we are forced to reconsider this issue.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a gigantic headache coming. Lu Gong is the most respected man in the Qin military and his words represent the thinking of the Qin military leaders. If they regard Xiao Pan as Lu Buwei’s illegitimate child and supported Cheng Chongqiao instead. Lu Buwei and Xiao Pan will both be destroyed.

Lu Gong mused: “We must verify this issue before we can plan our next step. Just like we are not sure what is going on between you and Lu Buwei, so we petitioned to promote you as the Imperial Cavalry Commander to test Lu Buwei’s reaction. Surprisingly, the test is very successful as Lu Buwei is the only man who objects your promotion.”

Xiang Shaolong finally comprehends the complications of politics. When he first heard about it, he thought Lu Gong and the military are in favour of him. Now, he knows the real reason and motive.

Lu Gong shook his head and bitterly smiled: “Actually, only they themselves know what is going on and it is rather difficult to prove their relationship. Not impossible but difficult.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and asked: “Is there a way to test?” He was also puzzled that Lu Gong is discussing this with him. After all, isn’t he close to Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan and may warn them beforehand?

Lu Gong mentioned: “We need Shaolong to help us with the testing.”

Xiang Shaolong was staring at him in amazement when he recalled Zhu Ji’s words and realised: “You want to conduct a blood test!”

Lu Gong seriously explained: “This is the only way to satisfy us. We shall put a drop of blood of each person into a silver bowl filled with a special chemical. It is a foolproof method.”

Abruptly, Xiang Shaolong’s thumping heart slowed down. As light as an astronaut in space, he nodded: “I will get the blood from Crown Prince. Lu Gong had better prepared a witness to see me drawing the blood personally from him. This way, there will be no

tricks.”

It is Lu Gong’s turn to be amazed.

He looked for Xiang Shaolong as he is the closest to Zhu Ji after Lu Buwei. In addition, he is the one who personally saved them from Handan City. More or less, he should have an idea about the relationship between the three of them. If he hesitates about the blood test, Lu Gong will guess that something is amiss and know which Prince he will support.

Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong readily agreed and even wants him to provide a witness.

Both men were silent for a minute and Lu Gong decided: “Fine! I will get Lu Buwei’s blood. If the Crown Prince is Lu Buwei’s son, what will Shaolong do?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “I am positive that the Crown Prince is the late king’s own flesh and blood. The test will prove everything.”

All of a sudden, his biggest headache has been resolved.

The blood test will ‘prove’ that they are not related and the Qin military will fully support Xiao Pan unlike now.

But with Zhu Ji’s support, Lu Buwei can continue to expand his influence and control the politics.

As Xiang Shaolong was wondering about the efficacy of this blood test method, he thought deeper and kicked himself for thinking too much. History has proven that Xiao Pan will be Qin Shi Huang.

Book 12 Chapter 06 – Before The Funeral

Xiang Shaolong returned to the Wu residence.

The fire that night only burned down a rice granary. The rest of the buildings are not affected.

Over the past ten days, two thousand of the elite family warriors entered Xianyang City separately, increasing their fighting prowess.

Riding Jifeng, he rode through the main gates with Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Guardians. The air is filled with loud noises as the warriors are busy erecting sentry posts and other fortifications.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling great and jumped down his horse, wanting to inspect their work. Tao Fang came up and welcomed: “Lord Longyang is waiting for you in the main hall.”

Teng Yi glanced at the huge courtyard in front of the residence and did not see any horse carriages or escorts. Puzzled, he asked: “He came alone?”

Tao Fang nodded.

Xiang Shaolong is excited to see him as well and know more about matters in Wei, including news about Zhao Ya. With Tao Fang, he entered the hall to see Lord Longyang.

He did not put on a fake beard this time but was dressed as a commoner to keep a low profile.

Tao Fang left the two men alone and Lord Longyang happily exclaimed: “I am delighted to see Brother Xiang doing well.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “From your tone, it seems that I should count my blessings to be able to stay alive.”

Lord Longyang faintly sighed: “Countless people inside and outside of Qin are dying to kill you. There has been news that you are opposing Lu Buwei. With Lu Buwei’s growing influence, even I am worried for you!”

Xiang Shaolong is already used to this drag queen’s emotional outbursts. He bitterly smiled: “Paper cannot contain a fire. Nothing can be concealed from the world.”

Lord Longyang was astounded and asked: “What is paper?”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself, remembering that paper is only invented during the Han Dynasty. He lied: “It is my hometown dialect which refers to silk material.”

Lord Longyang ‘understood’ and added: “I am here to pay my last respects to your late king. It is strange to have two kings die within four years. Everyone is heavily suspicious and Lu Buwei is really brave.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is trying to trick him and sighed as well. Changing the topic, he asked: “How is Prince Xinling doing?” Lord Longyang coldly replied: “This traitor got his just desserts. I don’t think he will ever recover his former glory. My spies reported that he is indulging in women and wine and even disband many of his family warriors. Under these circumstances, the King should not make things hard for him anymore.”

He lowered his voice and revealed: “Zhao Ya is very sick!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and exclaimed: “What!?”

Lord Longyang sighed: “When she was sick, she kept calling your name. Prince Xinling was so furious he did not step into her bedroom at all.”

Xiang Shaolong was grieved upon hearing this. How he wished he can grow two wings and fly to Daliang straight away.

Lord Longyang assured: “Brother Xiang can rest easy. I have petitioned the King and brought her into the palace and send the best physicians to take care of her. If Brother Xiang is willing, I can send her to Xianyang City but you must wait till she gets better.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “She is so sick that she cannot travel?”

Lord Longyang intimately replied: “Lovesickness is the hardest to cure!”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered about the double meaning in his words. Impulsively, he declared: “No! I am going to Daliang to fetch her.”

In a gentle voice, Lord Longyang advised: “Brother Xiang, do not let your emotions overwhelm logic. Xianyang City is now the battleground for all the strongmen of every state. If you leave like this and return to find your family annihilated, it will be too late for regrets.”

Xiang Shaolong was not fully convinced and insisted: “I will send someone to fetch her. Can Lord please send someone capable to come along as well?”

Lord Longyang agreed: “No problem. Prince Zhen has an excellent opinion of you. If he knows it is to help you, he will do his best. The King agreed to take care of Zhao Ya also because you rescued Prince Zhen.”

Xiang Shaolong put Zhao Ya’s issue aside and asked: “Except for Tian Dan, Li Yuan and General Pang, who are the other representatives?”

Lord Longyang disclosed: “Prince Dan represents the state of Yan and your old friend Han Chuang is here. Everyone is eager to collaborate with Lu Buwei and you better watch your back. They dare not do anything in Xianyang City but if Lu Buwei sends you out of Qin, there will be people trying to kill you.”

Xiang Shaolong was wondering if he should tell Lord Longyang that his assassins are led by Yan's Xu Yi Luan when Lord Longyang continued: "Li Yuan brought Chu's youngest Princess along and hoped to match-make her with Prince Zheng. Lu Buwei has agreed on his behalf but Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Du Bi are voicing strong objections. If the matchmaking fails, Lu Buwei's prestige will be affected."

Xiang Shaolong commented: "The success of the matchmaking depends on the Empress's decision. However, Lu Buwei will use some devious method to make her agree with his suggestion."

Lord Longyang whispered: "I heard that the Empress favours you greatly. Why don't you sow discord and destroy Li Yuan's plans?"

Xiang Shaolong feared seeing Zhu Ji. If things go wrongly and they got together, he will have a guilty conscience and it also affects his standing and reputation. He sighed loudly: "It is because she favours me that it is difficult for me to say anything."

Lord Longyang knew his character and concluded: "I came here in secret and cannot stay too long. Tomorrow morning, I will send someone to look for you. His name is Ning Jia and he is my trusted subordinate. He is capable and smart. With him accompanying your man to Daliang, the trip will be a success."

Xiang Shaolong thanked him profusely and sent him out.

Coming back into the house, he held a discussion with Teng Yi and Tao Fang.

He originally wanted Jing Jun to fetch Zhao Ya but he needed all the men he can muster now. Finally, he got Wu Guo to fetch her with five hundred elite warriors.

In the middle of the conference, Qin Qing actually sent someone to find him.

The three men were caught by surprise. Has this pure and virtuous beauty finally fallen in love?

By the time Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the original Eighteen Guardians reached her place, it was nightfall, adding to the ambiguity of the situation. Everyone got seated at the simple main hall and two pretty maids begin to serve tea. Second Uncle Fang, the housekeeper, brought Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun into the inner hall.

Jing Jun was elated that his beauty treats him as an important guest while Xiang Shaolong is disappointed that this visit has nothing to do with their personal romance.

Men are like that. Even if they are not interested, they would not mind women falling in love with them as long as it is trouble-free.

Still in her mourning clothes, Qin Qing has a serious expression on her face. She greeted them and sat down in the host's seat.

Upon knowing that they have not taken their dinner, she

instructed her maids to serve cakes to them and the Guardians.

Xiang Shaolong and his men did not hold back their appetites and munched on the cakes. The cakes are delicious and Jing Jun is full of praise for them.

Noticing her furrowed brows, Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask: “Why is Grand Tutor Qin looking for me?”

Qin Qing faintly sighed: “I may be thinking too much but something has happened today that I don’t feel good about.”

The three men were shocked. Putting their cakes down, they stared at her.

Qin Qing is uncomfortable with three men staring straight at her, especially Jing Jun’s shifty eyes. Lowering her head, she described: “I went to the royal temple today to change the flowers at the late king’s altar. When I was about to leave, I was waylaid by Premier’s guest-advisor Lao Ai.”

The three men’s expression grew heavy as well.

Jing Jun was incensed: “How daring! I must teach him a lesson. Who cares where is he from.”

Teng Yi questioned: “Doesn’t Grand Tutor Qin have any warriors escorting you?”

Qin Qing responded: “Not only do I have warriors escorting me; even the two Premiers are at the Royal Temple. When they heard my cries, they ran out.”

Jing Jun coldly smiled: “Now Lu Buwei is in trouble!”

Teng Yi kicked him under the table.

Qin Qing faced Teng Yi and sincerely pleaded: “Brother Teng, please do not regard me as an outsider. Sister Yanran and I click very well. That’s why I invited everyone here to discuss this.”

Teng Yi was embarrassed and awkwardly agreed: “Sure! How did Lu Buwei handle this affair?”

Qin Qing’s expression became more serious and slowly described: “Lu Buwei did a good job. In front of Premier Xu and myself, he got Lao Ai to kowtow and apologise. He even publicly censured him.”

Xiang Shaolong could guess what is coming next as it is recorded in history. He sighed: “Did he proceed to send him into the palace to be a eunuch?”

Bewildered, Qin Qing asked: “How did you know?”

Teng Yi and Jing are even more fascinated. They have been with Xiang Shaolong the entire day. If there is anything he has seen or

heard, they should see it or hear it as well.

Even if Philosopher Shi is reborn, he may not even guess that Lu Buwei is ‘punishing’ Lao Ai in such a manner.

Xiang Shaolong was in a fix, knowing that he has a slip of the tongue and revealed Heaven’s Secret. No matter how he tries to explain, no one will believe that he is that lucky.

Qin Qing had thought that Xiang Shaolong has spies in the palace who told him. But witnessing the look of amazement on the faces of Teng Yi and Jing Jun, she had a big shock and interrogated with disbelief: “Grand Tutor Xiang only made a guess?”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and pretended that it is nothing significant and sighed: “This is quite easy to predict. Lu Buwei’s top priority is to get Empress Ji to support him fully. In Xianyang City, there is no one who knows her weakness better than him. Lao Ai is his strongest pawn. He will make Lao Ai a fake eunuch and let him enter the palace and seduce Empress Ji. In terms of scheming, we are way inferior compared to Lu Buwei.”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun began to see some light but were still in awe about Xiang Shaolong god-like prediction.

Qin Qing stared viciously at Xiang Shaolong. After some time and still unconvinced, she commented: “I spend a long time thinking about this matter before I reach this conclusion. Before I could finish speaking, Grand Tutor Xiang knows everything as if he is also present as well. I think Grand Tutor’s intelligence is sky-high

and the inferior Lu Buwei is therefore jealous of you.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty and worried at the same time.

Zhu Ji and Lao Ai are like dry wood and fire. Nobody can stop it. What should he do next?

Jing Jun suggested: “Let me sneak into the palace and deliver a cut to him, making him a real eunuch.”

Qin Qing cannot tolerate his coarse words and her face turned red. Displeased, she chided: “Brother Jing, we are talking about important issues!”

Teng Yi shot Jing Jun an angry look but Jing Jun is dissatisfied. Xiang Shaolong spoke coarsely too but this widow did not blame him. Xiang Shaolong knew that he has deceived them and relaxed. He was inspired and replied: “”Grand Tutor Qin thinks too highly of me. It is a pity that nobody can stop them.

Qin Qing was taken aback: “But Empress always listens to Grand Tutor!”

In a frank and agonized manner, Xiang Shaolong replied: “The problem is that I cannot replace Lao Ai and thus, lose my advantage.”

Momentarily, Qin Qing does not understand his meaning. After realising, she lowered her head and bit her lip, pondering: “I

understand but this is no small matter. Not only does it concern the reputation of the palace, it will allow Lu Buwei to be even more aggressive. Isn't Grand Tutor Xiang worried at all?"

Xiang Shaolong earnestly suggested: "Why don't Grand Tutor Qing head to Bashu and accompany Lady Hua Yang and lead a peaceful life?"

Qin Qing was shaken and stared at him. With mixed expressions on her face and lost for words, she finally lowered her head and dismissed in a low voice: "I have my own life and Grand Tutor need not worry. It is late! Thanks for coming!"

The three men did not anticipate her to end the discussion so abruptly and were disappointed. As they left, Qin Qing did not bother to see them off. The night wind is blowing strongly as they left her residence.

Teng Yi could not hold back and asked: "Third Brother is not going to expose Lao Ai and Lu Buwei's scheme to Empress Ji?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "For Empress Zhu Ji, it is like fresh water after a drought. Who can resist?"

Jing Jun praised: "Fresh water after a drought. Lu Buwei is really good."

As he held his horse, Teng Yi sighed deeply: "If Lao Ai manages to control Empress Ji, can we still survive in Xianyang City?"

Xiang Shaolong icily state: “Firstly, Empress Ji is not so easy to be controlled. If fact, we can make use of this to support Lao Ai and make him break away from Lu Buwei. When that happens, Lu Buwei will be in trouble, not us.”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun were awestruck while Xiang Shaolong has leapt onto Jifeng and rode ahead towards the long street.

In this moment, he is full of confidence when dealing with Lu Buwei.

Because no one can change history, including Lu Buwei.

So this evil man will pay the price for playing with fire.

No one can change history. The only problem is – he doesn’t know his own fate!

The next day, at dawn, Li Si led a huge group of palace guards and the Imperial Edict to Wu Residence. Representing Xiao Pan, he officially appointed Xiang Shaolong as the General in charge of the Imperial Cavalry. Teng Yi and Jing Jun are appointed his assistant generals. They were presented with appointment letters, bows and arrows, official swords, army uniforms and emblems, as well as five hundred personal escorts. This shows that the King has been generous with them.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that this arrangement is planned by Li

Si and is perfect. After receiving the Imperial Edict, Teng Yi personally selected five hundred men and got them to change into military uniforms. Together they rode towards the palace.

At the giant courtyard before the main palace, Xiao Pan has just finished the morning court session. With Zhu Ji by his side, he led both Premiers and his officials up an altar where he prayed to Heaven. The procession is impressive and majestic.

On this day, Xiang Shaolong and his men are exceedingly busy but joyful. He has to take over the Imperial Cavalry Command Centre east of the City and inspect his army. Later, he has to tie up the communication channels with the other ministries and even prepare for King Zhuangxiang's funeral tomorrow. The list is endless.

Fortunately, Xiang Shaolong enjoys support from the military leaders and Lu Buwei pretended to support him so everything went on smoothly.

Jing Jun is the grandest looking. Officially appointed at the assistant general of the Imperial Cavalry, he is in high spirits.

On the same day under Tao Fang's arrangement, Wu Guo and Lord Longyang's Ning Jia left for Daliang with five hundred elite warriors, determined to bring Zhao Ya back.

At night, Xiao Pan summoned Xiang Shaolong into the palace. Meeting him alone at the inner palace, he was infuriated: "Have you heard about Lao Ai?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Empress is involved with him right?”

Anxious and angry, Xiao Pan cursed: “The late king has yet to be buried and Lu Buwei this traitor brought this gigolo to be a fake eunuch and seduce Mother. I wish I can tear him to pieces.”

Xiang Shaolong has to admit that Lao Ai has his way with women to seduce Zhu Ji in such a short time. Feeling bitter himself, he is disgusted with Zhu Ji for not monitoring her own behaviour. However, Zhu Ji has been lonely for some time and is a passionate woman. As a result, she cannot resist the seduction of Lao Ai the Casanova.

Xiao Pan is so mad he began to pace up and down the room. Xiang Shaolong could only accompany him in pacing.

All of a sudden, he stopped and stared at him furiously: “When I left Mother and you alone that day, I wanted you to comfort her. Of all the men in the world, I will only accept you being close to her.”

Xiang Shaolong can only look back at him helplessly.

He understood Xiao Pan’s thinking. Just like only he is good enough to be Lady Ni’s lover in the past, Xiao Pan has regarded Zhu Ji as his mother and hoped that he will be Zhu Ji’s lover as well. To a certain extent, he is Xiao Pan’s ideal father.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “If I do that, I will not be Xiang

Shaolong.”

Xiao Pan was astounded for a while. Then he nodded: “I understand. But now my heart is full of anger and hatred. I have this urge to barge into the back palace and give Lao Ai a heavy beating to vent my frustration.”

Pausing, he continued: “Ai! What shall we do now? Before I am officially crowned King, everything must be approved by Mother. If Lu Buwei controls her, I will face further constraints. This afternoon, Mother summoned me and wanted me to replace the head of the palace guards An Gu with Lu Buwei’s Guan Zhongxie. I violently objected and after quarreling for two hours, she retracted her suggestion. She proposed to make Guan Zhongxie the Imperial Infantry Commander instead and I had to agree.”

He sighed loudly: “What should I do?”

Scanning his child-like face, Xiang Shaolong explained: “This is your mother tricking you. She knew that you will never change An Gu and proposed an alternative so that you will consent at the end.”

Xiao Pan was in a daze. Thinking hard, he confessed: “So this is how it is. I still cannot win her.”

Xiang Shaolong comforted: “Do not lose hope. You are still young and love her deeply. That is why you lost to her. Come! Let’s sit down and think it over and see if we can counter Lu Buwei’s scheme.”

Like a deflated balloon, a crestfallen Xiao Pan returned to his seat on the sofa and turned his attention to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong seriously asked: “How did Crown Prince know about Lao Ai?”

Xiao Pan angrily recounted: “Yesterday morning, Lu Buwei’s men brought Lao Ai into the palace. In front of Mother and I, he read out his crimes, saying he has just castrated him and ordered him to serve the palace as an eunuch. I am already suspicious because Lao Ai still looks full of life despite a recent castration. Only his face is slightly pale. Lu Buwei and Mother spoke in secret after that and Mother brought Lao Ai back to the Empress Palace. I felt that something is amiss and sent someone to investigate. They spent last night together.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “What is so attractive about Lao Ai?”

Xiao Pan slammed the table and cursed: “Damn gigolo!” He added: “Honestly, he is tall, handsome and imposing with some heroic air, similar to you. His skin is much whiter; no wonder Mother was smitten the moment she saw him. Ai! What shall I do?”

This is the third time he said these words. Zhu Ji’s action has caused him to lose his bearings.

Xiang Shaolong came face to face with him and whispered: “Have

you spoke to Li Si about this?”

Xiao Pan gave an agonized look: “Except for Master, I would not dare to tell anyone else. In fact, I have to keep it a secret for her.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly. This is Xiao Pan’s dilemma. With everyone eyeing his position, he is dependent on Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji. Without them, this twelve year-old will be fighting a lone battle. Before he is crowned King, he must protect Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei and consolidate his power. It is a complicated affair.

Xiang Shaolong shifted his position and looked up at the main pillar support the room. He breathed deeply and offered: “There are two great plans that will help you avoid this present danger and be crowned in the future.”

Like a lost person who found the way home, Xiao Pan jumped for joy: “Master, tell me quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong watched him brightening up and was pleased. He explained: “First, we must win the support of the military. They are divided into four main groups. The most powerful tribe is central (Zhong Li) group and they are led by Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang Ling. They stand for righteousness and fairness. In a way, they are the most dangerous. If they turn against us, we will fight a losing battle. We can say that whichever side they choose, that side will benefit tremendously.”

Xiao Pan frowned: “I understand this. The other three groups are Lu Buwei, Lord Gaoling and Cheng Chongqiao. How can we win

the support of Lu Gong and his men?”

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to laugh: “It is simple. You must prove to them who you are.”

He proceeded to tell him about Lu Gong and the blood test.

Xiao Pan was initially dumbfounded and exchanged a strange look with Xiang Shaolong. Simultaneously, they burst out in wild laughter, unable to believe such a ridiculous and funny experiment.

This future Qin Shi Huang was laughing so hard that his tears are flowing. Panting for air, he asked: “What is the other plan?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “That is to work with Lu Buwei.”

Xiao Pan was flabbergasted and exclaimed: “What!?”

Xiang Shaolong analyzed: “Lord Yangquan may be gone by Cheng Chongqiao still remains. There is also Lord Gaoling who is waiting patiently at the side. Both of them are serious contenders for the throne. If we focus on opposing Lu Buwei, both of us will be at a disadvantage and these two groups can seize the opportunity to attack us. They may even work together and force you to abdicate and that will be disastrous. If Lu Buwei still treats you as his son but Lu Gong and his men knows a different truth, you can control both sides and eliminate both contenders first. Then you will turn

around and attack Lu Buwei. By then, no one will dare to oppose you.”

Xiao Pan slapped the table: “This is a good plan but Lu Buwei is a domineering man. If we allow him to do whatever he wants, he will end up with the most authority. If the military leaders are all his men, what can we do?”

Xiang Shaolong’s mouth curled up in a smile and simply state: “This is called ‘using your own weapon against yourself’. Not only will we not bother about your Mother, we will support Lao Ai.”

Xiao Pan thought he heard wrongly and exclaimed: “What?!”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “Lao Ai is a heartless and selfish man, always looking for benefits. If he sees the opportunity, he will leave Lu Buwei’s control. Since he knows the Premier residence well, he will get capable men to defect as well, weakening Lu Buwei. Your mother will support him and use him to counter Lu Buwei’s influence. While they are fighting, you will be the one reaping all the rewards.”

Pausing, he added: “Unless I am wrong, when your father is buried, Lao Ai will ask your mother for an official appointment. When that happens, you should know what to do!”

Xiao Pan is totally swept off his feet. At the end, he breathed in deeply and wondered: “Is there anyone in this world who is more scheming than Master?”

In this very moment, Xiang Shaolong knew that Xiao Pan has fully matured and is not a willful child anymore.

Book 12 Chapter 07 - Deceitful Support

Before dawn, led by Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji, the royal family, every court official and the various representatives from the six states attended a grand but serious funeral procession. King Zhuangxiang's corpse is delivered from the Royal temple to the Royal Mausoleum for permanent burial.

Every single palace guard was activated to maintain law and order. Thousands of items were to be buried together with the coffin and the entire procession stretches over ten miles.

The citizens of Xianyang City put on mourning clothes and kneeled by the side of the streets, crying over the death of this benevolent ruler.

Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji cried heavily too. Everyone who heard them will be affected to cry as well.

Lu Buwei acted his part very well, expressing his deep sorrows and pain.

Xiang Shaolong, An Gu and Jian Sheng rode ahead and open up the roads for the procession. Jian Sheng is the current Imperial Infantry Commander as Guan Zhongxie is not officially appointed yet.

After Handan City's incident, this is the first time he saw Tian Dan, Li Yuan, Han Chuang and the rest. They paid attention to him but does not seem to realise he is Dong Horse Fanatic.

General Pang is a steady man of average build with a square face and large ears. When their eyes meet, he can see the intelligence shining from his eyes. No wonder he can rise to such a post based on his words alone.

In his twenties, Prince Dan is the youngest among them. He is of medium build and has a jade complexion, making others trust him. But to Xiang Shaolong, it is a different matter altogether. Zhao Qian and the maids indirectly died under his hands. If he has the chance, he will not let him off.

Qin Qing was mingling among the royal family and the esteemed guests. Xiang Shaolong waved to her but she pretended not to see him.

Under the strict and sad atmosphere, the procession has traveled for several hours. They finally reached the mausoleum in the afternoon.

The Royal Mausoleum is divided into two parts, an exterior and an interior, forming a 回 formation. There is a northern gate, southern gate, eastern gate and western gate. With the typical Chinese arch at the four corners, the mausoleum is heavily guarded with an official in charge.

The way leading into the mausoleum is lined with burial items such as pottery, furniture, books and clothes. The most important people entered the inner part of the mausoleum and were seated in a resting area while attendants start to move the burial items into

the burial chamber. When everything is settled, Lu Buwei went to the front and delivered a eulogy. At the end of the eulogy, the burial process begins.

Xiang Shaolong was grieved as he recalled King Zhuangxiang's generosity and hot tears begin to flow down his face

When the coffin is finally brought into the mausoleum, Zhu Ji fainted. Thinking about the past two nights she spent with Lao Ai, Xiang Shaolong still find it hard to forgive her.

To a certain extent. He could sympathise with her behaviour. First, she lost this man who has treated her so well and even made her the Empress of Qin. Secondly, she knew it was Lu Buwei who poisoned him but could not take revenge. In such a helpless scenario, she reacted irrationally.

Even with this understanding, he still feels uncomfortable with her situation.

Back at the Wu residence that night, he had insomnia. The moment he woke up, he got his men to fetch Ji Yanran and the other girls back to Xianyang City. He really needed them by his side. Teng Yi naturally wishes to have Shan Lan around too.

As long as he is the Imperial Cavalry Commander, Lu Buwei dared not attack him rashly.

Three days later, the population of Xianyang City removed all

signs of mourning and everything resumed as per normal.

Xiao Pan had not attended his coronation yet but he is now the King of Qin.

Except for Xiang Shaolong and the farsighted Li Si, no one will expect this kid to break centuries of deadlock and lead Qin to victory over the six states.

Back at the East Gate Command Centre, Xiang Shaolong was in a conference with Teng Yi and Jing Jun when Lu Gong came to find him.

Generals are the highest ranked positions in the military.

There are many different general ranking. Xiang Shaolong's Imperial Cavalry Commander is considered a lower ranked general and his army size is limited to fifty thousand men. But as he is considered half a City Commander, his status is slightly higher.

The highest ranked is Imperial General, which only Lu Gong ranks. Others like Wang Ling, Xu Xian, Meng Ao and Du Bi are only Great Generals. Thus, Lu Gong is considered the military chief.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun excused themselves while Lu Gong got seated at the chair of authority, smiling: "I came here to discuss something with you and to give you support as well. Now, everyone will know that I am behind you and will obey your

command with question.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly presented his thanks and appreciation.

Lu Gong’s face became serious and revealed: “Are you aware that during the morning court session, Lu Buwei made another recommendation?”

Xiang Shaolong is not permitted to attend morning court yet. Frantically, he asked: “What are the changes?”

Lu Gong angrily detailed: “Lu Buwei made an exception and recommended a family warrior Guan Zhongxie to be the Imperial Infantry Commander instead of Lord Changping. Xu Xian and I objected strongly but were put down by Empress and Lu Buwei. Luckily, the Crown Prince got An Gu to guard Hangu Pass and made Lord Changping and his brother Lord Changwen the new leaders of the Palace guards, preventing a military protest. Hng! Lu Buwei is getting more and more out of hand! He keeps promoting outsiders as if Qin has no talented men!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief, glad that Lu Gong has treated him as a Qin native.

He felt some regrets not having his buddy An Gu in the palace anymore. But Xiao Pan’s decision is the best given the circumstances. It must be Li Si who advised him to promote another person from the Qin military.

It will help to convince Lu Gong that Xiao Pan is not on the same side as Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji.

Lu Gong lowered his voice: “I have spoken to Xu Xian and Wang Ling. We have unanimously decided that the blood test is the best plan. Look!” From his bosom, he retrieved a special needle that has a sharp point but a wide base. He proudly explained: “This needle has a small opening. Once inserted into the flesh, blood will flow and accumulate at the base. When it pierces the skin, it is as painless as a mosquito bite and the bleeding will stop after it has been removed. If you are quick enough, the person being pierced may not even notice it.”

Xiang Shaolong received the needle from him and scrutinized it closely. Realising that it is probably the origin of acupuncture, he praised this invention and asked: “When do we act?”

Lu Gong explained: “According to our laws, ten days after the funeral, we must hold a hunting fair as a show of appreciation to everyone. The royal family, every official, the state representatives will all participate. Even those young men without official appointments will take part too.”

As the Imperial Cavalry Commander, Xiang Shaolong naturally knew about this but did not expect it to be so grand. He was curious: “Is it very lively?”

Lu Gong bellowed: “Of course! Everyone is doing their best to display their talents and hope to be noticed by the new king. That year, I was talent-spotted by the late king during the hunt and nobody else received a bigger honour.”

Xiang Shaolong was uncomfortable with the idea of killing animals blindly for pleasure and not for food. He will never stoop to such a level.

Lu Gong continued: “This is the best opportunity! I will draw Lu Buwei’s blood while you get the Crown Prince’s. Changping, Changwen and Xu Xian will be our witnesses. Hei! Only Shaolong is brave enough to draw the Crown Prince’s blood. An Gu is a coward and he deserves to be posted out of Xianyang City.”

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused. After going through the details of their plan, he sent him off respectfully.

Lu Gong’s estimate is right on the spot. His rebellious subordinates underwent a huge attitude change and were more respectful than before, saving him and Teng Yi lots of time and effort.

In the evening, Zhu Ji summoned him to the palace.

Xiang Shaolong knew that it is inappropriate but still went ahead.

Zhu Ji looks calm and did not do anything extraordinary. She treated Xiang Shaolong warmly and expressed much concern. First, she enquired about his work as the Imperial Cavalry Commander and smiled: “I have warned Buwei that you belong to me. If you lose a single strand of hair, I will not let him off. Ai! The dead cannot come back to life. Will Shaolong see to your duties and

do your best to protect Zheng'er, and leave everything else out of your consideration."

Xiang Shaolong understood where she is coming from. He secretly thought that this is her own wishful thinking and Lu Buwei is not an easy person to get along with.

At the same time, he can see the shift in Zhu Ji's attitude.

Unless she is happy with her present state of affairs, she will not want everything to stay the same forever.

He smiled: "I obey Empress's orders."

Zhu Ji wailed: "Don't give me that subordinate expression! I am able to speak my mind only when I am with you."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "If I do not act befittingly our positions, there will be gossips."

Zhu Ji was irritated: "There is nobody here and who cares about what they say! Who dares to offend me?"

Xiang Shaolong reminded: "Don't forget about Lady Xiuli. We are meeting each other privately and if word gets out, Xianyang City will be gossiping about us."

Zhu Ji smiled coquettishly: "You can relax. Cheng Chongqiao has

been made Lord Changan and will leave with Lady Xiuli to Changan province tomorrow. Now, we do not have to run into each other in the palace. Everyone in the palace now belongs to me. See, I still have what it takes.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that this is probably to prevent news about Zhu Ji and Lao Ai leaking out instead but he cannot expose her now. He plainly state: “Empress definitely has what it takes.”

Zhu Ji was slighted stunned and stared at him with suspicions. In a gentle voice, she inquired: “This is the first time you are speaking to me like that. Are you unhappy that I am supporting Buwei? But everyone has their difficulties and must resort to doing certain things against their will. I am able to say this confidently because of what I went through in Handan City.”

Xiang Shaolong is not sure she is defending Lu Buwei or herself with Lao Ai. After thinking, he replied: “Empress is right. I am feeling so helpless now.”

Zhu Ji slowly sighed and stood up.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up, thinking that she is sending him off. This charming and mesmerizing beauty came face to face with him and looked deeply into his eyes. In an enchanting manner, she offered: “The Xiang Shaolong I loved the most is the heroic man I met at Handan City’s Hostage residence. Full of courage and fearless, allowing a weak woman like me to fully rely on without hesitation. Shaolong! Now that I am freed, why should we be bothered about all the unreasonable restrictions? Let’s rekindle our relationship.”

Watching her heaving chest, pretty face and smelling her scent, Xiang Shaolong nearly wanted to embrace her in his arms and make passionate love, forgetting about the world outside and indulge in pleasure between woman and man.

He will be lying if he says he is not aroused or have feelings for her.

But with King Zhuangxiang's image still fresh in his mind, he resisted this temptation. When he was about to say something, heavy steps can be heard from beyond the door.

Both of them were shocked and hastily retreated a few steps from each other.

Incensed, Zhu Ji yelled: "Who is it?"

An attendant from the inner palace came in, kneeled down and kowtowed: "Lao Ai is here to accompany Empress!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and looked over at this handsome man. Lao Ai happened to raise his head to face him as well. His eyes were filled with hatred and pain.

Scrutinising him carefully, Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed.

In terms of looks, other handsome men like An Gu, Lian Jin, Qi Yu and Li Yuan are not too far off. But in terms of overall feeling, Lao Ai stands out.

His body is as sturdy as a hunting leopard, with every muscle toned. A perfect body coupled with skin as white as snow and hair as black as charcoal. He does look similar to himself.

But his most attractive part is his wild and playful side. With his eyes burning with passion and emotion, it makes whichever girl that conquers him feel an extreme sense of accomplishment.

No wonder Zhu Ji is seduced by him in such a short space of time.

Zhu Ji is apparently flustered at his interruption and is afraid of Xiang Shaolong knowing about their affair. Her face turning white, she scolded: "What are you doing here?"

Lao Ai lowered his head and calmly replied: "Subordinate knows that Empress does not have any attendant with her and came in to see if you have any needs."

Apparently, Zhu Ji has given him some privileges but Xiang Shaolong dare not mentioned it. Zhu Ji ordered: "Get out of here at once."

If it was anybody else, he would have been executed on the spot.

Lao Ai is definitely here to vie with Xiang Shaolong for her attention, showing his hidden agenda. Since he knows that he has made her very happy in bed, he knows that Zhu Ji will not do anything to him.

He humbly and respectfully answered: “Empress, please don’t be angry. I am only trying my best to serve you.” He appears to disobey her order.

Zhu Ji was taken aback and peeped at Xiang Shaolong, howling: “Men!”

Two palace guards came into the room.

Xiang Shaolong knows that it is time for him to enter the picture. He held the two guards and helped Lao Ai up. Pleased, he commented: “This talented man is truly loyal to Empress. I like him the first time I see him. Empress must not blame him.”

Zhu Ji and Lao Ai were astounded at his words.

Xiang Shaolong was amused and continued to exaggerate: “I am a good judge of character and this man is a dragon among men. Let’s work hard together and do our best for Qin.”

Zhu Ji saw that the two guards are in a dilemma and stood there dazed, she shot: “Get out!”

The two men knew they had angered her and ran out in a flash.

Lao Ai has always regarded himself as a dragon among men but nobody has praised him about it before! His hostility towards Xiang Shaolong decreased greatly. In fact, it is Lu Buwei who gave him this mission to sow discord between Xiang Shaolong and Zhu Ji. Otherwise, he dare not barge in like this. Awkwardly, he replied: "Official Xiang is too kind."

Zhu Ji was staring at Xiang Shaolong in a daze. Taking this opportunity, Xiang Shaolong bade her farewell.

Zhu Ji dared not hold him back. Instead, it was Lao Ai who sent him out of the palace.

At the palace exit, like an old friend, Xiang Shaolong offered: "Attendant, let's work closely in the future."

Lao Ai was embarrassed: "Official Xiang is too generous. I dare not accept your offer. After all, I am just an attendant."

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be angry and promised: "With brother's talent, why should you subject your will to others. This will not do! I will speak to the Crown Prince immediately and give you an official position. As long as Empress does not object, you will be promoted for sure."

Lao Ai was muddle-headed by his support and asked with surprise: "Why is Official Xiang treating me so well? Hei! I am originally from Premier Residence. Official Xiang should have heard of me before. I am sent into the palace as a punishment."

Xiang Shaolong feigned surprise: “You are from the Premier residence? No wonder I can see your talent the first time I set my eyes on you. Ai! What offence has Brother committed? Actually, it doesn’t matter to me. With your talent, Premier Lu will seek to restrict you. I am a man who keeps my promises and will take you to see Crown Prince at once. A talented man like you must be put to good use.”

Lao Ai was amazed but after consideration, he knew that Xiang Shaolong is telling the truth. Lu Buwei is a man who dislikes people who are more talented than him.

Presently, Lu Buwei is using him against Xiang Shaolong and Zhu Ji. In the future when Empress Ji is favouring him, Lu Buwei may seek to harm him.

If he can be on good terms with Xiang Shaolong and Crown Prince, it will help him in the future.

He happily nodded: “Many thanks for Official Xiang’s recommendation.” He became alarmed and asked: “Will Crown Prince be unwilling to see a mere attendant like me?”

His is ranked the lowest among all the people in the palace. Strictly speaking, he is just a toy for the Empress. No wonder he is having low self-esteem.

Xiang Shaolong nearly burst out laughing and dragged him along.

Back at the Wu Residence, Ji Yanran and the ladies have arrived. Even Wu Yingyuan came personally.

Wu Tingwei's execution has become a matter of the past.

Everyone knows that he has been promoted to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander and were jumping for joy.

Wu Yingyuan got his beloved son-in-law to the back garden for a private chat. He started: "Thanks to Shaolong, our family's reputation is growing day by day. In the past, applying for an exit permit takes almost two weeks; now, we get it on the spot. This is even better than our days in Handan City."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: "Father-in-law must be mentally prepared that Lu Buwei will become more powerful in the future and things will become more difficult for us."

Wu Yingyuan smiled: "By then, we'll be out of here. Wu Zhuo has sent word that he has discovered fertile land that stretches for thousands of miles. It is right beside Mount Huer Luan (?) and consists of grasslands and rivers. More importantly, there are no aggressive nomads nearby. With a few years of hard work laying the foundation, we can migrate there. I have decided to send another team of men there to start work. When we finally build our own state, our farms in Xianyang City will be insignificant."

Xiang Shaolong was happy for him and enquired about Mother-in-law. Wu Yingyuan sighed: "She'll be fine after a while. She will

cry occasionally when she thinks about Tingwei.”

Xiang Shaolong do not know how to console him.

That night, Xiang Shaolong and his three alluring wives chatted by the candlelight, telling them everything that has happened over the past few days. When he mentioned Xiao Pan promoting Lao Ai to be an official, everyone was full of praise.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Like fish finding water, they made passionate love.

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong can feel that his entire year of bad luck is finally over. Currently, he is super confident in dealing with Lu Buwei.

Book 12 Chapter 08 – Jing Luo Canal

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun have finally worked out the intricacies of Imperial Cavalry. Taking charge, they begin to improve the training and operations.

The Imperial Cavalry consists of ten thousand soldiers and are divided into five armies of two thousand men each. They are elite soldiers handpicked from the Qin army to protect the palace guards. The majority of the soldiers are descendants of the royal family and previous officials. With clean records and an attractive salary, everyone wishes to be part of them.

On normal days, The Imperial Cavalry will be based in Xianyang City's four strategic fortresses and are responsible for patrolling the city's external perimeter.

Issues within the city are the responsibilities of the Imperial Infantry. The two roles are very clearly defined.

If anything happens, the Imperial Infantry Commander is subjected to the Imperial Cavalry Commander's instructions. Between the two, the Cavalry Commander is the main Commander and the Infantry Commander is the assistant Commander. Every three months, they must practise their drills together to ensure that everyone knows their job well.

The Infantry Commander will report to the Cavalry Commander once a month and the Cavalry Commander will report to the King of Qin.

The Imperial Cavalry Commander is almost as good as the City Commander, receiving instructions directly from the King and must be a trusted and reliable person.

In the eyes of Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan, there is no one more suitable than Xiang Shaolong. Moreover, it was proposed by Lu Gong. Even with Lu Buwei's influence, he cannot prevent this from taking place. All he can do is to counter back by promoting Guan Zhongxie as the Infantry Commander.

The palace guards, imperial cavalry and imperial infantry formed the backbone of Xianyang City's defence.

Early in the morning, a promotion ceremony was being held at the palace courtyard.

An Gu was promoted to the rank of Great General and was commissioned to defend Hangu Pass, Hu Lao Pass and Yao Sai Pass. An Gu was delighted that his new post and rank were both higher than before.

His position is succeeded by Lord Changping Yinghou and Lord Changwen Yingyue, relatives of the royal family. One of them manages the palace cavalry and is made the Palace Cavalry Commander while the other manages the palace guards and chariots and is made the Palace Infantry Commander.

Using members of the royal family as leaders of the palace guards is a Qin tradition and even Lu Buwei cannot break this custom.

Guan Zhongxie was promoted to be the Imperial Infantry Commander and Lu Xiong is assigned to be his assistant General.

The Infantry army may be secondary to the Cavalry army but they are in charge of city defences and enforcing law and order, similar to our modern police and civilian soldiers. The people of Qin are naturally violent and it is not easy to be a good Infantry Commander.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong met Guan Zhongxie.

As Tu Xian has described, this man is even taller than Xiang Shaolong but looks much uglier than his martial brother Lian Jin. However, he has a coarse face, wide shoulders, a thick neck, a thin waist and long legs. Guan Zhongxie is brimming with masculine prowess and makes people feel like he is a wild beast. He is around the age of thirty.

With thick eye brows, a high nose and deep eyes that sparkle like electricity, he strode in long strides up the platform to receive his military seal. Those officials that objected to his appointment were blown away by his aggressive aura. It is no mystery why he can stand out among all the talented men in the Premier Residence and become Lu Buwei's favourite.

Jing Jun got Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi to focus on Lu Buwei's guests, informing: "The fellow in yellow is the scheming Mo Ao and the two warriors behind him are Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen."

Both men quickly assessed them.

Mo Ao is a tall man with a long face like a horse. His skin is an unhealthy shade of green and is around the age of thirty five. He has a thick beard like a goat and looks like an educated man. His eyes are half-closed but looks energetic and unpredictable.

Xiang Shaolong inched towards Teng Yi's ear and whispered: "If we do not kill him, we will die under his scheming sooner or later."

Teng Yi nodded his head in full agreement.

Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen have a big difference in their heights but both men looked very calm and athletic. From their appearance, Xiang Shaolong can tell that they are very fearsome swordsmen.

Tian Dan and the other states representatives are not present as this is Qin's internal affair. Moreover, it concerns the safety of the city and outsiders are not permitted to participate.

Xiao Pan is from the royal family of Zhao and spent most of his time in the palace. For the two years he spent in Qin, he was tutored everyday in the ways of the royalty. Moreover, his actual age is two years older than the genuine Yingzheng. At the promotion ceremony, an important event witnessed by tens of thousands of soldiers and officials, he behaved appropriately and naturally, earning the praise of officials and men alike.

Lu Buwei was proud of his 'son' and felt that his effort had not gone to waste.

After the ceremony is over, the crowds begin to disperse. An Gu, Changping, Changwen, Guan Zhongxie and Xiang Shaolong stayed behind to have lunch with Empress and Crown Prince.

Right Premier Lu Buwei, Left Premier Xu Xian, Generals Lu Gong, Wang Ling, Du Bi, Meng Ao, Official Cai Ze, Left Marquis Wang Wan, Right Marquis Jia Gongcheng were all invited to join them.

This is something like a welcome feast for those who are promoted.

Lunch was held in the inner hall.

While waiting for the Empress and Crown Prince to change their clothes, everyone gathered around and begin to chat among themselves.

An Gu introduced brothers Lord Changping and Lord Changwen to Xiang Shaolong.

The two brother look quite similar with square faces and big ears. Tall and intelligent looking, they are around twenty years old.

It may be due to An Gu's influence that both men are very friendly towards Xiang Shaolong.

After some courtesy talk, Lord Changping Yinghou suggested: “Official Xiang’s martial arts have reach the pinnacle and even Wang Jian lost to you. After the duel, he praised you to the skies. When you are free, you must come over to my place and teach my stubborn sister a lesson. That day, she bet that you would lose to Wang Jian even before she sees you.”

Lord Changwen laughed: “Bring Talented Lady Ji along and let us widen our horizons too. But you must keep it a secret or all the men in Xianyang City will come to our residence and barricade the roads.”

An Gu interrupted: “Official Xiang must be careful when you fight with Lady Ying Ying. You must not underestimate her sword skills. She trashed me the last time we fought. Hei! This girl is almost eighteen and still does not want to get married. All the handsome lads in Xianyang City are getting impatient!”

He lowered his voice and added: “Beside Qin Qing, she is the prettiest lady in Xianyang City.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed to hear this. Since this is the case, he will not visit them and avoid getting tangled in another relationship.

Presently, he is treading on dangerous grounds with heavy responsibilities. The thought of skirt chasing is the lowest priority on his list!

When he was about to excuse himself, Lu Buwei came over with Guan Zhongxie, laughing: “Zhongxie! Let me introduce you to your colleagues!”

A flash of disdain shot passed the eyes of the four men before they greeted him.

As Lu Buwei introduced him, Guan Zhongxie was cordial and smiling. But when he faced Xiang Shaolong, a murderous look flashed past his eyes.

Xiang Shaolong was annoyed at his stare and was feeling absurd.

They have crossed swords before but have to hypocritically face each other with a smile on their faces.

Lu Buwei treated Xiang Shaolong as per normal and invited: “We must find one day and bring everyone to my place to chat and drink wine. Recently, the state of Yan gave me some top grade courtesans who are still virgins. If you like, you can bring two of them home. It is a joy to hear them sing and dance for you.”

Who can resist the lure of beauty? The two brothers were tempted and gave their thanks.

An Gu maintained his stand and rejected: “I appreciate Premier Lu’s goodwill but I am unavailable. In fact, I have to leave for the eastern border two days later.”

Guan Zhongxie interrupted: “Why don’t we hold it tonight while General An is still in Xianyang City? We can even hold it as a farewell feast for you.”

Hearing him interrupt under such circumstances, Xiang Shaolong could guess his importance to Lu Buwei.

An Gu could not reject any longer and agreed.

Lu Buwei glanced at Xiang Shaolong and insisted: “Shaolong must come. Let it be your punishment for leaving without a word that day.”

Xiang Shaolong helplessly agreed.

While Guan Zhongxie and the Lords are chatting, Lu Buwei pulled Xiang Shaolong aside and questioned in a low voice: “There have been rumours that we are on bad terms. Have you heard about such news?”

Xiang Shaolong cursed secretly but acted surprise: “Is it so? I have never heard of it.”

Lu Buwei frowned: “Shaolong need not deceive me. After the last mission, I can feel your attitude changing. After thinking about it, I interviewed the Meng brothers in detail and realised that you have mistaken Lu Xiong’s conspiring with Lord Yangquan, causing the death of Princess Qian. It is a misunderstanding. The person who betrays us is assistant general Qu Dou Qi, which is why he is

on the run and dare not return to Xianyang City.”

Xiang Shaolong was elated. At first, he did not anticipate Wu Tingwei to pass Ji Yanran’s fake information to Lu Buwei so quickly. Unexpectedly, this kid is eager to produce results and spoke to Lu Buwei already.

He knew that if he believed him so easily, Lu Buwei will be suspicious. He wore a heavy expression and his face and asked: “Please forgive me for being frank. On the night the late king died, somebody bribed my family warrior to lead me out of the city to be ambushed. Fortunately, I discover his ruse and narrowly escape. Does Premier Lu know about this?”

Lu Buwei’s expression turned serious: “Did you capture the traitor?”

Wu Tingwei’s death is a Wu family secret. The public was only informed that he was sent out of Qin for business. Thus, Xiang Shaolong lied: “He said he was bribed by someone from Premier Residence and we killed him on the spot. After much difficulty, we managed to slip back to the farms.”

Lu Buwei ‘sincerely’ suggested: “No wonder Shaolong has doubts about me. You are my confidante and I will not harm my own men. I will investigate this matter thoroughly. I am sure it is related to Du Bi. He whole-heartedly supports Cheng Chongqiao and is using this opportunity to sow discord between Empress, Crown Prince, you and me.”

Xiang Shaolong is certain that his next target is Du Bi and Cheng Chongqiao. Therefore, he should be safe for the time being. However, things are unpredictable and he feigned surprise: “I did not think so far ahead.”

The gong sounded at this instant, signalling the start of the banquet.

Lu Buwei hurriedly added: “The storm is over and so is the misunderstanding. Shaolong must cooperate with Guan Zhongxie and defend our city well. I have high expectations for you.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed on the surface but was cursing Lu Buwei’s ancestors secretly.

Everybody lunched in harmony.

Guan Zhongxie is very articulate and knows his boundaries. Most impressively, he is able to praise people indirectly without looking too obvious. He is the kind of person you can curse when his back is turned but when chatting; you will never be bored by his words.

Lu Gong and the others have a good opinion of him but disliked him for ganging up with Lu Buwei.

Zhu Ji displayed her talent and expressed her appreciation to everyone, making those present delighted with her praises. Lu Buwei, Cai Ze and herself lead the interaction, adding plenty of excitement to the banquet.

Xiang Shaolong subtly noticed Left Marquis Wang Wan and Right Marquis Jia Gongcheng were supporting Lu Buwei, becoming his conspirators as well.

Of course they are with him, now that Lu Buwei is in power. If Lu Buwei is toppled, it will be a different story altogether.

Meng Ao may be defeated but he had conquered the three provinces of Sanchuan, Taiyuan and Shangdang, allowing the territory of Qin to expand greatly towards the east. An eastern base was built, scoring him a big merit. Thus, Lu Buwei is even more reliable with Meng Ao's accomplishments.

The ultimate defeat under Prince Xinling's combined army is forgivable. Anyone else in his position will be defeated too.

Among the three Tiger Generals of Qin, Wang Ling has been slowly won over by Lu Buwei and is on good terms with him. Now, he is not as friendly to Xiang Shaolong compared to Lu Gong and Xu Xian.

Only Du Bi is constantly bickering with Lu Buwei and state their differences clearly, not even giving face to Empress Ji and Crown Prince Zheng. As he is still a crucial military leader, Lu Buwei cannot do anything to him.

Cai Ze detailed: "Ever since Premier Lu enter politics, Qin has gained three provinces. Originally, we have ten provinces of Ba, Shu, Hanzhong, Shang, Beidi, Hedong, Longxi, Nan, Qianzhong

and Nanyang. With Sanchuan, Taiyuan and Shangdang, we now thirteen provinces. It is a milestone for Qin's prosperity. We have twelve million inhabitants, hundreds of thousands of soldiers, thousands of chariots, tens of thousands of horses. The six states may be strong or weak but none of them is as good as us."

These words are to flatter Lu Buwei.

Lu Buwei was overjoyed to hear this but pretended to be humble and gave the credit to the late king and Xiao pan.

Everyone was lost for words as this is genuine truth.

Great General Du Bi frowned and faced Prince Zheng, asking: "Our country is improving by leaps and bounds. What future plans does Crown Prince have?"

Everyone frowned upon hearing his words.

He is only a thirteen year old.

If he was born as the Crown Prince, there will be tutors who will teach him how to govern a country from young. The problem is Xiao Pan 'grew up as a commoner' and has only been in Xianyang City for two years. As the present King but with limited experience, he will not give a satisfactory answer.

Du Bi obviously despise him and purposely put him on the spot.

Unexpectedly, Xiao Pan smiled and replied in his child-like voice: “In terms of prestige, there is no one better than one of our Qin’s founding King, King Mu Gong. But even he cannot unite the world as Zhou De is still alive and feudal lords ruled the lands. After the reign of Xiao Gong, the states begin to fight among themselves, giving us an opportunity to take a break and build our country. As the days go by, our enemies become weaker as we grow stronger. Presently, there is once in a millennium opportunity to unite the world as long as the six states do not work together. Otherwise, even if the Yellow Emperor is reborn, he cannot unite the six states.”

Everyone was flabbergasted as they did not expect this kid to have such extraordinary views.

Only Xiang Shaolong knew that it is Li Si’s views. He was impressed that Xiao Pan can improve on it and say it out fluently.

Du Bi was dumbfounded and stared blankly at Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan’s words have secured a foothold in the hearts of the officials.

Lu Buwei laughed: “The Crown Prince has great insight and my Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu have not been written in vain. Even when we have won, we must continue to work hard and govern the country with love. You must never forget this.”

Not only did he grab the credit for himself, he acted like a father

lecturing a son, making all those present frown deeply.

Zhu Ji smiled: “Zheng’er is still young and we must still depend on Premier Lu and everybody’s support.”

No one dare to rebut Lu Buwei after hearing her words.

Lu Buwei added: “Recently, I met a man from Han who knows how to dig canals. He recommended that we can open up a water channel between River Jing and River Luo. That will irrigate hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile land. This suggestion will benefit our state tremendously. Will Empress and Crown Prince permit me to start work?”

The moment he heard this, Xiang Shaolong knew that Lu Buwei is trying to grab more power.

To dig a canal that stretches for hundreds of miles will take ten over years. It will also use up plenty of men and resources from Qin.

If this canal is to be dug, a significant amount of men and resources will be assigned to Lu Buwei since he is in charge. This will boost his authority accordingly.

Such an massive project should be brought up during morning court and have the various ministers analyzing its worthiness. Instead, he chose to bring it up now. Cai Ze, Wang Wan and Jia Gongcheng are here to support him, proving that it has all been

planned earlier.

Zhu Ji was pleased: “Since Premier Lu feels that this is beneficial to us, it must be so. Does anyone else have anything to add?”

Cai Ze and the two marquises voiced their support.

Before Xu Xian has a chance to say anything, Zhu Ji announced: “Premier Lu shall see to this. Once you have the plans, submit them to the Crown Prince to have a look. If there is no problem, you can start work immediately.”

With a few sentences, Lu Buwei’s authority has increased considerably.

Xiang Shaolong could only think of Mo Ao. Such a indirect power grabbing plan can only come from his wicked but ingenious brain.

Without killing him, it is hard to defeat Lu Buwei.

With Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei supporting each other mutually, not to mention the other officials, even Xiao Pan’s opinion was not consulted.

The only way to destroy this treacherous partnership is through Lao Ai.

Book 12 Chapter 09 – Conflict

In front of Li Si and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan blew his top over Lu Buwei, cursing: “Why would I want to read his stupid Annals of Lu? He wrote so much about morals and virtues but he himself is an asshole. Tell me, Study Attendant Li, what is the logic behind his theory of ‘ruling by virtue, the world does not belong to one man but men belonged to the world’? Why don’t he get rid of me as well and rule Qin directly.”

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si glanced at each other, choked by the forceful scolding of Xiao Pan.

After lunch, Xiao Pan had summoned Xiang Shaolong into the study.

Zhu Ji spent most of her time with the newly-promoted Lao Ai and did not have much time for her growing child.

But Xiao Pan still loved this surrogate mother. He only cursed at Lu Buwei and did not say anything about her.

Li Si was frightened and kneeled down, kowtowing: “Crown Prince, please be appeased!”

Xiao Pan barked: “Get up and start explaining to me.”

Li Si stood up and respectfully begin: “Qin has been prospering for four generations and possess a strong army. The feudal lords

are not righteous people. You must use the military to overcome them and govern the country with laws. The commoners will look up to the officials as an example. There is no other way.”

Xiao Pan calmed down and asked: “What about the Ruler’s principles?”

Li Si fluently replied: “I have been traveling all over the world and analyzed the politics of every state. It is pretty much the same everywhere. Firstly, it is the communication of the King’s orders. Power must be held in his hands and law must be used to govern the country, winning the support of the people and strengthening the country. Premier Lu’s ‘Govern the country with morality and righteousness’ is just plagiarising Confucius’s impractical ideas. It only sounds good but cannot work in real life.”

To Xiang Shaolong who came from the 21st century, Li Si’s theory is correct and managed to pinpoint the realities of life. The only issue is that the monarch is not subjected to the law like everyone else. Until two thousand years later, nothing much will change.

Since Xiao Pan came to Qin, he received the teachings of Shang Yang which emphasizes on power and military might. Moreover, he grew up in the palace of Zhao and knew the value of power. This will make him clash with Lu Buwei in the future.

Recently, he came into contact with Xiao Pan more frequently and found this kid to be developing his own set of thoughts. If there are people around him, he will use gestures to highlight his authority. He is becoming more and more like the future Qin Shi

Huang.

Xiao Pan appears to be fully satisfied with his answer and nodded: “From today onwards, Subject Li shall be my Palace Librarian and be responsible for all work related to books in the palace. You need to attend morning court every day.”

Li Si was overjoyed and gave his thanks.

Xiang Shaolong was dazed and felt that Xiao Pan really have what it takes to rule Qin in the future.

Although everything in the palace has to be approved by Zhu Ji, she will not fall out with her son over a librarian. Moreover, her son has just promoted her secret lover.

Xiao Pan gestured: “I have something to discuss with Grand Tutor Xiang.”

Li Si got the hint and took his leave.

Xiao Pan sat down and sighed: “You saw it for yourself how Empress and that traitor are singing the same tune. Even I do not have a chance to speak up.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “No! Crown Prince performed excellently and won the hearts of the officials. Now, the Crown Prince is only lacking in patience!”

Xiao Pan continue scolding: “Lu Buwei took all the credit for himself, wanting both power and fame. He may even want the throne!”

Pausing, he angrily added: “The Annals of Lu mentioned that we must punish evil men and not take bribes; we must give good men official positions. The good men is referring to himself. He is the one accepting bribes. And yet he says that the King must be frugal and lead by example.”

Although there is still a long time before his coronation, Xiao Pan’s dissatisfaction with Lu Buwei is growing every day. The moment he comes into power, Lu Buwei will be toppled for sure.

Xiao Pan asked: “Have you seen Li Si’s classmate, Han Fei’s work? He mentioned: Since Shang Yang’s reforms, Qin has become rich and strong but there is still evil at work. The people really getting wealthy are the ministers. He also mentioned: The Marquis of Rang crossed Han and Wei to attack Qi and did not even gain any territory after five years of war but was given a title. The Marquis of Ying attacked Han for eight years and was also given a title. Since then, everyone followed their example and start wars. If they win, they will be promoted; otherwise, they will be conferred a title. The King has no idea about all these treachery. What fascinating views he has! I cannot wait to meet him.”

Xiang Shaolong has not seen Han Fei’s work before and was impressed by his literature and brilliance. He curiously asked: “Is it Li Si who introduced them to Crown Prince?”

Xiao Pan shook his head: “It is Grand Tutor Qing who introduced them to me.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that this is human nature. Li Si may be his good friend but he knows that he has a one-track mind and will not easily accept the teachings of others.

After a moment of reflection, Xiang Shaolong assured: “We have stirred up Lao Ai’s ambitions. If we can give him more benefits, I am confident that he will betray Lu Buwei and set up his own organization. When that happens, Empress will stand on his side and counter Lu Buwei. We will then reap benefits from their fighting.”

Xiao Pan sighed: “Is there anything else we can do? I did not want to approve the canal project or the majority of our men and resources will be under his control.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “This strategy comes from a person named Mo Ao. Once this man is eliminated, Lu Buwei is as good as someone who has lost half his brain and will be easier to deal with.’

Xiao Pan cheered: “Master has finally decided to act?”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes flashed with a strong killing aura and coldly promised: “Lu Buwei’s schemes originated from this man. He is considered my arch enemy and how can I not avenge Princess Qian’s death? I guarantee he will not survive the three day hunting fair!”

Xiang Shaolong was about to leave the Crown Prince palace when a sweet voice called him from behind: “Grand Tutor Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong was caught unaware and turned his head. A lively Qin Qing came into his sight.

She sauntered up to him and solemnly apologised: “My mistake. I should have addressed you as Imperial Cavalry Commander.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Your words are filled with sarcasm. Are you still grudging me for saying the wrong things that night?”

Qin Qing was stunned at his forthrightness. Her alarmed expression is enchanting and even Xiang Shaolong who is used to seeing pretty women feasted his eyes on her beauty.

However, her attitude remains the same and coldly replied: “Not really. Grand Tutor’s words are right. Men are like that, always thinking that they are right and everyone else should listen to them.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed at her angry words. But since it was her who approached him, he should have a chance to maintain a certain degree of relationship with her.

He raised his hands in mock surrender: “I give up and I throw in the towel. Grand Tutor Qin please forgive my incompetency and

foolish behaviour.”

Originally, Qin Qing successfully maintained her cold demeanour but now, like the sun after the storm, she lowered her head smiling and wailed: “You are incorrigible.”

Heavens! If she gives him this hot-and-cold treatment continuously, he may cross his own line and fall in love with her.

Luckily, Qin Qing resumed her coolness and lightly sighed: “I cannot forgive you because you did not expose Lu Buwei’s scheme to Empress. But after thinking, I find it reasonable. Everyone is trying their best to get into Lu Buwei’s good books and even you are not an exception.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that he was severely misunderstood.

But he cannot rebut her.

How can he tell her that he cannot change the path of history and thus, will not support Lu Buwei as Lu Buwei will be the ultimate loser at the end?

While he was lost for words, Qin Qing added with disdain: “I felt bad for Sister Yanran to have married a husband who panders to those in power.”

She turned and left.

Watching her graceful, swan-like posture moving away from his, he roared: “Hold it!”

The nearby palace guards were alarmed and looked in their direction. They saw the respected Grand Tutor of Crown Prince Zheng, Xianyang City’s number one beauty Qin Qing on one side and the Imperial Cavalry Commander Xiang Shaolong on the other side. Helplessly, they pretended not to have heard or seen anything and returned back to their original duties.

Qin Qing casually halted and coldly snorted: “Are you going to arrest me? Now, you are in power and enjoy the backing of several influential people. Naturally, you will not see eye to eye with me.”

Xiang Shaolong nearly exploded. Striding to her back, he angrily exclaimed: “You!”

Qin Qing simply asked: “Are you trying to create a scene in front of the entire palace?”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and discouragingly hissed: “Forget it! You can think whatever you like! I know what I am doing.”

Qin Qing softly asked: “Aren’t you just a lackey of Lu Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong felt terrible to be misunderstood by this beauty and shot out without thinking: “I wish I can grab hold of him

and... Hei! It's nothing.”

Qin Qing turned around and was pleased: “Now you are telling the truth. But why did Mister Xiang did not expose Lu Buwei's scheme to seduce Empress?”

Xiang Shaolong realised that she acted in such a manner to force him to reveal his true self and was dumbfounded. He stared blankly at her attractive face which only Ji Yanran can match.

For once, Qin Qing did not mind him appreciating her looks. Revealing two rows of neat and snowy white teeth, she smiled: “Please forgive me for tricking you. But you are such a chauvinist man and always keep secrets from women, especially me. What did you say to King Zhuangxiang on his deathbed?”

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and bend forward towards her, admiring her flawless skin, her petite ear and her novel earring. In a hushed voice, he disclosed: “I promise His Majesty that I will kill Lu Buwei one day to avenge him and told him to leave peacefully.”

Hot tears flowed continuously from Qin Qing's eyes.

Through her vision blurred by tears, she saw Xiang Shaolong walking away from her.

To keep his dinner appointment at the Premier Residence, Xiang Shaolong quickly left the palace and rushed home to shower and

change.

Naturally, the Tian sisters were tending to him

Music from Ji Yanran's playing of the flute can be heard from the rear garden. The tune was sad and full of pain. Yanran played for a while, stopped, resumed playing and stopped again.

Xiang Shaolong was finding it strange and proceeded to the rear garden to see his pretty wife.

Ji Yanran was seated in the garden pavilion and holding her flute. Something seems to be on her mind.

Xiang Shaolong went up behind her and stretched his hands in front, embracing her into his bosom. Kissing her delicate face and smelling her scent, he implored: "Why is Yanran's music so melancholic?"

Ji Yanran slowly explained: "Today is the anniversary of our country's annihilation. Thinking that our grand empire is gone just like that, I cannot help but be distracted. People fight and countries fight. When will everyone see eye to eye with each other?"

Xiang Shaolong went for her lips and kissed her heavily, sighing: "This will never change. Everyone is out to benefit themselves and it doesn't matter if it is one man, an organization, a tribe or a country. As long as greed and benefits are present, fighting is

unavoidable. For example, there is only one Talented Lady Ji whom I have gotten. Other people will not have a share of you and will fight with me for you.”

Ji Yanran was greatly amused and hugged him in return, shaking her head in amazement.

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Did you have an afternoon nap? When I first saw you in Daliang, you just woke up from your nap and your fragrance is overwhelming.”

Ji Yanran was happy with his teasing and giggled: “Nonsense. Hubby seems to be in a good mood today.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Don’t even ask. I was tricked by your good friend Qin Qing and nearly blew my top.”

Ji Yanran was surprised: “Are you sure? She is a proud woman but still has a good opinion about you. Based on our friendship, she should not give you any trouble!”

Hugging her, Xiang Shaolong lead her to another side of the pavilion. After they got seated, he told her the whole story.

Ji Yanran was laughing non-stop like a blossoming flower. Even though he is familiar with her looks, her charming posture aroused him and he began to fondle her.

Ji Yanran held his naughty hands and wailed: “Stop tempting

me. You are going to the Premier Residence for dinner soon.”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded and stopped immediately. Curious, he asked: “How did Qin Qing become a widow? Do you know about her background and history?”

Ji Yanran softly sighed: “Sister Qin is a royal descendant and her forte is in academic. At the age of sixteen, she married a capable general according to her parents’ wishes. Sadly, on the day of their wedding, her husband received a military order to enter war at once. He did not return.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Such a pitiful girl!”

Ji Yanran objected: “I don’t think she is pitiful. Sister Qin knows how to enjoy life and loves to trim plants. Once, I saw her spend an entire day trimming a pot of peonies. I cannot be like her and entertain myself and be lost in my own world. Unless it is with you Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “I have just heard the best flattery in the world. But you are right. Qin Qing an elegant and virtuous lady who is as calm as the moon.”

Ji Yanran laughed: “But her peaceful composure has been shaken by you. It is said that she never talks about men but she kept asking me about things related to you. When I told her about you, her eyes are shining with excitement. Hng! I did not pick the wrong person to marry.”

Xiang Shaolong was dazed: “You are telling me all her secrets; are you trying to encourage me?”

Ji Yanran seriously state: “On the contrary. Sister Qin is special and commands the highest respect from all Qin women, like a goddess of chastity. Unless you can bring her away from here, you will create endless trouble for you and for her if you violate her purity.”

Xiang Shaolong was awe-struck and promised: “Relax! After the unfortunate incident of Princess Qian and the maids, I have given up skirt-chasing. Except for my wives and maids, I have no other desires.”

Ji Yanran straightened up and repeated: “Given up skirt-chasing. Ai! Why does hubby’s casual words always enlighten me and taught me something new?”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty. He managed to woo this top beauty and shake the resolution of the pure Qin Qing because he has two thousand years of history backing him up.

This is his trump card in betting his life against Lu Buwei’s. Otherwise, he would have been killed a long time ago.

At this very moment, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi came home with Xiang Bao’er whom they had brought out to play. Xiang Shaolong accompanied them for a while until evening time. He then made his way to the Imperial Cavalry Command Centre to meet up with Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Together, they rode towards

the Premier Residence for Lu Buwei's banquet.

Book 12 Chapter 10 – Premier Residence

Banquet

Arriving at the Premier Residence, Master Tu Xian is waiting to welcome them.

This old friend whispered a secret meeting time and place to them before getting his men to bring them into the Eastern Hall where the banquet is being held.

He was the last to arrive. Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and An Gu were there before him. Unexpectedly, Tian Dan and Li Yuan were present as well. Tian Dan's General Dan Chu is also present.

As a host, Lu Buwei introduced the three of them to Tian Dan and the rest.

Xiang Shaolong recognized Tian Dan but pretended to meet him for the first time. Tian Dan is scrutinizing him carefully but did not display any recognition. However, this devious man masks his thoughts well. Even if he spots something wrong, he will not express it on his face.

Lu Buwei continued to introduce them to the other guests from the Premier Residence. Guan Zhongxie, Lu Xiong are definitely joining them for the banquet. The others are Mo Ao, Lu Chan, Zhou Zihen and his other clansmen.

Mo Ao is a quiet man with little words, keeping a low profile. If

not for Tu Xian's warning, nobody will know that this man is Lu Buwei's chief strategist.

Li Yuan is looking great and was quite friendly and polite towards Xiang Shaolong. From his facial expressions, he did not show any signs of jealousy about losing Ji Yanran to him.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking about Guo Xiu'er who married him. Is he treating her well?

Love can be the biggest mental burden.

The three allied states of Han, Zhao and Wei were not invited to this banquet, showing that Lu Buwei supports only the friendship between Qin, Qi and Chu. Since this is the case, Yan should be invited as well. It is possible that Yan has caused the death of Princess Qian and Lu Buwei did not invite them on purpose so as not to make things difficult for Xiang Shaolong.

Everyone got seated.

Just by looking at the seating arrangements, Xiang Shaolong can tell that it has been thought over carefully.

The banquet is held in the large hall with people seated on two side rows. Tian Dan and Li Yuan were seated at the first seat of the two rows. Lu Buwei himself was seated beside Tian Dan while An Gu is accompanying Li Yuan. Following them were Xiang Shaolong seated with Guan Zhongxie; The Changping brothers with Dan

Chu and Lu Xiong, followed by Teng Yi, Jing Jun accompanied by Tu Xian and Mo Ao, etc.

Tian Dan started: “If this banquet is held ten days later, it will be surely held at the new Premier Residence.”

Lu Buwei laughed gleefully at his remark.

Until now, Xiang Shaolong does not know how these two men are related but he can guess that there are some dealings going on between them. Otherwise, why didn't Qi send their forces to join Prince Xinling's combined army?

Or it could be Li Si's deduction that Qi is only good at boasting and lack real military prowess.

Li Yuan comes from Chu which took part in fighting against Lu Buwei's General Meng Ao but was still well-received by Lu Buwei. Thankfully, Xiang Shaolong knew what is going on and was not surprise at all.

At the end of the day, the most influential man in Chu is Lord Chunshen. He may indulge in women and wine but is someone who looks at the big picture and is on good terms with Prince Xinling. He will definitely support Prince Xinling by sending the Chu army to join his combined army.

To execute his plan to ally with Qi and Chu while attacking the three allied states (Han, Zhao & Wei). Lu Buwei has to do his best

to win Li Yuan to his side. If Li Yuan can topple Lord Chunshen and gain military control, he can attack the eastern states in peace without fearing intervention from Qi and Chu.

Tian Dan is not easily tricked so there must be a secret agreement between Lu Buwei and him.

This is what politics is all about.

Secret arrangements can have a far greater effect than the results of a fierce battle.

To Xiang Shaolong who knows the eventual winner of the Warring States Period, Tian Dan and Li Yuan are making unwise decisions.

But to the people who existed during these times, the future is unpredictable.

Warlords and heroes have fought countless battles for centuries, making everyone believe that this will go on forever.

Qi and Chu had hoped to reap rewards from the fighting between Qin and the allied states.

Tian Dan leaned towards Lu Buwei and whispered to him. From their expressions, there is something going between them.

While waiting for the dishes to be served, everyone began chatting among themselves.

Xiang Shaolong did not want to speak to Guan Zhongxie but the next table is a few feet away from them. He knew that conversation is going to be unavoidable.

Guan Zhongxie began: “Official Xiang’s swordsmanship is famed throughout Qin and I value martial arts more than my life. We must find one day and exchange pointers. ”

Xiang Shaolong could guess that his words sound nice but he is actually trying to beat him in a duel and gain fame for himself.

But he is a real expert after all. His posture, footsteps and balance reveals everything about his real fighting talent. Among all the men he can duel before including Yuan Zong, Teng Yi and Wang Jian, this man should be the most formidable.

If his arm strength is stronger than Xiao Weimou, Xiang Shaolong is likely to lose unless he resorts to some extraordinary fighting techniques.

He beat Lian Jin as he applied the correct strategy and his Mohist sword is much heavier, thereby forcing Lian Jin to be out of breath and dying a tragic death.

This method will not work on Guan Zhongxie.

He smiled: “Official Guan may not know about our rules yet. The King has decreed that military officials are forbidden to duel among themselves.”

Guan Zhongxie was startled and weakly replied: “Official Xiang is mistaken. How would I dare to duel against you; I am only suggesting we examine each other’s swordplay!”

Xiang Shaolong officially state: “I see. I have misunderstood you.”

Guan Zhongxie cheerfully added: “I heard that the Crown Prince loves sword fighting. Premier Lu is concerned that Official Xiang may be too occupied and wanted me to teach the Crown Prince but forgot that I am very busy myself. Premier Lu may be a brilliant man but he makes some small errors as well!”

Xiang Shaolong was caught by surprise.

Lu Buwei’s attacks come one after another like waves upon the shore.

Firstly, he used Lao Ai to tie Zhu Ji down and now he is trying to use Guan Zhongxie to isolate Xiang Shaolong from the royal family altogether.

Lu Buwei did not know their secret and thought that Xiao Pan favours Xiang Shaolong because children love to worship heroes. If Guan Zhongxie can defeat Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan will lose

interest in him.

He could forecast Lu Buwei arranging a duel between them in front of Xiao Pan. When Xiao Pan personally witnesses his defeat, Guan Zhongxie will likely replace him in tutoring Xiao Pan.

If Mo Ao is the originator of this scheme, then this man is simply horrendous.

Unconsciously, he looked towards Mo Ao and saw him chatting joyfully with Jing Jun. He is worried that Jing Jun may reveal some secrets unknowingly and prayed hard that Jing Jun is cleverer than he looks.

A series of gongs can be heard approaching the hall.

A group of ten odd musicians came in from the left and began playing.

Everyone stopped talking and enjoyed their performance.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong saw musicians at dinner banquets since he came to Qin. This is a common sight in the six states but rare in Qin. It appears that Lu Buwei is becoming more and more reckless and even started this culture in Qin.

As everyone is waiting with anticipation, a group of nearly thirty courtesans danced lightly like butterflies into the hall. Full of liveliness and beauty, they gathered at the centre of the hall and

began performing according to the music.

These Yan ladies were of average built and dressed in bright flowery colours, showing their excellent curves and astonishing skin. With their gentle expressions and pleasant singing, everyone present was intoxicated by their presence.

Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are hot-blooded young men and were dazed at the sight before them. Remembering Lu Buwei's promise to give them some of the courtesans, they stared hard and try to memorise who are the prettier ones.

Xiang Shaolong hated this practice of using women as gifts. He frowned in silence.

Guan Zhongxie suddenly came to his ear and whispered: "Like you, I hate to see decent women who are treated like slaves. The only thing I can do for them is to keep them in my own room and treat them well!"

Xiang Shaolong was completely blown away and cannot imagine these humane words coming from him. His impression of him greatly improved.

After the dance has ended, the Yan girls divide themselves into two groups and greeted the guests.

The hall was filled with thunderous applause.

They did not take their leave and lined up neatly to be assessed by the men.

Lu Buwei chortled: “People say that the ladies from Yue are the prettiest. Having traveled all around the world, I must say that the ladies of Yan are not inferior too.”

The Yan ladies must be virgins as Lu Buwei had mentioned because every one of them became embarrassed immediately.

Tian Dan the expert remarked: “The Qi lady is passionate; the Chu lady knows her fashion; the Yan lady is gentle; the Zhao lady is charming; the Wei lady is elegant, the Han lady has the best figure. This is my frank assessment after personally trying and after discussing with other men.”

Lord Changping objected: “Why is there no assessment of the Qin lady?”

Li Yuan joked: “The Qin lady is known for her stubbornness and Chancellor Tian is a guest and dared not say it! But having seen Qin Qing’s excessive beauty, I think the ladies of Qin and Yue are the prettiest of all. Who can match the beauty of Official Xiang’s wife and the widow Qin Qing?” Finishing, hints of jealousy can be seen on his face.

Guan Zhongxie interrupted: “No wonder Lord Changping has such strong objections. I heard that Lord’s sister is an expert swordswoman and her looks are as good as her sword. If it was me, I will speak out for my sister as well.”

Lord Changping smiled bitterly: “A Qin lady like her is indeed stubborn. My brother and I have suffered greatly under her hands.”

The moment he said these words, everyone at the banquet roared out with laughter.

Xiang Shaolong is reassessing Guan Zhongxie, thinking that this man is more capable than he had imagined. He is very articulate and knows how to win the hearts of others. Compared to Xiao Weimou who only knows how to fight and Lian Jin who is so cocky, he is way better than them. As a result, Lu Buwei has chosen him to counter himself.

Lu Buwei laughed until he choked: “Prince Dan’s generous gift consists of one hundred Yan ladies. After careful selection, I have handpicked the best twenty eight for all of you. You can choose with your eyes blindfolded and still end up with a good catch. After the banquet, I will send them to each of your residences. The Yan ladies, you are dismissed.”

The ladies knelt down and bade farewell before taking their leave.

Lord Changping and the rest finally regained their composure.

Lu Buwei is an easy going man and is very generous to those he is keen to bribe. It is no mystery why his power is growing everyday and he even dared to poison King Zhuangxiang.

After three rounds of drinking, the musicians begin to play again.

Everyone was astounded and did not know what program is coming up next.

Out of a sudden, a cloud of red flew into the hall. Among the flashing swords, a delicate and charming belle was seen. With a sword in each hand, she displayed many enchanting yet difficult sword poses, causing those present to be deeply fascinated.

She was dressed in a yellow and white warrior suit but had a large red cloak on. Awe-inspiring and imposing, she gained everyone's attention in the shortest amount of time.

The cloak was moving quickly like a ball of fire, making her strong fighting spirit even more mesmerizing and captivating.

Her swords flashed relentlessly from her toned arms and were full of life and energy. Even Xiang Shaolong was dazed by her performance.

Guan Zhongxie has an intoxicated look on his face and he watched without blinking.

Using her sword to protect her body, she leapt forward and somersaulted several times, earning loud cheers from the crowd. Her swords flashing again, she suddenly moved towards Xiang Shaolong's and Guan Zhongxie's table.

As everyone is watching with a mixture of fear and amazement, her two swords shot out towards them.

Both men did not make a single move nor did they blink once, allowing the swords to brush past their noses.

The young lady stared fiercely at Xiang Shaolong for a quick second before she kept her swords, saluted and left like the wind.

Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie exchanged a smile as both of them started to become more suspicious towards each other.

Everyone looked at Lu Buwei and wanted to know who is this pretty lass who can use the sword so well.

Lu Buwei merrily mentioned: "If I have to give this girl away, the receiver will have to be my son-in-law."

Xiang Shaolong recalled the angry look on her face and instantly knew who she is.

She is the Lu Buwei's third daughter Lu Niang Rong whom he refused to marry.

After the banquet, Lu Buwei had already sent three Yan courtesans to Wu residence.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi had a quick conference and informed Jing Jun: “Little Jun can choose one of them and must treat her well and not as a slave.”

Jing Jun was caught by surprise and nodded in agreement. Before Xiang Shaolong finished speaking, he had slipped out to choose a woman.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi faced each other and smiled bitterly. They thought of Lord Changping and Lord Changwen at the same time. With Lu Buwei’s bribery, they will switch sides to support him sooner or later.

To Pu Bu and Liu Chao waiting beside them, Xiang Shaolong instructed: “The other two girls shall belong the two of you. They are helpless ladies and I want you to take care of them for life and give them happiness.”

Liu Chao and Pu Bu were surprised as well to gain rare Yan beauties. Originally, they should serve Xiang Shaolong and his wives and it will be long before they get such opportunities. But Xiang Shaolong is a unique master who is fair and generous. Both men are deeply grateful for the gifts.

After settling the girls, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi sat down for a chat.

Teng Yi began: “Guan Zhongxie is a worthy opponent. He will soon gain the respect of the Qin military who worships heroes. Compared to the six states, the people of Qin are more innocent

and are easier to deceive.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “From my point of view, I know that he has evil intentions but admired him at the same time. We have finally met our match.”

Teng Yi added: “Mo Ao is the dangerous one and kept a low profile. Without Tu Xian’s reminder, we will never know that he is such a significant character in the Premier Residence. This kind of hidden enemy is the most frightful. You must not forget your appointment with Tu Xian tomorrow at Phoenix Bridge. I am sure he has some news for us.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded to his head to show that he has remembered and state in a deep voice: “We must plan to kill Mo Ao during the hunting fair.”

Teng Yi frowned: “Are you sure he will be present?”

Xiang Shaolong affirmed: “This is the best time to network with Xianyang City’s royal family as well as the high ranking officials. Lu Buwei will need him around to assess his opponents and he will be there for sure. Our biggest advantage is that Mo Ao does not know that we are aware about his devious schemes.”

Teng Yi detailed: “Leave this to me. We will begin by examining and analyzing the western wilderness intimately. The people of Jing village are second to none in the forest. As long as we can get Mo Ao to be alone for a short while, we can make it look like he has been bitten by a poisonous snake. Lu Buwei can only blame Heaven

for his death.”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “We shall do as Second Brother advised.”

Teng Yi had a hurt look on his face: “I feel really guilty about Princess Qian and the maids. As long as I can do something for them, I will sleep better at night.”

They head back to their bedrooms.

Wu Tingfang and the other wives are still awake and waiting for him to come back. Nursed by a nanny, Xiang Bao'er had fallen asleep already.

Xiang Shaolong had been working the whole day and was exhausted. As Tian Zhen and Tian Feng assisted him in changing, Ji Yanran asked in a low voice: “Sister Qin wishes to see you. Can you try to visit her tomorrow? She also hopes that me, Tingfang and Zhi Zhi can stay at her place for a few days.”

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders” “As long as all of you are agreeable, why not? But I am not sure if I have any free time tomorrow.”

Ji Yanran assured: “Just do your best!”

On the other side, Wu Tingfang commented: “Look! Sister Yanran is in such high spirits today!”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “What has happened?”

An ecstatic Zhao Zhi replied: “Her godfather sent her an intricate five-string qin (musical instrument) shaped like a banana. Sister Yanran is over the moon!”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased: “Is there news about Mister Zou?”

Ji Yanran blissfully state: “Godfather went to Bashu and visited Lady Hua Yang. He found the scenery to be picturesque and stayed there to focus on his <<Teachings of the Five Morals>>. Based on his intellect, it will be a great piece of work.”

Wu Tingfang smiled: “When will our Talented Lady write her own book?”

Ji Yanran shot her a look: “I did have that intention but once I met my nemesis Xiang Shaolong, I discovered that my knowledge compared to his was like comparing the glow of the firefly to the glow of the moon. Thus, I gave up that idea! He should be the one who should write a book!”

Xiang Shaolong was guilt-ridden and he led his pretty wives to bed.

That night, he dreamed that he was in the heavenly Bashu and even Qin Qing is with him. Together, they led a peaceful existence without a care in the world.

The dream turned into a nightmare where he saw Zhao Ya who is so sick until she did not look like a human anymore. When he woke up with his body full of sweat, he found out that the sun is already high up in the sky.

Book 12 Chapter 11 – Each Having Their Own Plots

When Ji Yanran and the ladies set off to Qin Qing's residence, Xiang Shaolong removed Bloodwave, the sword that has never left his side and changed into commoner's clothes. Under the discreet protection of the family warriors, he slipped out of Wu residence and made his way to Phoenix Bridge north of Xianyang City to keep his appointment with Tu Xian.

Since he arrived at Handan City, he has always been mixing with the royalty and upper class. In Xianyang City, he is leading an even more prestigious lifestyle which is very different from the commoner's way of life. Whenever he wants to do anything, there is someone at his beck and call. Now, he has regained some freedom and has transformed into a common man, enjoying the interesting lifestyle of the man in the street.

He intentionally squeezed his way into the busy business streets and observed the stalls selling various vegetables, goods and art pieces.

Regardless if it is made of steel, bronze, porcelain, wood, leather, cloth or sculptures, everything for sale has an ancient feeling which is not seen in the modern 21st century.

He could not resist buying a few toys to present to his wives and maids to make them happy.

The market is crowded with people and most of them are

females. Noticing Xiang Shaolong's sturdy built and handsome looks, they disregard other men and cast their gazes at him frequently.

The young girl selling the bracelet to him kept staring at him with love in her eyes and was smiling sweetly like a blossoming flower.

Xiang Shaolong found it very unique. If it was him years ago when he first came to the ancient times, he would seduce the prettiest girl back home to his bed.

The ladies of Qin are open-minded and straightforward, unlike those in the south-eastern states.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and ignored the young girl's loving gaze. When he turned around, the crowd was becoming chaotic. It seems like several thugs are chasing a young man and are trying to hit him. On the other side, a girl who appears to be his sister or wife is crying as she tries to stop the attackers but was pushed down to the floor instead.

The young man has strong endurance. Despite being overwhelmed, he did not succumb to their attacks and gritted his teeth and continued fighting.

One of the thugs picked up a pole from a stall nearby and was about to hit the young man on his head. Xiang Shaolong leapt in front of the young man and pushed the fiercest thug back a few steps. Spreading his hands, he called: "That's enough! This matter

shall end here and no one is allowed to fight anymore. If someone dies, who is accountable?”

The lady took this chance to rush up to the badly bruised young man and cried: “Hubby Zhou! Are you ok?”

Xiang Shaolong realised that this is a young couple and took pity on them.

The group of thugs are rascals who have been terrorizing the common folks. Even though they have caused several stalls to collapse, no one dare to say anything or even blame them for it. Seeing that someone has come to challenge them, they were infuriated and cannot let Xiang Shaolong off. They observed Xiang Shaolong is extremely brave and heroic looking and dared not underestimate him. Picking up poles and other makeshift weapons, they surrounded Xiang Shaolong.

The leader of the thugs roared: “Who are you? You look like a newcomer and probably has not heard of us, the Ten Tigers of Xianyang. If you know what is good for you, you better kneel down, kowtow to us and admit your mistake or we will give you a good trashing.”

Xiang Shaolong rudely stared at him and couldn't be bothered. He turned back to the young couple and smiled: “Is little brother ok?”

Before the young man could answer him, his wife shrieked: “Be careful!”

Xiang Shaolong let out another smile and flipped to one side, snatching the pole that was about to hit his head. At the same time, his leg kicked out into the private region of his attacker.

The thug gave a loud and tragic cry and released his pole. He was sent flying by another kick from Xiang Shaolong and cannot get up anymore.

Grabbing another pole with his other hand, Xiang Shaolong took up a fighting stance and attacked two men simultaneously with his two poles on two sides. He aimed for their ears and fell both men in one stroke. The ear is the human body's most fragile part and their agony is written all over their faces.

The other thugs were scared stiff and dared not attack him. Picking up their fallen comrades, they slipped away quickly into the crowd.

The onlookers clapped loudly to show their appreciation.

Xiang Shaolong has an appointment to keep and cannot stay around for too long. From his bosom, he retrieved enough silver to buy several horses and pushed them into the hands of the young man and sincerely advised: "Find a physician to treat your injuries and leave quickly before those men come back!"

The young man firmly rejected: "I did not do anything to deserve this money. Mister has helped me greatly and how can I receive your kindness once again?"

His wife nodded her head vigorously, showing her strong approval of her husband's decision.

Xiang Shaolong is secretly joyful and gently asked: "If it was me that was in trouble and you are wealthy. Would you have done the same thing?"

The young man named Zhou replied: "Of course!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "So be it!" Stuffing the silver into his hands, he left laughing.

Among the cheering of the crowd, he hurriedly left the market. Just as he was about to cross a wide street, someone called him from behind: "Mister, please hold your step!"

Xiang Shaolong turned around in surprise and saw a stocky man approaching him. This man is neatly dressed with a long sword at his waist and appears to be a family warrior. The man invited: "Mister's action has been witnessed by my Young Mistress who happened to be passing by. She admires your character and wishes to meet you."

Xiang Shaolong was very amused but looking at his fine bearing, he must have come from a prestigious family. He politely rejected: "I am a born wanderer and aspires to fly everywhere like the wild geese. Please tell your mistress that I am grateful for her appreciation."

Finishing, he left.

The family warrior repeated ‘fly everywhere like the wild geese’, the refreshing new proverb a few times before he left dejectedly.

Tu Xian led Xiang Shaolong to a simple and inconspicuous hut near the bridge and declared: “I have specially arranged this place for our rendezvous. If we have to meet up in future, this will be the place!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is very experienced and will make this safe house undetected by Lu Buwei and his cronies. He sat down and inquired: “How is Lu Buwei treating Brother Tu?”

Tu Xian plainly state: “There are many things he still needs my help. Especially those that he wishes to keep confidential. For example, it was me who extorted the bunch of Yan courtesans from Prince Dan. Originally, Prince Dan wanted to give them to the influential people in Xianyang City as bribes but Lu Buwei learnt about this. He hinted to me and got me to be the bad person and extort these girls. I even have to pretend that this issue has nothing to do with him. Isn’t it hilarious?”

Xiang Shaolong is slightly amused and felt less hatred for this man. He recollected that he will send assassins after Xiao Pan in the future. The assassination will fail and his state will be annihilated. He will eventually become another pitiful soul.

Of course! Prince Dan can never guess that his future is so tragic.

Tu Xian voice sounded in his ear: “There is news of Yuetan!”

Xiang Shaolong is rejuvenated by this news and happily asked: “Where is Brother Xiao now?”

Tu Xian disclosed: “He has changed his identity and is currently an attendant in Han’s Lord Nan Liang’s residence. I have sent someone to give him fifty taels of gold. Han is not a good place to stay for long.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed: “If Qin wants to attack the east, the first point of contention is Changping and Han will be in great danger with their minimum resistance.”

Tu Xian smiled: “Han may be weak but still have some tricks up their sleeves. You should know about this man called Zhengguo. This man is not as simple as he looks.”

For a while, Xiang Shaolong did not know who he was talking about. He suddenly remembered Zhengguo is the water engineer from Han who is trying to build a canal linking River Jing and River Luo, irrigating the land between them. Startled, he asked: “Is there a problem?”

Tu Xian explained: “I have met this man and he is very gifted. The King of Han treats him very well and his loyalty to Han is without question. When he came to Lu Buwei with his plan, I thought that he is here to assassinate him and purposely did not remind that traitor. Amazingly, the fella really has a grand plan to

build the canal and knows every single process. Mo Ao knew that this will increase Lu Buwei's influence and encouraged him. Thus, Zhengguo's canal plan is born." Xiang Shaolong still did not comprehend: "Since this is the case, Lu Buwei will only stand to benefit without any losses."

Tu Xian analyzed: "This may be beneficial to Lu Buwei and Qin but is bad for any eastern campaign. Such a canal will need several years and millions of manpower to build. With this burden, Qin will not have any more resources to conquer the east. The most they can conquer is a few plots of land around Changping! Zhengguo's strategy is indeed top-notch!"

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened. Although he is from the elite special commando unit, he is not someone who wants to look for trouble. All these infighting before Xiao Pan's coronation may not be a bad thing after all!

He nodded: "So Master Tu summoned me here is to update me on these two issues."

Tu Xian seriously commented: "Of course it is not over such small matters. Lu Buwei has plotted to kill you during the hunting fair. Wu Tingwei's disappearance has raised his suspicions. He knows that you and him are irreconcilable like fire and water, and can never work together again. Unless you marry Lu Niang Rong as a form of submission, Lu Buwei will not allow you, his scourge, to remain alive. There is no one who knows how capable you are other than him."

Xiang Shaolong had a narrow escape. When Lu Buwei spoke so

politely to him yesterday, cleared up their misunderstanding and even gave him Yan courtesans is to make him lessen his guard and not take any precautions against him. He was nearly tricked!

He bitterly laughed: “What a coincidence! I planned to kill Mo Ao during the hunting fair too.”

Tu Xian smiled: “I knew you will not bend to his will. Shaolong is right on target. If you get rid of this man, it is as good as breaking one of Lu Buwei’s limbs.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “How did Brother Tu come to know these secrets?”

Tu Xian proudly boasts: “There are still many tasks that have to go through my men. They would never guess that I know the truth behind the red pine forest attack and that I have been serving them loyally over such a long time but is now working with outsiders. With my additional information, I can easily see through their schemes.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “If we can know how they are trying to kill me, I can turn the tables on them.”

Tu Xian shook his head: “This matter is planned by Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie and I do not have the details. Guan Zhongxie is desperate to kill you. First, he can replace you and secondly, he did not want his dream girl Lu Niang Rong to marry you. If he can become Lu Buwei’s son-in-law, his reputation will grow drastically.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “He is trying too hard. You should have seen the hatred in her eyes last night.”

Tu Xian laughed: “Women are strange creatures. Initially, she did not want to marry you. When you rejected the marriage proposal, she begins to notice you. Whether is it love, hatred or spite, she has a different attitude towards you. She was the one who suggested the swordplay performance to Lu Buwei. I believe she wants to show you how enthralling she is and make you regret your decision.”

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to laugh or cry, sighing: “I will rather kill myself than to marry my arch-enemy’s daughter.”

Tu Xian smiled: “Lu Niang Rong is apple of Lu Buwei’s eyes. If Crown Prince Zheng is really not his son, he would have arranged for their marriage.”

Glancing at Xiang Shaolong’s questioning gaze, Tu Xian shrugged his shoulders: “Don’t ask me who the real father of Crown Prince is. I think even Zhu Ji does not know. When she got pregnant, she was sleeping with both of them.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed secretly. In the whole world, only he, Teng Yi and Wu Tingfang knew Xiao Pan’s real identity.

The moment Xiang Shaolong stepped into the Cavalry Command Centre, he received word that the Crown Prince wishes to see him. He rushed to the palace immediately. Dressed in long robes of the

King of Qin, Xiao Pan is having a secret discussion with Li Si in the study room.

Seeing him, Xiao Pan mentioned: “General’s words have a great effect on Lao Ai. This morning, Empress told me that this man is a rare talent and should be utilised well, asking me to give him a promotion. Needless to say, Empress is besotted with him and must reward him for his efforts.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself, knowing that Zhu Ji has degenerated to the point of no return.

But he could not bear to blame her. This beauty has always been grateful towards her benefactors or she will not tolerate Lu Buwei’s evil acts. King Zhuangxiang’s death is a heavy blow to her, making her a traumatized and confused woman. She has lost her usual sanity and felt that life is empty. Moreover, she has been rejected by him. Under such circumstances, Lao Ai the Casanova is able to make use of this opening to win her affections.

She needs the pleasure of the flesh to compensate for her sufferings!

Xiao Pan sighed: “This fellow is so impatient. After a few days as an attendant, he is already asking for a promotion. Li Si and I were discussing what official post to give him!”

Finishing, his mouth curled up in a smile.

Li Si who has become Xiao Pan's confidante suggested: "From my point of view, we can give him such a high post that it will incur Lu Buwei's jealousy. If we can make Lu Buwei object to this promotion, it will be even better. That will strengthen Lao Ai's determination to break away from Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong finally managed to sit down and laughed: "I am afraid even with the cleverest people guessing, they can never guess that we are discussing such nonsense with the Crown Prince. Hei! Is there any post that will be in open conflict with Lu Buwei or one of Lu Buwei's cronies?"

Li Si had a brainwave: "Why don't we promote him to be the Inner Custodian? This post is related to the Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry. Documents from the Imperial Cavalry and Infantry must be vetted by the Inner Custodian before it can be submitted to the King. This is a position of authority and is almost like a supervisor of the Imperial Army."

Xiao Pan frowned: "But this post is occupied by Teng Sheng. This man has shown real ability and is respected by the military. If we displace him, the generals may protest."

Li Si suggested: "Crown Prince can promote him to another higher post to reassure the military."

Xiao Pan thought deeper and remarked: "The most important post in the palace is the Commander of the Palace Guards which is held by Lord Changping and Lord Changwen. Below them is Subject Li who is the Imperial Librarian who is in charge of all documentation. The next in power will be the Inner Custodian.

The remaining positions are those concerning the hunting fair, the ceremonial officials, the banquet officials but these positions are ranked much lower. I cannot think of an ideal position that will satisfy Teng Sheng.”

Xiang Shaolong did not say anything as he is completely ignorant about palace rankings.

But after he has heard all their discussions, he remembered Justice Bao and had a brainwave: “Since there is an Inner Custodian, there should be an Outer Custodian as well! This new official shall be the eyes and ears of Palace and be responsible for gathering information outside the palace. If there are any suspicious activities, he must report it to Crown Prince immediately. This is a challenging and refreshing job which should make Teng Sheng happy and excited.”

Xiao Pan slapped the armrest exclaiming: “Great idea! The Empress will support this idea and Lu Buwei cannot intervene. But I do hope he will still voice out his objections.”

Li Si praised: “Official Xiang is creative and thinks out of the box. I am impressed.”

Xiang Shaolong added: “It will be good to give Lao Ai an office in the palace. He can use the office to plan his schemes and hold meetings for his cronies. Soon, he will be Lu Buwei’s opponent.”

Xiao Pan joked: “Let’s find a place opposite the new Premier Residence, since they are going to be opponents, their residences

should be opposing each other too.”

Everyone roared out in laughter.

Lu Buwei will be burnt for playing with fire. He wanted to use Lao Ai to control Zhu Ji but now, Zhu Ji has ‘switched sides’ and cultivated a new adversary against him.

An attendant came to report that Grand Tutor Qin is here and is waiting outside.

Xiao Pan’s face shone with happiness and instructed Li Si and the attendant to leave first. When they have left, he stood up and confided in Xiang Shaolong: “I don’t know why but after His Majesty has passed away, I especially love to see Grand Tutor Qin. Watching her calm expression and peaceful demeanour, I feel extremely comfortable, even with her occasional scolding. In the past, I never had this feeling before.”

He added softly: “Except for Master and Grand Tutor Qin, nobody dares to scold me. The late king and Empress never scold me.”

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and hugged him tightly, sighing: “Dear Child! It is because you needed a respectable motherly figure like Lady Ni.”

Xiao Pan trembled strongly and his eyes reddened, leaning into Xiang Shaolong’s bosom like a little boy hiding in his father’s

protective arms.

Xiang Shaolong understood his behaviour. Ever since he became Yingzheng, this poor orphan began to treat King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji like his natural parents, especially doting on Zhu Ji. With King Zhuangxiang's death, his beautiful dream is shattered.

Zhu Ji is a realistic woman who will not fall out with Lu Buwei over King Zhuangxiang's death. With Lao Ai entering the picture, Xiao Pan knows that Zhu Ji can never replace his stern but righteous birth mother Lady Ni.

And Qin Qing has unconsciously become the closest idea of being his mother.

Xiang Shaolong is also saddened about Zhao Ni. In a low voice, he instructed: "When you have regained your composure, go out at once for your lesson."

Xiao Pan forcefully nodded his head.

Xiang Shaolong released him and left.

Book 12 Chapter 12 – Heartbroken Over A Silk Painting

Passing through the corridor, he came to the outer hall and saw Qin Qing's beautiful figure standing right in front of the window. She is staring at the garden beyond the window and seems to be thinking about something.

Xiang Shaolong could not resist going up to her back and softly asked: "A penny for your thoughts?"

Qin Qing must have predicted that he will past by and wasn't surprised at all. She did not turn around but plainly state: "Is Grand Tutor Xiang interested to find out?"

Based on these words, Xiang Shaolong affirms that she has feelings for him as these words have crossed the line on an ordinary conversation. Moreover, she is someone who is not into relationships, making it even more striking.

Xiang Shaolong is stunned and wanted to cower back but he likes her special attention towards him. Summoning his courage, he answered: "Hei! If I am not interested, I would not have asked in the first place."

Qin Qing turned her slender frame around and her icy face is just an arm's length away from Xiang Shaolong's own face. Her eyes shining sharply, she simply remarked: "I am thinking, if Official Xiang knows that I am here, would he take a detour and avoid me?"

Xiang Shaolong could not take it anymore and dryly laughed: “Grand Tutor is thinking too much. Oh! Have you seen Yanran and the rest?”

This strong-willed woman refused to back down and scolded: “Don’t change the subject. The people I hate the most are the traitors who bring harm to the King. The other types of people I also hate are those who have a high opinion about themselves, pretending to protect women but actually regard women like us to be nothing more than goods. Have I wronged you?”

Xiang Shaolong had a taste of her temper before and bitterly laughed: “It seems that I am not any better than Lu Buwei. Ai! I have apologised to you already and only made a mistake by advising you to accompany Lady Hua Yang in Bashu! Until now, you are still unwilling to let me off?”

Due to Xiang Shaolong, Qin Qing may have cultivated a new habit, which is to maintain her icy expression but wanted to laugh out at the same time. Finally, she gave up and burst into giggles and her cold expression begin to thaw. She viciously shot him a look and declared: “Yes! I am dissatisfied. And I will never forgive you!”

This is the first time she is flirting with him. Xiang Shaolong’s heart warmed up and was about to retort when footsteps were heard.

Both of them knew that the Crown Prince has arrived and

quickly parted.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly bade her farewell but Qin Qing's teasing expression has been engraved into his heart forever.

Under the protection of the Eighteen Guardians, Xiang Shaolong rode towards the outer palace. Coincidentally, he ran into Lord Changping who is deploying the palace guards guarding the palace gates. Lord Changping pulled him aside and whispered: "The Yan ladies are really something!"

Xiang Shaolong could only mumble a reply.

Lord Changping is young and curious, asking: "Premier Lu's third daughter is delicate-looking and well-skilled with the sword. When I woke up this morning, her performance is still fresh in my memory. Hei! How is she related to you? Why did she test your reaction with that stance?"

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely intimate, as if he is chatting with his army buddies in the 21st century. Their conversations will be filled with women, fighting and curses at the instructors. He smiled: "I think that this is called a large tree attracts the most wind!"

Lord Changping chortled: "Well said. Your newly created proverb suits you very well. My stubborn sister has come to know about our friendship and demanded that we bring you home to meet her."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a headache coming: “Can we talk about this later? You know that I have many things to attend to.”

Lord Changping smiled: “You cannot escape from her grasp. Just show her a few strokes and make her happy on account of our friendship. Otherwise, she will give you a hard time during the hunting fair.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled: “She is taking part as well?”

Lord Changping replied: “It is her big day! She will lead her female army in a grand and imposing parade.”

Xiang Shaolong was swept off his feet, exclaiming: “Female army!”

Lord Changping sighed: “It is an army of aggressive ladies just like my sister. Normally, they will look for expert swordsmen to compete their sword fighting skills. Even Wang Jian is terrified of them. Personally, I think this is the main reason he slipped off to guard the Northern Border. If not for the fact that you are at the farms most of the time, you will not be spared too.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood and burst out in guffaws. Lord Changping added: “An Gu is leaving tomorrow to guard the eastern Passes. We have always been on good terms and will organize a farewell dinner tonight. Why don't you come along too and humour sister Ying Ying?”

Xiang Shaolong has always like Lord Changping for he does not put on any airs and is easy to get along with. Moreover, it is An Gu's farewell dinner. He consented immediately.

Lord Changping is pleased and left him.

Back at the Command Centre, he was detained by Jing Jun. Jing Jun excitedly reported: "There are three things! Ah!" He yawned.

Xiang Shaolong stared at him, asking: "You have been busy the whole night?"

Jing Jun nonchalantly replied: "As Third Brother instructed, I spent half a night chatting and coaxing her and the other half indulging her. That's why I am so tired."

Xiang Shaolong was tongue tied and did not know how to advise him. Embarrassed, he asked: "What are the three things?"

Awkwardly, Jing Jun began: "First, the three sister-in-laws mentioned that if you can afford the time, please join them for lunch at Qin Qing's residence. Xiang Bao'er misses you too. I would suggest you spend the night there with them."

Xiang Shaolong glared at him: "Little Jun, why are you such a busybody today?"

Jing Jun modestly answered: "I will not have the guts. But I noticed that Third Brother has been smiling more and could not

help but pay more attention to you.” Finishing, his eyes became red and he lowered his head.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the deep brotherly love that exists between them. Hugging him by his shoulder, he kept quiet.

It may be due to King Zhuangxiang's death that he gathered his courage and fighting spirit, pushing the sad memories of Zhao Qian's and the maids' deaths out of his daily thoughts.

After all, everything happened more than a year ago.

Jing Jun reported: “The other two matters are Lord Longyang is waiting for you in the main hall and Tian Dan have sent someone to summon you urgently to his guesthouse.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled.

Why is Tian Dan looking for him?

Based on his wide network of spies, he should know about Lu Buwei's enmity with himself. If he wants to stay in Lu Buwei's good books, he should avoid him instead.

Thinking about this, his heart began to beat wildly.

After he sat down with Lord Longyang in a resting room, Lord Longyang congratulated: “My heartiest congratulations to Brother

Xiang for being promoted to be the powerful Imperial Cavalry Commander.”

His face darkened and he added: “Thinking that we have to face each other in the battlefield one day, I am really filled with dread. Why is life filled with so many things beyond our control?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely state: “Relax! I will do my best to avoid such a situation from happening. In these turbulent times, even parents fight their children and brothers fight among themselves. Lord must be more open-minded.”

Lord Longyang emotionally commented: “Back in the past at Daliang, we were as irreconcilable as water and fire. Now, Shaolong is my true and best friend. I will be leaving tomorrow and we may never meet again. I am tormented and agonized at such a separation.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “Lord is not participating in the hunting fair?”

Lord Longyang’s eyes shone with a murderous look. Unhappily, he replied: “Lu Buwei is openly working with Qi and Chu against the allied states. Why would I spend more time here and receive more cold treatment? I am not so foolish.”

Xiang Shaolong knew this is the truth as well and did not bother to pacify him. He recollected Zhengguo’s canal project and disclosed: “Lord need not worry for the time being. For the next eight to ten years, Qin will be unable to mount an eastern

campaign. As long as everyone continues to work together, this should be a peaceful period. At the most, you will lose small pieces of territory!”

Lord Longyang’s eyes shone sharply and inquired: “What makes Shaolong say so?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed and told him everything about Zhengguo Canal.

Lord Longyang was extremely moved: “Shaolong actually told me such a big secret. I will keep it confidential even from my King to show my gratitude.”

He realised: “No wonder Han Chuang is so confident and flamboyant. I was worried till I cannot eat or drink but he is partying and visiting the courtesans every night. So this is the reason.”

He lowered his voice: “Why don’t Shaolong remind the Crown Prince and score a big merit. It will also underscore Lu Buwei’s influence.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I do not want Qin to attack Daliang so quickly!”

Lord Longyang was deep in thoughts for a while and added: “There is something I initially did not want to tell you but I am touched by your kindness and will feel guilty if I continue to hide it

from you.”

He gritted his teeth, disclosing: “Han Jing (Zhao’s Empress Jing) that bitch does not look at the big picture and I need not help her keep this secret.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “What is it?”

Lord Longyang replied in a deep voice: “You have met Pang Nuan (Junyu). He is the spokesman and confidante of Han Jing. Not only is he a devious schemer, he is very articulate as well. This time, he came to Qin with ulterior motives. Recently, he has been in constant contact with Lord Gaoling Yinghou. You should know better than me that something is afoot!”

Lord Gaoling is the prince who was overridden by King Zhuangxiang to be the new King of Qin. All along, he has been dissatisfied and has the intention to rebel. Unexpectedly, he is in cahoots with Zhao.

Xiang Shaolong understood that since Lord Longyang knew about Han’s scheming and put aside his worry about Qin’s attack, the next person he hated is Zhao’s Empress Han Jing and took this chance to backstab her. If Pang Nuan died in Xianyang City, Han Jing will be devastated.

Politics is dirty and complicated.

People fight openly and also secretly.

Among all the various schemes, no one will know the clear winner until the end.

Although this has no effect on Xiang Shaolong who knows the ending, personal fights and schemes are still unknown to him. For example, he still does not know if he will be killed by Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong thought for a while and enquired: “Tian Dan wishes to see me; does Lord know the reason behind this?”

Lord Longyang was surprised: “Is that so? From my observations, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan must have a secret agreement. They are likely to follow the Eastern and Western Emperors example, with the allied states belonging to Qin and Yan belonging to Qi. Although they know that they are deceiving each other, there are advantages to both parties in the short term. Now, they are best buddies. I really have no idea why Tian Dan is looking for you.”

Xiang Shaolong is sure that Lord Longyang is as puzzled as him. Ending their conversation, he sent him out of the Command Centre personally. Under the escort of the Eighteen Guardians, he went to see Tian Dan.

The guesthouse is heavily guarded.

Dan Chu welcomed him at the main door and has a serious expression on his face. He only exchanged some courtesy words.

When he brought him into Tian Dan's inner chamber, this Chancellor of Qi is playing a tune on the ancient qin instrument.

Like waves hitting endlessly upon the shore, the 'Male Immortal' piece he was playing filled the entire hall with music.

The Liu brothers who never left his side were staring at Xiang Shaolong menacingly.

Dan Chu retreated a few steps but did not leave the room.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this is inappropriate but no matter how daring Tian Dan is, he dared not assassinate him in Xianyang City.

But if Tian Dan has the support of Lu Buwei to kill him, the Eighteen Guardians and himself will perish in this guesthouse.

Tian Dan suddenly stopped playing and laughed: "How is Dong Horse Fanatic?"

He stood up and faced him, his eyes shining sharp like an eagle's eyes.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he cannot hide his identity for long but is certain that Tian Dan is not fully confident of this truth. Thus, Tian Dan is trying to trick him with this sentence.

No matter how intimate Tian Dan is to Lu Buwei, Lu Buwei will not be so foolish to tell him this secret. After all, everything is planned by Lu Buwei, causing Tian Dan's scheme to fail, his army suffering losses and returning to Qi in disgrace.

He feigned surprise and replied: "I do not know what Chancellor Tian is talking about."

Tian Dan confidently walked over towards him. When he is pretty close, he challenged: "The earth-shattering Xiang Shaolong did not dare to admit his past actions? You may have deceived others but you can never deceive me!"

The corners of his mouth curled up in a devious smile and he gestured with his right hand, adding: "Let me show you something interesting."

Dan Chu reacted to his gesture and came between them. From his bosom, he retrieved a silk drawing and spread it open.

At the same time, the Liu Brothers came forward to Tian Dan's sides and strike a defensive posture in case there is an attack from Xiang Shaolong.

The atmosphere became very tense.

When Xiang Shaolong glanced at the drawing, his limbs turned cold and his whole body shook uncontrollably, as if he has fallen into a ice lake.

On the silk painting was someone who looks similar to Shan Rou, except for the eyes. The person in the painting has weak looking eyes unlike the determined eyes of Shan Rou.

Tian Dan coldly laughed: “Needless to say, Brother Xiang should know this lady. She came to assassinate me and was captured by me. I believe she was once the wife of Dong Horse Fanatic. Does Brother Xiang still want to deny?”

Xiang Shaolong is at a disadvantageous position and is feeling tremendously uncomfortable. Thinking that Shan Rou is in his hands, he has lost his bearings and cannot think properly.

Tian Dan plainly state: “It is only a woman and I can give her back to you anytime. As long as Brother Xiang can do something for me, this woman will return back into your arms.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization and figured out the problem that bothering him.

His heart was filled with utmost grief.

He knew that Shan Rou has failed to assassinate Tian Dan and committed suicide. That is why the artist cannot paint her eyes with the determined look.

With his eyes glowing with hatred, he roared: “You need not speak further. If you, Tian Dan, can return back to Qi alive, I will

write my name in inversely.”

As the four men were flabbergasted, Xiang Shaolong left with a pained expression.

Finally, he has a reason to kill Tian Dan.

end of book 12

Book 13 Chapter 01 – Prince Dan From Yan

After Teng Yi finished listening, he was dazed like a wooden figure and was speechless for some time.

With her around, everyone has to withstand her tantrums; without her around, everyone is pining for her return.

Unexpectedly, she met with a tragic ending.

Shan Rou is a rare person during these ancient times to stand up for female rights. She is strong, brave and determined. As long as she sets her sights on something, she will do her utmost best to accomplish it.

And she has now sacrificed her life to achieve her biggest dream!

With both his hands supporting his face, Xiang Shaolong is tearing quietly.

An attendant came in to report something but was chased away by Teng Yi. He instructed the Guardians not to allow anyone to disturb them.

Teng Yi reached out and patted Xiang Shaolong's shoulder, speaking out in a sorrowful voice: "The dead cannot be returned to life. Our most important task presently is to take revenge for her. She is considered my relative so it is two strong reasons we must kill him for sure!"

When Xiang Shaolong has somewhat calmed down, Teng Yi asked: “Do you think Tian Dan will report you to Lu Buwei or Crown Prince? After all, it is widely accepted that emissaries should not be killed. Qin cannot just watch you kill Tian Dan within their territory.” Xiang Shaolong give a pained reply: “It may be Shan Rou’s divine intervention. Whenever I think of her committing suicide, my mind becomes extremely clear and can identify all the issues.”

Pausing, he continued: “Even if Qin sends soldiers to escort Tian Dan home, it is limited to Qin territory. Once they left Qin’s border, it will be time to act but we must first find out the strength of his army and whether there is anyone receiving him outside Qin. I must speak to Lord Longyang. He can definitely provide me with some information.”

After thinking, he sighed: “Tian Dan can be considered isolated from the rest since he did not participate in the combined army. He conspired against King Xiaocheng on his last trip and the people of Zhao hates him to the core. Han is on good terms with Zhao’s Empress Han Jing and will not make it easy for him. Under such circumstances, the only way home is to go through Wei or Chu. Wei is much nearer but is not as safe as Chu. If I am not mistaken, he will travel with Li Yuan. Thus, we can more or less know his traveling route.”

Teng Yi was startled: “If he is protected by the Qin army in Qin and the Chu army in Chu, when is a good time to kill him?”

Xiang Shaolong revealed an icy cold smile and plainly state: “For

Shan Rou and Second Brother's revenge, I will do whatever I can to kill this evildoer. First, we must force Li Yuan to leave Xianyang City. Tian Dan cannot leave without finishing his discussion with Lu Buwei."

Teng Yi frowned: "Let's talk about forcing Li Yuan later; how did you know that Lu Buwei and Tian Dan are still in discussion?"

Xiang Shaolong answered: "It is called intuition. Last night, they are busy whispering into each other's ears. In addition, he used Shan Rou to blackmail me to do something for him. These are all signs that they are still in discussion. It is useless to continue talking without facts. Let's get moving. Second Brother shall investigate Tian Dan's army strength while I look for Lord Longyang and Prince Dan. I may learn something useful from them."

Teng Yi was stunned: "Prince Dan?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "Within Xianyang City, there is no one more concerned about Tian Dan's life and death other than him."

He softly added: "Send someone to inform Zhi Zhi that I do not have any free time today." At the same time, he swore that he will never tell Zhao Zhi that Shan Rou has come to harm.

Lord Longyang is delighted to see Xiang Shaolong again. Leading him into a scheduled eastern room within his guesthouse, he listened to his account and consoled him, saying it that there is no point crying over spilt milk. The conversation turning serious, he

explained: “There is a horse plague in Qi and I think he wants a few thousand warhorses from you! Naturally, he will not ask you to make trouble for Lu Buwei. In fact, he is more concerned about Lu Buwei than the Qin people. Just by looking at Lu Buwei’s political and military successes within a few years, anyone can tell that he is formidable. If Qin falls under his control, all his opponents will suffer greatly.”

Xiang Shaolong asked in a deep voice: “Will Lord disapprove of my killing of Tian Dan?”

Lord Longyang shook his head: “Not only will I not disapprove, I am exhilarated! You are right. Tian Dan will return to Qi via Chu and he has an army of ten thousand soldiers, led by his trusted general Tian Rong, waiting there for him. You must kill him before he meets up with them. Except for Qin, our next greatest threat is Qi. If Tian Dan is killed, everyone in the allied states will be overjoyed. He alone did not participate in the last battle and has incurred everyone’s wrath. Obviously, he is trying to benefit from our losses.”

Sighing, he added: “It is a pity most of our soldiers are based at the Qin-Wei border and cannot assist you. Moreover, the King may not agree. But I can always send spies to investigate the deployments of the Qi and Chu armies. Their reports are guaranteed to be accurate.”

Xiang Shaolong is grateful: “That will help a lot. I am sure that with my present forces, I can make him die a terrible death. How many men did Tian Dan bring on this trip?”

Lord Longyang detailed: “He has a few hundred men within the City. Outside the city is another elite army of one thousand Qi cavalry. With Li Yuan’s forces, their army strength will exceed three thousand. Shaolong must not underestimate them, especially when you are attacking them outside of Qin. If you make a serious mistake, you may be killed by him instead.”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Of course I know that he is a powerful foe but I have some tricks that are beyond his imagination.” Lord Longyang can never guess that he is referring to his 21st Century warfare and strategies. Thinking that he has a large army too, he inquired: “Shaolong has official work to attend to; can you leave for a few months?”

It is hard to explain the special relationship between Crown Prince and himself.

Xiang Shaolong simply sighed: “I have my methods.”

After deciding on future communication methods, Xiang Shaolong bade his farewell and left Jifeng and the Guardians at Lord Longyang’s courtyard, walking over to Prince Dan’s guesthouse next door. After he reported his name, Prince Dan came out personally to receive him with a few escorts.

Temporary putting aside his hatred regarding Xu Yi Luan’s double ambush, he greeted: “How are you doing, Prince Dan? Please forgive me for taking such a long time before paying my respects to you.”

Staring at him, he was reminded about Jing Ke.

Without Jing Ke, he would never know of this man called Prince Dan.

The vibrant looking Prince Dan happily greeted: “General Xiang is an important military figure. I had wanted to visit you but am afraid that General is busy with his new duties and dare not interrupt. I planned to visit you after the hunting fair but since General is here, I welcome you with open arms.”

Moving forward, he grabbed his hand and whispered: “Honestly, I am so jealous that the stunningly attractive Talented Lady Ji is your wife.”

Finishing, they broke out in laughter.

In the midst of his laughter, Xiang Shaolong could start to understand why Jing Ke is willing to assassinate Qin Shi Huang for him.

These legendary men all possess extraordinary abilities.

Prince Dan began introducing his men to Xiang Shaolong.

There are three men who left an impression on him. First, it is Physician Leng Ting. This man is around forty years old with delicate features and eyes that shine with wisdom. He is rather tall, just two inches shorter than Xiang Shaolong, and has long and

agile limbs. He is a man of few words but Xiang Shaolong is sure that this man has both brains and brawns.

Next is General Xu Yi Ze. From his name, he must be Xu Yi Luan's brother. Around thirty years old, he is short and stout with a giant head. He has a figure that resembles a wrestler in unarmed combat. He has a serious look on his face that makes it hard for people to confide in him.

The last gentleman named You Zhi is a handsome man who is a few years older than Prince Dan. He carries an intimate smile on his face and leaves a good impression on everyone he meets. The moment Xiang Shaolong saw him, he is certain that this man is Prince Dan's chief strategist.

After the usual pleasantries, Prince Dan led him into the main hall.

After everyone got seated, two ladies even prettier than Lu Buwei's courtesans came forward and served tea.

Accompanying them are the three men as well as two generals Yan Chuang and Yan Jun who are related to the royal family. The remainder of the guards remained in the outer hall.

Xiang Shaolong took a sip from his tea cup and went straight to the point: "I wish to speak to Prince in secret."

Prince Dan is slightly startled and dismissed the two ladies. He

sincerely assured: “These men are my most trusted subordinates. Regardless of what General Xiang wishes to say, you may say it in front of these men.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised Prince Dan for his strong trust in his men. Under the scrutiny of the six pairs of eyes, he casually state: “I want to kill Tian Dan!”

Everyone including Prince Dan is stunned. Only You Zhi remains calm and aloof.

Xiang Shaolong stared at Prince Dan, examining his reaction.

Prince Dan’s eyes shone sharply and exchanged a glance with him. Recovering from his shock, he asked: “I am not surprised to know that General has such an intention but why are you specially telling me about it?”

Xiang Shaolong energetic eyes scanned everyone before him and slowly declare: “Before I explain, let me first bury the hatchet over Xu Yi Luan’s double ambush. We shall work sincerely from today onwards and do not keep any secrets from each other.”

With these earth-shattering words, even the collected You Zhi lost his composure. The others naturally reacted even stronger than before.

Prince Dan will now know that Dong Kuang and Xiang Shaolong are actually the same person.

There is a strange feeling in the air.

After a long while, Prince Dan let out a long sigh. Standing up, he bowed and apologised: “Brother Xiang, please excuse me. To save my country, I have done many things against my conscience.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly got up to return his courtesy, congratulating himself for choosing the right partner. If Prince Dan denied everything, he need not bother himself with this man anymore.

Both men got seated and the atmosphere is much friendlier.

Leng Ting’s eyes shone with appreciation and nodded: “I finally understood how General can triumph in Wei and Zhao, and even counter Lu Buwei in Qin.”

You Zhi plainly state: “Does General Xiang know that killing Tian Dan is more difficult than ascending to heaven? Moreover, you should know your status as a general of Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is testing his background. If he wanted to hide in Qin while asking them to kill Tian Dan, these six men will despise him.

At the end of the day, this is a business deal. The success of the plan is dependent on the potential benefits.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Li Yuan and Tian Dan are committing atrocities all over the country. Li Yuan used his sister Li Yan Yan to give birth to the Crown Prince. If King Xiaolie dies, the newcomer Li Yuan will need to borrow Qi’s forces to counter the incumbent Lord Chunshen. Tian Dan needs Li Yuan’s assistance to attack the allied states and expand his territory. When fighting against Tian Dan, we must not neglect Li Yuan. Regarding the Qin military, I have my ways of dealing with them as long as it does not involved Lu Buwei. Everyone can rest easy.”

Prince Dan let out another long sigh: “I finally tasted Brother Xiang’s formidability. Since you are so knowledgeable about every state, I will not waste any more words. May I ask how Brother Xiang plans to solve the problem regarding Chu? If Tian Dan and Li Yuan travel together, their strength would increase drastically. When they are nearing Chu, they will be received by both their armies. There is no way we can intercept them. We have such an intention as well but it is an impossible task.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled mysteriously and official state: “Leave Li Yuan to me. I will make him leave Qin before the hunting fair, disrupting their travel plans. Li Yuan has always been a selfish man. If he is in deep trouble himself, he will not be bothered about Tian Dan.”

Everyone was confused.

Xu Yi Ze could not help but asked: “What clever scheme does General Xiang has?”

Xiang Shaolong spontaneously replied: “Please let me keep this

little secret to myself. You will see results within these two days. If I cannot even accomplish such a small matter, I will be too ashamed to face everyone again.”

Prince Dan concluded: “Great! Xiang Shaolong is worthy of his reputation. If Li Yuan leave Qin before the hunting fair, I will do my best and cooperate with you. Tian Dan that traitor will not return to Qi alive!”

Xiang Shaolong had expected this agreement.

Qi and Yan are neighbours and have always been irreconcilable like water and fire, eyeing each other’s territory. Yan had invaded Qi but was repelled by Tian Dan, causing heavy losses to Yan. Everyone in Yan hated Tian Dan to the core and would not hesitate for an opportunity to kill him.

To them, Li Yuan plays a crucial role.

If Li Yuan is killed too, it is equivalent to offending two states that are stronger than Yan and it is not something to laugh about.

But if they can ignore Chu’s issue and even push the blame to Xiang Shaolong, it will be even better.

Xiang Shaolong shook hands with Prince Dan to seal their agreement and he left in search of Lu Gong, proceeding with the next step in his grand plan.

Ever since the return from his last mission, this is the first time he is approaching a task with such enthusiasm.

He finally know how deeply he loves Shan Rou.

The minute he sat down with Lu Gong in a private hall, Xiang Shaolong began in a deep voice: “I want to kill Tian Dan.”

Lu Gong was shocked and checked: “What did you say?”

Today, this is the fifth time he is saying he wants to kill Tian Dan. First, he said it to Tian Dan, followed by Teng Yi, Lord Longyang, Prince Dan and finally to Lu Gong, the number one head of the Qin military.

To openly kill an earth-shaking figure like Tian Dan is setting a new precedence in history.

Full of confidence and persuasion, he explained: “This is the only way to prevent Lu Buwei from dominating Qin politics.”

Lu Gong was puzzled: “What has this got to do with Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong simply state: “The eastern states have recently attacked us but why is Qi not involved?” Lu Gong’s expression became thoughtful and replied after a short while: “Is Shaolong referring to Tian Dan and Lu Buwei’s secret collaboration?”

Xiang Shaolong positively explained: “In the past, Lu Buwei did not have any military accomplishments. Now, he has conquered the three eastern provinces and solidified his position. When the combined armies taught him a serious lesson, he focused on his present status and put aside any plans to mount another eastern campaign. What he plans to do now is to increase his power in Qin and the Zhengguo canal is the first step in his grand plan.”

Lu Gong was agitated upon hearing this.

For the past two days, he himself has been complaining to Xu Xian, Wang Ling and other military leaders, cursing Lu Buwei for having an ulterior motive and wasting manpower and resources over the canal. This will weaken the country and interfere with plans to unite the world.

Xiang Shaolong is sure that he is disturbed and egged him further: “Therefore, Lu Buwei is now in league with Chu and Qi, isolating Yan and the allied states. This is to safeguard his external interests and focus on internal issues. He can then focus on building up his influence. If he is successful, our state of Qin will land in the hands of this outsider.”

His latest words have an even greater impact than the last sentence, stunning this strong advocate of Qin race superiority. Lu Gong thought for a while and raised his head, his eyes shining with energy and stared straight at Xiang Shaolong, asking in a deep voice: “Before we continue further, I need you to clear something up. Why are you so certain that the Crown Prince is not Lu Buwei’s illegitimate child?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly glad that Lu Gong is moved and therefore asked such a question. If he can assure him, the discussion can continue smoothly.

He sincerely looked back at him and revealed: “It is very simple. I have my own suspicions as well and questioned Lu Buwei’s confidante Xiao Yuetan about this. He swore that Crown Prince is indeed the late king’s flesh and blood because when Zhu Ji became pregnant, the only man she is sleeping with is King Zhuangxiang.”

Lu Gong frowned: “I know this man Xiao Yuetan and he is someone who should know the truth. But since he is Lu Buwei’s trusted subordinate, he may continue to conceal this secret for Lu Buwei despite his own death.”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes reddened and intimately disclosed: “When Xiao Yuetan died, not only does he declare himself free from Lu Buwei’s control; he even hated Lu Buwei to the core. It is all because the man who killed him is Lu Buwei.”

Lu Gong was not horrific at this news. Stretching out his hand, he grabbed Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and nervously asked: “Do you have any proof of this?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head in grief.

Lu Gong released him and remarked: “We have investigated this matter on our side but those who came back alive did not know what happened. Qu Dou Qi and the others have disappeared so there are many suspicious points but there is nothing we can do to

Lu Buwei. When you came back and hurriedly retreated to the farms, we know that something is amiss.”

Sighing, he added: “I believe Shaolong is telling the truth. I guess we need not carry on with the blood test.”

Determined, Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “No! The blood test must still be conducted. Only this way can we fully verify that the Crown Prince is the late king’s flesh and blood.”

Lu Gong stared at him solemnly and inquired: “I like the way you handled things. Yesterday, Du Bi came looking for me and told me you said something to the late king on his deathbed. The late king then passed away peacefully. What did Shaolong say to him?”

Xiang Shaolong is certain that Du Bi learnt about this from Lady Xiuli. Without hesitation, he divulged: “I told the late king that if he is murdered by someone, I will do whatever I can to avenge him.”

Of course he made some changes to the words and purposely left Lu Buwei’s name out.

Lu Gong stood up and his eyes shone with determination. Looking up to the sky with agony, he took some time to recompose himself. Finally, he barked: “Fine! Shaolong, what can I do to help you?”

Xiang Shaolong quickly stood up to match him and respectfully

state: “Lu Buwei’s influence is growing day by day. To stop him, we must first destroy his alliance with the outsiders. If we can kill Tian Dan, it will not only help in uniting the world, it will also force Lu Buwei to spend some effort against foreign attacks and protect the three eastern provinces. We can then slowly erode his power within Qin.”

Lu Gong shows signs of anger and grabbed Xiang Shaolong’s arm, leading him to the rear garden. His face tight with emotion, he gritted his teeth: “Why don’t we command our army and attack his residence, annihilating every single person related to him? As long as the Crown Prince nods his head, I can accomplish this easily.”

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice, saying: “You must not do this. Lu Buwei has gained the loyalty of many officials. If this matter is leaked out and he strikes first, it will be disastrous and may even cause the death of Crown Prince and Empress. Even if we succeeded, Cheng Chongqiao and Lord Gaoling will immediately vie for the throne. If Qin deteriorates to such a condition and the six states adding fuel to fire, our country may be split into three factions just like in the past.”

Lu Gong’s face changed colour and he softly held Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and asked in a low voice: “Tell me how I can help you?”

Xiang Shaolong is mad with joy. With Lu Gong’s consent, Tian Dan is almost as good as dead.

Book 13 Chapter 02 – The Stubborn Qin Lady

Leaving the Lieutenant General's residence, Xiang Shaolong galloped non-stop. Fortunately for him, Qin Qing's residence is along the same street leading to the palace. It is separated from the palace by twenty over residences belonging to other Marquises and Generals.

He wanted to keep a low profile and rode alone on an ordinary horse. Jifeng and the Guardians have all been sent back to the Cavalry Command Centre.

To make it easier to walk, he has removed his heavy armour and is dressed in a warrior suit. However, his imposing stature is hard to remain unnoticed but at least it makes him feel more at ease.

The sun is gradually setting in the west and there are hardly any passersby on roads. Xiang Shaolong was reminded about Shan Rou and could not help but feel dejected.

He can only lessen his pain by working hard to avenge her!

A group of loud galloping sounds can be heard.

A group of ten odd riders rode towards him.

Xiang Shaolong has a high sense of awareness and scanned them carefully. He was shocked at what he saw.

Unbelievably, it is a cohort of female riders. Dressed in different colours of warrior suits, they resembled a colourful rainbow flowing down the long street.

They seemed to be competing among themselves on their horse speed and horsemanship. They speedily overtook every chariot and horse in front of them. In the blink of an eye, they are almost upon him.

Xiang Shaolong recollected Lord Changping's sister Ying Ying and her female army. Curious, he looked closer at them.

The leading rider is a young lady in a yellow and white warrior suit. As beautiful as an angel, she is even prettier than Lu Niang Rong. Riding her horse with gusto, she looks even more young and lively.

She has long legs like Zhao Zhi and is as charming as Wu Tingfang. Her snowy skin is comparable to Ji Yanran's. Adding that to her slender waist and full chest, it was a mesmerizing sight. It is a body to die for.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but praise her figure secretly.

The other riders paled in comparison.

The most unique thing is that she carries a proud and satisfied smile on her face, as if all the men in the world are only good enough to be trodden by her horse. Interestingly, every man who

saw her lowered their gaze and dare not look straight at her.

Xiang Shaolong is almost sure that this beauty is Ying Ying herself. When she saw him, her pretty eyes lit up like the stars at night.

Xiang Shaolong was terrified and lowered his head, avoiding her gaze.

Ying Yong whistled once and the entire fleet of fifteen female riders stopped their horses and arranged themselves in a neat formation. They are as disciplined as the Qin army, if not better.

Xiang Shaolong can see trouble coming. Lowering his head, he tried to slip away and his mind is full of panic.

Are these female warriors so aggressive that they pick up fights with passerby on the streets?

With this thought running through his head, he heard swishing sounds. Ying Ying is apparently swinging her horsewhip over her head. Once she has gained enough momentum, she lashed out towards his back.

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated.

This stubborn girl is truly overbearing. He did not know her nor have any enmity but yet she attacked him.

He listened intently for the whip striking down and stretched his hand, grabbing the whip.

If his opponent is a male, he would continue to pull strongly on the whip, causing the other party to fall down his horse and be embarrassed. But his opponent this time is a young maiden and he could not bear to embarrass her.

Ying Ying let out a cry and pulled strongly at the whip.

Xiang Shaolong turned around and pulled the whip strongly too. The beauty is strong as well and the whip is straightened by both their pulling. Both of them exchanged a fierce look. There is a six feet distance between them which is the length of the whip in addition to the length of their arms.

Everyone else on the street disappeared to avoid getting into trouble.

The female warriors spread out like a fan and cornered Xiang Shaolong against the wall.

Ying Ying's mouth curled up in a satisfied smile and tugged her horse. The horse reacted to her tug and began to step back.

Xiang Shaolong praised her secretly and released the whip.

Ka-Ching!

Every female warrior pulled out their swords and pointed them at Xiang Shaolong and scolded him with vulgar words like ‘bastard’ and ‘Damn your mother.’ These vulgarities are only heard among the scoundrels of Xianyang City.

Xiang Shaolong can feel a headache coming, knowing that he has run into ‘female hell riders.’

Ying Ying retrieved her horse whip and was feeling very proud. She rode forwardly slightly and barked to her warriors: “Are you trying to kill someone? Sheathe your swords!”

Xiang Shaolong and the ladies are all confused. The ladies were puzzled and sheathe their swords.

Ying Ying’s laughter rang out like a bell: “You are good! Such a fine fellow! Come with me and let me try out your sword skills.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “Does Mistress know what I am?”

Ying Ying impatiently retorted: “You did not even tell me, how am I suppose to know which presumptuous fool you are?”

The female warriors looked at him closely and saw that he is silly looking besides his heroic air. Their hostility reducing greatly, they start to criticise his appearance.

From her tone, it seems like there is some rift between them. However, he cannot recall any such incident after going through his memory and apologised: “My apologies but I have an errand to run and cannot accompany you.”

Ying Ying was displeased and curled up her proud and toned lips, laughing coldly: “You do not know what is good for you. Girls! Get him!”

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to laugh or cry. The female warriors have reacted to her command with two of them producing a huge net normally used to catch animals. The other warriors re-drew their swords and approached him.

There are some onlookers a distance away. They may have been bullied by them before and is unclear of Xiang Shaolong’s status and dared not intervene.

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly and rolled on the floor right under the nets, and was in front of Ying Ying’s warhorse in a flash.

The warhorse was startled and raised its front hoofs and was about to step on Xiang Shaolong. Xiang Shaolong somersaulted and was beside the horse in a split second.

Ying Ying reacted quickly and her whip is swishing through the air towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong roared loudly and leapt up, landing behind the horse and avoiding the whip.

Unexpectedly, Ying Ying's long boots kicked to the back towards Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Xiang Shaolong could not imagine her fighting prowess has reached such a level and had underestimated her. He was forced to retreat a few steps but his left shoulder has been grazed by her boot, leaving a small mark.

The other warriors cried out in joy and chased after him.

Xiang Shaolong could see that the situation is becoming disadvantageous. He sped along the chariot lane and squeezed into the crowd of onlookers. The situation became chaotic and he slipped away in the confusion.

Arriving at Qin Qing's residence, Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused and began to understand the suffering of the two Changping brothers.

Housekeeper Uncle Fang received him in the main hall and brought him into the inner hall.

Qin Qing and Ji Yanran were happily playing a tune on their musical instruments.

Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen, Tian Feng and the maids of

Qin Qing are gathered at a large garden outside the building. Under the evening sunshine, they take turns playing with Xiang Bao'er who has learnt how to walk a few steps. The air is filled with their cheerful laughter.

Unfortunately, all Xiang Shaolong could think of is Shan Rou. The sight before him only adds to his pain.

He went to the garden and greeted Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi, taking time to cuddle his son Xiang Bao'er. He then returned back to the inner hall and joined them at their table, ignoring all the usual boundaries between him and Qin Qing.

Qin Qing was delighted: "Bao'er has been playing the entire day but did not take his afternoon nap. I am amazed at his stamina."

Xiang Shaolong stared at the window and can still hear the ladies playing with Bao'er. Feeling emotional, he vented: "A child's imagination is the richest. Everything that they see will be exciting, enriching and extraordinary. In the ordinary stuff that we see as adults, it is endless fun for them. Regrettably, when they grow up in the future, everything will be replaced by cold and harsh reality. This is the price to pay for growing up."

Both ladies exchanged a look and were deeply moved by his enlightening words. For a while, they were speechless. Xiang Shaolong turned his face and looked at them and was swept off his feet.

They resembled two blossoming flowers but did not suppress

each other's beauty.

Ji Yanran is charming and glamorous while Qin Qing is elegant and classy. They are the best there is.

Qin Qing's delicate face turned slightly red and lowered her gaze, gently mentioning: "Mister Xiang is finally able to come and visit your wives and kid." Finishing, she realised that she had a slip of the tongue and her jade face became even redder.

Ji Yanran gazed lovingly at Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "Why does hubby seem to be troubled about something?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed but did not reply her.

Qin Qing took the initiative and excused her and joined them at the garden, allowing them to speak in privacy.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: "Do you recall the letter Lord Chunshen wrote to Zhao Mu? Can your family warriors duplicate a copy?"

Ji Yanran answered: "No problem. They are skilled in forgery. What shall be the content?"

Xiang Shaolong detailed: "It will be a secret letter from Lord Chunshen to Li Yuan, informing him that the King of Chu is gravely ill and commanding him to return to Chu immediately. At the same time, instructing him to keep this a secret from Qin or

Qin may take advantage of Chu's political instability. You can add whatever else you think is appropriate."

Ji Yanran was astounded: "What is going on?"

Hot tears begin to leave Xiang Shaolong's eyes. In a grieved voice, he revealed: "Shan Rou is dead!"

Xiao Pan received him in his bedroom and dismissed the palace maids. "What has happened?" he questioned in surprise.

Xiang Shaolong repeated what he told Lu Gong and emphasized on Lu Buwei conspiracy with Qi and Chu.

Xiao Pan thought for a while and frowned: "But this policy of allying with the far countries and attacking the neighbouring countries has always been our strategy. Lu Buwei is only proceeding according to this direction and I don't see what is wrong."

Xiang Shaolong could tell that Xiao Pan is no longer a kid who can be easily manipulated. He nodded: "Crown Prince is right. But Lu Buwei is a man with ulterior motives. If he has his external affairs settled, he can focus on politics and eliminate all his opponents. If one day, Lu Gong, Xu Xian and the other generals have been killed by him, we will not be able to overcome him in the future."

Xiao Pan was shaken: "I am most afraid of him killing Master."

Xiang Shaolong had not thought about himself.

Although his intention to kill Tian Dan is because of Shan Rou, his suspicions of Lu Buwei are not without reason.

After being defeated by the combined armies, Lu Buwei has overhauled his strategy and focused on building up his political might.

King Zhuangxiang has lost his usefulness and became an obstacle. This heartless man used poison to remove him and paved way for his own son Xiao Pan.

He needs to take a little break now.

If he still wants to engage the six states in war, he will not dare to make changes in the Qin military, such as replacing a huge number of military leaders with his own men who are far less capable and experienced.

If he can hold the six states at bay and use a few years, he can cultivate a new generation of capable men who can help him control Qin. By then, even if he turns Qin into his own playground, no one can oppose him.

Against the six states, the allied states are as close as family. Regardless of Lu Buwei's scheming, it will not work against them. So he ignored them totally and conspired with Qi and Chu. In the

future, Yan will belong to Qi, Wei will belong to Chu, Zhao and Han will belong to Qin. With this agreement, he can focus his energies on Qin politics.

After his lengthy explanation, Xiao Pan was enlightened.

From this, Xiang Shaolong can see the difference in Xiao Pan.

In the past, Xiao Pan will listen to his words without question. Now, he is beginning to take ownership of his own decisions, thinking and position.

He is becoming more and more like Qin Shi Huang.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived at the Lord Changping's residence, he is already an hour late. This is unavoidable. Given his present circumstances, the fact that he even showed up is already giving plenty of respect to the two lords.

Feeling like an ugly daughter-in-law going to see her father-in-law, he went in with the hideous mark on his shoulder left by Ying Ying's boot. Led by a servant into the main hall, he had a big fright.

It is not a question about the number of guests but who they are. Seated on two rows of ten seats, only Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and An Gu are male. The rest are all female warriors.

When the attendant announced: "Imperial Cavalry Commander

Xiang Shaolong,” the noisy hall became as quiet as a grave in an instant.

Lord Changping jumped up and welcomed him at the door. Holding him, he frowned: “I did not anticipate my sister to bring her female warriors and scared all the guests away. Only An Gu is a true friend. Ai! But if he wasn’t the special guest tonight, he may have slipped off too. Luckily you came to join us, otherwise, Ai! Come! Let’s talk more when we settled down.”

It is now Xiang Shaolong’s turn to hold him and questioned: “Why are they here?”

Lord Changping replied: “To see the famous Xiang Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Who are they?”

Lord Changping whispered back: “They are all unmarried virgins and are all younger than eighteen years old. The best fighters are Sister Ying Ying and Lu Gong’s granddaughter Lu Dan’er. If you cannot please them, you wouldn’t be able to leave tonight.”

Xiang Shaolong was about to ask how he can please them when Ying Ying’s shrill voice rang out behind Lord Changping: “Big Brother! Are you trying to help Xiang Shaolong escape?”

Her view has been blocked by Lord Changping and did not see Xiang Shaolong. After she finished speaking, she saw him and her eyes lit up, calling: “So it is you!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “That’s right.”

Lord Changping is astonished: “Have you two met before?”

Ying Ying stomped her feet: “He is the asshole who saved the young man at the market and left without saying his name.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization.

The family warrior who invited him the other day is her family warrior. Fortunately, she did not see himself with Tu Xian or it will be catastrophic. No wonder she attacked him today.

Lord Changping did not suspect her story and smiled: “That’s great. Ever since she came back, she has been thinking about you, but...”

Ying Ying stood up with her arms akimbo and challenged: “I dare you to continue!”

Lord Changping was terrified and smiled weakly: “Fine. I will stop. Come! Let’s have a drink. Everything in the past is a misunderstanding.”

Ying Ying cooed: “Come!” and happily led the way in front.

Glancing at her beautiful back and her rare long legs, he was

slightly intoxicated.

All of a sudden, he felt that these female warriors are not as scary as they look.

To a certain extent, he was afraid to go home and see people or things that remind him of Shan Rou.

After he learnt of Shan Rou's demise, he has been keeping himself busy to numb his pain, using the most exciting experiences to erode his grief.

Until Shan Rou's death did he realised how much he treasured her in his heart.

This is his next greatest blow after Zhao Qian's death!

Book 13 Chapter 03 – The Female Warriors

Under the gaze of nearly a hundred female warriors, Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping entered the main hall led by Ying Ying.

Xiang Shaolong has the perfect body tightly dressed in a simple warrior suit. Except for the dirty mark on his shoulder, he strolls in gracefully with his right hand on his sword hilt and his left arm swinging by his side, almost like a modern male model striding down the cat walk. Everyone in hall could not help but be mesmerized by him.

The women warriors who attacked him earlier realised that it was Xiang Shaolong who is the dream man of many Xianyang ladies. They were especially taken aback.

Ying Ying went back to her seat. Before she could sit down, another beauty next to her jumped up and whispered into her ears before resuming their seats together.

Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and An Gu were seated at a table full of dishes and wine. Lord Changping sighed: “Thanks to Shaolong’s presence, we brothers have finally fulfilled our sister’s demand.”

Lord Changwen was disappointed: “Why didn’t Shaolong bring Talented Lady Ji and let us have a look at her? Big Brother said he reminded you.”

An Gu smiled: “Shaolong! Now you finally got a taste of how irritating they are. Luckily, I have to leave the city for my duties. I shall pass on this burden to you. Good luck!”

Xiang Shaolong is already burdened with countless worries and sadness. Now, as he is facing these three friendly and sincere men in a place filled with young, passionate girls, his accumulated stress begin to go away. Finally relaxing, he grabbed his wine cup and was about to drink when Ying Ying’s voice rang out behind him: “Don’t drink wine! Otherwise when you lose, you will say that we are being unfair to you.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and suspicious. Holding back his wine cup, he turned around and questioned: “What does drinking wine have to do with winning and losing?”

The whole hall quietened down.

Ying Ying and the pretty girl seated with her came in front of him, both putting on the airs of a spoilt and stubborn character.

Behind him, An Gu sighed: “Shaolong should know their prowess by now. If they attacked openly with a fair fight, I will lose without a single complaint. Somehow, they have so many tricks up their sleeves and I was taken by surprise every single time.”

The beautiful girl stared at him and giggled sweetly. Her mouth curled up with a proud look, she plainly state: “Dear General An, I had regarded you as someone important in Xianyang City! Hng! Since young, you have always been repudiating. Commander Xiang

is not like you and will face our challenges bravely.”

Xiang Shaolong looked back and exchanged a helpless grin with An Gu. Lord Changping came to his ear and whispered: “They called themselves the Royal Reviewer. Hei! They joked that Generals promoted by the Qin court has to undergo a second review with them to prove their worthiness. ”

Ying Ying impatiently cut in: “Cut the crap. Shaolong will now compete with Dan’er in wine drinking.” When she mentioned Dan’er, she arrogantly pointed to the pretty girl beside her with her thumb.

Xiang Shaolong eyes landed on Lu Dan’er petite face and begin to scrutinize Lu Gong’s stubborn granddaughter.

Lu Dan’er’s eyes matched his gaze. She has a nice smile and her eyes are glowing with happiness, mischief and arrogance.

But she is indeed pretty and does not look a day over sixteen. In these ancient times, it is a marriageable age. But just looking at her wild and formidable aura, a weak husband will be unable to control her.

Compared to Ying Ying, she is shorter by half a head. She has a well-proportioned body and did not have any excess fats due to constant exercise. Any normal man who saw her will be aroused.

Like Ying Ying, they are energetic, lively and full of enthusiasm.

With healthy complexions and white glowing skin, they are truly alluring.

However, Ying Ying is slightly more appealing than her.

Scanning her body next, Xiang Shaolong lowered his gaze and caught sight of her full and perky chest.

While he was secretly praising the full bosoms of Qin ladies, Lu Dan'er's face reddened and she looked down.

An Gu and the Lords laughingly retaliated: "Ha! Dan'er's face is red with embarrassment. What a rare sight!"

Ying Ying was astounded and glanced at her partner. Stomping her feet, she called: "Dan'er!"

Lu Dan'er shot a vicious look at Xiang Shaolong who has embarrassed her and denied: "Who is embarrassed? It is because the weather is too hot! Bring the wine!"

At last, Xiang Shaolong is fully familiar about these female warriors. They are just troublemakers in Xianyang City. As most of them are related to high-ranking officials and are spoilt by nature, they are able to terrorise the commoners without much repercussions.

Several giggling young ladies came in carrying a few jugs of wine. The battle is about to begin.

An Gu came to Xiang Shaolong's side and smiled: "How is your alcohol tolerance? This lady's liqueur capacity is not something to laugh about."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Why do we have to hold a drinking contest?"

Ying Ying stepped forward and proclaimed: "Wine drinking is a man's forte. We want to challenge you men in your best forte. Understand?"

An Gu produced a spitting sound and barked: "What are you so proud about? You wanted to get Commander Xiang drunk and then compete with him in martial arts. When you have won, you will brag about it. I know all your dirty tricks!"

Lu Dan'er is bitter about An Gu embarrassing her earlier and arrogantly retorted: "You are our defeated opponent and how dare you speak like that? You lost in the last archery contest and blamed us instead of your own incompetency. What a loser."

Au Gu faced Xiang Shaolong with an agonized smile: "Now you should know what I mean."

Xiang Shaolong could only smile weakly in return.

The imposing Ying Ying commanded: "Except for the contestants, everyone else return to your seats." She led her

warriors back to their seats, leading by example

Lord Changping whispered before he left: “Good luck!” and returned to his seat with Lord Changwen and An Gu.

Slightly fearful of Xiang Shaolong, Lu Dan’er sat down and raised the wine jug in front, commenting: “Let’s drink up our share of wine and compete our archery skills in the rear garden. Quick! Why are you hesitating like a woman!”

The female warriors burst out in laughter and made all sorts of jeering noises.

Xiang Shaolong felt his own tummy and realised that he had not eaten a single meal today. It is a taboo to drink wine on an empty stomach and he is bound to lose. He hardened his resolve and shot back: “Such an impatient little doll. You have already lost to me in terms of patience.” He purposely looked at her chest again and walked towards Ying Ying. Sitting down opposite her, his stomach began to rumble.

Ying Ying raised her eyebrows and implored: “Since when did you last eat something?”

Everyone in the hall laughed loudly.

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered with her and started eating. At the same time, he was puzzled. An Gu is a great drinker and how could he lose to a young girl.

Suddenly, he was inspired and thought about the bar girls in the 21st century. Their drinks are always diluted to earn more money and also to prevent them from getting drunk.

Remembering this, he turned back and returned to the 'battleground.' Sitting down across her, he conveniently placed his wine in front of her and pointed to the jug she is hugging. He demanded: "I will drink your wine and you will drink mine!"

The entire hall quietened down.

Lu Dan'er was flustered and shrilled: "The wine is the same. You drink your own wine!"

An Gu laughed loudly and jumped up, exclaiming: "I see! I see! No wonder I lost the last time!"

Lu Dan'er is so furious her face became red again. She shot an angry look at Xiang Shaolong before giggling out loudly. She put down her wine jug and slipped back to her seat.

An Gu and the two Lords cheered loudly and received the victorious Xiang Shaolong back to his seat. Xiang Shaolong has never seen them so excited before.

All the girls are laughing so hard they can barely sit straight. None of them felt guilty about their trick being exposed.

Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er had a quick discussion and came up to their table. Ying Ying declared: "So it is considered a draw!"

Lord Changwen is confused: "Shaolong has obviously won. How come it is a draw?"

Displeased, Ying Ying retorted: "Second Brother has eyes that cannot see. The mark on Commander Xiang's shoulder is left by my boot. Isn't this a draw? To determine the winner, we must have another round of competition."

An Gu was curious: "What happened?"

Ying Ying stubbornly interrupted: "Don't deny it if you are a man. Come! We shall compete on strength."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "Compete on strength!"

Ying Ying charmingly smiled: "Of course we must compete in everything. I dare you to say 'women are weaklings' in the future." Finishing, they returned to their table.

Lord Changping advised Xiang Shaolong: "Do not underestimate her. This woman possesses brute strength. Not many people in Xianyang City can win her."

Xiang Shaolong noticed a huge woman coming out from the crowd and a girl bringing out a long rope and another girl drawing boundaries on the floor. It looks like a game of tug of war.

Xiang Shaolong was baffled. Women are limited by nature to be weaker than men. Even if they have a large body, they can defeat common men but not martial arts practitioners like Lord Changping. He unconsciously looked down to her feet and saw some sort of talcum powder scattered on the floor. He guessed it is another trick and suggested to the huge lady: “To prevent cheating, I suggest we take off our shoes before we compete!”

The ladies became silent and there is a strange expression on their faces.

As if this is the first time she saw him, Ying Ying stared blankly at Xiang Shaolong for a short while. Stomping her feet, she hissed: “Exposed by you again. Why can’t you give us a break?” Even her two brothers are stunned by her stubborn behaviour.

Before she finished speaking, the ladies were laughing uncontrollably and the atmosphere is very cheerful.

Amused, Xiang Shaolong went back to his seat. The three men are laughing so hard that their stomachs hurt.

An Gu held his breath and barely spoke out: “What an exciting night! All my frustrations have been vented out.”

Lu Dan’er yelled: “Stop laughing!”

Everyone stifled their laughter.

Lord Changping challenged: “What other tricks do you have?”

Xiang Shaolong understood that these females are just troublemakers who use tricks to ridicule men. They do not have any ill intentions and there is no real damage done. Thus, the people of Xianyang tolerated their antics.

Lu Dan'er proclaimed: “We have competed on tricks and Xiang Shaolong has won. Now, we will compete on real abilities.”

An Gu snorted: “What is there to compete? Can you defeat Wang Jian? Shaolong fought Wang Jian and it was a draw. You better save your breath. Come! Dan'er! Sing me a song and let's see how much you have improved.”

Lu Dan'er made a face at him. Displeased, she remarked: “Previously, we are testing if Commander Xiang is an idiot like you. Now we are playing for real.”

An Gu was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “We can compete in anything but I must choose the topic. Otherwise, forget it.”

Lu Dan'er invited: “Let's hear it!”

Ying Ying dared not underestimate Xiang Shaolong anymore and

kept tugging Lu Dan'er's sleeve.

Lu Dan'er softly assured: "We need not fear him!"

It is now the three men's turn to laugh and jeer, making the situation extremely lively.

Xiang Shaolong raised his wine jug and drank two large mouthfuls.

The scorching wine entered his throat and he was reminded of Shan Rou. Grieved, he sighed loudly.

Lord Changwen leaned over and whispered into his ear: "Is something troubling Shaolong?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and summoned his courage. Facing Lu Dan'er he began: "First, you can send anyone you want to accept my challenge. This person will represent your group. If she loses, then your group has lost. In the future, you must not harass me with other competitions."

The ladies gathered together and discussed in secret. They dared not let down their guard against him anymore.

To the three men, he commented: "Shoot the horse to capture the man, catch the bandit king and the bandits will succumb. Watch and see!"

An Gu praised: “Shaolong is so capable and vented the frustration for all the bullied men of Xianyang City.”

The ladies have concluded and Ying Ying stood up. Puffing her chest, she declared: “If we’re fighting, I will be your opponent. But you can only hit my sword and my body. If you happened to injure me, you will not be able to compensate.”

Xiang Shaolong is already aware of their unfair and stubborn ways to achieve victory. Expectedly, he exclaimed: “You will be fighting me? That’s wonderful! Let’s have a wrestling match!”

Every girl started to protest.

Ying Ying is so angry her face turned red and furiously state: “You are so demanding.”

The three men clapped loudly and cheered in approval.

An Gu seems to have plenty of ‘deep grievances’. He chortled: “After the wrestling, Sister Ying has to leave the female army and marry into the Xiang family as Shaolong has touched every part of your body. If he does not marry you, then it will really be hard for him to compensate you.”

Xiang Shaolong began to recognize how open the people of Qin are when talking about such matters and was slightly regretful. If he made Ying Ying fall in love with himself, he will have plenty of

headaches in the future.

On the other hand, he felt very excited and it was like he is flirting with girls back in the 21st century.

Lu Dan'er 'righteously' spoke: "If this is the battlefield, weapons will be used to fight for survival. This is just a banquet friendly match. Must we watch them wrestle like that? Obviously not!"

The girls begin to protest to help Ying Ying and they are noisier than the marketplace. For a while, it was chaos.

Xiang Shaolong let out a long laugh and gathered everyone's attention. He solemnly mentioned: "When fighting a battle, every method has to be used. When you want to capture an enemy, you may have to use some tricks. Are you going to tell the enemy that no wrestling is allowed during the fight?"

Everyone was humoured and broke out into laughter, forgetting their differences. Infuriated, Lu Dan'er stomped her feet and screamed, stopping the laughter. However, some girls continued to chuckle in the background.

Xiang Shaolong kept forcing his way: "Bring me a mat. You girls mentioned that whatever men can do, you can do better. Stop your whining and stop embarrassing yourself."

Ying Ying held back her own laughter. Shooting him a dirty look, she swore: "You are good, but this is not over yet. We will

temporary retreat and show you the might of our Qin Female Army at a later date. Dismiss!”

The four men stared in amazement as all the girls left the hall simultaneously. They did not look angry but were still giggling, showing that they have a good impression of Xiang Shaolong.

The four men were elated and drank to their heart’s content.

It was four am when they reluctantly concluded the banquet.

Xiang Shaolong left with An Gu. As they traveled down the street, Xiang Shaolong recomposed himself and officially asked: “There is something I need to bother Brother An!”

Riding beside him on this quiet street at night, An Gu smiled: “I get along with Shaolong very well. Just call me Gu. Tell me about it. As long as it is within my abilities, I will do my best.”

Xiang Shaolong noticed their escorts are not too far away from them. He lowered his voice: “I want Gu to help me seal the border leading to Chu and arrest every messenger from Qi.”

An Gu was slightly shaken: “Shaolong wants to attack Tian Dan?”

From his quick thinking and intellect, Xiang Shaolong is certain that An Gu did not take any shortcuts to earn his former rank as the Head of the Palace Guards.

Xiang Shaolong continued in a low voice: “That’s right. The real person I am attacking is Lu Buwei. The Crown Prince and Lu Gong knew about this too but this is a huge secret. Brother An may verify with them on this.” An Gu assured: “Why bother? Will Shaolong want to harm me? Leave this to me.”

After a short contemplation, he offered: “I have a plan that can cause the two armies of Qi and Chu waiting at the border to retreat by more than ten miles. I wonder if it would help.”

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: “How can Gu accomplish this?”

An Gu confidently revealed: “The Qin Chu border is an uninhabited, mountainous area. No one knows where the border line is and we assumed the river from Sanchuan is the dividing line. We can pretend to clash with their armies and I will meet the generals from Qi and Chu for a truce. To show goodwill, everyone has to retreat by ten miles. This way, when Tian Dan leaves our border, he must still travel some distance before he meets up with his own army. Even if the Qi army receives word and presses near to our border, we can use the excuse that they have crossed the border to surround them or chase them away. This will make it easy for Shaolong to execute your plan. Hei! Qin is afraid of no one!”

Xiang Shaolong was over the moon. Finalising the details with him, they went on their own ways.

On the way home, Xiang Shaolong once again experienced the

uncertain feeling of whether this is a dream or reality.

He was once a homeless scavenger and now he is the top favourite subordinate of Qin Shi Huang. Moreover, he is battling the powerful Left Premier Lu Buwei and even planning to kill the legendary Tian Dan. What a feeling!

Like an invisible hand, fate is guiding him flawlessly to create history based on the history he learned.

But history did not mention anything about a man named Xiang Shaolong. Why?

What is his ending? He could not help but feel muddle-headed.

Book 13 Chapter 04 – Feelings

Back at the Wu residence, Teng Yi is still awake and is drinking alone in the dark.

Xiang Shaolong is sure that he is agonizing over Shan Rou's death and sat beside him without saying a single word.

Teng Yi passed him some wine and disclosed: "Tian Dan went to find Lu Buwei after he met you and left after a long time. He must have been complaining to Lu Buwei about you. After that, he went to find Li Yuan. A single sentence from Third Brother has terrified him so much."

Xiang Shaolong swallowed a gulp of wine and his tears begin to fall uncontrollably from his face. In a deep voice, he commented: "This is better than I expect. To comfort him, Lu Buwei will swear to kill me during the hunting festival. They will allow Li Yuan to return to Chu first and leave Tian Dan behind. After all, he wanted to see me dead before he can return to Qi with peace of mind."

Smelling strongly of alcohol, Teng Yi remarked: "I did not think about that. It must be Rou'er assisting us from Heaven to take his miserable life."

Xiang Shaolong inquired: "Has Yanran started work on the fake letter?"

Teng Yi nodded: "Yes. I got a pigeon messenger to send it back to the farm immediately. According to Yanran, Uncle Qing and his

men just need one night to forge a fake letter based on the letter from Lord Chunshen to Zhao Mu. It is guaranteed to be foolproof.”

The pigeon messenger is a new secret weapon Xiang Shaolong introduced to the Wu Family Elite Warriors. This will speed up communication between the farms and Xianyang City and was implemented recently.

Xiang Shaolong silently drank another two cups of wine and wiped away his tears. “Have you told Jing Jun?” he asked in a deep voice.

Teng Yi sighed: “Tomorrow! He ought to know. He was overjoyed with his Yan beauty and let’s give him another day of happiness!”

He asked: “Will Li Yuan really leave after receiving the letter?”

Xiang Shaolong coldly sniggered: “Similar to Lu Buwei using women to gain power, Li Yuan is using her pretty sister as a gift to the same effect. If he learns about Xiaolie’s condition, he will not be bothered about Tian Dan. Lu Buwei will encourage him to return immediately and execute their plan. I expect that they will try to take Lord Chunshen’s life. The Lord is so amusing and yet pitiful.”

Teng Yi sighed: “Third Brother is becoming more and more formidable, covering every aspect of the plan flawlessly.”

Xiang Shaolong icily laughed: “For Shan Rou and Second Brother, I will do whatever I can to kill Tian Dan. Killing Mo Ao is another crucial part of the plan. If this man continues to provide them with strategies, we may be killed by Tian Dan instead.”

Teng Yi sighed: “This is my biggest worry too. If Lu Buwei sent his own warriors and escort Tian Dan all the way until he meets his own army, it will be impossible for us to act.”

Xiang Shaolong confidently explained: “Remember the last time we spoke about Lord Gaoling conspiring with Zhao General Pang Nuan? If I am not mistaken, these two men will try to rebel during the hunting fair. Lu Buwei will be too busy dealing with them and will not have time for Tian Dan. As long as we misled Tian Dan that Xianyang City is an unsafe place, he will rush back to Qi via Chu as soon as possible, giving us the golden opportunity.”

Speaking till here, the sky is gradually brightening up but neither man felt the least urge to sleep.

Xiang Shaolong stood up: “I don’t know what but I am pining for Ji Yanran and the ladies. Since it is still early, I will visit them at Qin Residence. Second Brother should spend some time with Sister-in-law.”

Teng Yi appreciated: “You go ahead! I still want to think about some things.”

Qin Qing is pruning her plants in her garden and saw Xiang Shaolong coming to her place before the sky is fully bright.

Stunned, she put aside her gardening tool carefully in an intricate bronze box and instructed her attendant to bring it into the house. She simply state: “They are still asleep. I heard that Commander Xiang has the habit of sleeping late and they have inherited your habit as well. Why don’t we take a stroll?”

How can Xiang Shaolong reject her? He walked beside her and enjoyed her fabulous garden with many unique plants and the fragrances of flowers filled the air. They traveled down a zigzag path that snakes through carefully pruned trees and bushes.

Birds are chirping loudly, filling the garden with a sense of liveliness.

With a solemn expression, Qin Qing led him down the path. With a hint of blame in her tone, she asked: “Your hair is messy; your clothes are untidy and there is a dirty mark on your shoulder area. Both of your eyes are red and swollen and you smell strongly of alcohol. You must have stayed up the whole of last night?”

Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate this and was astonished: “You only peeped once at me and you can deduce so many things?”

Qin Qing turned her head at shot him a look, scolding: “Your words are vulgar and rude. Who is peeping at you?”

Xiang Shaolong can sense the happiness in her scolding and knew that she is not really blaming him. He bitterly laughed: “I am not fully conscious yet. Ai! I really look disgraceful compared to Grand Tutor Qin. My smelly alcohol fumes has polluted your fragrant

scent!”

Qin Qing abruptly stopped walking and turned around. Before she could say anything, an aimless Xiang Shaolong bumped right into her.

Both of them shrieked out in fright and backed off instantly.

Qin Qing's face is burning red and a flustered Xiang Shaolong apologised: “Ai! So sorry! I am so muddle-headed! Did I hurt you?” As he is saying this, the feeling of Qin Qing's tender and bouncy breasts on his own chest has left an everlasting impression.

Qin Qing shot him a vicious look and resumed a blank face. She lightly mentioned: “We are both careless. Forget it! But I must still reprimand you. As a gentleman, how can you pass such a comment about a lady's natural scent?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “I am not a gentleman and am not interested to be one! Honestly, I am quite afraid to talk to you. I may offend you without even knowing it!”

Qin Qing's face darkened and coldly replied: “So you are afraid to see me and thus advised me to leave for Bashu so that I will not pose as a hindrance to you?”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded at this baseless accusation. He surrendered: “I only mentioned it by mistake! Grand Tutor Qin is still grudging me for this sentence? Let me kneel and kowtow to

you for my mistake.”

Qin Qing was startled and stopped him: “A man must not kneel down easily! Hng! You are playing a fool.”

Xiang Shaolong stretched out in a yawn and took a deep breath. He left the small path and cut through the flowers, arriving at a small stream near a bridge. He kneeled down and used his hand to scoop up the running water, happily washing his face.

Qin Qing came to his back and was frowning at his uncouth behaviour. At the same time, her eyes twinkled with interest.

Xiang Shaolong used more water to wet his hair and combed it with his fingers. Rejuvenated, he looked up at the blue sky and the white clouds. Raising his hands, he declared: “Today is the first day of the rest of my life. I will live my life to the fullest.”

Qin Qing repeated his words twice before she grasped its meaning. She was slightly shaken and remarked: “No wonder Yanran often mentioned that you are a very intelligent person. Words casually sprouted by you have such deep meanings and philosophies.”

Xiang Shaolong blinked hard and gazed back at her, laughing: “Unexpectedly, I managed to hold a nice conversation with Grand Tutor Qin. Unfortunately, I have some matters to attend to but I am very satisfied already.”

Qin Qing revealed a sweet and intimate smile, gently correcting: “It is really my honour. Actually, there is something I wanted to discuss with Commander Xiang. Can you spare some additional time?”

Actually, Xiang Shaolong did not have anything urgent to attend to but he is afraid he may start flirting with her if he stayed any longer. Qin Qing’s charm is nothing to joke about. Unsure of her feelings towards him, he was tempted and teased her: “So there is something important. I thought Grand Tutor Qin treats me like a special person.”

Qin Qing’s jade face begin to glow and her almond shaped eyes stared at him as she exclaimed: “Commander Xiang! How can you use these flowery language on me?”

A shy looking Qin Qing is even more enchanting.

Xiang Shaolong slightly regretted his action but was highly excited at the same time.

In the past, Qin Qing will walk off and ignore him forever upon hearing these words. Her cheerful reply reminded him about his uncertain feeling about all these being a dream or reality.

Luckily, he has some strand of sanity left in him and bitterly smiled: “Please do not be angry. I am not clear-minded and was just joking with you!”

Qin Qing calmed and softly commented: “Yesterday, Empress Ji spoke to me about matchmaking the Crown Prince and asked for my opinion.”

Xiang Shaolong was immediately alerted and was slightly shocked. “What does the Empress think?” He asked.

Qin Qing stepped forward and came within an arm’s length of Xiang Shaolong. Her eyes deep in thought, she divulged: “She told me Lu Buwei explained to her the benefits of Crown Prince marrying the Princess of Chu, saying that it will prevent the six states from working together against Qin. But she is hesitant due to the violent objections of Lu Gong, Xu Xian and the other high ranking officials.”

Unconsciously, Xiang Shaolong inched towards her and observed her unparalleled beauty. He then asked in a deep voice: “What advice did Grand Tutor Qin give her?”

Qin Qing apparently cannot tolerate the proximity between them and retreated half a step. She lowered her head and softly replied: “I told her that the Crown Prince may be young but has his own mindset and thinking. She should ask him directly.”

Xiang Shaolong’s nose is filled with her nice fragrance and was intoxicated. He took another small step towards her and lightly guessed: “She would reject your suggestion.”

Qin Qing retreated again and was surprised: “How did you guess correctly?”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to see her reaction when she is distressed and stepped forward again. Now, they can almost smell each other breaths. He is almost invading her personal space and nearly touching her fast-heaving chest. He stared at her lowered head and whispered: “This is called having a guilty conscience. For the past few days, she has been trying her best to avoid him.”

Qin Qing ran out of space to retreat and her ears are burning red. She complained in a low voice: “I am most fearful of the smell of alcohol!”

Xiang Shaolong was jolted awake and recognized that he had nearly molested her. He took two steps back apologetically and stammered: “I better take my leave.”

Qin Qing’s cheeks are red hot and her eyes are flashing with excitement. She glanced at him in silence.

Xiang Shaolong began to panic and uttered: “Hey! Why are you looking at me like this?”

Qin Qing broke into a smile: “I wanted to see if you will leave without finishing your words like what you did in the past, showing that you have a guilty conscience too!”

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed: Damn it!

The lady whose beauty equaled Ji Yanran is someone unique,

elegant and classy. Her most attractive part is her wisdom. Every time he met her; he could not help but be attracted by her.

He came here early in the morning to lessen his pain by indulging himself with Ji Yanran and the girls. He secretly hoped to see Qin Qing as well. This is a very complicated and ironic thinking.

As Ji Yanran has mentioned, Qin Qing is the model lady who is widely respected and regarded by the people of Qin. Pure and chaste, she is a top beauty who cannot be violated.

But it is due to her special position and status that his desire to eat this forbidden fruit is even more challenging and exciting.

To a modern man from the 21st century, this is not a question of morals.

Qin Qing does not belong to the people of Qin. She belongs to herself.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his temptation but could not resist rebutting her. He shrugged his shoulders and opened up his palms: “I have never stolen anything in my life so why should I feel guilty?”

Qin Qing is a master at handling her emotions. Resuming her icy blank expression, she casually reminded: “That’s great! How? You have not told me your views about the marriage!”

Xiang Shaolong was agonized and implored: “This is not my forte. Will Grand Tutor Qin please enlighten me on the crucial aspects of the marriage?”

Qin Qing is annoyed: “Sometimes, you are incredibly clever like you can predict the future. Sometimes, you are as dumb as a bell. The marriage itself is crucial. Xu Xian and Wang Ling wanted Crown Prince to marry Lu Gong’s granddaughter Lu Dan’er so as to preserve the purity of Qin’s blood in the royal family. Lu Buwei wanted to spoil their plan as he is not a Qin native himself. Does Commander Xiang understand now?”

Xiang Shaolong was blown away by this insight.

At the end of the day, it is Qin’s racist mindset. To an outsider like him, it doesn’t mean anything but to the Qin, it represents their determination against Lu Buwei. If this matter is not handled well, it will put Xiao Pan in an unfavourable situation.

Qin Qing sighed: “I advised Empress to reconsider her thinking and wait for some time. She should decide only when she has a clearer understanding of the full picture.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “That’s the best plan for now. Lu Dan’er is really pretty but is actually a formidable tigress.”

Qin Qing laughed: “You finally met the female army!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “That was what happened last

night.”

Astounded, Qin Qing glanced at him: “You accompanied them throughout the night?”

Xiang Shaolong simply replied: “I am not so free.”

Qin Qing questioned in a low voice: “What has happened? Last night, Yanran was playing the qin alone in the garden and her music is full of sadness, making everyone feel like crying. Are you treating me like an outsider? Why don’t you share with me your sorrow?”

Xiang Shaolong intimately revealed: “We received news about the death of someone close to us. But only Yanran knows this. Grand Tutor Qing...”

Qin Qing nodded: “I understand. Does Commander Xiang want to take a look at Yanran and the rest? They should be up by now!”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “I will make a quick trip to the Command Centre. If I have time, I will visit them later!”

Qin Qing advised: “Commander Xiang should speak to Crown Prince about the marriage. I am sure he has the ability to make a good decision.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement and left.

A sense of longing is growing within his heart.

The longing is intertwined with complicated excitement and thrill.

Both Qin Qing and Xiang Shaolong know that they are traveling along a 'very dangerous' path. Sooner or later, they will lose their self-control.

Book 13 Chapter 05 – A Well-Devised Plan

Back at the Cavalry Command Centre, the sweet memory of Qin Qing is still lingering in Xiang Shaolong's mind.

And he was annoyed.

Hasn't he sworn not to be involved in relationships anymore?

Due to Shan Rou's news, he was in a terrible mood and did not sleep at all last night. Coupled with his unclear mind from all the wine he drank, he became irrational and unconsciously flirted with Qin Qing.

Humans are unpredictable. Even he cannot explain his own actions.

If Qin Qing is her usual impenetrable self and censured him soundly, it may not be so bad. However, this chaste and pure beauty is warming up to him.

Her retorts are filled with secret delight and her rejections filled with secret acceptance.

The unique relationship between them is the most tempting factor.

Lost in his daydreaming, he bumped into Jing Jun at the main

gate. Jing Jun secretly whispered: “Third Brother! We caught a big fish last night!”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled: “What big fish?”

Jing Jun proudly declared: “Have you heard of this man named Lu Bang?”

Xiang Shaolong sobered up and inquired in a low voice: “Is he one of Lu Buwei’s men?”

Jing Jun explained: “Not only is he one of the traitors from Lu, he is the son of Lu Xiong. Somehow, this fella was attracted to someone’s wife and tried to harass her. Coincidentally, Xu Xian was passing by and saved her. The couple has left the City quickly to avoid them but this kid still harbours ill intention and did not give up. He led several family warriors out of the city in pursuit. They caught up with them, beat the husband up and were about to rape the wife when I caught up to them. They have all been arrested. Ha! Is this fish big enough?”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “How did you know they were up to no good?”

Jing Jun was on cloud nine about his accomplishment. He laughed: “It is all thanks to Tao Fang’s intelligence unit. The moment they knew about this, they told me about it. I am familiar with Lu Bang’s character. If he is onto something, he will go all out to achieve it. I therefore assigned someone to trail him and caught him red-handed. This is going to be exciting. Qin has strict laws

regarding sex criminals. If we send him to the law bureau, he will be heavily punished. It would be great if he is castrated. Lu Xiong would be devastated and we would have taken some revenge for Princess Qian.”

Xiang Shaolong pondered on this for a while and questioned: “Where is Lu Bang being held and do people from the Premier Residence know about this?”

Jing Jun led him past the main hall and towards the back hall. He happily reported: “Last night, I secretly brought everyone back here, including the young couple. Lu Xiong and his men are now in prison. Ai! There is a problem here. That kid is denying everything and the couple are terrified to know that their attackers are from Premier Residence. They did not want to provide evidence of their crime and kept pleading me to release them, saying that they will never come back to Xianyang City in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong was agonized. Without witnesses, Lu Bang can instead accuse him power abuse and he will be in trouble. He asked: “Where is Second Brother?”

Jing Jun sighed: “Since morning, he has been in a horrible mood. He slapped Lu Bang heavily after the interrogation barely began. Now, he is interrogating the young couple. I am really afraid he will resort to violence.”

Xiang Shaolong understood Teng Yi’s character well. He panicked: “Let’s check on him first!”

They increased their pace towards the inner hall where the couple is being held.

Before they stepped over the door ledge, Teng Yi's loud scolding can be heard. The men guarding the doors have a helpless look on their faces, signalling that the interrogation has been unfruitful.

Xiang Shaolong entered the inner hall and was startled at the sight of the young couple in front of Teng Yi. The young couple exclaimed: "Benefactor!"

Xiang Shaolong was amazed at the coincidence. It is the young couple he helped when he was on his way to meet with Tu Xian. He saved them in the market when they were chased by thugs and even gave them a large sum of money.

Teng Yi was stunned: "You know Official Xiang?"

Xiang Shaolong sincerely pleaded: "Let's talk about that later! Mister and Madam have been assaulted by evil doers and why don't you testify against them? We must not let them remain free and cause more trouble to other people."

This man named Zhou and his wife exchange a glance and resolutely promised: "We will do as Benefactor advised without the slightest hesitation."

Teng Yi cheered: "Both of you need not worry. I will get someone to bring you safely far away from here."

Xiang Shaolong simply added: “By tomorrow morning, both of you will be far away from danger.”

By now, he has a good plan to deal with Lu Xiong.

Lu Xiong is one of the culprits behind Zhao Qian’s death. He will surely take advantage of this golden opportunity to take revenge.

After Xiao Pan finish hearing his story, he frowned: “The only criminal is Lu Bang. Moreover, he did not violate the woman yet. At the most, we can give him a severe beating.”

Li Si smiled: “I think Commander Xiang has thought of a special plan already!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Nothing can hide from Official Li’s eyes. I planned to leak the news to Lu Xiong, deceiving him that his son has raped and killed a woman. If he panics and barges into the Cavalry Command Centre to save his son, I have a way to trick him.”

Xiao Pan thought it over and slowly asked: “What kind of a man is this Lu Xiong?”

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si exchanged a glance of amazement.

The Crown Prince Zheng is becoming more formidable and is

developing his own thinking style and observations.

Xiang Shaolong leisurely explained: “This is a man who takes shortcuts to success and is an idiot who good at claiming credit for himself. Since he came to Qin, he has been the second most important man among Lu Buwei’s clansmen. He is so arrogant that it is rumoured that he does not pay respects to Guan Zhong despite being the assistant Imperial Infantry Commander.”

Xiao Pan was stunned: “Why is Subject Xiang so familiar with Premier Residence’s developments?”

Xiang Shaolong will naturally protect his spy Tu Xian and casually mentioned: “Lu Buwei can bribe my warrior and I can do the same.”

Xiao Pan contemplated for a while and gingerly state; “If Lu Xiong is as what you had described, we can make use of him.”

He turned to Li Si and instructed: “Subject Li please summon Lu Buwei, Lu Gong, Xu Xian, Wang Ling, Meng Ao, Cai Ze, Wang Wan and various officials for a meeting. I want to deprive Lu Xiong of any mental support and make him even more reckless.”

Li Si was pleased and left to execute his order.

Xiao Pan waited until only Xiang Shaolong and himself was left in the study before he happily cheered: “It will be even better if this matter is blown out of proportion. I can use this chance to

show my authority and put down Lu Buwei. This traitor has been even more overbearing now that he has the support of Empress. He even proposed to Empress to promote himself to be the Regent of Qin. What a shameless cad!”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “What did Empress say?”

Xiao Pan furiously disclosed: “Empress has been bewitched by Lao Ai. Except for matters regarding Master, she approves all his other requests. She has spoken to me twice regarding this matter already. Ai! I have been unable to sleep for the past two nights because of this as well.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled that in the movie, people addressed Lu Buwei as Premier Mentor. ‘Mentor’ refers to a kind of officials that is found in the state of Qi which can also mean ‘Father.’ This will give Lu Buwei some sort of promotion and hint at his fatherly status. He could not help laughing: “Let’s make him a Premier Mentor instead and create more trouble for him.”

Xiao Pan was elated and asked for the details.

Xiang Shaolong added: “This must be done after the blood test or it will have the opposite effect.”

He explained the meaning of Premier Mentor and its double meaning as well.

Xiao Pan frowned: “Isn’t that asking me to acknowledge a traitor

as my father?”

Xiang Shaolong casually mentioned: “This is just a name without real authority and we have two advantages from this promotion. First, we assured this traitor of his position and he will not make any more ridiculous requests. Secondly, we can increase the dissatisfaction of Lu Gong and the military. With evidence that you are not his son, they will assume that he gave himself that title and will give him more trouble.”

Xiao Pan was shocked: “How can Master leisurely think of such a unique position?”

Xiang Shaolong was slightly awkward: “I am not sure too. The name just came up me all of a sudden.”

Xiao Pan stared at him for a while and gently remarked: “Let me think about this further. Master! It is not that I do not trust you but this is an important issue and I want to hear Li Si’s opinion.”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased: “I am more than happy to know that Crown Prince is taking up the responsibility of his own decision making. Seeing you grow up to be a great man is my greatest reward.”

He stood up and bade farewell: “By now, Lu Xiong should have received my news. I should head back to handle him.”

Xiao Pan stood up and stammered: “Can Master pay a visit to

Empress? Only you can make Mother break out of Lao Ai's control."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "I'll see what I can do!"

Stepping out of the study, he was detained by Lord Changwen. Lord Changwen apologised: "Shaolong, please forgive me for divulging your whereabouts. My sister is waiting for you outside the palace. Hei! You should know that she is up to no good."

Xiang Shaolong is in a rush to return to the Cavalry Commander Centre to implement his trap to trick Lu Xiong. He was astounded: "Then I had better leave by another exit."

It is Lord Changwen's turn to be astounded. He begged: "You must never do that or they will know that I tipped you off. Please go and humour them a bit! Take it that you are doing it on account of our friendship. I will buy you drinks tonight as a form of gratitude."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "I have only heard of fathers doting their children but never heard of brothers doting their sister."

Lord Changwen smiled bitterly and replied in a low voice: "I can see that my sister has a favourable impression of Shaolong. Of course she does! She may not admit it but I can tell it from her joyful expression last night. I have very sharp eyes! Ha! She is a good catch!"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and smiled weakly: "It's not funny. Let's see what she is up to."

They continued chatting as they walked towards the palace gates. When they went through the corridor and was about to reach the palace gates, Lord Changwen slipped away.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his resolve and stride towards the Eighteen Guardians who were waiting for him. From afar, he caught sight of Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er the two stubborn Qin girls. They were trying out his horse Jifeng. Wu Shu and the other Guardians could only stare at them helplessly.

Ying Ying noticed him coming and whipped the horse, riding towards him, chirping: "Good day General Xiang. We are not convinced by your prowess and are coming to challenge you again."

Admiring her stubborn, cute and youthful demeanour, Xiang Shaolong wished he could leap up the horse, embrace her slender waist, lean against the back of her body and ride one big round around the city. Unfortunately, it can only be a fantasy. He bitterly smiled: "When can this come to a conclusion?"

Jifeng stopped beside him and stretched its long neck, nuzzling him.

Xiang Shaolong lovingly hugged Jifeng and led the horse with Ying Ying on it back to Lu Dan'er and the Guardians. He bitterly laughed: "I surrender. Can Miss have mercy on me and let me go?"

Ying Ying was displeased: “How can you go back on your word? Aren’t you a mighty hero? I don’t care; you are coming with us to compete on horse riding followed by other contests.”

Lu Dan’er welcomed with a smile: “When have you become another coward!”

Xiang Shaolong almost exploded. He had a brainwave and suggested: “Fine. I will compete with you but first of all, let me return to the Command Centre and run an errand. After that, I will play with you girls.”

Ying Ying agilely jumped off the horse and exclaimed: “Who is playing with you? I just saw that you may have some small abilities and wanted to see for myself how good you really are.”

Lu Dan’er added: “Men are all like that. When you treat them well, they think they are very important. Hei! Smart-ass!”

Xiang Shaolong acted like he did not care and declared: “If you don’t allow me to return to the Command Centre, I will not compete with you. If you don’t treasure it, too bad!”

Both girls were surprised: “Treasure?”

Roaring with laughter, Xiang Shaolong leapt up his horse and bellowed: “Whatever! Brothers, let’s head back to the Centre.”

His legs dug lightly into Jifeng and he galloped towards the main gate.

When Xiang Shaolong and the two stubborn girls jumped down the horse, they can all sense that something is going on in the Command Centre.

The area outside the main hall was crowded with Cavalry soldiers and everyone has an angry look on their faces. Sounds of scolding can be heard coming from inside the hall.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly glad and led the girls into the hall. The soldiers saw that Xiang Shaolong has returned and made way for him. Someone whispered: "Commander, someone from the Imperial Infantry is causing trouble here."

'Imperial Commander is here!' was announced. Accompanied by the two girls, Xiang Shaolong was feeling excited as he stepped into the hall.

The hall was split into two groups.

On one side were Teng Yi, Jing Jun and ten over cavalry leaders. On the other side were Lu Xiong and twenty odd Infantry escort soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong winked and the Eighteen Guardians fanned out and surrounded Lu Xiong's group.

Lu Xiong did not even turn around and coldly laughed: “The man who can speak is finally back.”

These words matched Lu Xiong’s attitude and mindset. He did not regard General Xiang Shaolong who is ranked two ranks higher than him. In fact, he did not even regard him at all.

Ying Ying is naturally familiar with the Qin military. She leaned towards Xiang Shaolong’s ear and whispered: “Aren’t the Infantry under your control?”

With her scent and breath on his ear, Xiang Shaolong was feeling ticklish and yet comfortable at the same time. He softly replied: “The two of you stay here obediently. Do not let them know that you are here. I will need you to be my witnesses.”

The girls are delighted and did not take offence at his commanding tone. They squeezed into the crowd.

Once they are in place, Xiang Shaolong sauntered up and stopped between Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Facing Lu Xiong whose face is as dark as charcoal, he feigned surprise: “Official Lu mentioned ‘the man who can speak’, may I know who he is?”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun wanted to aggravate him and purposely laughed in response. The other cavalry soldiers followed their example and laughed as well.

His eyes flashing with murder and anger, Lu Xiong hissed: “Of

course I am referring to Commander Xiang. Aren't you a man who can speak?"

Xiang Shaolong's eyes focused on him and he harshly roared: "How dare you!"

The entire hall became completely silent and the atmosphere became very tense.

Lu Xiong can never imagine Xiang Shaolong to be rude to him as he is an important figure of the Premier Residence. His face changing colour, he realised that he had said something wrong and undeserving of his military rank. He was lost for words.

Xiang Shaolong simply threatened: "Lu Xiong, you saw me and did not salute me. This is disrespectful. You even pass rude comments and disregard military subordination. Are you aware of your wrongdoing?"

The arrogant Lu Xiong has his own methods. He coldly laughed: "If Commander felt that I have committed a wrongdoing, he may feel free to complain to Premier Lu."

Every cavalry soldier began to protest.

Jing Jun cheekily asked: "If you are sent to war, will you only report to Premier Lu and nobody else? Is he the only person who can command you? Are you going to send someone to Xianyang City to ask him regarding every single thing?"

The Cavalry soldiers burst out laughing again. Even Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er were giggling too.

Lu Xiong was made into a joke and could not take it lying down. He barked: "Jing Jun, who the hell do you think you are, how dare you..."

Teng Yi interrupted: "If he is nobody, you are even worse off. Both of you are assistant generals but Jing Jun is still half a rank higher than you."

Hearing his words, the hall broke out into laughter again. The two girls even clapped loudly in approval, and nobody is afraid of Lu Xiong anymore.

Lu Xiong and his men have an ugly expression on their faces.

Xiang Shaolong will not allow him to recompose himself. "Lu Xiong, you are too much! Kneel down!" He barked.

Everyone present quietened down and waited for their reaction.

Lu Xiong was shocked and he took a step back. He challenged: "Xiang Shaolong, you better not force me."

Teng Yi knew that the time is right. He ordered: "Men. Apprehend this criminal!"

The Cavalry soldiers had expected this. Over ten men stepped forward.

Originally, all Lu Xiong wanted is to save his own son. Under the ridicule of Xiang Shaolong and his men, he fell into their trap. Moreover, he has been arrogant because he enjoyed the backing of Lu Buwei. With his status, he will not allow himself to be arrested like a common criminal. Jiang! He drew out his sword and like a fool, he wildly challenged: “Who dares to arrest me?”

His men originated from the Lu Family Warriors and are arrogant men who enjoyed Lu Buwei’s backing. Unafraid of a simple Cavalry Commander, they drew and brandished their weapons, surrounding and protecting Lu Xiong.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun exchanged looks. First, they called back their cavalry soldiers who are waiting to attack. Xiang Shaolong then shook his head and sighed: “If Assistant Commander Lu is not going to drop your weapons and kneel down, acknowledging your mistakes, I will not be merciful.”

Lu Xiong grinned: “What can you do to me?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled and gestured with his hand.

The Eighteen Guardians agilely armed themselves with their crossbows that were slanged on their backs. They loaded their crossbows and assumed fighting positions. They aimed their crossbows at the enemies and forced Lu Xiong and his men to a

corner.

When they could no longer retreat, Lu Xiong sobered up and stopped his men from withdrawing. He cried: “Xiang Shaolong! What do you mean by this?”

Jing Jun laughed: “The meaning of your swords is the same meaning as our crossbows. What meaning can there be?”

As the atmosphere is very tense, no one dared to make any noise. Only Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er cannot be bothered and giggled at Jing Jun’s joke.

Lu Xiong spotted them and questioned in a deep voice: “Who are the two girls?”

A Cavalry Captain shouted: “You did not even know the famous Miss Ying Ying and Miss Lu Dan’er. What kind of Assistant Commander are you?”

Lu Xiong was flabbergasted and felt that he is at a serious disadvantage.

If there were only Cavalry soldiers around, he can deny everything regardless of his mistakes. With these outsiders, he is really in trouble.

Xiang Shaolong saw his expression changing and knew that he is thinking of backing down. He will not give him any chance to

apologise and roared: “If you are not throwing down your weapons and kneeling down, you will regret it!”

He insisted on Lu Xiong kneeling down to make things difficult for him.

Lu Xiong was hesitating for a while. Before he had a chance to reply, Xiang Shaolong ordered: “Shoot their legs!”

The mechanism sounded and eighteen arrows shot out.

With this kind of distance and environment, there is no place to hide. Eighteen of Lu Xiong’s followers fell down, all with an arrow wound on their thighs.

The crossbows were reloaded immediately.

Lu Xiong may not be injured but his fighting will is gone. Afraid that Xiang Shaolong may really kill him, he angrily threw down his long sword and cursed: “You are good! I want to see how you are going to account for this to Premier Lu.”

The remaining seven of his uninjured followers threw down their swords and surrendered.

Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er did not anticipate that Xiang Shaolong will really attack them and were dazed.

Xiang Shaolong gestured again. The cavalry soldiers crowded forward, tying Lu Xiong and his men up. Lu Xiong and his men were then forced to kneel down.

Within Xianyang City, the Cavalry are considered a prestigious force and will not tolerate these insults. They are impressed and happy with Xiang Shaolong's brave actions.

Ignoring the injured men, Xiang Shaolong faced Lu Xiong and plainly asked: "Assistant Commander Lu, why are you doing all these? Your son only injured a few men and you resort to violence?"

Lu Xiong raised his head in surprise: "What?"

Xiang Shaolong gently reminded: "Didn't you hear what I said? Anyway, it doesn't matter now. We shall see Premier Lu now and see which one of us is disrespectful and insubordinate."

Lu Xiong's face was drained of colour. In the moment, he knew that he had been too reckless and was tricked by Xiang Shaolong's well-devised plan.

Book 13 Chapter 06 – Shi Huang Shows His Might

There is a Qin court in the west of Xianyang Palace. Xiao Pan is seated on the dragon throne on a platform that was raised three steps above the ground. Li Si the Imperial Librarian is seated behind him.

Empress Zhu Ji is seated one step below him.

The high ranking officials are seated on two rows on each side.

On one side were Lu Buwei, Cai Ze, Wang Wan and Meng Ao; on the other side were Xu Xian, Lu Gong and Wang Ling.

While they were in discussion over the Zhengguo Canal, a serious looking Lord Changping came in to report that Xiang Shaolong seeks an urgent audience. Everyone was caught by surprise.

Xiao Pan had expected this and order Lord Changping to bring Xiang Shaolong in at once.

Xiang Shaolong strode in and paid his respects to everyone. He detailed the entire situation and added: “Initially, this matter falls under my personally responsibility. However, Lu Xiong kept demanding he wanted Premier Lu to judge him. As this matter concerned Premier Lu’s reputation, I dare not act rashly and reported this to Crown Prince, Empress and Premier Lu.”

Lu Buwei is so angry his face is almost green. He furiously scolded: “Where is that son of a bitch?”

From this sentence, everyone can sense how domineering Lu Buwei is.

Under such a situation, the Crown Prince Xiao Pan should express his views first before others can comment. Apparently, Lu Buwei’s comment is tantamount to insubordination.

Moreover, he is scolding Lu Xiong like a parent and not like a high ranking official.

Xiao Pan was prepared and started: “Right Premier need not be angry first; we must first investigate and clarify all the details.”

He turned to Zhu Ji and inquired: “Empress! Am I doing it correctly?”

Zhu Ji looked down at the awe-inspiring Xiang Shaolong and her eyes are filled with mixed emotions. Noticing Lu Buwei also winking non-stop at her, she slowly sighed: “Yes. We shall let you decide.”

Under such circumstances, she can only support her beloved son.

Lu Gong and Xu Xian were stunned that this young Crown Prince is capable of handling such a complicated case.

Everyone can tell that this is actually a clash between Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong. It can be an easy or complicated case.

Xiao Pan suppressed his delight and ignored Lu Buwei. To Xiang Shaolong, he calmly enquired: “Lu Bang did not successfully committed his act as he was stopped but this attempted rape is still a serious crime. Does Subject Xiang have any witnesses?”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “The young couple are right outside the hall. We can summon them and Crown Prince can question them.”

Cai Ze interrupted: “The Crown Prince’s time is precious and need not fret over such a small matter. The law bureau can handle this case. I suggest that we must first clarify whether Assistant Commander Lu was misled and thus clashed with Commander Xiang. The Imperial Army are two important pillars of our City defences. It is important to maintain good relationships between them and bury the hatchet.”

These words are obviously meant to help Lu Xiong.

Cai Ze is an ex-Premier and is well respected. If this was another case, Xiao Pan may relent but in this case, he will push his way through.

Xu Xian and Lu Gong were about to say something but swallowed their words for the time being.

Lu Buwei's expression relaxed. Just as everyone except Xiang Shaolong and Li Si expected Xiao Pan to accept Cai Ze's suggestion, this future Qin Shi Huang slammed his armrest and stood up. He stepped down to Zhu Ji's front and coldly retorted: "Subject Cai's words make no sense! Since Qin has undergone Shang Yang's reforms, we hold military law as our top priority. The strict chain of command and our obedient soldiers have made our Qin army invincible."

He stepped down even lower to the lowest step and scanned the officials with his sharp eyes and officially state: "If someone violates the military law and is insubordinate but we did not handle this matter well, it will have further repercussions on the morale of our soldiers. I will judge this case personally. If it is proven that Assistant Commander Lu is guilty, we will punish him according to military law."

Everyone present was dazed as nobody imagined a young teenager using such strong and domineering words.

Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji reacted as if this is the first time they met Xiao Pan.

Only Lu Si is jumping for joy as these words originated from him.

Lu Gong barked: "Great! This is befitting our Crown Prince. Strict military command with fair rewards and punishment has always been the backbone of our great Qin army."

Xiao Pan smiled but was flustered when everyone is now staring at him. He hurriedly went back to his seat and in a weaker tone, he asked: “Does anyone else have anything to say?”

Cai Ze has been scolded by him and dare not voice his opinions. He lowered his head with dejection.

Lu Buwei was furious and was in a dilemma regarding Xiao Pan. He dared not rebut him as he knew that his words make sense. He could only look towards Zhu Ji and hoped that she will speak up for him.

Zhu Ji knew that Lu Buwei is hinting to her for assistance but because the person involved is Xiang Shaolong, she pretended not to notice his hints.

Meng Ao dryly coughed: “Shaolong and Lu Xiong are people that I am well-acquainted with. By right, such a thing should not have happened. I am guessing that this could arise from the differences between the Cavalry and the Infantry. Moreover, both men are newly promoted and it can be easy for them to misunderstand each other.”

Zhu Ji finally nodded: “Great General Meng’s words make sense. Crown Prince must conduct this investigation properly and not affect the harmony of the Qin military.”

Lu Buwei was relieved that Zhu Ji finally spoke out. He recommended: “This matter can be handed over to me. I guarantee that all violators will be punished accordingly.”

Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong and Li Si were at their wits end. Xu Xian, who has yet to speak, suddenly stood up and came to Xiang Shaolong's side. He plainly state: "I wish to leave with Shaolong for a minute. When I am back, I will voice my opinions. Will Crown Prince please consent?"

Except for Xiang Shaolong, Li Si and Xiao Pan, everyone else were shocked and wondered what he is up to.

Xiang Shaolong cheerfully left with Xu Xian. Wang Wan wanted to take this opportunity to say something but Xiao Pan raised his hand to stop him, declaring: "Wait till the Left Premier is back!"

Wang Wan did not expect Xiao Pan to be so forceful and swallowed his words.

The Court was strangely quiet.

Everyone could not help looking at Xiao Pan and assessed him as if this is the first time they saw him.

He still resembles a child but is extremely calm and confident. Sitting steadily in his throne, his eyes are shining mysteriously and no one can guess what he is thinking.

Zhu Ji had to admit her own son is now a young man.

For the past few days, she has been indulging with Lao Ai and enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, numbing herself from the harsh realities of life.

In her extraordinary life, the four men who made an impact are King Zhuangxiang, Lu Buwei, Xiang Shaolong and her son. But fate has caused her to share a complicated relationship with these men.

Especially Lu Buwei who poisoned King Zhuangxiang to death and made her very guilty when she faced Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan. Now, she must excruciating bear with Lu Buwei to ensure the survival of herself and her son.

Only Lao Ai can make her forget everything.

In this instant, she can feel a big gap between herself and her son. She felt like she did not understand him as well as before.

Lu Buwei is feeling even more ironic.

All along, he has been treating this 'son' affectionately and did his best to cultivate him to be a useful man. In the future, this father and son team can control Qin hand in hand, unite the world and build an everlasting dynasty.

That is one of the reasons he wants to kill Xiang Shaolong; he will not allow Xiao Pan's love for him to be diluted.

Never in his wildest dreams did he expect Xiao Pan to clash with

him. In this instant, he clearly felt some sort of conflict.

He has yet to see through that this is all part of an elaborate scheme conjured by Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan and Li Si. He simply assumed that Xiao Pan is judging this case based on the justice system.

He is well aware of Lu Xiong's idiocy and incompetence. Otherwise, he will not make Guan Zhongxie the main commander and Lu Xiong as the assistant commander.

Xiang Shaolong's elimination of Zhu Meng is a great blow to him and caused him to have some manpower issues. Now, Lu Xiong is in trouble too.

Now, his main focus is to kill Xiang Shaolong. No one must stand between him and his dream.

Cai Ze and Wang Wan who switched sides to Lu Buwei had a rude awakening and realised that the ultimate authority lies with Xiao Pan and not with Lu Buwei, Empress Ji or the other officials. As he grows up eventually, Xiao Pan will be the official King of Qin.

Meng Ao's thinking is much simpler.

His present success is due to Lu Buwei's support and is fiercely loyal to him. His military prowess is as good as, if not stronger than Wang Ling, making him Lu Buwei's biggest supporter. Regardless of what might happen, he will definitely stick to Lu

Buwei.

Wang Ling's thinking more complicated.

This Great General of Qin is someone who favours war and expansion.

Only by attacking the six states can he fulfill his life purpose. That is the reason he is leaning towards Lu Buwei. Lu Buwei is a courageous risk taker and they have a common goal of annihilating the six states.

Out of a sudden, he can sense that the young King is already exhibiting the same characteristics, ambition and energy, forcing him to reconsider his options.

Lu Gong, the most respected General, is someone who is an advocate of Qin supremacy and hated Lu Buwei from the beginning. Due to Xiang Shaolong, he has ditched his worries and believed that Xiao Pan is King Zhuangxiang's flesh and blood. With Xiao Pan's showing his might, he is even more convinced to support this future King.

With everyone deep in their own thoughts, the room was strangely silent.

In a short while, Xu Xian and Xiang Shaolong returned to the room.

Xiang Shaolong stood beside Wang Ling while Xu Xian proceeded forward to face Xiao Pan.

Xu Xian and Xiang Shaolong paid their respects and Xu Xian started: “I wish to inform Crown Prince and Empress that I can guarantee that this matter is not caused by a misunderstanding between the Cavalry and Infantry.”

Lu Buwei is annoyed: “How can Left Premier be so certain?”

In his usual affable manner, Xu Xian disclosed: “In the streets of Xianyang City, Lu Bang did harass the wife of a young man. I happened to pass by personally and stopped him. When I rebuke him, I can already sense that Lu Bang is dissatisfied. Just now, I went out to see if it was the same couple who was involved and it was them indeed. Therefore, it is definitely not the Cavalry soldiers making a false accusation at Lu Bang. There are also credible witnesses who saw Lu Xiong barging into the Cavalry Command Centre to demand for his son. He was also the first one to draw a weapon and disobeyed his superior’s orders.

Finally, everyone understood his reason for leaving the room and even Meng Ao is speechless.

Lu Buwei wished he can personally strangle Lu Bang. Despite Xu Xian ticking him off, he still got the guts to carry out this foolish deed.

Xiao Pan coldly snorted: “Lu Bang must have decided to kill the couple after his crime; thus, he wasn’t concerned about Left

Premier's advice.”

Everyone's heart turned cold, knowing that this young Crown Prince has a killing intention.

This is the wondrous part of the plan. With Xu Xian bearing witness, no one would guess that it was Jing Jun who masterminded Lu Bang's capture.

Zhu Ji frowned deeply: “Lu Bang is guilty of his crime but how does Left Premier know that Lu Xiong drew his weapon first and disobeyed his superior's orders?”

Xu Xian plainly state: “Because Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er are present and can verify this.”

Lu Gong was stunned: “Why is Little Dan'er there?”

Lu Buwei coldly laughed: “Can Shaolong please explain this strange occurrence?”

Everyone's eyes turned to Xiang Shaolong.

Xu Xian added: “I have questioned Shaolong about this. We need to summon Lord Changwen to give a proper explanation.”

Xiao Pan ordered: “Summon Lord Changwen!”

The palace guard at the door left to summon Lord Changwen.

Receiving his order, Lord Changwen rushed over and paid his respects to everyone. He continued to reveal that Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er detained Xiang Shaolong at the palace gates and wanted him to compete with them.

Lu Buwei's expression became very ugly. He stepped out and kneeled down, pleading: "Lu Xiong is my man and it is my fault that he is insubordinate. Please punish me instead."

Even Xiang Shaolong is caught unaware by this turn of event. Lu Buwei has shouldered the blame on himself and Zhu Ji will not allow Xiao Pan to make things difficult for Lu Buwei.

Zhu Ji expectedly interrupted: "Premier please rise. Allow me to speak to the Crown Prince before we pass judgement."

Lu Buwei knew that Zhu Ji will protect him from Xiao Pan. He continued kneeling and 'agonizingly' exclaimed: "Empress need not say more. I deserved to be punished!"

Zhu Ji secretly cursed him for putting on such an act but was helpless at the same time. She whispered to Xiao Pan: "Right Premier has accumulated many merits and may not be able to control his large forces well. Crown Prince must be lenient."

Xiao Pan was expressionless and silent for some time while everyone sat there anticipating his judgement. Ultimately, he

declared: “With Right Premier’s intervention, father and son Lu Xiong may be spared from death. But this matter concerns our military morale and everyone including Lu Xiong will be sacked from their military positions and can never rejoin the army. Lu Bang will be sentenced to fifty strokes of the pole for his attempted crime. As Lu Xiong’s direct supervisor, Guan Zhongxie did not set a good example and will be demoted by one rank. The Imperial Infantry Commander will be assigned to Commander Xiang for the time being. Right Premier, please rise.”

Zhu Ji is completely blown away and Lu Buwei is completely swept off his feet. He unsteadily stood up and forgot to give his thanks.

Xiang Shaolong went forward and kneeled down, accepting his assignment. He secretly thought that this multiple combo attack which gave him control over the Imperial Infantry must have come from Li Si.

Xiao Pan fiercely stood up and coldly barked: “This matter shall be decided then. Court dismissed!”

Everyone kneeled down immediately.

Xiao Pan helped Zhu Ji up and they left with Li Si under the escorts of the palace guards.

Xiang Shaolong was experiencing mixed emotions. He knew that he, like the other generals and officials, have finally felt the forceful and suffocating aura of the future Qin Shi Huang.

And he is still a teenager.

To avoid Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er, he intentionally left with Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang Ling.

The moment they stepped out of the hall, Lu Buwei and Meng Ao are waiting for them. When they saw Xiang Shaolong, Lu Buwei assured: "Lu Xiong is the culprit behind this incident, The Crown Prince may have let him off lightly but I will censure him myself. Shaolong need not hold it against him anymore."

Lu Gong and the other generals were surprised at Lu Buwei's forthcoming attitude.

Only Xiang Shaolong knew that Lu Buwei is determined to kill him at the three-day hunting fair that begins the day after tomorrow, which is why he is putting up a friendly demeanour. Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie's assassination plan must be a flawless one that will take his life for sure.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be embarrassed and apologised: "I am no other choice and seek Premier Lu's forgiveness."

Lu Buwei laughed loudly and chatted casually with Lu Gong and the rest. He then accompanied Xiang Shaolong out of the palace, leaving Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er staring at him furiously and helplessly.

Observing Lu Buwei's friendly manner as if nothing had happened, Xiang Shaolong was secretly in admiration.

The most powerful strategy is to hide a knife behind your smile!

Book 13 Chapter 07 – Hope At Death’s Door

Lu Buwei insisted on sending Xiang Shaolong home. Resistance is futile and he joined him in his luxurious carriage.

His carriage drove past the almost completed new Premier Residence. Lu Buwei proudly pointed: “After the hunting fair, I will move to this place with the best Fengshui in Xianyang City. But Mister Zou mentioned that after eight years, the Fengshui will move into Xianyang Palace. Ha! That is the same time as the Crown Prince coronation. What a coincidence!”

Xiang Shaolong knew nuts about Fengshui and acted according to his knowledge of history. Upon hearing this news, he was in shock and dare not belittle Zou Yan the astrologer and philosopher.

Lu Buwei stretched lazily and smiled: “With eight years of good luck, I can accomplish many things!”

Xiang Shaolong was full of admiration. Lu Buwei had just been defeated but he is truly not bothered. Like a shrewd businessman, he did not mind losing out this once as he has other means of fighting back.

Lu Buwei suddenly hugged his shoulder intimately and smiled: “The new Premier Residence has everything except a good son-in-law. Shaolong should understand my intention! Now that you have seen Niang Rong, I believe you would agree with me that she is an excellent catch! She is my favourite daughter.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. This is the last time he can mend fences with Lu Buwei.

Originally a businessman, this Qin Premier cooperated with him because there are benefits to be reaped. Next, he tried to kill him because he will benefit from his death. Presently, he is trying to secure his loyalty again to benefit himself.

He is a man who is focused on benefits and power. Everything else is unimportant.

If it was anybody else, that person would bear some grudges after being defeated. Lu Buwei did not bear any grudges at all but treated Xiang Shaolong even better than before.

From these, he concluded that even if he became his son-in-law, he can still be a sacrificial pawn in the political game. Lu Xiong is an example.

Xiang Shaolong can almost feel that Lu Buwei wanted to turn Qin into his own country via Xiao Pan. He may even want to be the King of Qin one day.

Lu Buwei saw that he did not reject outright and thought that he was tempted. Patting his shoulder, he added: "Think about it! Give me an answer the next time we meet. No matter what, I will punish Lu Xiong that idiot."

The carriage came to a halt and they have arrived at the main

gate of the Command Centre.

Xiang Shaolong gave his thanks and dismounted from his carriage. He is very confident that Lu Buwei will ask him for his reply during the hunting fair. If his answer is 'no', he will proceed to assassinate him.

Back at the Command Centre, everyone is full of praise and respect for him. Xiang Shaolong realised that Xiao Pan had gained the respect of the Qin Court and he had gained the respect of the Imperial Army. In the future, no one will dare to question his authority.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun had returned earlier. The moment they saw each other, they could not help but have a good laugh. Lu Xiong's career is over and it is more satisfying than killing him.

Teng Yi stopped laughing and officially state: "Even Guan Zhongxie the Infantry Commander has been demoted. This kid must have a lot of scores to settle with Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "We will soon be fighting him openly as he had just brought up the marriage proposal again. He must have an answer by the next time we meet."

Jing Jun blinked: "That Lu Niang Rong is quite attractive. Why don't you marry her first for fun and take revenge at the same time?"

Teng Yi furiously barked: “What kind of person do you think Third Brother is?”

Jing Jun shut up at once.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “This is a troublesome issue. If we reject him, Lu Buwei will attack us but I cannot be bothered anymore.”

Teng Yi was about to say something when an attendant reported that Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er are here to harass him again.

Xiang Shaolong and the two girls rode out of the city along the official roads. Riding down a slope, they came to a piece of flat grassland. It is the middle of Spring and the grass is jade green. With these two stubborn but beautiful girls accompanying him, all his worries disappeared and he was in high spirits.

Ying Ying rode cheerfully to his side and pointed to a hill nearby, stating: “That is Horse-resting hill. On the hill is a tall and ancient cypress tree with a spring beside it. That shall be our finishing line and whoever reaches first shall be the winner. For the next three months, the loser must pay obeisance to the winner every time they meet.”

On his other side, Lu Dan’er giggled: “Of course it is not a simple horse race. You can use any method to prevent your opponent from winning but the rider and horse must not be injured. Do you understand?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “The horse will sprint very quickly and how can there be any time to attack the opponent?”

Ying Ying shot him a look and used her long legs to dig into her horse’s stomach and rode off. She smiled like the Spring wind: “How would I know?”

Lu Dan’er sped off at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong is used to their ‘ruthless methods’ and did not have time to complain about their ‘false start’. He rode Jifeng and began to chase them.

In terms of horse riding, he only learnt about it when he came to these ancient times. Compared to Wang Jian who can eat and sleep on horseback, he is far behind. But in terms of speed, he can easily win them with Jifeng. He thought about the girls helping him to trap Lu Xiong and did not mind losing to them and make them happy in the process. After all, paying respects to pretty girls is something fun to him.

With this mindset, he lost the will to fight and rode leisurely towards the goal, trailing the tails of the two horses in front of him.

He gradually left the grasslands behind.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but think about Zhao Ya.

If he can really kill Tian Dan and avenge Shan Rou, she should be in Xianyang City by the time he comes back.

After so many twists and turns, he must treat her well and provide her with a comfortable life for the rest of her days.

In front of him, the two girls rode into a forest.

Xiang Shaolong turned his thoughts to Qin Qing.

Love is a funny thing. Opposites do attract which best describes their relationship. They need not be in an official relationship; all they need is the special feeling whenever they meet and the excitement of eating the forbidden fruit. If they can stay like this forever, it would be perfect. The problem is one day, they may cross the line and it will be too late for regrets.

In the 21st century, he would never stutter in front of a beautiful girl. But the inevitable has happened, showing how much he has changed.

Deep in his thoughts, he came to the forest and entered it.

Occasionally, he caught sight of the back of the two girls.

Ladies of these historical times mature very early. It may be due to them getting married at fourteen years old which is very normal. Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er are barely fifteen or sixteen but are like flowers in full blossom. Moreover, they have picked up

horse riding, sword fighting and archery skills. With a good figure, they are more enticing compared to girls from the six states. He would be lying if he said he is not tempted by them.

But Xiang Shaolong had no desire to be involved with them.

Firstly, he had no desire to get involved in new relationships, especially with Lu Dan'er. She is one of the girls shortlisted to marry Xiao Pan. If he gets involved with her, it is equivalent to him competing with Xiao Pan.

This is not the 21st century where people have one night stands. Additionally, she comes from a prestigious family. Anyone who made love to her must be responsible for marrying her. What Xiang Shaolong fears the most now is responsibility to pretty ladies. The only exception is Qin Qing, whom he is troubled over.

Still thinking about her, he suddenly felt something was amiss.

He caught sight of a black figure from the corner of his eye and he looked over in that direction. A net was thrown towards his head and the attacker was hiding behind a short tree.

Xiang Shaolong could have unsheathed Bloodwave and chopped at the net.

But the net suddenly tightened and was intertwined with Bloodwave. The net continued to pull Bloodwave away from him.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. Even if the two girls combined their strength, they are no match for him.

Without thinking, he pulled hard at the sword and wanted to cut the net into two.

Like a bolt out of nowhere, an unbeatable strong force pulled back and Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. He fell down his horse with his sword and landed squarely on his face.

A rider-less Jifeng galloped a few steps forward and stopped. It turned back and looked at Xiang Shaolong with a quizzical look on its face.

The opponent continued to pull very hard. Helplessly, Xiang Shaolong had to let go and lost his sword.

Shrill giggles of the two girls can be heard from the bushes.

Xiang Shaolong realised that they had used the horse's strength to steal his sword. Exasperated, he continued to lie on the grass and gazed up at the blue sky and white clouds.

Soon, the two attractive girls appeared by his side. Bending down to look at their defeated opponent, they were still laughing hysterically with satisfaction.

Ying Ying chirped: "You are so useless. Next time, we will not be bothered with you."

Xiang Shaolong could feel that his body is tired. Lying comfortably, he smiled: “You are ignoring me for good? Nothing can be better than that.”

Lu Dan'er placed Bloodwave beside his face and unhappily retorted: “Smart-ass. Do you think we longed after you? I wonder why Ji Yanran married you. You cannot even protect your own sword.”

Ying Ying stomped her feet whining: “Dan'er! Why are you still talking to him? Are you deaf? He said it would be great if we ignore him. Let's go! I never want to see him again.”

Lu Dan'er is still hesitating when the incensed Ying Ying dragged her away.

When the galloping sounds have faded, Jifeng came back to him. It lowered its head and stared at him.

Xiang Shaolong sat up with a bitter smile. It is better this way but he still feared that they will make trouble for him.

Ying Ying could not stand his joke as she had high regards and expectations of him. Therefore, she was especially angry.

In this instant, Jifeng was alerted and its ears straightened.

His sixth sense told him something was wrong. He slapped Jifeng on the rump and roared: “Go!”

Jifeng could understand him due to their constant interaction. It galloped non-stop away from him.

Simultaneously, Xiang Shaolong rolled behind the small tree where the two girls were hiding earlier.

The crossbow mechanism can be heard.

Ten over arrows whished through the forest.

By then, Xiang Shaolong had rolled out from the other side and is now behind a giant tree. From his waist, he retrieved two flying needles.

His attackers must have followed them from the city. When the two girls have left, they made their move.

He was caught unprepared as he did not expect Lu Buwei to ambush him right now. If he was killed, he will be the main suspect.

Swishing sounds were heard and an arrow came flying at him from the left.

Xiang Shaolong quickly evaded. The arrow flew past his face and

embedded itself in the tree behind him. It was a close shave.

He somersaulted and continued to roll toward the archer.

Hiding behind a tree, the masked attacker was about to load another arrow when Xiang Shaolong's Bloodwave has pierced his body.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw some human silhouettes. He did not have time to turn around and shot out his flying needles. Two tragic cries were heard one after another.

Xiang Shaolong knew he cannot stop moving and rolled into another bush. Four arrows shot past the place he used to stand, showing how ruthless and desperate his attackers are.

Listening to the footsteps behind him, Xiang Shaolong counted at least twenty enemies.

He sheathed his long sword and retrieved two flying needles in each hand. He shot the needles behind him based on the footsteps he heard.

A tragic cry was heard behind him. Out of the four needles, one found its target.

The enemies hurriedly took cover.

Until now, they have only used crossbows against him. It is fortunate that they feared his flying needles and dared not act rashly. Otherwise, he would have been killed.

But this is not good enough. With so many enemies against him, he will also die if they managed to surround him.

His only escape is through Jifeng whom he had chased away. If he can get on horseback, he has a chance to escape.

Xiang Shaolong continued to roll forward and was about to reach another tree when his thigh was in excruciating pain. An arrow had grazed his thigh, taking away large chunks of his pants, skin and flesh. Fresh blood began to pour out of his wound. He grunted and moved behind the tree.

Loud footsteps can be heard.

Xiang Shaolong looked behind him and saw another masked man pouncing at him with his crossbow. He frantically shot out another flying needle.

The man was hit on the face and fell backwards. His arrow shot aimlessly into the air.

Another three arrows were shot at him. Luckily, he had shrank back in time.

Fresh blood flowed out of his wound uncontrollably and he was

in great pain.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this is a crucial moment. He gathered his will to survive and forcefully rolled forward and hid behind a pile of rocks. His head started to swirl and he knew that it is a sign of losing too much blood. He quickly drew out a dagger and cut a portion of his long sleeve, using the sleeve to bandage his wound.

Rustling sounds were heard as the enemies neared his hiding place.

Xiang Shaolong was depressed. His injured leg will restrict his movement and he will be surrounded by the assassins before he can meet up with Jifeng.

In this instant, he saw a tripping rope tied between two trees.

Xiang Shaolong's mind was turning over furiously. He guessed that this must be the second trap Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er had laid for him. He looked closer and saw another two tripping ropes further down the road.

The footsteps are getting closer.

Xiang Shaolong is exhilarated and annoyed at the same time. He was glad that Jifeng did not come this way and that this is his only chance of escape. Motivated, he jumped up and ran madly ahead. Concurrently, he whistled to summon Jifeng.

Swishing sounds were heard.

Xiang Shaolong leapt over the tripping ropes and rolled forward.

Arrows flew past his head.

He bounced up and Jifeng's galloping sounds can be heard.

A whistle was heard behind him and the enemies begin to run after him without any reservations.

Xiang Shaolong weaved in and out of the trees and pushed his speed to the maximum, luring the enemies to fire their crossbows.

Reloading a crossbow is a troublesome chore which may even require using one's legs. After firing a shot, the enemies must stop temporarily to reload. If they did not want to lose sight of him, they must put their crossbows aside and focus on the chase.

Without the threat of the crossbows, it is now a running competition.

Jifeng suddenly appeared a hundred yards ahead on his left and galloped towards him.

Due to his thigh injury, Xiang Shaolong was limping and his speed is dropping. Fortunately, the crossbows have stopped firing and only running sounds can be heard.

It was followed by cries of surprise. Obviously, they have been tripped by the ropes.

Xiang Shaolong took this opportunity to shout: “The enemies have been trapped. Attack!”

Behind him, the enemies are in chaos.

By now, Jifeng has reached his side. Xiang Shaolong leapt up his horse and galloped away horizontally.

He turned around for a quick glance and saw several masked men who had tripped down. Among those who are still standing, he saw a familiar figure. This figure drew out his long sword and attack Jifeng. His sword stances and strokes are perfect.

Xiang Shaolong used his own sword to block his attack and laughed loudly: “Dan Chu is indeed worthy of being Chancellor’s Tian top general!”

He dug his heels lightly into Jifeng and rode off like a fleeting cloud.

Book 13 Chapter 08 – Deeply Intertwined

In the Wu Residence, Teng Yi bandaged his wound personally and observed: “If the arrow is shot an inch higher, Third Brother would not be able to come back alive.”

At this juncture, Jing Jun came back and reported: “I finished my checks. Dan Chu has yet to come back and the two stubborn girls are safely home.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned and thought aloud: “I am dead sure one of the Qin Court officials tipped Tian Dan off. Otherwise, he would not have found such an excellent opportunity.”

Beside him, Tao Fang nodded: “If Shaolong is killed, everyone will suspect Lu Buwei. Qin will be in chaos.”

Jing Jun interrupted: “Will it be Lu Buwei who wanted to kill you through Tian Dan? After you are dead, he will push the blame to someone else!”

Teng Yi countered: “Not likely. The attackers would have killed Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er as well. It is lucky that they left earlier and were not ambushed!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed coldly. His earlier ambush and escape is an once-in-a-lifetime experience. If not for the girls laying the tripping ropes and caused the enemies to lose their footing, he will not be able to survive.

Tao Fang added: “We should count our blessings that the arrows are not laced with poison. It must have been a hasty decision and they did not have much time to prepare. Otherwise, the consequences might be different.”

Pausing, he continued: “We must investigate and find out which high-ranking official went to see Tian Dan after the Court was dismissed. We must know who the spy is or we will continue to suffer in his hands.”

Xiang Shaolong advised: “It will not be easy! To conceal their secret relationship, they will have a covert communication method that will not be easy to discover.”

Teng Yi cut in: “Based on the fact that they managed to guess that Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er will bring you out of the city, this spy has a deep knowledge of Xianyang City affairs and may even be someone close to them. From this deduction, your assassins are neither Lu Buwei nor Meng Ao.”

Jing Jun was about to voice his opinion when Wu Shu came running in and reported: “There is a letter from the farm!”

Xiang Shaolong was elated and took the bamboo container from him. He opened up the lid and withdrew a letter. As expected, it was the forged letter from Lord Chunshen to Li Yuan.

As everyone scrutinized the letter, they were awe-struck.

Tao Fang inquired: “How does Shaolong plan to hand this letter to Li Yuan?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Prepare the carriage. I have to trouble you people to support me to visit Lu Gong.”

When he got down the carriage and his injured foot touched the ground, sharp pain shot right into his heart. Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for being too complacent.

Wu Yan Zhu and another Guardian Jing Bieli hurriedly supported him on both sides. Together, they slowly moved towards Lu Gong’s main hall.

The gatekeepers looked at him with astonishment.

With a bitter smile on his face, Xiang Shaolong crossed the door ledge and sat down in the inner hall. The two Guardians left and waited for him beyond the doors.

A servant girl served tea and secretly peeped at him, wanting to say something but held her tongue at the last moment.

Xiang Shaolong was curious and wanted to ask her what she wanted to say. A yellow silhouette flew in suddenly like the wind and sat down opposite him with a complacent look on her face. Of course it is Lu Dan’er.

Her lips were curled up and she proudly teased: “To think the high and mighty Imperial Cavalry Commander had a simple fall but broke his leg. What a joke and an embarrassment.”

Xiang Shaolong gazed at her arrogant face and bitterly smiled: “Didn’t you girls decide to leave me alone? Why is Miss Dan’er so interested in me now?”

Lu Dan’er was slightly stunned and countered: “Who is interested in you? It is you who come over to my house and yet you dare to sprout such nonsense?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “It is my fault. Miss Dan’er, please do not be angry anymore.”

Lu Dan’er was boiling mad and stared viciously at him. To the maid who was giggling at the side, she barked: “What are you looking at! Get lost!”

The servant girl panicked and quickly left in a flustered manner.

The atmosphere became awkward as neither of them knew what to say. Lu Dan’er is speechless for a while when Xiang Shaolong’s heart softened and started another conversation: “The day after tomorrow is the hunting fair. Has Miss Dan’er finished your preparations?”

Lu Dan’er acted as if she cannot be bothered: “Who are you to mind my business? Hng! You do not know what is good what for

and even made Sister Ying cry. I will never let you off.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “What?”

Lu Dan’er is even angrier: “What what? Who do you think you are? Must we come and beg you? How I wish I can kill you with one stroke.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked. Like Qin Qing the untouchable beauty, Lu Dan’er is also untouchable as she is shortlisted to marry the Crown Prince.

The opposite of love is hatred.

For these proud girls from prestigious families, they cannot tolerate people being indifferent towards them, especially people whom they admired.

He was dumbfounded for a moment when Lu Gong came in.

Lu Dan’er whispered: “Xiang Shaolong! You’ll pay for this!” and slipped away.

Lu Gong sat down on the host chair and shook his head, sighing: “She is a difficult child and sometimes even I cannot control her.”

Xiang Shaolong can only smile weakly in reply.

Lu Gong solemnly implored: “What happened to your leg? Did Dan’er injure you?”

In a low voice, Xiang Shaolong disclosed his assassination.

Lu Gong blew his top: “How dare Tian Dan try to kill someone in Qin? Are Qin people meant to be bullied by rascals like him?”

Xiang Shaolong added: “It is hard to link this case to him. Moreover, Lu Buwei will shield him.” From his bosom, he retrieved the forged letter and handed it to Lu Gong.

After Lu Gong finished reading, he nodded: “Leave this to me and Li Yuan will receive this letter by tonight. Recently, a guest-advisor from Lord Chunshen’s residence has come to visit me. With him delivering this letter, Li Yuan’s suspicious will not be raised.”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “That’s wonderful!”

After contemplating, Lu Gong uneasily revealed: “Little Dan is really troublesome!”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “What is your granddaughter up to?”

Lu Gong revealed: “For the past few days, Little Dan visited Guan Zhongxie besides you. She is full of praise for his sword skills and character. In addition, that man is good at sweet-talking young girls. Shouldn’t I be worried?”

Xiang Shaolong's spirits sank when he heard this. He frowned: "Isn't her marriage decided by you?"

Lu Gong shook his head: "Since ancient times, Qin has a custom of families staying under the same roof and relied on hunting and fishing as a way of livelihood. Children are taught martial arts from young and it is girls who look for a husband instead of boys looking for a wife. When they have kids, then we talk about getting married. Even with Shang Yang's reforms, there are many old customs that still remain. So if Dan'er is really in love with Guan Zhongxie, there is nothing I can do."

It is Xiang Shaolong's turn to be worried.

This can be the best way for Guan Zhongxie to infiltrate the Qin's circle of trust. If he manages to make love to Lu Dan'er and become Lu Gong's grandson-in-law, Lu Dan'er can no longer marry the Crown Prince and Guan Zhongxie's status will be raised. From then on, he will become a more formidable enemy.

No outsiders can meddle with a love relationship.

Without a single doubt, Guan Zhongxie is a charming man. Even he himself does not have the confidence to win him in this area.

He bitterly smiled: "Didn't you have the intention to marry Miss into the palace?"

Lu Gong sighed: “That is what Xu Xian and Teng Sheng suggested! Dan’er used to accompany Crown Prince in his studies but lost interest after she got to know Guan Zhongxie. Lu Buwei is devious indeed; now it is hard for me to propose marriage to Empress.”

Lu Gong’s eyes flashed with a murderous aura and added in a deep voice: “I sent someone to warn Guan Zhongxie that I will tear him to pieces if he dares to be involved with Dan’er. I am not afraid of Lu Buwei backing him. The problem is that it was Dan’er who looked for him every time.”

Pausing, he questioned: “Has Shaolong fought him before?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head.

Lu Gong described: “His swordsmanship is extremely formidable. During Lord Longyang’s farewell banquet last night, he displayed his true abilities and defeated the top swordsman from each state continuously. Even Tian Dan’s personal escort Liu Zhong Xia lost to him. It is now rumoured in Xianyang City that he is even better than you and Wang Jian. Hei! *****!”

Xiang Shaolong was agitated: “What does Lu Gong think about his attacks?”

Lu Gong replied in a deep voice: “His sword strokes are very peculiar and countered fast strokes with slow strokes. Compared to your sword skills, I say both of you have an equal chance of winning. But I afraid your arm strength is not as strong as his.”

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel the threat of Guan Zhongxie. This martial arts competition must have been thought of by Mo Ao. This man must be killed soon or he will pose a bigger threat to them.

If he manages to marry both Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er, he will enter the network of the high-ranking officials of Qin. He will be able to give Xiang Shaolong more trouble when that happens.

If Lu Buwei sends him to war and he won some battles and score military contributions, he will be invincible.

Thinking deeper, if he rejected Lu Niang Rong's hand in marriage, Lu Buwei will marry her to Guan Zhongxie. He will then rise to become the second in command in the Premier Residence.

Should he get rid of him? This will be a difficult and dangerous task. Or should he have duel with him? But remembering his godly strength and amazing sword skills, Xiang Shaolong was troubled and was in a dilemma.

Leaving Lu Gong's residence, he misses his wives, maids and son but was afraid that they may be worried about his injury and resisted visiting them.

Deep in his heart, he knows that he misses Qin Qing too. Even without bodily contact, he is very satisfied just to see her pretty face, smile and alluring figure.

Back at the Wu residence, Xiang Shaolong updated Teng Yi and Jing Jun about what happened at Lu Gong's residence. When he was talking about Lu Dan'er and Guan Zhongxie, he sighed: "This scheme is unbeatable. Nobody can interfere in a love relationship. Worse still, Qin ladies are open-minded and are free to choose their husband. Their parents have no say in their marriages."

Jing Jun was tempted: "Lu Dan'er and Ying Ying are top beauties. If Guan Zhongxie marries them, many men including me will be dissatisfied. Ai! After all, I am also a prestigious Assistant General, why don't I see them coming to look for me?"

Teng Yi seriously commented: "Let's stop all these idle chatter. Presently, we do not have time to attend to these affairs. There is one more day left till the hunting fair. We must plan how to kill Mo Ao and at the same time defend ourselves against Lu Buwei's scheming."

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Has Little Jun investigated the hunting grounds?"

Jing Jun happily stood up and took out a cloth map, spreading it on the table. Tao Fang happened to enter the room and joined their secret discussion.

Jing Jun explained: "The hunting area is about one hundred square miles situated between Xianyang City and Mount Liang. Half of the area is grasslands and rivers. The rest are mountainous forests. The camping grounds are based on a small hill east of the

hunting grounds nearest to Xianyang City. River Jing flows here from the east to the west. The inspection square is this piece of large grassland below the camps. We have the day hunt and the night hunt. If we want to kill Mo Ao, naturally the night hunt will provide us with more opportunities.”

Tao Fang was worried: “Shaolong’s leg injury may pose some problems.”

Xiang Shaolong remarked: “This is a battle of wits, not strength. If I am on horseback, my injury will not affect me at all.”

Teng Yi detailed: “There are hunting rules to be observed. No crossbows are allowed and no infighting is tolerated. There are also limits to the number of hunters. The highlight would be the night hunt on the third day. Every unit will send their best hunters to compete their hunting skills in the west hunting mountain. Tigers, leopards and other ferocious animals prowled that area. Whoever can come back with the most number of animal ears will be declared the victor.”

Each unit is referring to each army unit. The Palace guards, Cavalry Guards, Infantry Guards are three individual units. The Lieutenant General Residence, Left and Right Premier residences are all considered as units. The aim of this fair is to promote hunting skills just like an archery competition is used to promote archery skills.

To show their might and prowess, outsiders like Tian Dan will be invited to join and compete.

Jing Jun whined: “Laying the trap is easy, baiting Mo Ao is hard. This man is a genius and it may be hard to trick him.”

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Can you tell me more about the traps?”

Jing Jun excitedly divulged: “One of them is to apply some liquid from the Queen Bee on Mo Ao’s body. If he goes near a bee hive, he will be stung to death.”

Tao Fang frowned: “But if he is dressed in armour, only his face and hands will be stung. That may not be enough to kill him.”

Teng Yi added: “There are some things Master Tao does not know about. In the west hunting mountain, there are ten over hives with poisonous bees. After ten stings, a normal human will faint. After a few more stings, even an immortal cannot save him. The question is how to get him there. He is considered an academic official and need not take part in the hunt. It will be easier to kill Guan Zhongxie.”

Tao Fang’s face changed colour: “In this case, it will be easy for Lu Buwei to kill Shaolong too.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Just thinking that Mo Ao is the brains behind my assassination plan, I think it will be hard for me to escape alive. Seems like I must pretend to accept Lu Niang Rong’s marriage proposal first. When we have killed Mo Ao, we can break our promise.”

Teng Yi sighed: “Third Brother is willing to resort to such methods?”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes shone: “We must use tricks in our fight against him or we may suffer huge losses. We can even use Guan Zhongxie and disrupt his plans. When that happens, we will just act according to circumstances.”

Tao Fang thought of something and reminded: “I nearly forgot. Tu Xian wants to meet you tomorrow evening with news about the latest developments.”

Teng Yi stood up: “It is late! Shaolong should get some rest! If you are limping like this, how can you meet up with Tu Xian secretly?”

With two men supporting him, he returned to his bedroom.

He was at a loss.

In his fight against Lu Buwei, he may not be the overall winner but he was in a dilemma regarding Lu Niang Rong, Lu Dan’er and Ying Ying. Every one of them is considered a big headache for him.

He could clearly sense that even with Mo Ao out of the way, Guan Zhongxie can still cause him to lose everything he has.

In this moment, all he wishes for is to hug Ji Yanran and the others to sleep. It is too difficult to comprehend his own future.

Book 13 Chapter 09 – Hatred From Marriage Rejection

When he woke up the next morning, the pain from his injury has been greatly reduced and the swelling has subsided.

Xiang Shaolong was full of praise for Teng Yi's herbal concoction. Teng Yi warned: "For the next two days, you must not exert yourself. If the wound reopens, you will take a longer time to heal."

Xiang Shaolong was inspired: "I have the best excuse against Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie's assassination plan. I will not participate in the hunting fair due to my injury. After all, in terms of hunting, every one of you is way better than me."

Teng Yi smiled: "But many people will be disappointed."

He added: "There are more news from the farm. Uncle Qing has produced a foldable crossbow according to your suggestion that can be easily hidden inside our clothes. He will need another ten days to complete the prototype."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. The foldable crossbow is as powerful as an ordinary one except that it can be concealed. This is one of his inspirations from his knowledge as a modern 21st century man. With the blacksmiths of Yue working hard, he is able to increase the prowess of his elite forces by another notch.

While he was having breakfast, Lu Buwei sent someone to summon him.

Xiang Shaolong was reminded about Lu Niang Rong's marriage proposal and could feel a giant headache coming. Without a choice, he made his way to the Premier Residence.

At the door of the Premier Residence, he ran into Guan Zhongxie who politely paid his respects and smiled: "I had wanted to find Official Xiang for a drink but was too busy with work. I am so fortunate to run into you today. Since we have met now, why don't we have dinner together later? We can invite the two brothers Lord Changping and Lord Changwen and have a good time together."

Due to their complicated relationship, Xiang Shaolong found it hard to decline and agreed. He pretended to apologise: "Because of Lu Xiong, I caused Official Guan to be demoted by one rank. I..."

Guan Zhongxie laughed loudly and pulled him aside. In a low voice, he commented: "Official Xiang need not be bothered about this. Lu Xiong deserves this punishment and no one else is to be blamed. In fact, he is to be blamed for my demotion instead of you."

Xiang Shaolong's heart became icy cold. This man is extremely crafty and even he cannot help but be alarmed.

After fixing a time and place for dinner later, Xiang Shaolong went ahead to see Lu Buwei in the study room.

Lu Buwei is having his breakfast and invited Xiang Shaolong to join him. In a serious tone, he questioned: "I heard from the Infantry guards that Shaolong was assassinated outside the City yesterday evening and was even injured. What is going on and do you know who did it?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "They are all masked men but unless I am mistaken, one of them is Tian Dan's General Dan Chu."

Lu Buwei's face changed colour and pretended to eat his food to hide his emotions.

Xiang Shaolong can understand the reason for his reaction. If Tian Dan had succeeded, Lu Buwei will be the main suspect. This is equivalent to Tian Dan plotting against Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong frankly state: "Tian Dan already knew that I am Dong Horse Fanatic. He has captured a friend of mine and wanted to blackmail me. Luckily, I could tell that my friend has been killed already and I threatened to kill him for revenge. Thus, he wanted to kill me first."

Lu Buwei was silent for some time. He finally replied: "I wonder how did he find such a perfect opportunity to attack you. Just like that stupid Lu Xiong, he must have bore grudges and was dissatisfied with you. Luckily, I was the one who sent you back and had no time to instruct my men to assassinate you. Otherwise, I will be a key suspect too."

Xiang Shaolong was full of admiration at Lu Buwei's demeanour and persuasive skills. It is no surprise so many people are willing to work for him or work with him. For example, the words he mentioned earlier are full of intimacy and sincerity.

Xiang Shaolong divulged: "In Handan City, Tian Dan did hint to me that he is working with someone in Xianyang City and he is confident of dealing with me. He is obviously not referring to you but one of the six officials at the meeting yesterday."

Lu Buwei nodded: "Lu Gong, Xu Xian, Wang He and Meng Ao are above suspicion. The remaining are Cai Ze and Wang Wan. Cai Ze is more suspicious as I was the one who took over his Premier position. Hng! How dare he pretend to be loyal to me! Watch how I get rid of him!"

Xiang Shaolong was shocked: "I think you should investigate further!"

Lu Buwei coldly smiled: "I know what I am doing. Yes! Have you made up your mind about Niang Rong?"

Xiang Shaolong recalled the saying 'A true man must be ruthless' and hardened his heart: "Premier Lu has such a high opinion of me. How can I not recognize it? This matter..."

He was interrupted by a shrill voice outside the window: "Hold it!"

Both men had a big fright when Lu Niang Rong came in dressed in fiery red. She faced Lu Buwei first and informed: “Father must not blame the guards for failing in their duty. It was me who told them to keep quiet about my presence.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up and paid his respects.

Lu Buwei frowned: “Commander Xiang and I are having a secret discussion. How can Rong’er eavesdrop on us?”

Lu Niang Rong stood proudly before them and declared: “As long as it concerns my future, I have the right to know. In Qin, do as the Qin people do. The Qin has a custom of girls choosing their husbands. As the daughter of the Right Premier of Qin, I should enjoy this right too. Am I mistaken?”

Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong glanced at each other, not knowing how to deal with this stubborn girl.

Lu Niang Rong’s gaze fell on Xiang Shaolong’s face. Showing displeasure, she arrogantly proclaimed: “To marry me, you must first defeat me in all areas. After that, you will be qualified to be ONE of the men who are suitable for my hand in marriage.”

Irritated, Lu Buwei hissed: “Rong’er!”

Lu Niang Rong stomped her feet and whined: “Father! Do you really love me?”

Lu Buwei shrugged his shoulders to Xiang Shaolong, showing that he is powerless too and softly advised: “Xiang Shaolong is unparalleled in his character and swordsmanship. Of course Father loves you.”

Xiang Shaolong is greatly amused. He had to agree to the marriage so that he can live past the hunting fair and Lu Buwei will not suspect him to be Mo Ao’s killer. To his surprise, this third daughter of Lu Buwei is eavesdropping on them outside the window and create a disturbance, fulfilling his wish indirectly.

Lu Niang Rong sauntered to the front of Xiang Shaolong and raised her attractive face, assessing him. She insisted: “I didn’t say I do not like him! But there is someone who is better than him. Unless he can prove that he is better than this man, I will never choose him to be my husband.”

She was facing Xiang Shaolong but her words are directed at her father. Her attitude is a revengeful one, as if she is insulting Xiang Shaolong in return for rejecting her hand in marriage earlier.

She may be very enticing but because Lu Buwei is his sworn enemy, Xiang Shaolong has no feelings for her. He smiled: “Who is this gentleman Third Mistress is attracted to?”

Lu Niang Rong’s lips curled up and shot him a look, challenging: “It is none of your business. Let’s see how you fare at the hunting fair!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled at Lu Buwei: “I am afraid Miss

will be disappointed.”

Lu Buwei frowned: “Rong’er, watch your words. Shaolong has just been ambushed and his leg was injured. Tomorrow...”

Lu Niang Rong was annoyed: “He cannot even protect himself and how can he qualify to be my husband? Father! You must not speak about the marriage anymore. I will rather die than to marry him.”

With a loud Humph, she left quickly.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly overjoyed but pretended to be dejected.

Lu Buwei sat down and sighed: “I have spoilt her. Shaolong need not worry about it. I will speak to her over the next few days.”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly replied: “As you decide!” In his mind, he must somehow let Guan Zhongxie know about this so that Lu Niang Rong will not ‘change her mind’. If he made love to Lu Niang Rong, Lu Buwei will be unable to proceed with this marriage proposal anymore.

Lu Buwei thought for some time and softly asked: “Does Shaolong really want to kill Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Of course I do but it is very difficult. I am angry and not thinking clearly when I said that.

After I left, I realised that I have been too reckless.”

Lu Buwei nodded his head and began to think again. When he wanted to say something, an attendant reported that Li Yuan is here with an urgent matter.

Lu Buwei was taken by surprise and stood up: “Let me think about this further and we shall discuss more in the future. Let me first see what Li Yuan is up to.”

Xiang Shaolong almost could not hide his happiness and stood up.

Li Yuan has been tricked.

Leaving the Premier Residence, he went straight to the palace and seek an audience with the Crown Prince. Xiao Pan received him in the hall of his bedroom.

The palace girls serving him were pretty and enchanting. A few of them are even younger than him.

After they got seated, Xiao Pan noticed him paying attention to the girls and smiled: “These are all top grade virgin beauties presented to me by each of the six states. If you are keen, I can give you some of them.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the day he stopped him from molesting Lady Ni’s maid and was feeling emotional. He shook his

head: “Crown Prince is mistaken. I am afraid that you may indulge in women and damage your health.”

Xiao Pan replied with determination: “Commander can put your mind at ease.” He gestured and dismissed the palace girls and intimately revealed: “Since Mother was raped and died a tragic death, I have sworn to focus all my energy on vengeance and will not waste any of my precious time on women.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that this must be one of the reasons why Xiao Pan can unite the world in the future. The other princes of the six states are all indulging in wine and women. Only with his Mother’s death can Xiao Pan focus absolutely on his revenge and ignored all the beautiful women beside him.

He nodded: “Women can help to balance your physical and mental health as long as it is kept in control. Xiao Pan added: “You are right. Grand Tutor Qin gave me the same advice too.”

Pausing, he continued: “I heard from Lord Changwen that you have an arrow injury. When I tried to visit you, you were asleep already and I was worried sick. What actually happened?”

Xiang Shaolong told him the whole story and Xiao Pan had the same conclusion as Lu Buwei. He was agitated: “There must be a spy as Tian Dan can never predict the two girls will bring you out of the City for a contest.”

Xiang Shaolong interjected: “Let Lu Buwei worry about this. Right! You ignored your Mother’s advice yesterday. Did she hold it

against you?”

Xiao Pan coldly smiled: “After she got involved with Lao Ai, she was a little afraid of me. She did lecture me lightly and insisted that I promote Guan Zhongxie back to his post during the hunting fair. I agreed as I did not want to fall out with her over such insignificant matters.”

Speaking about Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong was reminded about Lu Dan’er and told Xiao Pan about their meetings.

Xiao Pan’s eyes were glowing with murderous intent and coldly hissed: “How dare Lu Buwei send someone to seduce my woman? In the future, I will make him die a horrible death.”

Xiang Shaolong can easily guess that he will force Lu Buwei to his death. He took the chance to ask: “Do you really like Lu Dan’er?”

Xiao Pan smiled: “She is a demanding girl and in terms of beauty, there are many girls around me who can win her. She is only Lu Gong’s granddaughter! Hng! I do not like someone to arrange my marriage for me. I should be the one who decides my marriage.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “I don’t think the Empress will allow you to make your own decision.”

Xiao Pan proudly state: “I have my own ways of dealing with this.”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to find out more when Li Si came in carrying a large stack of official documents.

After he paid his respects, Li Si laid the documents on the table and reported: “As Crown Prince had instructed, I worked non-stop over the last two days and completed the documentation regarding the Outer Custodian. Please have a look.”

Xiang Shaolong then remembered it was him who suggested this new post to promote Teng Sheng. He did not expect this post to involve so much documentation.

Xiao Pan looked at Li Si with appreciation and asked: “Is the Yan beauty a virgin?”

Li Si stole a look at Xiang Shaolong and replied embarrassedly: “For the past two days, I did not even have time to look at her.”

Xiang Shaolong was confused when Xiao Pan cheerfully revealed: “Three days ago, Lu Buwei sent a Yan beauty to me and I transferred his gift to Subject Li. Subject Li was focused on his work and did not touch the girl at all. I appreciate this characteristic very much.”

Li Si hurriedly kneeled down and thanked Xiao Pan for his praises. Xiang Shaolong can tell that Li Si is very touched.

Xiang Shaolong finally understood that a good king will have good ministers serving him. If it was someone else, they would not

notice Li Si's dedication and diligence.

After Li Si got seated, Xiao Pan rested his hand on the table and explained: "Empress and I had a deal. I made her lover an official and gave him a nice house to stay. She will have to give concessions on my marriage. I can accept the Chu Princess to be my concubine but my Queen will only be decided after my coronation."

Xiang Shaolong was full of praise. The chemistry between Qin Shi Huang and Li Si is unbeatable. History has proven that this is an invincible partnership.

Li Si was concerned: "I heard that Official Xiang was injured by an arrow! I am glad to see that you are recovering well."

Xiao Pan interrupted: "Does Subject Xiang want to be examined by the Imperial Physician?"

Xiang Shaolong politely rejected and was about to say something when Lord Changping came in and reported that Lu Buwei is here to seek an audience with Li Yuan.

The three men knew what is about to happen next. Xiang Shaolong left with Lord Changping first while Li Si accompanied Xiao Pan to receive the guests.

Slipping out from the back door, they came to the Royal garden. Lord Changping pulled Xiang Shaolong to one side and apologised:

“It is my sister’s fault to bring you out of the city and caused you to be ambushed.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled” “It is not her fault. Some things are just unpredictable!”

Lord Changping scolded: “I wanted to bring you to a brothel when your men told me that you slept early due to your injury. I will be treating tonight and Official Guan said that you have agreed. Hng! If I find out who is behind this, I will kill him without hesitation.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Don’t be so boastful. It must be some formidable evildoer who dares to attack me. Hei! How is your sister doing?”

Lord Changping sighed: “After she came back from outside the City, she threw a terrible tantrum and locked herself up in her room. She did not even have dinner. You should know that we brothers are busy with work and our parents have passed away. We simply do not have any time to humour her.”

He uneasily asked: “What happened?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I admitted that I have lost and pleaded with them to stop pestering me. Your sister was infuriated and dragged Lu Dan’er away.”

Lord Changping was delighted: “I can see that she is in love with

you. Hei! Are you interested in her?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Since the tragic death of Princess Qian, I am devoid of emotions and focused my time on my duties. I am not interested in love or romance anymore.”

Lord Changping sympathetically comforted: “I can understand your feelings. Three years ago, one of my concubines passed away due to illness. But men will always be men. Given enough time, you will get over it. As long as you do not hate her, it will be fine. But I understand Ying Ying’s character. She is a revengeful person and will make things difficult for you. Ai! I do not know what to say.”

Now, it is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to comfort him.

Lord Changping sent Xiang Shaolong to the palace gates before they split up.

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the Command Centre, Teng Yi, Jing Jun had left with Lord Changwen to the western suburbs to prepare for the hunting fair tomorrow.

He was doing some administrative work when an attendant reported that the Zhou couple is here to see him.

Xiang Shaolong had assumed that they had left Xianyang City long ago. He only realised now that they are still in the Command Centre and hurriedly invited them in.

After they got seated, Xiang Shaolong asked curiously: “Why didn’t you leave?”

Mister Zhou shyly explained: “I have spoken with my wife and we are interested to follow Master Xiang. For three generations, my family runs a ship building business. Is there any way I can be of use?”

Xiang Shaolong suspiciously assessed them and saw that they have a fine bearing and were unlike common folks. He could not help but asked: “Why did both of you come to Xianyang City?”

Mister Zhou revealed; “Actually, we are from the royal family of Song. When our state was annihilated, we became wanderers. She...” He looked at his wife and solemnly state: “She is not my wife but my sister. We pretended to be a couple to make our traveling easier. We came to Xianyang City to try our luck, hoping to be a permanent resident here, get a job and stay here for good.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback.

His sister lowered her head and explained: “My name is Zhou Wei and my brother here is Zhou Liang. We are willing to accept any positions you may have.”

Xiang Shaolong scanned her delicate face and noticed that she is indeed very attractive despite her simple clothes and lack of make-up. Now he understood why Lu Bang is besotted with her. Feeling sorry for them, he nodded: “I will do my best and help both of you.

Ai! Get up! You are making me feel bad!”

Both of them had kneeled on the floor and kowtowed with thanks.

Xiang Shaolong the 21st century man is most uncomfortable with this gesture and hurriedly helped them up.

After some discussion with them, an attendant reported that Prince Dan is here. Xiang Shaolong got someone to send them both to the Wu Residence and instructed Tao Fang to help them to settle down. He then went to the main hall to see Prince Dan.

With Prince Dan are Physician Leng Ting, General Xu Yi Ze and the flamboyant advisor You Zhi.

After the guards have all been dismissed, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “The Prince has received news about Li Yuan’s departure?”

Prince Dan admiringly praised: “Commander Xiang is amazingly talented. Li Yuan is really returning back to Chu at once. What did you tell him?”

Xiang Shaolong evaded his question: “It is nothing much. Has Prince decided to cooperate with me?”

Prince Dan did not ask any further and put his hand out.

Xiang Shaolong stretched his own hand and they shared a tight handshake and broke out into laughter. Their eyes are staring at each other and no words are needed between them.

To Prince Dan, his biggest threat is not Qin but the ambitious and powerful Tian Dan.

After they released each other's hands, Prince Dan asked: "It is improper for me to participate personally but would it be sufficient if I hand Xu Yi Luan and his army of five thousand cavalry army under your full control?"

You Zhi added: "I will assist you to ensure that they will follow your orders."

Xiang Shaolong was on cloud nine as he did not anticipate Prince Dan to be so easy-going and trusting of himself. Pleased, he replied: "If this is the case, Tian Dan's death is guaranteed."

They discussed further on the details of their attack before Prince Dan left with his men.

Xiang Shaolong was simply thrilled and suddenly longed for his wives, son and the Tian sisters. He left the Command Centre and head towards Qin Qing's residence.

Book 13 Chapter 10 – Eastern Province Rebellion

When he arrived at Qin Qing's residence, she received him in the main hall, mentioning: "Sister Yanran and the rest have left the City to try their horses, preparing to show their true abilities during the hunting fair tomorrow. I am not feeling well so I did not accompany them."

Xiang Shaolong was concerned: "How are you feeling?" She did look slightly tired.

Qin Qing lowered and shook her head lightly: "I am fine! I just did not sleep well last night!"

Raising her head, her clear and pretty eyes look straight ahead at him and explained: "I am slightly worried. When I came back from the palace yesterday evening, I ran into Lord Gaoling and said hi to him. He was very energetic and I am concerned that he might cause some trouble."

Lord Gaoling is the man who was substituted by King Zhuangxiang to be the new King of Qin. Xiang Shaolong was alarmed as he was too focused on Tian Dan and neglected this man. Lord Longyang did alert him that Lord Gaoling and Zhao's General Pang Nuan are in secret contact but he did not pay much attention to it as he did not have a high opinion of Pang Nuan. With Qin Qing's reminder, he could not help but feel worried about it.

Qin Qing dismissed: “I must have been over sensitive. With you protecting Crown Prince, I can set my mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that if the military is involved, he will be prepared but if it was some dark conspiracy, he may be taken by surprise! Oh! He should inform Lu Buwei about this and distract him and benefiting himself at the same time. Lu Buwei should be more concerned about Xiao Pan’s safety than him.

Qin Qing saw that he was deep in thought and slowly sighed: “I was having a meal with Empress yesterday and that irritating Lao Ai is always by her side. Why is she so obsessed with such a disgusting man?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “He is truly someone who looks good on the outside but has no substance all. Unfortunately, there are not many people like Grand Tutor Qin who can see that.”

Qin Qing trembled slightly and her pretty eyes shone with surprise: “No wonder sister Yanran always say talking with you is the most refreshing and entertaining thing in the world and your conversations are never boring!”

Xiang Shaolong was aroused and had to ask: “Does Grand Tutor Qin feel the same?”

Qin Qing’s face turned red and she shot him a look. Lowering her head, she nodded slightly. She looked absolutely enthralling.

Xiang Shaolong was bewitched by her charm but felt some regrets. He did not know what to say next and the room became quiet.

The short silence seemed to last forever.

Qin Qing asked in a low voice: “Has Commander Xiang eaten?”

Xiang Shaolong blurted out without thinking: “Yes!”

Qin Qing giggled and shot him an emotional look, declaring: “Finally I caught Commander Xiang lying. It is still late morning and lunch is not even prepared yet. If you do not want to have lunch with me, you can say that you are busy with work and I cannot expose you.”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly embarrassed and stuttered incoherently. His face became as red as a fireball.

Qin Qing was not the least upset and stood up, adding: “I have no time for you. I need to send lunch outside the City to your wives. Commander Xiang must be too busy to come along! Make sure you take your lunch!”

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand her forceful character and softly replied: “I do have some work to do! Hei! Please forgive me.”

Qin Qing smiled implicitly but meaningfully at him. Witnessing

Xiang Shaolong fumbling, she regained her usual coolness and plainly invited: “Commander Xiang, please!” This is her way of dismissing her guests

Following the direction her hand pointed, Xiang Shaolong walked towards the main door. Qin Qing followed closely behind him.

Xiang Shaolong had an evil thought and purposely halted without warning. Qin Qing did not expect a respected man like him to try such a trick. Letting out a shrill cry, she bumped right into his back.

It was a moment to die for.

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong resumed his flirty behaviour and snaked his hand behind and embraced her slender waist. He intimately whispered into her ear: “Grand Tutor Qin! Be careful.”

Qin Qing had not been hugged for a long time. Her body turned soft and her cheeks are burning hot. Trembling like a small bird, she tried to push him away.

Xiang Shaolong dare not go overboard and took this chance to release her, saying: “Please excuse my behaviour. You need not send me any further.”

Leaving Qin Qing with a frustrated and annoyed look on her face, Xiang Shaolong left happily.

He has regained the romantic side of him.

Due to all the complicated relationships, he was tormented by Qin Qing, Ying Ying, Lu Dan'er and Lu Niang Rong.

Now, he felt like he has vented some of his frustration.

Recollecting the feeling of embracing her, his heart leapt for joy.

This is probably called Uncontrollable Love.

He was filled with this uncontrollable love and desire.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived at the Premier residence, Tu Xian came to welcome him and revealed: "There is a rebellion in Pingyuan Province. When Premier Lu received the news, he hurriedly left to seek an audience with Empress and Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed. Pingyuan Province is made up of land that were seized from Zhao. The rebellion must be started by Pang Nuan but why?

Lu Buwei's natural reaction is to send the Qin army to protect the new province he had fought for. Otherwise, if Shangdang Province and Sanchuan Province followed their example and rebelled, with the intervention of Zhao and Han armies, it will be disastrous. The

strategic eastern provinces will be lost and Lu Buwei's earlier efforts would be annulled.

To counter such a situation, Lu Buwei will send every available soldier to Pingyuan Province to crush the rebels. When that happens, Xianyang City will only be left with the Palace Guards, the Imperial Cavalry and the Imperial Infantry.

Under normal conditions, these three armies are sufficient to protect Xianyang City. But during the hunting fair, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan will be in the open wilderness of the western suburbs.

If Lord Gaoling has an army of over ten thousand soldiers and know about the Xianyang's army strength as well as Xiao Pan's location, he may succeed with a well-planned ambush.

The more he thought, the worse he felt. It is inconvenient to speak with Tu Xian now so he bade farewell and left.

Tu Xian sent him out and reminded him about their appointment. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly left for the palace.

When he was about to reach the palace, a group of riders came into view. Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er are among the riders and between them was Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong did not harbour any thoughts about the two girls but still felt sour about it.

Both girls have their own beautiful ways but Ying Ying's long legs, slender waist and full bosom is something very attractive to him.

When the girls saw Xiang Shaolong, they pretended to be friendly towards Guan Zhongxie and were chatting and laughing happily. They acted as if they did not see Xiang Shaolong.

Guan Zhongxie naturally cannot adopt the same attitude. He led several of his leaders and rode towards him, paying their respects.

Xiang Shaolong returned the greetings. Guan Zhongxie held his horse steady and informed: "There is some trouble in Pingyuan Province. The Crown Prince, Empress and Premier Lu are having an emergency meeting."

The two girls followed Guan Zhongxie in stopping their horses but put on an air of discontent and stared at Xiang Shaolong with hostility.

Xiang Shaolong was amused and greeted them. He proceeded to ask: "Where is Official Guan heading?"

Guan Zhongxie replied: "These two ladies wanted to check out the hunting grounds in the western suburbs. I will accompany them and report this matter to Lord Changwen and the rest. The weather is pretty good to take a ride outside the city."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "With pretty companions,

anything will sound good.” He did not wait for the girls to react and rode away.

Ai! If not for Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie is a worthy friend and he would be truly happy for him. But now, he felt inferior as he had lost to Guan Zhongxie while he cannot do anything about it.

When he entered the palace, the meeting is still ongoing in the Qin Court.

Lord Changping pulled Xiang Shaolong to a corner and asked: “Did you manage to see Ying Ying?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

Lord Changping asked again: “Is she with Official Guan?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head again and commented: “I heard they are going to the western suburbs to check out the hunting grounds.”

Lord Changping sighed: “This morning, I was summoned by Left Premier Xu Xian for a scolding. He instructed me to discipline my sister and not let her get close to Lu Buwei’s men. I am in a dilemma. Does Official Xiang have any suggestions?”

Xiang Shaolong naturally understood his intention and bitterly smiled: “You should know that Guan Zhongxie is very good with women. With his excellent credentials, body, swordsmanship and

looks, even I may not be his match. Moreover, I am now her biggest enemy. You better resign to fate.”

Lord Changping was flustered: “How can I resign to fate? Xu Xian is exceedingly farsighted and he is never wrong. If Ying Ying marries Guan Zhongxie, what will happen if one day, his entire household is to be annihilated? Lu Buwei may be powerful now but he is still ranked lower than Lord Shang Yang in the past. Eventually, Lord Shang Yang’s body was torn apart by horses. Outsiders will not have a good ending in Qin. The higher their official post, the more terrible their deaths.”

Xiang Shaolong had not analyzed this problem from this angle and was left speechless.

Among the two brothers, Lord Changping is more sharp and knowledgeable. Lord Changwen is less clever and loves to have fun.

Lord Changping sighed: “You should understand my worries. Guan Zhongxie is considered our friend. How can I warn him to stay away from Ying Ying without a good reason?”

Xiang Shaolong was humoured. Lord Changping is right. How can he tell Guan Zhongxie that he will die with Lu Buwei in the future so please leave his sister alone?

Lord Changping was incensed: “You can still laugh about it. I am really at my wits end.”

Xiang Shaolong apologised: “I was entertained by your words! Her marriage has to be approved by you two elder brothers. Guan Zhongxie should not be that daring.”

Lord Changping was annoyed: “It would be good if it was that simple. But if Lu Buwei proposed marriage on his behalf and even got the Empress involved, what can we say?”

Xiang Shaolong thought that sounded reasonable and helplessly advised: “At the end of the day, all you wanted was for me to woo your sister! Why don’t you try to send a warning to Guan Zhongxie? Lu Gong warned him already.”

Lord Changping bitterly laughed: “Lu Gong is very senior and does whatever he wants. Forty years later, we can be like him but definitely not now. Hei! Are you that uninterested in my sister? In Xianyang City, she is the next prettiest after widow Qin Qing. Of course there is still the Talented Lady Ji whom we have not met.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “You know your women well.”

Lord Changping reached out and grabbed his arm, begging: “Stop hesitating. How about it?” Looking at his arm, he added: “Shaolong, you are very muscular.”

Xiang Shaolong adored this friend and without a choice, he promised: “Let me have a go! But I do not guarantee that I will be successful!”

Lord Changping was overjoyed. The meeting happened to end at the same time and Lu Buwei stepped out with Meng Ao with serious expressions on their faces. They were still talking as they were walking.

Lu Buwei noticed Xiang Shaolong and waved him over.

When Xiang Shaolong begin to walk over, Meng Ao had left Lu Buwei already. Lu Buwei received him and they walked to the rear garden together. Lu Buwei explained in a low voice: “Shaolong should know what has happened. After our discussion, Meng Ao has been selected to lead an army to Pingyuan Province to crush the rebellion. Wang He will lead another army and be stationed at the eastern Passes. This will serve as a warning to Shangdang and Sanchuan Province not to make any foolish moves. In case they rebelled too, he will move in and crush them.”

Pausing, he added; “What a coincidence. In a short space of time, all the excess soldiers in Xianyang City have all been used up and now it is our hunting fair. What does Shaolong think?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Lord Gaoling is planning a rebellion!”

Lu Buwei was startled: “What?”

Xiang Shaolong repeated his statement.

Lu Buwei composed himself and thought it over. They arrived at

a small bridge and he sat down on one of the stone railings and hinted Xiang Shaolong to sit on the opposite side. He frowned: “How did Lord Gaoling motivate the Pingyuan residents to rebel?”

Xiang Shaolong sat on the opposite railing and looked down at the running water. Noticing some swimming fishes, he calmly replied: “Lord Gaoling did not have this ability but he can conspire with Zhao General Pang Nuan to achieve this.”

Lu Buwei slapped his thigh: “No wonder he left in such a hurry after the funeral. It is all because of this.”

His eyes shining with a killing aura, he slowly state: “Lord Gaoling! You must be tired of living.”

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he instructed: “If he wants to rebel, the hunting fair is a golden opportunity. I shall put you in charge of this. If I am not wrong, Lord Gaoling’s men will try to hide in the vicinity of Xianyang City today and tomorrow. With all the chaotic preparations, they can move undetected. We must also guard against Lord Gaoling’s family warriors within the city. I will get Zhongxie to take care of this.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly pleased. Indirectly, Lord Gaoling has helped him to distract Lu Buwei from assassinating himself. Moreover, he had agreed to Lu Niang Rong’s hand in marriage.

Lu Buwei stood up, declaring: “I must see the Crown Prince and Empress. Shaolong must report everything to me so that I have a clear picture of what is going on.”

Xiang Shaolong put on a respectful look until he left. He then rode his horse out of the city and towards the western suburbs.

Book 13 Chapter 11 – Exposing The Scheme

When Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians arrived at the West Gate, they ran into Ji Yanran and the rest who are about to return to the city.

The carriages stopped along the wide road leading to the West Gate. Xiang Shaolong leapt down his horse and went to say hi to the ladies.

Everybody have red and healthy looking faces, showing that they had a generous amount of exercise.

Xiang Bao'er saw Xiang Shaolong and waved his little hand calling him Father.

Zhao Zhi was annoyed: “Are you so busy that you cannot visit us?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed along: “After the hunting fair, I will spend more time with all of you!”

Wu Tingfang proudly state: “Ignore him Sister Zhi. We will have a good time with Sister Qing.”

Xiang Shaolong reached out through the window and pinched the cute face of his son. He spoke briefly with the Tian sisters before he went to the second carriage.

When the blind was lifted, it revealed Ji Yanran and Qin Qing seated inside. Qin Qing's face was slightly red and was staring viciously at him.

Xiang Shaolong's heart began to thump harder.

Ji Yanran smiled sweetly and gently asked: "Hubby is going to the western suburbs?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded and took this opportunity to inform Qin Qing: "The residents of Pingyuan Province are rebelling. This rebellion is likely to be linked to Lord Gaoling. Lu Buwei has been notified and I am fully in charge of this matter. Grand Tutor Qin can set your mind at ease."

Qin Qing could not stand his strong gaze and lowered her face. It was a magical and romantic moment.

Ji Yanran trembled slightly and asked in a low voice: "Lu Buwei has been especially kind to you!"

Xiang Shaolong remembered the marriage proposal and nodded.

Ji Yanran intimately whispered into his ear: "He really wants to kill you! That is why he is doing all these things to make people less suspicious of him. If you don't believe me, you can try asking Empress and Crown Prince. You will discover that Lu Buwei has given them a misleading impression of the hostility between you and him. Ai! Hubby is too trusting."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked but still have some doubts about it. He frantically nodded his head.

Ji Yanran slapped his shoulder and cooed: “Think about it! With Lu Buwei’s intelligence, how can he not spy on Lord Gaoling and need you to remind him? If Lord Gaoling is rebelling, he will be the happiest man in Qin!”

Qin Qing heard these words and her face is filled with care and concern.

Xiang Shaolong’s body trembled and was finally enlightened. He bowed: “Thanks for wife’s reminder. Xiang Shaolong learnt something today.”

Ji Yanran looked at Qin Qing who was staring at Xiang Shaolong. Noticing Ji Yanran penetrating gaze at her, she guiltily lowered her head.

Ji Yanran shot Xiang Shaolong another look and intimately advised: “Be careful!”

When the carriages are far away. Xiang Shaolong consolidated his thoughts and rode towards the western suburbs; however, his mood is very different from before.

Riding Jifeng and escorted by the Eighteen Guardians, he sped all the way.

The carriages transporting goods and other items to the hunting grounds formed a long queue and the atmosphere is very lively.

Beside the official road are ancient forests with giant pine trees that are a few hundred years old.

After leaving the city for three miles, the flat roads start to fluctuate up and down depending on the terrain. Every time they rode up a hill, they can see River Jing flowing in the south east direction. Below them, logs are flowing down the river towards the camping grounds. The logs will be used to build the campsite and inspection square.

Spring is now slowly being taken over by Summer and the strong wind is blowing through the grasslands and forests alike, making Xiang Shaolong feel extremely comfortable. Listening to the peaceful rustling sounds of the leaves, his thinking becomes very clear.

The Jing river is a few thousand miles long and it is intersected by many small rivers.

The thick forests and wide grasslands is home to many unique birds and beasts.

They rode through a deep valley with clouds on both sides of the slopes and the roads begin to widen. River Jing continued to flow in front of them and the thick pine trees are like poles pointing to heaven. Across the fresh green grasslands, there were countless

tents that were pitched in an orderly manner. Thousands of Palace Guards and Cavalry Soldiers are busy with preparations and they have built two wooden bridges that go across River Jing.

Xiang Shaolong stopped on a hill and looked around him.

The grass straightened and bend down according to the wind and there are clusters of trees here and there. Herds of deer, horses, sheep and other wild animals are gathered around the river shore, drinking to their heart's content, occasionally letting out a small cry. Tomorrow, they will be the targets of the hunters.

The sun began to shift to the west where high mountains are stacked upon one another. That is where the most ferocious wild beasts roam.

Xiang Shaolong believed that with all the thick forests surrounding the camping grounds, it is a piece of cake to hide an entire army.

With his trained eye, he quietly scanned the surroundings and quickly grasped the geographical advantages and disadvantages. He then rode towards the main camp near the river.

The air is filled with sounds of horses braying and dogs barking.

An enormous flag embroidered with the word 'Qin' is flying grandly, competing with the beautiful clouds for everyone's attention.

As he rode past them, the workers will stop and greet him.

Leading the Guardians, he rode past several tents belonging to the various high ranking officials and generals before he came to the centralised main tent.

Lord Changwen is instructing his men to construct wooden gates in all four sides of the slope, providing additional protection to the main tent.

There are ten odd tents on this flat hilltop. Except for Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji, the rest of the tents belonged to the other members of the Royal Family.

Xiang Shaolong jumped down his horse and questioned: “Why are you building the gates now? Isn’t it too hasty?”

Lord Changwen replied: “It is Premier Lu’s idea. He received news about the Pingyuan Province rebellion and insisted that I build the gates by tomorrow morning.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that it was a narrow escape. Ji Yanran is right. Lu Buwei knew about Lord Gaoling’s rebellion a long time ago and acted ignorant to deceive him, causing him to let down his guard and even mistook Lu Buwei for really forgiving him.

Lord Changwen pointed to a group of men beside the river and

commented: “Both assistant generals are there playing with the hunting dogs. My stubborn sister is there as well. She is the one dressed in a white and green warrior suit; the one dressed in yellow and purple is Lu Dan’er.”

He added in a low voice: “Has Big Brother spoken to you?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head slightly: “Is there no one your sister likes among all the young men in Xianyang City? For example, An Gu is even a better catch than myself.”

Lord Changwen sighed: “An Gu is a talented man who is comparable to Shaolong. However, they grew up together and treat each other like siblings so it is impossible for them to fall in love.”

Pausing, he added: “Qin is unlike the six states and it is very common for people to have pre-marital sex. Ying Ying has dated several guys before but none of them lasted long enough. She became serious only after she met you.”

Xiang Shaolong countered: “She is only serious about Guan Zhongxie. The two of you are forcing me to join this disadvantageous competition.”

Lord Changwen laughed along: “It is because we admired you! Hei! We dote on our sister dearly. Actually Zhongxie is not bad and he is a good fighter. Unfortunately, he is Lu Buwei’s man.”

Cheers can be heard from the crowd. Guan Zhongxie had put on his armour and was playing with one of the hunting dogs.

Xiang Shaolong climbed onto Jifeng and remarked: “Here I go!”

Lord Changwen hurriedly asked for a horse and rode with him towards the crowd.

Escorted by a large body of men, both men came to the edge of the crowd and dismounted.

Teng Yi was focused on observing Guan Zhongxie’s intricate footsteps. When he saw Xiang Shaolong, he had a serious expression on his face. After he waved to Lord Changwen, he hinted at Xiang Shaolong to accompany him to one side. Arriving at a cluster of rocks near the river, he reported: “This man is extraordinarily shrewd. Even under such circumstances, he is still hiding his true abilities. What a frightening character!”

Xiang Shaolong glanced back at them and nodded in agreement: “He is the most dangerous swordsman we have ever come across. This man had reached a very high level of swordsmanship and I have never seen anymore who can breathe so calmly. I admit that I have not reached his level of cultivation.”

Teng Yi smiled: “But you are someone who never underestimate your enemy. If it was Jing Jun, he would never believe that someone can be better than him.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Right! Where is that kid?”

Teng Yi replied: “He is out surveying. The more we know about the hunting grounds, the better chance we have at killing Mo Ao. How is your leg injury?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Much better but I still cannot run or the wound will reopen for sure.”

Teng Yi advised: “When I changed your dressing this morning, the swelling has subsided. Based on your physique, you should recover fully after two days.”

Xiang Shaolong happily state: “Now, I must thank Tian Dan for injuring me. It will be harder for Lu Buwei to kill me now.”

Teng Yi was stunned: “Didn’t Third Brother say Lu Buwei is patching up with you?”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh and repeated Ji Yanran’s words. He also told him about the Pingyuan Province rebellion and Lord Gaoling’s scheme.

Teng Yi thought carefully and affirmed: “I will handle Lord Gaoling. If necessary, we will use our elite army. We must not let Guan Zhongxie gain this honour.”

As he spoke, they noticed Guan Zhongxie, Lord Changwen, Lu Dan’er and Ying Ying walking towards them. Teng Yi winked at

him and whispered: “I will go and join Little Jun!” and slipped away.

From afar, Lord Changwen winked and shouted: “Official Xiang, let’s test the target boards at the archery grounds. Official Guan has an iron bow that only he is able to pull apart.”

Xiang Shaolong was agonized. Lord Changwen is trying to create an opportunity for him to put down Guan Zhongxie in front of the two girls. Xiang Shaolong knew himself too well. He may be considered an expert archer but he is still inferior to Wang Jian, Teng Yi and even the dead Lian Jin. As long as Guan Zhongxie is a better archer than Lian Jin, he will be humiliated.

Guan Zhongxie raised his hands to show his innocence: “I am not harbouring any intention of winning. It is Lord Changwen and the two Misses who wanted Brother Xiang to show us your skills!”

Xiang Shaolong cursed secretly and acted apologetic: “I am afraid I have to disappoint Official Guan. My leg injury has yet to fully recover and it is not advisable for me to exert any strength. I think we can just watch Official Guan perform.”

Guan Zhongxie was startled: “Forgive my impertinence. I noticed that Official is walking normally and thought that you have recovered!”

Ying Ying’s face turned cold: “Is Official Xiang making excuses?”

Lu Dan'er spat: "Coward!" Dragging Ying Ying, she unhappily turned around and shouted to Guan Zhongxie: "Official Guan! Let's find something else to do!"

Guan Zhongxie humbly paid his respects and left with the two girls.

They left Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changwen smiling bitterly at each other.

Xiang Shaolong thought of Tu Xian's appointment and bade farewell, returning back to Xianyang City.

On the way back, he thought of the girls' cynical expressions but did not feel bad at all. He was amazed at his own change.

In his wild days in the 21st Century, he must win every fight and every drinking contest.

He has lost his eagerness to be the victor in everything. Now he looks at the bigger picture and does not mind these insignificant losses. That is why he is not bothered about the girls' vicious attitude.

Maybe he has finally matured!

Back at Xianyang City, there was still some time so he returned to Wu residence first. He checked with Tao Fang about the Zhou siblings and went to visit them.

Tao Fang has given them a nice accommodation in the east garden near where the Guardians are sleeping. It is quite a comfortable place to stay.

When Xiang Shaolong stepped into the small hall, the pretty Zhou Wei is busy sewing in one corner while Zhou Liang was fiddling with a small metal mechanism on the table. When they saw him coming in, they hurriedly got up to greet him.

It may be due to sympathy that Xiang Shaolong is especially caring towards them. He smiled at Zhou Wei: "Is Miss Zhou making new clothes?"

Zhou Wei's face reddened and she lowered her head, replying: "En!"

Xiang Shaolong was feeling strange at her shyness and sat down on the other side of the table. Gesturing for them to sit down too, he asked Zhou Liang: "What is that toy you are playing with?"

Zhou Liang handed him the metal piece and replied: ""This is a wrist guard for a hunting eagle to perch on. Watch!

He lifted his sleeve and showed Xiang Shaolong his left wrist. There were over ten scars on his wrist.

Xiang Shaolong was interested and asked: "So Brother Zhou is an expert in shipbuilding and eagle-rearing. Since there is a wrist

guard, why are you still injured by the eagle claws?”

Zhou Liang answered: “The wrist guard is meant for new eagles. An expert can train the eagle to vary its clawing strength. These scars are accumulated before I was fifteen. Since then, I have no accidents with them anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “In this case, Brother Zhou must be an expert eagle handler.”

Zhou Liang humbly replied: “That was in the past. Now, I felt guilty towards them. Under their fierce stares, I dare not rear them anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong thought for a while and instructed: “From today onwards, Brother Zhou need not worry about his next meal or being bullied. Just focus on developing this and it may help me in the future.”

Zhou Liang was delighted and his eyes were shining: “I dare not disobey Master Xiang’s orders. Hei! You can call me Little Liang. I dare not be addressed as Brother Zhou!”

Xiang Shaolong officially state: “I have never regarded Brother Zhou as an outsider. You should not call me Master Xiang too. Can I ask you what is the secret of rearing eagles? How long does it take to train one and what are they capable of?”

Zhou Liang brightened up and proudly revealed: “First, you must

know which eagles are trainable. The easiest to train are King Eagles who share human instincts. After that, you need plenty of patience and hard work. The eagle must be reared from young and need about a year to be fully trained. Hei! Hunting is nothing to them. The pinnacle of rearing eagles is to train Warrior Eagles. They can chase the enemy from the sky, spy on surroundings and assassinate someone. They can be a formidable weapon.”

It is now Xiang Shaolong’s turn to brighten up. He excitedly instructed: “We must not delay any further. Brother Zhou shall look for your King Eagle tomorrow. I will send some men to accompany you and make it easier for you.”

Zhou Liang received his order gratefully.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that it is about time to go and he bade farewell. Stepping out of the door, Zhou Wei’s voice rang out: “Official Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong turned around and smiled: “What can I do for Miss Zhou?”

Zhou Wei came to him and shyly asked: “Big Brother has an assignment on hand. What about me?”

Xiang Shaolong gently replied: “Your brother will rear eagles and you will sew clothes. Isn’t that what both of you are doing?”

Zhou Wei’s face turned even redder and slowly state: “I wish to

wait upon Master. Will you please give your consent?”

From her expression, he knew that it is not as simple as it looks. She is willing to sleep with him for the rest of his life. He cannot blame her as he probably is her dream man. Moreover, it is a way of repaying her gratitude to him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “That is too tough for you. Let me think about it and decide tomorrow.”

Zhou Wei shook her head with determination: “Unless Master Xiang despises me and finds me clumsy, I have decided to wait on you for the rest of my life.”

Frankly, Xiang Shaolong is also tempted by this pretty woman in front of him. Agonized, he thought that he will just agree for the time being and decide later.

He sighed: “You are making things difficult for me. For the time being, we shall follow your wishes! But...”

Before he can finish speaking, Zhou Wei joyfully interrupted: “Thanks for your approval!”

With a contented look, she turned back into the house.

Xiang Shaolong can only leave the house with a bitter smile on his face.

Book 13 Chapter 12 – Flying Dragon Spear

At the appointed hut, Tu Xian is already waiting for him. When they saw each other, both men are equally delighted. Through these difficult times, they have built a trusting relationship and a strong friendship. If not for Tu Xian's intervention, he would have been killed a long time ago.

Tu Xian smiled: "You did a great job with Lu Xiong, catching Lu Buwei unaware and losing face in front of everyone. Back at the residence, this traitor threw a mad tantrum and summoned Mo Ao for a two hour meeting. Needless to say, they are plotting on killing you."

Xiang Shaolong inquired: "What happened to Lu Xiong and his son?"

Tu Xian revealed: "Lu Xiong may not be badly beaten like his son but was publicly slapped and scolded by Lu Buwei in front of everyone. Lu Buwei has sent him to help out with the Canal and harass the villagers opposing it. No one is happier than Guan Zhongxie. Lu Xiong has been on loggerheads with him and with his exit, Guan Zhongxie's importance is elevated within the Premier Residence. With a few more accomplishments, Lu Niang Rong will also be his."

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: "Guan Zhongxie is someone greedy for fame and power. Does Brother Tu think we can win him to our side?"

Tu Xian seriously state: “You must never do that. This man’s shrewdness and ambitions are not inferior compared to Lu Buwei. Moreover, he is clear that he is an outsider and is only using Lu Buwei to pursue his own goals. In addition, he bore deep grudges against you over Lian Jin’s death. You must not waste any effort in this area.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. Tu Xian is an experienced man and his judgement will not be wrong.

Tu Xian divulged: “Recently, I have been secretly monitoring Mo Ao’s activities. I discovered that he had got somebody to produce some floats as well as some snorkeling masks. I am positive that these will be used against you.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed as this is something he did not consider at all. Rivers and lakes are part of the hunting grounds. Except for the two bridges across the Jing River, they will require rafts or even wade through the water. If someone attacks them underwater, such as shooting a poisonous needle, the victim will be caught with his pants down. He took a deep breath and sighed: “I am lucky that my leg is injured and I cannot go anywhere.”

Tu Xian smiled weakly: “That’s the best plan so far. But you must still be careful. He will try to kill Brother Teng and Little Jun too. If they are killed, your strength will be drastically affected.”

Pausing, he added: “I may not know what they are doing exactly but based on Mo Ao’s intelligence, he will create a situation where they can attack you when you least expect it.”

Xiang Shaolong's is perspiring with cold sweat. He did not anticipate Lu Buwei to target Teng Yi and Jing Jun too. With Tu Xian's reminder, he realised how careless he is.

Tu Xian described in a deep voice: "The most frightening thing about Mo Ao is that he is the silent killer in the background. He knows how to protect himself and cannot be bothered with fame and official posts. He is a man who goes for the big kill."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Doesn't he have any flaws?"

Tu Xian answered: "His only flaw is that he lusts after women! When he first saw Widow Qin Qing, he lost his bearings. Lu Buwei cannot do anything about her or she would have long entered his bedroom. I forgot to tell you. Lu Buwei is very jealous about Talented Lady Ji marrying you. On more than one occasion, he had mentioned that she is too good for you."

He added: "Comparing both of them, Guan Zhongxie has better self control. He has never touched any of Lu Buwei's courtesans or maids. He spends most of his time practising his horse riding, archery, swordplay and even reads military classics. He repeats this schedule every day and his willpower is amazing. Moreover, no one knows what he wants or what he is thinking about. He will be a more difficult opponent to kill compared to Mo Ao. If an opportunity presents itself, you must kill him too so that we can all sleep better at night." Xiang Shaolong was totally frightened by these words. Compared to himself, he is much more lecherous and lazy.

Emotionless people like Guan Zhongxie are the most frightening opponents.

Mo Ao has a weakness, which is Qin Qing.

This weakness will cost him his life.

Tu Xian sighed again: “Lu Buwei’s influence is growing drastically. Every day, there are countless officials coming to flatter him or present gifts. Additionally, he controlled the Empress through Lao Ai. If this continues, Qin will soon belong to him. If not for his strict security, I will present him with a cup of poison wine just like how he poisoned others.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Lao Ai may not be as beneficial to him as it looks.”

He told Tu Xian about supporting Lao Ai to oppose Lu Buwei.

Tu Xian was stunned and sighed after some time: “Shaolong may be better than Mo Ao in terms of scheming! Lao Ai is indeed a selfish and ungrateful man.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty about this praise and asked about Lu Niang Rong.

Tu Xian responded: “She is the only person I do not detest within the Premier Residence. Lu Buwei’s three sons are useless bums who indulge in wine and women. The other two daughters are

ugly, incompetent and not worth his attention. Only Lu Niang Rong manages to win his affection. Whoever marries her will be considered to be Lu Buwei's successor. If you can make her fall in love with you, Lu Buwei will be in trouble."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Even if she is my arch enemy's daughter, I should not toy with her feelings. Moreover, I am not as capable as Guan Zhongxie. Even I can feel that he is a very charming man."

Tu Xian disclosed: "Guan Zhongxie has his own way of getting anything or anyone he desires. Additionally, he is humble, polite and never put on any airs and is not as inaccessible as Mo Ao. He knows how to win your respect and he has bribed everyone around Lu Niang Rong. Needless to say, Lu Niang Rong is deeply infatuated with him. You honestly do not have the slightest chance of marrying her."

He thought hard and frowned: "But things are not as simple as it looks. Since you rejected the marriage, she was annoyed but her interest in you grew. She loves people with extraordinary sword skills. If you can beat Guan Zhongxie, she may be moved."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "That is even more difficult than winning her affections openly. Do you know if they had made love already?"

Tu Xian affirmed: "Guan Zhongxie will never do such silly things that will anger Lu Buwei."

Glancing out of the window at the darkening skies, he added: “In the three days of the hunting fair, Shaolong must be fully alert and protect yourself. Do not give Lu Buwei any chance to assassinate you. You are his biggest obstacle and you must not be complacent when dealing with him.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in agreement and they parted.

As Xiang Shaolong strode down the road, the street lamps are being lighted up. Xianyang City’s nightlife is not as lively as Handan City or Daliang City but there are still people walking on the roads. This is even more true on the main roads where the brothels are located. In fact, there are more people on those roads at night than in the daytime.

They have decided to meet at Xianyang City’s biggest brothel Drunken Wind Brothel. Drunken Wind Brothel is a privately owned high class brothel and Xiang Shaolong do not know who the owner is but he is sure that he is a very popular man.

Xiang Shaolong used to frequent pubs and nightclubs in the past. In this ancient period, this is the first time he is visiting a private brothel and he could not help but feel refreshing.

Wearing a normal warrior suit and walking down a busy ancient street, he reminisce about his life and was intoxicated.

Four years has come and gone.

Xiao Pan the future Qin Shi Huang has transformed from a playful and innocent child into a determined and capable Crown Prince.

Nobody among the six states could be bothered with him but are more concerned about Lu Buwei or himself. Ten years later, they will realise how wrong they are.

While he was deep in his thoughts, he came to Drunken Wind Brothel's vicinity and noticed it was crowded with horse carriages and people.

The bouncer recognized him immediately and bowed deeply, welcoming him.

Before he could move another step, a familiar voice called him from behind: "Official Xiang, please hold your step!"

Xiang Shaolong recognized that it was Han Chuang's voice and turned around with astonishment. He saw Han Chuang dismounting from his carriage and striding towards him in large steps. When he reached him, he held his sleeve and pulled him towards the entrance, whispering: "Dong Horse Fanatic, you have deceived me thoroughly."

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered to deny, thinking that the whole world should know about his impersonation by now. He bitterly laughed: "Who told you?"

Han Chuang was about to say something when a well-dressed middle-aged man accompanied by two attractive ladies with thick make-up welcomed: “Welcome to your first visit Official Xiang and welcome back Marquis Han. I, Wu Fu, am deeply honoured by your presence.”

On his right, the beauty giggled: “I am Guiyan. When our girls heard that Official Xiang is coming, everyone is putting on their best make up, hoping to be chosen by you!”

Han Chuang chided: “So no one is bothered about me?”

The other beauty seemed to be familiar with Han Chuang. Batting her long eye lashes at him, she smiled: “Marquis Han is so jealous; shall I accompany you myself?”

She then faced Xiang Shaolong and informed: “I am Bailei, please make yourself at home.”

Han Chuang is an experienced brothel man and will not take it easy on them. He clapped Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and exclaimed: “Bailei actually wants you to make yourself easy in her home!”

The two girls incidentally burst out in giggles.

Wu Fu was still laughing as he led them through the main hall and into an inner chamber. A pretty maid served tea and the two girls sat beside both of them.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling puzzled over why they are seated there when Wu Fu clapped once and smiled: “This is Official Xiang’s first visit and we have prepared a little surprise for you. It is a just little gift and we hope you do not take it to heart.”

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused. Corruption and bribery is the same in these ancient times. As the Imperial Cavalry Commander, he is as good as Xianyang City’s chief protector. These brothel owners must naturally treat him well so as to enjoy certain benefits in the future.

Han Chuang smiled: “Boss Wu is knowledgeable man. Official Xiang will surely appreciate your friendship.”

Half of Bailei’s body is already leaning on Han Chuang’s back and she teased: “Marquis Han is the knowledgeable man. Our boss pale in comparison!”

On the other side, Guiyan leaned into Xiang Shaolong’s bosom and cooed: “Official Xiang must come here more often or the girls and myself will not let you off.”

Xiang Shaolong finally realised the meaning of ‘A brothel is a hero’s home.’

For the past two years, he has been avoiding all females except his own wives and maids. On one hand, he is satisfied with them already. The real reason is he wants to avoid the responsibility linked to relationships.

The plus point of these women is the way sex is conducted. Everybody can fulfill their fantasies and simply leave without any repercussions. This is also a way to balance the human needs as long as it is not done excessively.

When Xiang Shaolong first arrived in Handan City, someone brought him to the Official Brothel and he was faced with Su Nu's tragic ending. This tragedy has left a scar in his mind, making him fearful of brothels and even more fearful of the tragic stories of the brothel girls.

But he can tell that private brothels and official brothels was very different. Private brothels girls are women who are willing to enter flesh trade and are very open about their occupations.

Remembering the days when he was down and out, he was lucky to be retained by Tao Fang. Otherwise, he may have to be a paid assassin or a gigolo.

Guiyan intimately whispered into his ear: "Why is Official Xiang so listless? Let me get Meimei to accompany you! Every guy who sees her will be mesmerized."

Xiang Shaolong thought that this name sounded familiar. His mind raced furiously and he recalled that it is Lao Ai's old flame Dan Meimei who bewitched Wu Tingwei into betraying his family and eventually dying a tragic death. He was annoyed and barked: "This beautiful Guiyan accompanying me is good enough; who cares about the ugly Meimei?"

Bailei sniggered: “Official Xiang is a lecherous man too. You are even better than Marquis Han is making girls happy!”

Han Chuang laughed: “Official Xiang’s real abilities will scare both of you to death if you ever come to know about it! He is not only good at humouring girls.”

His remarks were followed by a flurry of laughing and teasing.

Wu Fu was curious: “So Marquis Han and Official Xiang know each other very well.”

Xiang Shaolong and Han Chuang smiled knowingly at each other.

At this moment, four pretty maids entered the room in two groups. The first two were holding a spear that was three metres long and the other two were holding onto a triangular shield that was one and a half metres tall.

Xiang Shaolong was blown away.

He anticipated a gift of some precious jewels or gems but he was presented with weapons instead.

Wu Fu stood up and held the spear in his right hand and the shield in his left hand. He grunted and pretended to attack an invisible enemy and was incredibly entertaining and imposing.

Guiyan intimately whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ear: "This is our Drunken Wind Brothel sacred treasure that we use to ward off evil spirits. Three years ago, a guest presented this gift to us. When Boss Wu heard that Official Xiang is coming, he thought for a long time before he decided to give this to you."

Xiang Shaolong believed that this guest must have run out of money so he had to leave his weapons behind. In these times, top grade weapons can be used as currency but they are not easily available.

Han Chuang received the spear and shield from Wu Fu and tested its weight. He was agitated: "These two weapons can fetch at least a hundred taels of gold. I cannot believe that Boss Wu have such a precious pair of weapons."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised Wu Fu. With his gift of weapons, it is hard for him to reject and it is also hard to trace as a bribe. He stood up joyfully and received the spear. The body of the spear was straight, shimmering and engraved with motifs. The spear head is extremely sharp and made of top quality steel. This is the first time he has seen such a well-made spear.

Wu Fu leaned over and pointed to the spear: "Official Xiang, please look here. This spear has a name."

Xiang Shaolong then noticed there were two ancient words engraved near the spear head. He naturally could not read them.

Fortunately, Han Chuang excitedly leaned over and read: “Flying Dragon! Ha! So interesting. With this spear, Official Xiang’s career will fly high.”

Wu Fu respectfully replied: “It is a small gesture and please do not mind its little value.”

Guiyan moved closer to Xiang Shaolong and pleaded: “Official Xiang! Can I make a spear pouch for you?”

Xiang Shaolong received the shield and lifted it twice. The shield is amazingly thin but extremely hard at the same time. Even if it is held for long hours, the holder will not feel tired at all. He was elated and thanked Wu Fu profusely.

Guiyan whined: “Official Xiang has not answered my question!”

Wu Fu smiled: “Official Xiang did not reject you so it is a yes. You have three days to produce the spear pouch and we will send the pouch and the spear together to Official Xiang’s residence.”

Guiyan pinched Xiang Shaolong gleefully.

Wu Fu apologised: “We have wasted some of your precious time. The two Lords and Official Guan are seated in the VIP seats in the rear garden awaiting Official Xiang. Will Marquis Han join Official Xiang’s table?”

Han Chuang rejected: “I am here to drink with Prince Dan. Can

Boss Wu give us some privacy? I have some confidential things to discuss with Official Xiang.”

He whispered intimately to Bailei: “You are next.” And slapped her bum heavily.

Bailei let out an exaggerated yelp.

Guiyan slipped out of Xiang Shaolong’s bosom and cooed: “You must ask for me later!” Batting her eye lashes at him, she left the room with Wu Fu and Bailei and even closed the door for them.

Xiang Shaolong sat down again and could not help but feel some temptation. Even if Guiyan is not fully sincere, she knows how to make men feel good about themselves. Any other man will also be tempted.

Han Chuang softly smiled: “Wu Fu is really good and even brought his two best girls to accompany us. Even when we know that he is out to please you, we still fall into his trap willingly.”

Xiang Shaolong felt the same and believed that with such men around, it is hard to be an uncorrupted official. He nodded: “Brother Han still did not tell me how you found out that I am Dong Horse Fanatic!”

Han Chuang revealed: “Someone saw you going to see Tian Dan and my suspicions are raised. I heard that you came out with an ugly expression on your face and Tian Dan rushed to see Lu Buwei

immediately. Did something happen?”

Xiang Shaolong do not trust Han Chuang as much as he trusts Lord Longyang. He plainly state: “We have some slight disagreements! It is nothing serious.”

Han Chuang sincerely commented: “If Brother Xiang wants to deal with Tian Dan or Li Yuan, you must not leave me out.”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “If there is a need, I will definitely ask for your assistance.”

Han Chuang’s expression suddenly turned vicious and asked: “Has Brother Xiang heard of this man named Lao Ai?”

Xiang Shaolong recalled that Lao Ai seduced his concubine and was forced to escape to Xianyang City. He nodded to show that he has heard of him.

Han Chuang gritted his teeth: “This bastard is an ungrateful man who is worse than a beast. I treated him well and yet he eloped with my concubine. He even strangled her to death when she became a burden to him. Such a heartless fellow; I cannot wait to tear him to pieces. Unfortunately, he is hiding in the Premier Residence and I cannot do anything about it.”

Xiang Shaolong guessed that he does not know that Lao Ai is now Zhu Ji’s beloved. His constant patronage to this Drunken Wind Brothel must be due to Lao Ai and not because he likes to drink or

womanize. He sighed: “Marquis must give up all hope. Lao Ai has entered the palace and is adored by Empress Ji. If you try to kill him, you will not return to Han alive.”

Han Chuang trembled strongly and his eyes reddened, glowing with pain and agony. After some time, he dejectedly sighed: “I understand. In this case, I will return to Han tomorrow. If Brother Xiang needs my assistance in any way, I will do my best as long as it is within my power.”

He softly added: “I still remembered and am grateful for your assistance in Handan City.”

Xiang Shaolong can never imagine that Han Chuang can be such a thankful person. He could not hold back and promised: “Brother Han can rest easy. I guarantee with my head that Lao Ai will die a horrible death within seven years. I will avenge Brother Han’s injustice.”

Han Chuang stared at him with disbelief for a while and finally nodded: “If these words come from anyone else, I will take it as a bad joke. But if they came from the mouth of Dong Horse Fanatic, I have absolutely no doubts about it.”

Both men stood up and Han Chuang finished: “Sister Jing may be with Pang Nuan now but the man she truly loves is the dead Dong Horse Fanatic. I have decided not to tell her the truth.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and an image of the pretty Zhao Empress appeared in his mind.

Book 13 Chapter 13 – An Evil Beauty

With two pretty maids leading the way, Xiang Shaolong walked through a long corridor and stepped into a garden. The garden is filled with sounds of laughter and idle chatter.

Under the illumination of the lamps, Xiang Shaolong noticed that there are many different kinds of flowers planted in the garden. They are neatly arranged to give a sense of peace and tranquility, soothing the minds of those who see them.

In the centre of the garden, there is a fake mountain and a fish pond. With the fresh green grass and insects chirping, it is hard to imagine that this is the garden of a brothel. Xiang Shaolong was so comfortable that he thought that he had returned home.

The two maids leading the road are whispering and giggling to each other. They turned back occasionally to look and smile at him, trying to entice him.

Xiang Shaolong knew that women are naturally attracted to him. Moreover, he is the mighty Imperial Cavalry Commander. These girls will feel honoured if they are linked to him.

Ever since his promotion to this highly-sought-after post, he has been busy with work and family and did not have much time to know the common folks. Instead, all these work has been delegated to his men. Today, he finally get to know these commoners and felt the glory and intangible benefits of being the Imperial Cavalry Commander.

No wonder so many people are interested to be officials.

His men like Pu Bu and Liu Chao have benefited from his glory too.

Going around the fake mountain, a two-storey building came into view. The entrance was guarded by dozens of Palace Guards and Infantry Soldiers who are the escorts of the Lords and Guan Zhongxie. Xiang Shaolong is familiar with them as he saw them quite often.

They may be standing guard outside the door but were not lonely at all as a group of maids are flirting with them, creating a lively atmosphere. When they saw Xiang Shaolong coming alone, they stood at attention and paid their respects but could not hide the look of surprise on their faces.

When the maids announced his arrival, he smilingly strode into the main hall that was lighted with oil lamps.

Inside the wide hall, there were four seats situated on each side. The tables are full of dishes and wine.

Guan Zhongxie, Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are seated around the tables. When they saw him, they joyfully stood up and greeted him. The atmosphere is very friendly.

The ladies serving them drinks kneeled down and kowtowed

humbly.

Guan Zhongxie laughed: “Official Xiang is late. Despite having a valid reason, we must still punish you with three cups of wine. When we compete in drinking later, you will not have an unfair advantage.”

Xiang Shaolong found him to be more and more articulate and his words are full of reason. He smiled: “Official Guan’s words are as powerful as your sword skills. I will do as you wish.”

After he got seated, a beauty came from Guan Zhongxie’s side and filled his wine cup.

Xiang Shaolong caught sight of the crystal clear wine being poured into his cup and was reminded about Brandy. Feeling exhilarated, he put his hand on the shoulder of the pretty girl who was kneeling down beside him and pouring wine into his cup. He gently asked: “How do I address you?”

Opposite him, Lord Changping burst out laughing: “This is news indeed. So Shaolong is an expert with women.”

Lord Changwen interrupted: “He has to be, otherwise how can he win Ji Yanran’s affections? Big Brother should call him a brothel expert instead.”

The beautiful courtesan batted her eyes at Xiang Shaolong and shyly answered: “My name is Yang Yu. Official Xiang must

remember this.”

Xiang Shaolong felt completely relaxed.

The past few days have been too stressful and he was almost broke down.

He needs to let his hair down and enjoy the nightlife of Xianyang City. He must forget about Shan Rou and numb himself in the brothel and forget about the world.

He finished his drink in one gulp.

Everyone was cheering for him.

Seated beside him, Guan Zhongxie turned his head and cut in: “Wait. Before the second cup, you must order your dish first.”

Xiang Shaolong stared at the dishes on the table with surprise and curiously asked: “Aren’t the dishes here already?”

Everyone was bowled over with laughter.

Lord Changwen was holding his stomach and suppressing his laughter. He stammered: “You have to order your women first. I suggest you limit yourself to two of them or you will not be able to wake up for the hunting fair tomorrow.”

Guan Zhongxie added: “The Boss has reserved the best girls for your selection. The finest dishes are all available.”

His words evoked another round of laughter.

Lord Changping advised: “If you wish, you can have our girls too. Since this is your first visit, we shall go lightly on you!”

The two girls beside him began to quarrel and the scene became slightly chaotic.

His two hands holding the second cup of wine Yang Yu poured for him, he weakly smiled: “I did not force any of you to give way to me! I will not make things difficult for anyone. I will only need Miss Guiyan to drink with me. At the stroke of midnight, I have to return home.”

Yang Yu, the other courtesans and the accompanying maids started to protest loudly.

Guan Zhongxie sighed: “Unless Official Xiang is going to fight his way out, the brothel girls will not let you sleep in your own bed tonight.”

As Yang Yu filled the third cup of wine for Xiang Shaolong, she softly invited: “Shall I accompany Official Xiang to sleep tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong finished his drink in one gulp and bitterly smiled: “It is not that I am unwilling but I have my difficulties. My

injured leg has yet to recover and I am really sorry. Will everyone please forgive me?”

Guan Zhongxie apologised: “It is us who have mistaken him. We should all drink as a punishment.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed Guan Zhongxie for using this excuse to verify his leg injury without exposing his true intention. They began to toast each other and Xiang Shaolong drank as well.

Yang Yu gently reminded: “Official must come back and look for me.” She lowered her head and returned to Guan Zhongxie’s side in a charming manner.

Lord Changwen remarked: “There is a dish that Shaolong must definitely order or we will all be disappointed. That will be Xianyang City’s top courtesan Dan Meimei.”

Xiang Shaolong is certain that Guan Zhongxie will be observing his reaction to this name so he can deduce whether he knows about Wu Tingwei and Dan Meimei’s relationship. He pretended to be surprised and laughed: “I must be working too hard. How come I have never heard of her name?”

Every lady present is jealous of Dan Meimei and cheered when they heard this, adding to the festive atmosphere.

Guan Zhongxie was speechless: “Luckily, Dan Meimei did not hear this or she will reject your invitation and she will cover her

ears whenever she hears your name in the future. Men! Invite Miss Guiyan and Miss Dan Meimei for Official Xiang. I am the host tonight and we must give our guests the very best.”

His words are slightly overbearing but it still sounds comfortable and acceptable.

The maids received his order and left.

Guan Zhongxie clapped loudly three times and the hall quietened down instantly.

The female musicians seated near the door may be slightly older but still retain some charm and elegance. It is not surprising Drunken Wind Brothel has been named Xianyang City’s top brothel. If not for their official ranks, they are not fit to be seated where they are.

The female musicians begin to play a melody.

The two doors of the main hall were thrown open and a large group of courtesans ran in like a bunch of butterflies flying in. The spring in their steps signifies youth and liveliness, and they were a pleasing sight.

Xiang Shaolong scrutinized them carefully and could tell that they are around the age of eighteen and nineteen. Every one of them has an excellent complexion and nice skin.

In these warring times, men are more highly regarded than women. As a result, many poor families resort to selling their daughters. When Xiang Shaolong first ran into Tao Fang, he was acquiring beauties from all over the world. The courtesans in front of him are possibly acquired in the same manner.

Thinking about this, he could not help but recalled the pitiful Ting Fangshi. Agonized, he wished he could leave immediately.

He was still feeling sad as the music gradually stopped and the courtesans bade farewell and left.

Their beautiful companions began to fill up their wine cups.

An attendant announced: “Miss Guiyan has arrived!”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and gazed at Guiyan sashaying in. He thought about her name and the possible meaning behind it. He guessed that Guiyan is not a Qin native but gave herself this name to remind her of her hometown.

(Translator note: Gui = Belong. Guiyan = Belonging to Yan.)

Guiyan paid her respects to everyone and joyfully sat down besides Xiang Shaolong. All the other girls present have an envious look on their faces.

Xiang Shaolong did not have a chance to say anything yet when Guiyan leaned on him and poured another cup of wine. Smiling

brightly, she toasted: “I am grateful for your appreciation. Let me drink a toast to you!”

Guan Zhongxie and the two Lords burst out laughing.

Lord Changwen explained: “This is called intoxication with both women and wine. Shaolong may eventually risk his injury and stay overnight at Drunken Wind Brothel!”

Guiyan was shocked: “Official Xiang is injured?”

Xiang Shaolong sniffed at her fragrance and was slightly uneasy. Guiyan is a very charming lady, especially when she is trying her best to seduce you. In the past, Zhao Mu used Zhao Ya and a strong aphrodisiac to try to harm him. The best trick in the book is the Beauty Trap.

Thinking about this, he recalled Guan Zhongxie’s sharp eyes staring at him when Dan Meimei’s name is mentioned. It was a really close shave.

He was really complacent. If the wine he drank earlier was poisoned, he will be dead in no time.

Mo Ao is a poisons expert. He may even create a poison that will only react a few days later. If that happens, no one will suspect Guan Zhongxie is his murderer.

Guiyan noticed his expression changing and thought that his leg

was in pain. She swallowed some wine herself from a cup and pass the same cup of wine to him, advising: “Wine can lessen your pain. Please have a drink.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved that she had drunk from the same cup and finished the cup of wine.

His mind began to think furiously.

To bribe a courtesan to harm him, the Imperial Cavalry Commander, is not an easy task. The entire brothel may be forced to close down and it will have huge repercussions. Moreover, Guan Zhongxie will not take such a risk. If he wants someone to kill Xiang Shaolong on his behalf, the only possibility is Dan Meimei. She has been bewitched by Lao Ai and will obey his orders without question.

Lord Changwen smiled: “Guiyan is so sweet; Shaolong should reward her with a kiss.”

Guiyan pretended to whine and collapsed into Xiang Shaolong’s bosom. Her left hand hugging his solid waist and her right hand hugging his thick neck, she raised her pretty face and closed her eyes, breathing heavily with anticipation.

With her large breasts pressing against his body and witnessing her horny face, Xiang Shaolong was aroused and kissed her once on the lips.

Everyone clapped and cheered loudly.

Guiyan released him reluctantly and whined: “Official is so stingy.” She lowered her head and added: “Official is even more muscular than lions and tigers!”

The attendant announced: “Miss Dan Meimei has arrived!”

The entire hall quietened down and every single pair of eyes turned towards the main door.

Accompanied by the sounds of her accessories tinkling, a tall woman sauntered towards them.

Xiang Shaolong took a look at her and was taken aback.

Dan Meimei is around the age of twenty with chiselled good looks, the sweetest smile and the most loving lips. She has an innocent aura that makes all men feel like protecting her from harm. Now that she is here, she has become the glowing moon while every other girl is just a shimmering star.

The music started to play.

Dan Meimei twisted and turned her body around and began dancing.

Under the lamp’s illumination, the golden birds embroidered on

her clothes seemed to have a life on their own and are flying around the room, making her resemble an angel from heaven.

Dan Meimei, the most popular courtesan of Xianyang City, began to strike certain seductive postures. Out of a sudden, she started singing.

Her voice is pure and refreshing, adding to her sensuality.

Xiang Shaolong could catch some parts of the lyrics. The song is about a young lady bathing in the river and thinking about her beloved. She received a flute from her lover which is engraved with a pair of loving mandarin ducks, making her even more madly in love with him.

Coupled with her dance gestures and her enchanting expression, Dan Meimei was absolutely mesmerizing and even Xiang Shaolong is captivated by her.

Her beauty and grace is just one notch lower than Ji Yanran and Qin Qing. Xiang Shaolong did not expect such a beauty to be found in a brothel.

With her beauty and performing ability, a rich man could have easily brought her home and add her to his harem. Why does she still need to work for a living?

She continued singing: “Anyone can share my blanket while I think of my beloved. My fate has been decided.”

Her beautiful singing slowly ended and everyone regained their self-control and cheered wildly for her.

Dan Meimei paid her respects to everyone and tip toed to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong reminded himself that this beauty before him is a vicious and evil woman in disguise. He stood up clapping and smiled: "Welcome, Miss Dan."

Dan Meimei giggled and her eyes gazed towards his face. The moment she got a closer look, her eyes lighted up with a mixture of fear, appreciation, doubt and hesitation.

Xiang Shaolong is even more suspicious of Dan Meimei and is certain that she will be poisoning him as ordered by Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao. Otherwise, she will not have such a strange look in her eyes.

Her eyes cannot hide the truth. With Xiang Shaolong looking for tell-tale signs, she had inadvertently revealed the truth.

When Dan Meimei laid her eyes on Xiang Shaolong, she was shocked as he reminded her of Lao Ai. But to her, Xiang Shaolong is even better than Lao Ai as he has a heroic air around him.

Dan Meimei intentionally avoided his gaze and lowered her head. She came to Xiang Shaolong's side and knelt down.

Xiang Shaolong peeped quickly at Guan Zhongxie and saw him staring at Dan Meimei with a nervous look in his eyes. He must have suspected that Dan Meimei is attracted to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong bended down and reached out, holding onto her firm shoulders and helped her up.

Dan Meimei raised her head and politely greeted: “Dan Meimei pays her respects to Official Xiang!” She lowered her head again gently but in a pitiful manner.

But Xiang Shaolong knew that she has a guilty conscience and could not stand his righteous staring.

Lord Changping smiled: “Dan Meimei must have been moved by Official Xiang to be so shy and quiet.”

Lord Changwen added: “Has Official Xiang’s leg undergone a miracle healing?”

Everyone laughed at his sentence.

As Xiang Shaolong supported her to sit down, Guan Zhongxie suggested: “A beauty should match a hero. Meimei should offer Official Xiang a welcome toast.”

Xiang Shaolong continued to observe Dan Meimei every little

move. Her body trembled slightly when she heard Guan Zhongxie's suggestion and was agitated. He was amused that Guan Zhongxie was afraid of her backing out and was forcing her to poison Xiang Shaolong at once.

Mo Ao is truly brilliant. If Xiang Shaolong did not know that Dan Meimei is Lao Ai's mistress, he would die a wrongful death.

Dan Meimei hesitated for a while and finally her pair of jade hands appeared from her long sleeves and went ahead to pour some wine for Xiang Shaolong.

Observing a delicate hairpin inserted into a bun of her shiny black hair and smelling her womanly scent, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to detest Guan Zhongxie for forcing this beauty to commit such an atrocious act.

Dan Meimei's jade hands trembled slightly.

On his other side, Guiyan whispered intimately into Xiang Shaolong's ear: "Official has forgotten all about me!"

Xiang Shaolong chain of thoughts was disrupted by her. When she finished speaking, his hand snaked over, embracing her slender waist while he kissed her on her neck.

At this point, Dan Meimei raised a cup of wine and cooed: "Meimei will first drink half a cup to represent my respect for you. Official Xiang shall finish the rest."

She raised the cup with one hand and put the other hand into her sleeve. With a magnificent posture, she lifted the cup and drank from it without making any noise.

Xiang Shaolong focused hard and saw the other hand fiddling in the sleeve. He is certain that she is taking this chance to add poison to the wine.

She lowered her sleeve and now held the cup with both hands, sending the cup to Xiang Shaolong's lips but she looked down away from him.

Lord Changping clapped and cheered loudly.

Xiang Shaolong peered down at the cup half-filled with wine and had a sudden brainwave.

Should he expose the truth about the poisoned wine? This will be the best chance to destroy Guan Zhongxie.

end of Book 13

Book 14 Chapter 01 – Xianyang Happenings

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at the cup of wine Dan Meimei presented to him but could not see anything unusual.

He did not believe that the poison will dissolve into the wine immediately. However, all he can rely on is the illumination of the oil lamp, which makes it more difficult for him to scrutinise the wine.

He gave up the idea of exposing Guan Zhongxie. He wasn't intimidated by him as he is confident that he can make Dan Meimei confess that Guan Zhongxie to be the mastermind behind the poisoning.

The problem is by doing so; it is equivalent to openly opposing Lu Buwei. Their underground battle will come to light.

Remembering that Lu Buwei has another several years of ultimate power, he decided to play safe for the time being.

Moreover, this issue may become even more complicated and even affect Lao Ai indirectly.

At the same time, he wonders if he can pretend to drink the poisonous wine. This will make Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao leave him alone for time being. When the matter has passed, it will cause confusion among them. They may be misled into thinking that Xiang Shaolong is immune to poison or that Dan Meimei did not poison him in the first place. Their infighting will only benefit

him.

These thoughts flashed through his mind very quickly and he reached a decision in a split second.

Xiang Shaolong held the poisonous wine with one hand and embraced Dan Meimei's waist with the other and laughed: "Miss Meimei needs to drink another mouthful of wine to make it exactly half a cup."

With his back to Guiyan and Guan Zhongxie, he forced Dan Meimei to take another sip of wine.

All the colour in Dan Meimei's face disappeared and she strongly fought back and protested: "Official Xiang is so barbaric!"

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to release his hold on her. As Dan Meimei has been resisting fiercely all the while, she lost her balance and fell on the floor.

While everybody is focusing on Dan Meimei, Xiang Shaolong swiftly flicked his wrist and scattered the wine under the table. At the same instant, he pretended to help Dan Meimei up and concealed his extra movement. His cover-up was perfect.

Dan Meimei sat upright in shock and was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "It is my fault for causing Miss to fall down. I deserved to be punished!" He raised his cup and

pretended to drink the poisonous wine.

Opposite him, Lord Changping sighed: “Official Xiang is really amazing. This is the first time I saw Dan Meimei lying down on the floor in front of everyone.” Everyone burst out in laughter at his comments.

Xiang Shaolong put down his wine cup and noticed Dan Meimei’s head still lowered with guilt. She did this to prevent others from witnessing the fear and unease in her eyes.

On his left, Guiyan poured more wine for him.

Guan Zhongxie smiled: “If Official Xiang can bear with some pain, I am sure Dan Meimei will lie down again tonight!”

The two Lords broke out in more laughter while the other girls are expressing a mixture of smiles and jealousy.

Xiang Shaolong embraced Dan Meimei’s slender waist and placed another cup of wine beside her lip, gently saying: “Please forgive me by drinking this cup of wine!”

Dan Meimei parted her sexy lips and stared at him with mixed emotions in her eyes. She then drank the entire cup of wine silently.

Everyone cheered loudly.

On his other side, Guiyan was annoyed: “Official Xiang is so biased!”

Xiang Shaolong could see that Guan Zhongxie was not suspicious of him and was secretly happy. He boasted: “I am the most unbiased man. Come! Let me serve Miss Guiyan in drinking wine too.”

Lord Changwen egged: “You should feed her wine from your mouth to make it more interesting.”

Guiyan chortled and actually lay down on Xiang Shaolong’s lap with an inviting and seductive look on her face. Luckily, her position did not affect his injured leg.

Although a beautiful woman is lying on his lap, Xiang Shaolong is not the least aroused. Firstly, he was busy peeping at Dan Meimei and Guan Zhongxie’s reaction. Secondly, he knew that Guiyan is sent here to please him, the mighty Imperial Cavalry Commander, and is full of insincerity.

Guiyan may not be as pretty as Dan Meimei but is considered the second prettiest among all the girls present. Only Guan Zhongxie’s Yang Yu can be considered on par with her. He could not resist taking advantage of her and poured a cup of wine into his mouth without swallowing it. He then lowered his head, matched her lips and let the wine slowly trickle out of his mouth.

Guiyan moaned slightly and drank the wine skilfully. It is really

not easy to drink wine lying down and it must be quite challenging for her.

With everyone cheering him on, Xiang Shaolong was about to withdraw when out of a sudden, Guiyan grabbed him tightly and forced some wine back into his mouth.

Xiang Shaolong was very aroused and forgot about his inhibitions. He sent his tongue into her mouth and they frenched for a while before separating.

Everyone cheered wildly.

Guiyan leaned on him weakly and seductively whined: “Can Official Xiang stay here tonight? I guarantee that your injury will not be affected.”

As she was whining into his ear, only Dan Meimei on his other side can hear the words she mentioned. Dan Meimei trembled slightly and lowered her head again, as if she is lamenting over Xiang Shaolong’s impending death and that she is his murderer.

Xiang Shaolong kissed Guiyan’s forehead and smiled: “If you do not make love wholeheartedly, it is not worth it.” His hand snaked over and hugged Dan Meimei again and feigned surprise: “Is something bothering Miss Meimei?”

Dan Meimei was stunned and sadly replied: “Official Xiang only has eyes for Sister Guiyan so I am naturally upset.”

Guan Zhongxie hurriedly spoke up for her: “Official Xiang is truly impressive and can even make Dan Meimei jealous. We brothers are all in awe of your talents.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed him for calling himself his brother. Lord Changwen smiled: “Looks like Official Xiang has to feed her a cup of wine too.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that he might as well go all the way and tempt this female murderess. He prepared and held another cup of wine in his mouth and leaned over to match Dan Meimei’s lips. After he finished feeding her the wine in his mouth, he refused to let her go and frenched her deeply. Using all his kissing technique and tricks he learnt in the 21st century, he did his best to tempt and arouse her.

Dan Meimei’s cold demeanour melted and starting burning with passion.

Xiang Shaolong knew that with his kissing skills and his impending death, Dan Meimei will feel even more remorseful and may even really fall in love with him.

After some time, tears can be seen in the corner of her eyes, affirming that she was forced to poison him.

Xiang Shaolong did not want to leave yet as he is concerned that the spilt wine under the table has not evaporated yet.

Guiyan came over to fondle him too. Inspired, Xiang Shaolong spilled another cup of wine under the table to hide the earlier spill.

After a series of caressing, Dan Meimei surprisingly excused herself and took her leave.

Without this popular babe, the Lords were less enthusiastic compared to before. Xiang Shaolong took the chance to take his leave too.

Whether she is sincere or putting up an act, Guiyan actually sent him all the way to the front courtyard. She made him promised to come back for her before she allowed him to board Lord Changwen's carriage.

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong finds himself more and more interested in this ancient 'Black Leopard Bar.'

Back at the Command Centre, he met Teng Yi who is on night shift and told him everything that happened. Teng Yi was relieved: "What a close call!"

He added: "We are too rigid and kept thinking that he will only attack us during the hunting fair. To think that he will use the Beauty Trap tonight. If we know more about the poison, we can trick them instead."

Xiang Shaolong affirmed: "The poison will take effect after the

fair.” Teng Yi was stunned: “What makes you so sure?”

Xiang Shaolong explained; “Tu Xian informed me that Mo Ao has constructed a kind of tool that can kill underwater. It is meant for you and Jing Jun. When I die of poisoning later, there will be no one in Wu Family to counter them in the future.”

Teng Yi was incensed: “If Mo Ao survives the hunting fair, I will change my surname to his.”

Xiang Shaolong’s expression darkened: “We have always been thinking about ourselves. If they planned to assassinate Lu Gong and Xu Xian too, it will be disastrous.”

Teng Yi breathed out in shock: “Will Lu Buwei be so daring?”

Xiang Shaolong remarked: “Normally, he always play safe. But with the chaos caused by Lord Gaoling’s rebellion, he can easily push the blame to him. With his devious scheming, this is an opportunity he will not bypass.”

Thinking about this, he became impatient and stood up, declaring: “I need to see Lu Gong now and warn him.”

Teng Yi suggested: “I think you should see Xu Xian instead. In terms of intelligence, Lu Gong is way behind him. If he believes us, they will take the appropriate countermeasures.”

Xiang Shaolong found it reasonable and left the Command

Centre under the escorts of the Eighteen Guardians and a few hundred Cavalry soldiers. Pretending to patrol the City, he rode towards Xu Xian's Left Premier Residence.

As the Imperial Cavalry Commander, he is responsible for all security matters in the City except for the palace.

As the dinner appointment ended early, it is only twelve plus now. Except for the brothel areas, the remaining streets are deserted except for the occasional horse carriage.

At the Left Premier Residence, Xu Xian met him in the inner hall. This famous Great General of Qin smiled: "I knew Shaolong would look for me before the hunting fair."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "Why is Premier Xu so certain?"

Xu Xian sighed: "Since Mu Gong ruled Qin, we become a serious contender for power. Unfortunately, the roads to the east were heavily fortified by Jing so we focused on attacking the western lands. Finally, we conquered the other twelve states and gain plenty of territory. By the time Mu Gong passed away, we have amassed almost every piece of land on both sides of the Wei River. Since then, we did not conquer any new territories for over two hundred years. We can blame the enemy but it is actually our inability to overcome them. If you are powerful, who dare not succumb to you? It is as simple as that."

Xiang Shaolong had no idea about history during those times and

kept nodding his head.

Xu Xian became more enthusiastic and lectured: “When the eastern lands are divided, we should take the chance to attack them. It is a pity that the Qin court is in trouble and power was in the hands of evil ministers. Within forty years, we have a King who committed suicide, a Crown Prince denied of his succession, another King who was killed in the wilderness along with the Empress Dowager. Taking advantage of our internal strife, Wei invaded us and we lost all territories west of the river.”

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand Xu Xian’s mindset. Lu Buwei is walking along the same old path. Whether Lu Buwei can control the Qin court or even remove Xiao Pan, ultimately, Qin cannot unite the world. This is Xu Xian’s main concern.

Xu Xian stood up and mentioned in a deep voice: “Shaolong! Let’s take a walk in the rear garden!”

Xiang Shaolong’s goose pimples stood up and knew that he has something confidential to say to him.

Under the bright moonlight, the two men strolled slowly in the rear garden.

Xu Xian sighed: “We are just as barbaric as Rongdi and can be extremely stubborn. Xianyang City may be a beautiful city but it is just a nice cover for our rough ways. If the city is gone, you will see our uncivilised lifestyle and customs. Fortunately, Xiao Gong implemented Shang Yang’s reforms and imposed harsh laws to

make us learn how to respect rules. He built up our army and emphasized on military contributions that make us invincible wherever our armies go. Now, Lu Buwei entered the picture and kept promoting his own men. He even invited the inferior representatives from the six states to Qin, flattered them and secretly conspired with them. These actions are unfavourable to our state. I have read his Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu. Hng! If Shang Yang comes back to life, he will burn them at once.”

Xiang Shaolong finally learnt about another set of thinking other than Lu Gong’s Qin racism. It is a clash of culture. Lu Buwei has been too arrogant and did not consider the feelings of the Qin people.

The Qin people he met are honest, straightforward and do not employ schemes. Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Wang He, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and An Gu are all alike.

Lu Buwei, Mo Ao, Guan Zhongxie and Lao Ai are all scheming people.

Qin’s invincibility comes from their strong family relations coupled with Shang Yang’s reforms.

Lu Buwei uses military men like Guan Zhongxie and Lu Xiong who are all his own subordinates. Moreover, Lu Xiong’s denial of his wrongdoing is something Qin people detests the most.

Xiao Pan’s strict punishment of Lu Xiong thus earned him the respect of the Qin people.

Xu Xian stopped walking and gazed at Xiang Shaolong before mentioning: “I am not against Lu Buwei because he is an outsider. Shang Yang is from Wei but he is someone I respect the most.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “I understand Premier Xu’s thinking.”

Xu Xian shook his head and sighed: “Lu Buwei is too simple-minded. He thought that by poisoning the King, Qin will belong to him. Thankfully, Heaven has not abandoned us yet and gave us a capable ruler Crown Prince Zheng. Even at the sacrifice of my own life, I will ensure Crown Prince Zheng will be coroneted as the King of Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked: “From Premier Xu’s words, our situation seems to be life-threatening.”

Xu Xian led him to sit down on some stones beside a small bridge and whispered: “Initially, I am not worried. But because of the uprising in the eastern provinces, Lu Buwei has sent Meng Ao, Wang He and all our nearby forces to crush the rebels. Now, there is only the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry protecting the capital. This is the most dangerous situation I have ever seen.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “From what I know, the uprising is a scheme by Lord Gaoling and Zhao General Pang Nuan. Didn’t Lu Buwei mention this?”

Xu Xian’s face become clouded and commented: “That’s true but

we all know Lord Gaoling's ability. Ten Lord Gaolings are still inferior to half a Lu Buwei. Lu Buwei is not someone who will be taken by surprise at the rebellion and send troops hastily to defend the provinces."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his body turning cold and softly asked: "Premier Xu is saying that..."

Xu Xian concluded: "This has something to do with Lu Buwei. As long as Lu Buwei can time this scheme with Lord Gaoling's rebellion, he can control him like a puppet."

Xu Xian's face became more solemn and he added: "If Lu Buwei can kill you and your assistant Commanders, both Imperial Armies will land in his hands. What do you think will happen to Xianyang City? That is why I can guess that you will visit me before the hunting fair. If you are really not Lu Buwei's lackey, you should sense something amiss with your level of intelligence. Does Shaolong understand?"

Xiang Shaolong has a second close shave. It is not easy to gain Xu Xian's trust. It is only until now that he fully believed that Xiang Shaolong is opposing Lu Buwei. He must be guarding against Lu Buwei's spying.

After an awkward silence, he replied: "Thanks for Premier Xu's trust."

He still has some doubts and asked: "Even if both armies belong to Lu Buwei, they will not necessary obey him if he wants to

overthrow the Crown Prince.”

Xu Xian sighed: “Shaolong is still inexperienced. Unless Lu Buwei has full control of the military, he will not dare to harm the Crown Prince. But if he can kill Lu Gong and me and push the entire blame to Lord Gaoling, he will control the Qin court. Meng Ao is his lackey and Wang He the foolish asshole dare not oppose him. With the Empress supporting him, there is nothing he dare not do.”

His eyes flashed energetically and state: “He who acts first is in control; he who acts later is controlled.”

As long as Lu Buwei is alive, everyone will suffer. The history of Qin will repeat as long as power is held in the hands of unscrupulous ministers.

Xiang Shaolong nearly groaned.

From Xu Xian’s point of view, everything is well-analyzed and the strategies are appropriate.

However, Xiang Shaolong knew that before Xiao Pan’s coronation, nobody could kill Lu Buwei.

If he cannot kill him, he will be killed. What kind of choice is this?

He hated himself for not being able to use this reason to persuade

Xu Xian. How can he explain to Xu Xian that history books have recorded that Lu Buwei will live for several more years?

While he is agonizing, Xu Xian continued: “As long as Crown Prince nods his head, Lu Buwei will not survive these three days.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Has Premier Xu thought about the consequences?”

Xu Xian coldly snorted: “There are three obstacles. They are Empress Ji, Meng Ao and Du Bi. Du Bi is the biggest headache. With Lu Buwei gone, he will support Chongqiao to be the Crown Prince. If not for this consideration, Lu Gong and I would have acted when the late King passed away. Of course! Wang He has been dissuading us from doing this. Therefore, I hope you will persuade Crown Prince. You are, after all, the person he trusts the most.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “I have another plan in mind. First, we must conduct the blood test and prove that Crown Prince and Lu Buwei are not related at all. Secondly, we must kill Lu Buwei’s top advisor. With this man gone, Lu Buwei is like a tiger without teeth and claws and his prowess will be limited. Thirdly, we will...”

Xu Xian waved his hand and interrupted him: “Are you referring to Mo Ao?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Premier Xu has heard of this man?”

Xu Xian simply dismissed: “If I have never heard of him, how would I dare to oppose Lu Buwei? It will be great if we can kill Guan Zhongxie too. Unfortunately, we are all guarding against each other secretly. If we openly fight, it will be hard to tell who the winner is.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that based on this point, he can still dissuade this clever man. He whispered: “Thirdly, we will support Lao Ai and use him to counter Lu Buwei. As long as we can drag everything until the coronation date, Lu Buwei will be the eventual loser.”

Xu Xian was blown away: “Isn’t Lao Ai a lackey of Lu Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong revealed his whole scheme to him and added: “I even recommended Crown Prince to name Lu Buwei the Premier Mentor to curb his ambitions.”

Xu Xian inhaled a deep breath and stared at Xiang Shaolong as if this is the first time they met. Assessing him for a while, his eyes glowed and he remarked: “In terms of scheming, Mo Ao is inferior to you. No wonder you can still live healthily until today.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt guilty and smiled: “Luckily, I did not finish one special cup of wine tonight or I would have failed your expectations.”

Xu Xian pressed for an explanation and he revealed everything that has happened.

After he finished listening, Xu Xian nodded in agreement: “You are right. If Mo Ao does not die, we will die under his hands one day. From my estimates, the poisoned wine will take effect after seven days. King Xiaowen drank Lu Buwei’s medicine and died from breathing difficulties seven days later. There has never been any poison that takes effect after seven days so even with our suspicions; there is no evidence to indicate Lu Buwei to be the mastermind. Ai! Now, nobody dares to eat food from Lu Buwei. It is really strange. The medication that King Xiaowen drank was also tested by an attendant. Why didn’t the attendant die of poisoning too?”

Xiang Shaolong had to admit that Mo Ao’s poisoning skills are many times better than the dead Zhao Mu. Even if it is a slow-reacting poison, there will still be traces of poisoning when the poison has entered the stomach. How can there be a poison that will only react seven days later? Even in the 21st century, it is still not possible. The only likelihood is that the poison is carefully wrapped in a special capsule. When the capsule is in the stomach, it will stay there for some time before it leaks the poison and take the life of the person.

Thinking about this, he was agitated. He wished he could immediately rush back to Drunken Wind Brothel and investigate the area where he spilled the poisonous wine and see if there is really such a capsule there.

Xu Xian noticed his countenance changing and implored: “What have you thought of?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “I am thinking of how to persuade Premier Xu to delay his plans to attack Lu Buwei.”

Xu Xian smiled: “I am not a brainless fighter. Since Shaolong has such a brilliant plan, Lu Gong and I will hold our plans back. But if you cannot kill Mo Ao, it will be our turn to attack Lu Buwei. It is better to die fighting for something you believe in than die an unexplainable death at home.”

Xiang Shaolong beat his chest and swore: “Give me ten days! I may be able to use his own poison against himself and let him die a mysterious death!” Surprised, Xu Xian stared at him speechlessly.

Book 14 Chapter 02 – Re-visiting The Brothel

Xiang Shaolong agilely leapt over the wall and landed in the garden of Drunken Wind Brothel.

It is two am in the morning and the several entertainment buildings behind the main building are still lighted and filled with sounds of music and singing.

Xiang Shaolong took some time before he could determine the exact building Guan Zhongxie had hosted him earlier. Strangely, the building is still lighted. Xiang Shaolong was perplexed, thinking that another batch of guests is now occupying their room.

Curious, he took advantage of the shadows of the trees and bushes to creep nearer to the building. As silent as a mouse, he finally reached the perimeter of the building and hurriedly prone down with his heart thumping wildly.

He was taken by surprise by several strongmen guarding the main door and he could recognize some of them to be Lu Buwei's personal escorts.

Is Lu Buwei here?

He peered harder into the darkness and noticed that the building was securely guarded by men in all four corners.

Of course, they do not pose an obstacle to an elite soldier like him

who can climb walls and swing from buildings.

He scrutinized his surroundings and chose a tall tree besides the building. He stealthily shimmied up the tree and shot his grappling hook onto a roof tile. Once the rope is tightened, he carefully glided onto the roof and peeped into the building through one of the ventilation gaps.

He was so completely overwhelmed by what he saw that his body turned cold immediately and he nearly fell off the roof.

Under the illumination of the bright oil lamps, he saw Guan Zhongxie, Mo Ao, Brothel Owner Wu Fu, Guiyan and Dan Meimei analyzing the spilled wine under the table.

Wu Fu sighed: “Mister Mo is truly a genius. First, you advised me to use precious gifts to lower his guard; then we misled him that Meimei is going to poison him when the real culprit is Guiyan.”

Guan Zhongxie commented: “I am full of respect for Brother Mo’s abilities. Now, that kid thought that he had managed to escape our poisoning and will lower his guard. What a thrilling outcome!”

The main door opened and a delighted Lu Buwei strolled in arrogantly.

As Xiang Shaolong was totally flabbergasted at this revelation, Dan Meimei gracefully leaped into the arms of Lu Buwei and cooed: “Meimei has scored a huge merit for Premier Lu. How do

you plan to reward me?”

Lu Buwei hugged her slender waist before patting her hips and laughed: “Fine! Then let me serve you in bed tonight!”

Mo Ao’s hand snaked out and embraced Guiyan, adding: “Premier must not forget our dear Guiyan. Without her skilful tongue, Xiang Shaolong will not be tricked.”

Above them, Xiang Shaolong was nearly fainting. How he wished he can jump straight down and slaughter all of them at once.

Heaven!

There is a poison pill in his stomach now. He had no knowledge of surgery and his death is imminent.

Still embracing Dan Meimei, Lu Buwei walked over to the spilled wine and took a closer look. He chortled: “Xiang Shaolong, even with your intelligence, you are only good enough to be my puppet. You made a mistake when you thought you have discarded the poisoned wine. When the poison takes effect, you will die an unexplainable death.”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave and saw a ray of hope.

If the pill is stuck in his throat, he can still survive.

Guan Zhongxie remarked: “Miss Meimei’s performance is brilliant. I am almost convinced by your acting too.”

Lu Buwei leaned forward and kissed her tightly on the lips, making her squirm and aroused.

Guan Zhongxie clapped Wu Fu’s shoulder and smiled: “When everything is over, Boss Wu will surely be promoted to a high official post!”

Wu Fu gave his thanks and worriedly asked: “Is there a chance that he may spit the pill out?”

Leaning on Mo Ao, Guiyan assured: “Boss can put your mind at ease. The pill is very sticky and if not for his tongue entering my mouth, I will not be able to feed him the pill too.”

Mo Ao revealed: “The weakness of the pill is that it sticks to the bottom of the wine cup. Otherwise, Little Yan need not feed him with your tongue and let him take advantage of you.”

Guan Zhongxie laughed: “He only took a little advantage. The big advantage will be taken by you tonight!”

All the men laughed while the ladies protested.

Xiang Shaolong was in a state of panic. He could not wait to leave and remove the pill from his throat.

What an excellent plan! In the midst of all the kissing, he was intoxicated and did not realize that it was a kiss of death.

He was too careless and did not anticipate his opponent to guess that he knows Dan Meimei's background. His earlier antics looked so ridiculous now.

Lu Buwei smiled: "The night is painfully short. Mister Mo should retire to Guiyan's room and serve her well for her hard work."

He faced Wu Fu and added: "You have done well. I will see to your reward."

Laughing, he left with Dan Meimei still his in arms.

Xiang Shaolong groaned loudly.

From his open mouth, Teng Yi used a pair of bronze clippers to extract a black pill and put it on a plate. The pill is extremely small and it is about the size of a housefly.

Besides him, Tao Fang, Jing Jun, Pu Bu, Liu Chao, etc sighed with relief at the close shave.

Xiang Shaolong's throat was scrapped and he could not say anything for the time being.

Teng Yi raised the pill to eye level and everyone clustered around to have a closer look.

Jing Jun viciously demanded: “What can we do to put this pill in Mo Ao’s throat?”

Xiang Shaolong cleared his throat and spoke in a hoarse voice: “If this pill is put in a wine cup, it will stick to the bottom. However, it did not happen to King Xiaowen’s bowl of medicine.”

Tao Fang happily exclaimed: “In this case, we can find out the recipe and use the same herbs but improve on its stickiness. Once we can make it stick only upon reaching the throat, it will be a piece of cake to kill Mo Ao. The recipe can be preserved for other uses too.”

Teng Yi was shaken and glanced at Xiang Shaolong. They thought of Tu Xian and shook their heads at the same time.

If Tu Xian can poison Mo Ao without any difficulty, Mo Ao will be dead long ago.

Pu Bu interceded: “Even if we can improve the stickiness; it is still insufficient. How can we convince him to drink it in the first place?”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “Let’s act according to circumstances. I will carry the pill at all times and poison him whenever possible. It is late! Let’s have some rest to have enough stamina to face Mo

Ao's devilish schemes tomorrow. Second Brother and Little Jun must be especially alert."

Everyone agreed in unison and retired to their respective bedrooms.

Back at his own chamber, Xiang Shaolong was reminded of Ji Yanran and his other pretty wives. Deep in thought, he was abruptly disturbed by a shrill voice: "Master is back!"

Xiang Shaolong turned around in surprise and saw Zhou Wei lying on one side of his bed. Her clothes are slightly ruffled and she must have been sleeping before he came into the room. Staring at her tempting figure, Xiang Shaolong was agonized.

Since the deaths of Zhao Qian and the maids, he was mentally tormented and spent a year in living hell. Moreover, he was discouraged at his lack of success in battling Lu Buwei. He no longer wished to add the burden of new relationships to his existing heavy load.

That is the same way he feels about Qin Qing and Ying Ying.

He may have promised the Changping Brothers to woo Ying Ying but it is an obligation and not resulting from his true passion. Additionally, he is not confident of winning her from Guan Zhongxie.

Presently, Zhou Wei is giving him the biggest headache.

From her characteristics, Xiang Shaolong deduced that she is a stubborn girl with plenty of self respect. She will either love him or hate him to the core.

Fortunately, their relationship is just starting out and he can still worm his way out. He coughed: "It is so late and you should go back to sleep."

Zhou Wei got up and paid her respects to him. She proceeded to gently undress his cloak and cheerfully replied: "I slept already and am very energetic now. Master Tao has assigned a rear room for me. Shall I help you take a shower?" By the time she finished speaking, her two cheeks have turned completely red.

Xiang Shaolong lamented secretly that he is truly lacking the company of his wives and his earlier brothel experience has aroused his sexual desire. If he agrees to her company, he will have to bear with the consequences. But if he rejects her, would she be extremely offended?

Luckily, just as Zhou Wei is beginning to undress him further, footsteps were heard.

Astounded, Xiang Shaolong turned his head and saw Jing Jun. Stunned, he exclaimed: "Little Jun! What is so urgent?"

Jing Jun is still under the impression that Zhou Wei is Zhou Liang's wife and stared at her suspiciously.

Xiang Shaolong instructed Zhou Wei to retreat into her own room and asked again: “What is going on?”

Jing Jun watched Zhou Wei as she left and inquired: “What is she doing here?”

Xiang Shaolong explained their sibling relationship and Jing Jun eyes lit up and sighed: “Third Brother is a blessed man. If she dresses up and apply make-up, her beauty will surpass the Tian sisters.”

Xiang Shaolong was inspired and asked Jing Jun to take a seat before smiling: “Is Little Jun interested in her?”

Jing Jun seriously answered: “Third Brother must be kidding. I will not dare to compete with you for her affections.”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased: “She is not my woman yet. If you are keen, you can try wooing her. I do not mind at all but instead will be grateful towards you!”

Jing Jun was overjoyed: “Hei! I shall give it a try! I am much better with girls now.”

Xiang Shaolong decided: “It is settled then. Why are you not sleeping and came all the way here to look for me?”

Jing Jun enquired: “Can Third Brother participate in an expedition with your injured leg?”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “As long as it is not a fight, I should be fine. What bright ideas do you have?”

Jing Jun whispered: “There is four hours from now till daybreak. If we want to kill Mo Ao, this is the best opportunity.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Mo Ao is heavily protected with his own escorts in addition to Lu Buwei’s escorts. How can we kill him?”

Jing Jun detailed: “Of course we cannot resort to force. I am familiar with Drunken Wind Brothel’s layout and I know the location of the bedrooms of Dan Meimei and Guiyan. If we can slip in and force the pill down Mo Ao’s throat, we can turn the tables and wait for him to die an unexplainable death. Wouldn’t that be great?” Xiang Shaolong excitedly cried: “What’s the plan?”

Jing Jun opened his palm and displayed a twig that was about three inches long. He proudly proclaimed: “This is a twig from the tree of slumber. When it is lighted, anyone who breathes in the fumes will start to fall asleep. Anyone already asleep will fall into deeper sleep that he will not be awakened even if he is being slapped. Does Third Brother understand now?”

Xiang Shaolong thought it over and agreed: “You better inform Second Brother. If we leave him out of this fun, he will give us a terrible scolding.”

With their climbing skills, the three brothers slipped into the Drunken Wind Brothel noiselessly and hid within the vegetation.

Beyond the trees, bright lights can still be seen.

The experienced Jing Jun explained: “There are four chambers in the building within the bamboo clusters ahead. They house the four great beauties of Drunken Wind Brothel who are Dan Meimei, Yang Yu, Guiyan and Bailei. Guiyan’s chamber is the left one at the back of the building. Once we can get through the bamboo plants, there is a chance we can slip inside. If I remember correctly, there are some cinnamon trees near the building which is a good place to hide.”

Teng Yi frowned: “If Lu Buwei is in there too, security will be extra tight. A cluster of bamboo plants is harder to infiltrate compared to normal trees. If there is someone guarding the entrances and exits of the bamboo clusters, how can we slip in?”

Xiang Shaolong asked: “Is there another alternative?”

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: “It is completely surrounded by bamboo and thus, it is named the Secret Bamboo Rendezvous. Once we can pass the obstacle, Mo Ao is as good as dead.”

Footsteps can be heard as two family warriors walked towards them. They seemed to be leading the way with the lanterns they carried and were chatting happily. The three men quietened down and strained their ears to eavesdrop on their conversation.

The first man started: “The four great beauties truly live up to their reputations. Even our Master Guan is tempted and is spending the night in Yang Yu’s room.”

The second man replied: “I heard the last one is Bailei. I wonder if she has an overnight guest. If not, we can have some fun with her.”

The first man sighed: “Can you afford her? I heard that she may not even accompany you even if you have money.”

When they have traveled out of earshot, Xiang Shaolong was inspired and revealed: “Bailei should be accompanying Han Chuang. We can use him to pass through the bamboo clusters.”

Before he could finish speaking, a group of people are walking towards them from another building. Han Chuang and Bailei could be seen among them. Teng Yi anxiously exclaimed: “How can we avoid being identified by Bailei?”

This group of people has walked down a garden path and is led by two pretty maids carrying lanterns. Behind the maids are four of Han Chuang’s family warriors, followed by the lecherous Han Chuang caressing and hugging Bailei. Behind them are another eight personal escorts.

Witnessing this, Xiang Shaolong was at a loss.

Jing Jun suddenly whispered to Teng Yi: “Bailei does not know who you are!”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “Second Brother can masquerade as Prince Dan’s subordinate. Han Chuang just had a drink with him.”

By now, Han Chuang’s party has walked past their hiding place and are walking down the straight path leading into the bamboo clusters.

Teng Yi removed his sword and gathered his courage. He rushed out to the path and hailed: “Marquis, please hold your step. Prince Dan has instructed me to pass you a message.”

Han Chuang’s party stopped walking and the personal escorts revealed a threatening look on their faces.

Teng Yi strode towards him. Although he is unarmed, everyone stared at him with suspicions and their hands are on their sword hilts.

Han Chuang released Bailei from his hold and coldly snorted: “What does Prince Dan wants to say to me?”

Teng Yi knew that Han Chuang’s men will not allow him to get close to their master. He stopped walking and bowed: “I am Prince Dan’s Right General Long Shan. Has Marquis Han forgotten about me already?”

Long Shan is Teng Yi's fictitious name during their Handan City mission.

Han Chuang was stunned for a while and came to realize the hidden meaning. He laughed: "Yes! Yes! I remember you! General, please forgive me for not recognizing you earlier in the dim environment."

He faced Bailei and ordered: "Please return to your room first. I will join you shortly."

Bailei is not the least suspicious. She reminded Han Chuang to be quick and sauntered off.

Under Han Chuang's cover, the three men disguised as his followers and passed through the heavily-fortified bamboo clusters safely. They arrived at a cinnamon tree which separates Guiyan's chamber from Bailei's chamber.

Han Chuang winked at them and began to climb the stairs.

Two of Bailei's maids stepped forward to entertain them.

Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and Teng Yi are afraid to be recognized by the maids. They had made earlier arrangements with the other subordinates of Han Chuang. Two of the escorts hurriedly dragged the two maids into another room and love-making sounds can be heard after a short while.

With the other escorts acting as a lookout, the three men climbed up the cinnamon tree and reached the roof of Guiyan's chamber.

Sounds of snoring can be heard from within.

Jing Jun is the most agile among them. He slipped into the room via a window and Mo Ao's snoring is replaced by sounds of heaving breathing. Xiang Shaolong signalled Teng Yi to stay on the roof while he somersaulted into the room.

Jing Jun was squatting beside the bed and signalled that everything is under control.

Xiang Shaolong was delighted and joined him.

With an oil lamp providing some light, Jing Jun has forced opened Mo Ao's mouth. Xiang Shaolong quickly retrieved the poison pill and used the bronze clippers to insert it into his throat. When the pill is securely stuck in place, they tried to leave but were interrupted by footsteps outside the door.

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were terrified. They stepped over the two sleeping bodies and hid themselves in a dark corner between the bed and the wall.

Heavy knocking is heard and a man shouted from outside: "Master Mo! Premier Lu is looking for you." Mo Ao and Guiyan naturally did not respond.

Xiang Shaolong knows about the workings of the human anatomy. He pinched Mo Ao heavily at the base of his foot.

Fortunately, Jing Jun did not use a heavy dose of the slumber fumes. Awakened by the sharp pain, Mo Ao was roused from his sleep.

The man shouted again: “Master Mo!”

Mo Ao was in a daze as he just woke up. “What is going on?” He shouted back.

The man replied: “Premier Lu has received urgent news and is waiting downstairs for Master Mo. Ai! Even Master Guan is waiting too.”

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were horrified. If Mo Ao notices them, they will be doomed.

Suddenly, Lu Buwei’s voice is heard outside the door: “We are waiting for you at the external hall.”

Mo Ao shoved Guiyan but she did not respond. He pinched her white breasts for some time before putting on his clothes and casually stepping out of the room.

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were elated. They quickly trailed

him and eavesdropped outside the room.

Lu Buwei began: “I just got word that the short-lived Xiang Shaolong went to find Xu Xian and they chatted for two hours before he returned back to the Wu Residence. Hng! Does Mister Mo think they will try any tricks?”

Mo Ao is still under the effects of the slumber fumes and his head is still spinning. He remarked: “I think I drank too much and my head is in pain.”

Guan Zhongxie advised: “Brother Mo should drink some tea to calm your nerves.”

Sounds of water pouring and drinking can be heard. From the sounds he heard, Xiang Shaolong deduced that only Lu Buwei, Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie are present.

After some time, Lu Buwei questioned: “Is Mister Mo confident that the poison will act up on the last day of the hunting fair? Without the rebellion of Lord Gaoling, we will be the chief suspect if he dies.”

Mo Ao took a deep breath and replied: “Premier Lu can put your mind at ease. I have tried the same poison on several other men and I am confident of the timing.”

Guan Zhongxie smiled: “Without Xiang Shaolong, they will be in chaos. We are well-prepared to send the Crown Prince and

Empress over the river first. When it is Lu Gong and Xu Xian's turn, we will make the bridge collapse and assassinate them underwater. It will be a clean job and no one will suspect us."

Lu Buwei brought up: "I am concerned that Xiang Shaolong and Xu Xian will act first in the first two days. When that happens, we will be at a disadvantage."

Mo Ao confidently assured: "Relax! As long as they are not sure about Lord Gaoling's ambush, they will not attack us and make it easy for Lord Gaoling. I doubt they have the guts anyway."

Lu Buwei sighed: "The Crown Prince is another issue. He still does not know he is my own flesh and blood. Ai! It is all because of that bitch Zhu Ji. I have told her numerous times to clarify this with him but she flatly refuses. She is also unwilling to make me the Regent of Qin. Hng! Lao Ai is such a useless bum."

Guan Zhongxie suggested: "I think Xiang Shaolong is the main reason that Empress does not fully submit to Premier."

Mo Ao sniggered: "I have a secret plan to make her happy and make you the Regent at the same time."

The two eavesdroppers Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were excited and curious to know about his plan. At the same time, they have to admire Mo Ao's quick thinking.

Lu Buwei was pleased and asked for the details.

Mo Ao smiled: “You must let Empress feel that you and Xiang Shaolong are no longer enemies to make her submit fully to you.”

Guan Zhongxie was slightly irritated: “Is Brother Mo suggesting that we let Lu Niang Rong marry him!”

Mo Ao smiled: “Don’t tell me Brother Guan is jealous of a man with only three days left to live!”

Mo Ao explained in a low voice: “Premier Lu can invite Empress to announce the wedding plans for Third Mistress and Xiang Shaolong. At the same time, to promote Premier to Regent. When these two matters are carried out together, it indicates that if Empress allows Premier to be promoted, Premier will sacrifice his favourite daughter to guarantee the safety of Xiang Shaolong. In these circumstances, Empress will relent in order to protect Xiang Shaolong. Of course, Lao Ai needs to put in some effort too.”

Xiang Shaolong has no idea what is the difference between a Regent and a Prime Minister but it should be a post of authority that will slowly diminish Xiao Pan’s right of rule.

Guan Zhongxie did not object any further.

Lu Buwei cheered: “This is a brilliant plan. Zhongxie! I have to bother you to persuade Niang Rong! She only listens to you. When she pretended to kick up a fuss as you instructed, even Xiang Shaolong was fooled.”

Xiang Shaolong realised that Lu Niang Rong's tantrum and marriage rejection was all a ploy and could not help but feel extremely hateful.

Since she is such a vicious woman, he need not show her any mercy or pity in the future.

As Jing Jun suggested, he should toy with her and it is as good as delivering a blow to Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie.

Lu Buwei concluded: "So it shall be decided then. The sky is brightening soon!"

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun dared not loiter any further and slipped away in the blink of an eye.

Under such unexpected circumstances, they actually managed to gather such crucial intelligence. Now, the game will be played differently.

Book 14 Chapter 03 – The Great Hunting Fair

Before dawn, an exhausted Han Chuang had to drag his tired body out of bed to escort Xiang Shaolong and his brothers to leave the brothel safely.

When they reached the streets, they parted immediately to avoid suspicions.

Back at the Wu Residence, the sky is beginning to brighten. The three men hurriedly changed their clothes and while Teng Yi and Jing Jun set off to the Command Centre to see to the hunting fair, Xiang Shaolong made his way to the palace.

He ran into Xu Xian's convoy and was invited to join him in the horse carriage. Lu Gong is in the carriage too and they were discussing on how to counter Lu Buwei's schemes. Although they are fully dressed in hunting clothes, they do not seem enthusiastic about the hunting fair at all.

Lu Gong noticed that his eyes are red because he did not sleep a wink last night. He nodded: "It must be hard on you."

Xiang Shaolong was glad: "My body may be tired but I am in a great mood."

Xu Xian was stunned: "Shaolong has such a confident expression. Have there been any new developments?"

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice and revealed his two adventures to Drunken Wind Brothel, including the eavesdropping of Lu Buwei's secret meeting.

Both listeners cheered at his accomplishment.

Lu Gong slapped his thigh with delight and cried: "Even the poison pill can be extracted from Shaolong's throat. This shows that Heaven is on our side."

Xu Xian decided: "Since this is the case, we shall adhere to Shaolong's suggestion and use Lao Ai against Lu Buwei. Actually, Lu Buwei is quite a good administrator. Let's give him a few years of peace. When our Crown Prince is coroneted, that will be the end of him."

Lu Gong agreed: "In the meantime, we will hold on to our military authority and cultivate good leaders. When it is time to act, we will be more than prepared."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "I have a good man to recommend and it is none other than Wang Jian..."

Xu Xian laughed and interrupted him: "Thanks for your reminder and in fact, we have noticed him as a potential leader as well. Let's give him more time to fine tune his skills! Ai! Wang Chi is getting senile and it will soon be time for his son to succeed him."

Lu Gong is now in a good mood and laughed: “Is Shaolong ready to marry Lu Niang Rong while annoying Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled back: “I think this will in return give them a big headache.”

Xu Xian mused: “But as the Regent of Qin, his authority will be beyond question and he will be like the acting King. Without his approval, no royal order can be issued.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Does Premier Xu recall my suggestion about the Premier Mentor? We can use this official post to humour Lu Buwei first. When Mo Ao dies three days later, he will be at a loss. By that time, Lao Ai will be promoted to be the Inner Custodian and it will be too late for Lu Buwei to object.”

By now, the convoy is entering the palace and all the three men are in great spirits. They cannot wait for the three days to quickly pass and witness the retribution of these evil men.

Xiang Shaolong’s anxious mind has been replaced by a new relaxing mood. Amazing!

In the next few days, he will amuse himself with these evil men and even Lu Dan’er and Ying Ying will not be let off. After all, what is life without some fun!

The palace courtyard is filled with men and horses assembled for the hunting fair.

The participating hunters are either from the royal family, high ranking officials or the representatives of various departments. Everyone is dressed in light hunting clothes and mounted on their horses under their respective banners. Altogether, it was an impressive display of five thousand gallant men and stunning beauties.

Ten thousand Palace guards are protecting the Imperial Convoy on both sides as they prepared to move to the hunting grounds.

Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and Guan Zhongxie are fully occupied with managing the deployment of their men as well as maintaining law and order.

Xiang Shaolong left the carriage and mounted Jifeng. Leading his Eighteen Guardians leisurely, he soaked himself in the festive atmosphere.

One of the banners is embroidered with the word 'Qi' which reminded Xiang Shaolong of 'his old friend' Tian Dan. He was amused as Lu Buwei would have told Tian Dan about his impending death. Thus, Tian Dan would be delighted and complacent, making it easier for Xiang Shaolong to assassinate him.

Xu Xian, Lu Buwei, Lu Gong and the other high ranking officials are lined up in two rows in front of the inspection platform. Guests

like Tian Dan and Prince Dan are based further away. Han Chuang is apparently absent and he must have returned home to Han.

The most outstanding are the Female Warriors led by Ying Ying. Over a hundred young ladies dressed elaborately in their hunting outfits stood out from the crowd of mostly men. They bantered noisily with the young men besides them and added some liveliness to the situation.

However, the group that gained everyone's attention are his own wives and Qin Qing. They did not have any banner but just stood on one side under the protection of their family warriors. Everyone near and far strained their eyes and their necks to catch a glimpse of their beauty.

Ji Yanran and Qin Qing are beyond comparison; Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi are rare beauties themselves and the loving twin sisters Tian Zhen and Tian Feng only cause everyone to be intoxicated with their charm and elegance.

Xiang Shaolong could not resist and rode up to them, smiling: "Which department do you girls represent?"

All the girls giggled with pleasure.

Qin Qing coldly state: "Empress has specially instructed us to accompany her for the next three days for the hunt. I think we belong to her department."

From her cold expression, Xiang Shaolong deduced that she must be bearing grudges at him for taking advantage of her and is now viewing him with suspicions. Sighing secretly, he smiled weakly and did not reply. Facing Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi, he questioned: “Where is Bao’er?”

Wu Tingfang is so excited that her face is totally red. She cooed: “I wanted to bring him to the hunt but is concerned that he may catch a cold. I have left with at the Qin Residence under the care of the nanny.”

Zhao Zhi exclaimed: “Hubby! Shall I introduce you to our two new nannies?”

Behind her, the Tian sisters’ faces begin to burn like fire. Embarrassed, they were did not know where to hide when Wu Tingfang whispered: “Hubby! Can you come to our tent tonight? We missed you greatly!” Xiang Shaolong was tempted at her offer and hurriedly agreed.

Sounds of drumbeats can be heard as Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji ascended the inspection platform under the escort of the palace guards.

Everyone paid their respects and proclaimed their loyalty to them.

The hunting fair has finally begun!

The hunting teams stretched out over ten miles and it was a grand display of power.

The cavalry army is standing guard at the boundaries of the hunting grounds and security is extremely tight.

To show off the might of Qin, Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji rode on a horse each towards the hunting grounds. They were accompanied by Lu Buwei, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Wang Wan, Cai Ze, other important officials as well as the palace guards.

Xiang Shaolong was riding with Wu Tingfang and his wives when Li Si trailed behind the main group and came to find him. They left the official roads and rode on the byways.

Li Si whispered: “Whenever I saw Grand Tutor Qin, I always feel that she is more enthralling than Talented Lady Ji; but whenever I saw Talented Lady Ji, I feel that Qin Qing is inferior to her. Now that I have seen both of them side by side, I finally understood that they are both without equal and are attractive in their own ways.”

Xiang Shaolong observed: “Brother Li is in great spirits today!”

Li Si shook his head: “I am appearing joyful despite my difficulties! The hunting fair is fraught with dangers and how can I be happy?”

Carefully assessing Xiang Shaolong’s expression, he continued: “Brother Xiang must have a terrible night’s sleep. Your eyes are

bloodshot and your voice is hoarse. I am worried for you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I did not even sleep; so how can my sleep be bad? Regarding my throat, it was scrapped. If not for this throat injury, I may be dead.” He proceeded to divulge everything that that has transpired last night.

Li Si was totally blown away and excitedly exclaimed: “I must report this to the Crown Prince. Ai! I am more and more impressed with Brother Xiang’s abilities.”

He added: “No wonder Lu Buwei had earlier suggested marrying his daughter to Brother Xiang and petitioned Empress and Crown Prince to represent his wishes. Empress is naturally delighted but Crown Prince and I were puzzled. So this is the real motive behind his intention. Hei! Is Brother Xiang going to reject his marriage proposal?”

Xiang Shaolong returned his question with his own question: “Do you think I will?”

Both men looked at each other and broke out into laughter.

Li Si remarked: “It is a Qin custom to announce important policies or promote officials during the hunting fair. Brother Xiang’s suggestion to make Lu Buwei the Premier Mentor is a wonderful suggestion. It will keep him guessing and curb his ambitions. The Crown Prince will use this idea if the Empress tries to force him to promote Lu Buwei again.”

Xiang Shaolong noticed Guan Zhongxie riding towards them from the corner of his eye and hurriedly changed the topic to some irrelevant issues.

Guan Zhongxie may be up the whole night but he is much more rejuvenated than Xiang Shaolong and approached them energetically. He greeted Li Si: “Since Official Li has entered the palace to serve the Crown Prince, we did not have much time to catch up. We should spend more time together during these three days.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization. He realised that Lu Buwei may even try to replace Li Si with Mo Ao to fully control Xiao Pan. Li Si must be the next person on Lu Buwei’s hit list. Why didn’t he think of this earlier?

At the end of the day, he lacked a clever advisor like Mo Ao or Li Si to assist him.

Li Si is the best candidate but he needs to focus on helping Xiao Pan and cannot be available to him. He recalled that he had Ji Yanran and cursed himself for not making use of his clever wife’s intelligence.

Guan Zhongxie’s voice sounded out beside him: “Why is Official Xiang so melancholic?”

Xiang Shaolong decided to play a trick on him and winked at Li Si, saying: “Can I have a private word with you?”

Li Si understood his intention and bade farewell. He rode ahead and rejoined the main group.

Guan Zhongxie was startled: “What does Official Xiang want to tell me?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Official Li told me earlier that Premier Lu has the intention to marry Third Mistress to me and it may be announced tomorrow. Honestly speaking, I know that Third Mistress is in love with Brother Guan instead! No matter where we stand, I am full of admiration for Brother Guan’s character and sword skills. Even if we are on opposing sides, this is a love matter and not a manly fight. As long as you say the word, I will speak to Empress and Crown Prince immediately and not spoil Third Mistress’s chastity.”

Guan Zhongxie’s eyes were originally shining sharply but after hearing his words, his expression became mixed.

Xiang Shaolong was impressed. Guan Zhongxie could easily deny everything and no one will be the wiser. But this will also indicate that he is a cowardly liar.

Given the unique circumstances, no one else can understand their awkward positions.

In actual fact, they are out to kill each other but are doing it secretly.

In the eyes of Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong is nearly a dead man who still thinks he escaped the poisoning. With his upfront attitude, he is obviously not out to take advantage of Lu Niang Rong. From this, it shows that Xiang Shaolong is an honourable man who will not take revenge for the poisoning by seducing Lu Niang Rong. He was a true gentleman.

Xiang Shaolong is secretly laughing and patiently waited for his response.

Guan Zhongxie suddenly smiled bitterly: "I will not lie to you but Third Mistress's marriage is something beyond my control and I should not come between two of you. In life, you win some and you lose some. That's a fact. Third Mistress is no longer young but is still a willful girl. I am sure you can still be a good and fitting husband. Official Xiang should not worry about this anymore."

Finishing, he rode off.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Tu Xian is right about Guan Zhongxie being an asshole. Even to a dying man, he is still faking his words. What a despicable cad!

But this is what he expected. When he did not die three days later, Lu Niang Rong will become his fiancé and it is due to Guan Zhongxie's own arrangement. This will cause him great regrets and deal a blow to his pride.

In the past, he seduced Wu Tingfang and Zhao Ya from Lian Jin, making him lose his rationality and cause him to be defeated by

himself.

Coincidentally, the same scenario is repeated on Guan Zhongxie.

What will he do when he loses his rationality?

Thinking about this, he quickly caught up to Ji Yanran and wanted to consult her.

Qin Qing, Ji Yanran and the other girls are traveling with Empress Zhu Ji and were chatting happily. Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and the rest are traveling in front of them.

Xiang Shaolong is afraid to see Zhu Ji and stayed at the back, trying to find an opportunity to isolate Yanran.

Someone shouted: “Official Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong turned his head around and saw Lao Ai leaving his group and riding towards him. He greeted him respectfully when he reached his side.

Xiang Shaolong returned his greetings and praised: “Official Lao is looking great! Life must be good in the palace.”

Lao Ai lowered his voice: “It is all thanks to Official Xiang’s recommendation. Even the Crown Prince said the same thing.” He happily added: “During the hunting fair, the Crown Prince will

officially promote me to be the Inner Custodian. Soon, we will have plenty of opportunities to work together!”

Xiang Shaolong can feel that his thanks are sincere. For Lao Ai, he will be grateful to whoever that can bring him more wealth and authority. He used to obey Lu Buwei as he is looking for employment. Now, this unscrupulous and selfish man will forsake Lu Buwei for greater benefits.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a low voice: “Does Premier Lu know about this?”

Lao Ai angrily swore: “He only knew about it yesterday and threw his temper at Empress. Fortunately, Empress rebutted him.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised: “Brother Lao is being promoted and enjoying a life of luxury. He should be happy for you but why is he opposing instead?”

Lao Ai viciously hissed: “He naturally will not say that he opposes my promotion but he insisted that I am a criminal and should not be promoted or tongues will wag. Hei! Ultimately, he wants to keep me as a lowly servant forever.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly glad that Lao Ai and Lu Buwei are now openly on opposing sides. He officially state: “Brother Lao can put your mind at ease. I have spoken to Premier Xu and Lieutenant General Lu. They will support Brother Lao for sure.”

Lao Ai was flabbergasted: “Hei! This... This...” He was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong tried to control his laughter and strongly affirmed: “Lu Buwei is a bastard. The higher your rank, the more jealous he is of you. But Brother Lao can relax. As long as I am in his way, you will be safe.” Lao Ai trembled and his expression grew serious.

At this point, Tian Zhen noticed him and slowed down to join him.

Xiang Shaolong patted Lao Ai’s shoulder and rode ahead to join her.

The battle of Lao Ai and Lu Buwei is about to begin!

Book 14 Chapter 04 – The Incredible Talented Lady Ji

An endless sea of tents and flags can be seen west of the River Jing.

Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters are situated on a little hill near the royal tent. They were observing all the excitement happening below them.

It may not be a real battle but the military movements are precise and according to the military law.

Among the seven states, Qin has the heaviest emphasis on military contributions. Every young child would have learnt some form of martial arts and everyone is somewhat familiar with military formations.

Since the terrain is wide grassland with no cover, a square campsite has been laid out.

Xiao Pan's tent is situated in the centre of the defending gates and is akin to a military command centre. Within the gates are about twenty tents which belong to the royal family and others like Qin Qing who share a special relationship with the rulers of Qin.

On the two sides of the defending gates are two defending armies of palace guards led by Lord Changping and Lord Changwen

respectively. Xiao Pan has direct control over the army to safeguard his own safety.

The other soldiers are based in all four directions and act as defenders. Xiang Shaolong's cavalry army is based far away and is protecting the entire camp from their location. If necessary, they can act as a vanguard or a distraction to a potential enemy.

Besides the main tents, the other tents are in groups of ten and the space between them is wide enough for eight horses to travel side by side.

There are some dedicated areas with stables and target boards for hunters to practise their shooting skills, riding skills and even sword skills. These areas are especially crowded like a festive parade.

It is now four hours away from the evening hunt and everyone is enthusiastically assembled at the main assembly ground and challenging one another.

The main assembly ground near the royal tent has become the playground for Ying Ying and her female warriors. Young men keen to woo these stubborn Qin ladies are all gathering around the area for their chance to interact with them. Thus, this area is much livelier than the others.

Sounds of horses braying and people talking filled the air.

The strong wind began to blow and the flags unfurled majestically, adding to the grandeur of the hunting fair.

Ji Yanran has been updated on everything that has happened and smiled: “When Lord Gaoling is about to attack, he will first set fire to the tents furthest away from the royal tents and the river. Since it is now blowing the southeast wind, the fire will spread towards us and we can only escape by crossing the river and hiding at the north shore of River Jing.”

Xiang Shaolong and the ladies turned their attention to the two wooden bridges and were shocked. If the two bridges are destroyed, the consequences will be unimaginable.

Even if the two bridges are intact, they cannot support some many people crossing. Those who are unable to cross the bridge will have to swim over. During the chaos, it will be an easy feat for Lu Buwei to carry out his assassination.

He recalled that Guan Zhongxie will ‘heroically’ escort Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan across the river to safety while he will ‘die of poisoning’ and Guan Zhongxie will ‘score a huge merit’. Mo Ao’s devious scheme is indeed a brilliant strategy.

Rainfall is scarce and a fire attack is hard to prevent. Moreover, Lord Gaoling is familiar with the tents and in fact, his own tent is located at the southeast part of the campsite. He can easily set fire as Ji Yanran predicted.

In addition, during the night hunt, every hunter would be busy

in the west forests and their defences will be lacking. That would be the ideal time to ambush the Crown Prince and Zhu Ji.

If the Lord Changping brothers are killed in battle, it is possible that Lu Buwei can insert his own subordinates to replace them as head of the palace guards.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and remarked: “Yanran is amazing and can predict Lord Gaoling’s ambush like a fortune teller. Therefore, we must pay close attention to the southeast tents. The moment Lord Gaoling’s men or Lu Buwei’s men tried to bring flammable materials to that area, we will know when they will strike.”

Ji Yanran was overjoyed at his praise and smiled sweetly back at him.

Hoof beats can be heard as Lord Changwen rode up to him and cried: “Let’s ride our horses to the assembly ground to join in the fun!”

The ladies turned around to face him and he jealously stared at Ji Yanran and the girls with an intoxicated look on his face. He sighed: “Good evening ladies. Ai! I am so envious of Shaolong’s good fortune.”

Wu Tingfang chortled and smiled prettily, asking: “Has Lord Changwen finished his duties?”

Lord Changwen put on a busy expression and reported: “Empress and Crown Prince have settled down and Grand Tutor Qin is chatting with the Empress now. I was ordered to inform you ladies about this.”

Xiang Shaolong yawned: “You go ahead and have fun! I wished to catch some sleep in my tent.”

Lord Changwen burst out laughing and rode ahead between Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran. As he rode past Xiang Shaolong, he grabbed onto his horse’s reins and dragged him down the slope, shouting to the ladies: “We are going to have some fun!”

The ladies saw Xiang Shaolong helplessly being dragged down the hill and giggled with laughter. They then chased them down the slope.

Sou! Three arrows were shot out in succession and all three hit the bull’s eye of a target three hundred feet away. The observers cheered and clapped loudly.

The archer Ying Ying proudly scanned her audience and cried: “Who else is next?”

The various men may be itching to try but with this beauty challenging them, they are afraid to lose face if they failed to better her record. For some time, no one dared to accept her challenge.

Guan Zhongxie laughed: “Our best shooter among the female

warriors is invincible. Of course no one dares to accept her challenge.”

Ying Ying was delighted at his praise and shot him a lovely glance. The other men were jealous but still did not have the courage to give it a try.

Xiang Shaolong dismounted from his horse and was stunned at Ying Ying’s archery skills. He can hit the bull’s eye with one arrow but definitely not with three arrows in succession. No wonder Ying Ying is so arrogant.

When the female warriors noticed Xiang Shaolong, every one of them had a look of displeasure on their faces but when they saw Ji Yanran, their expressions became envious.

Lu Dan’er stepped out from the crowd and jeered: “Has Commander Xiang recovered from his leg injury? I heard that you are unbeatable in parrying arrows with your sword but I wonder how good are your archery skills?”

Nearly a thousand pair of eyes looked at Xiang Shaolong before shifting over to Ji Yanran.

Ji Yanran naturally knew the level her husband’s archery skill and recognizes that the people of Qin values martial talent. If Xiang Shaolong refuses to participate because of his injury, he will be ridiculed by the people of Qin. Grinning, she took off her cloak and revealed a figure-hugging white suit. She gracefully stepped forward and asked in her sweet voice: “Can I give it a try?” Her

casual demeanour and alluring disposition caused everyone present to be mesmerized by her.

When she finished speaking, everyone cheered at her decision and her attractive and athletic display.

Ying Ying shot a vicious look at Ji Yanran before she reluctantly stretched out to pass her the bow.

Ji Yanran noticed that Ying Ying is standing using the horse stance and guessed that she wanted to play a trick on her. Out of a sudden, she grabbed onto the end of the bow and applied downward pressure. Before Ying Ying could retaliate, the bow has been pried from her hands into the hands of the maiden who is even prettier than herself.

Even Guan Zhongxie was taken aback.

Standing besides Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changwen whispered: “It is good to curb that arrogant sister of mine!”

Ying Ying did not anticipate Ji Yanran to see through her trick and dejectedly returned to Lu Dan’er’s side.

Two cavalry soldiers happily stepped forward and presented three arrows to Ji Yanran.

Ji Yanran pretended that everything is the same and leisurely fitted the arrows to her bow while maintaining that sweet smile on

her face.

The crowd quietened down.

In a whirl of actions, Ji Yanran fired three arrows one after another while the crowd stared with their mouths wide open. Her arrows shot forward like shooting stars.

She fired her first arrow with her back to the target board and her second arrow with a backhand. It was only until the final arrow did she face the target board properly.

Zng! The first arrow hit the bull's eye while the second arrow split the first arrow into two and the final arrow split the second arrow into two. It was as if she is the Goddess of Archery. No one could believe their eyes. Without question, her archery skill is way above Ying Ying's.

The crowd burst out into wild cheering which lasted for some time.

Ji Yanran is furious at Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er for 'bullying' her husband and did not even spare them a single glance. She curtsied to the crowd and left without a word.

Xiang Shaolong can tell that their 'hatred' is becoming more intense.

An escort came to report that the Crown Prince is looking for

him.

As he crossed past the wooden defending gates, he noticed a group of female warriors are riding behind him. Taking a closer look, he realised that it is Lu Niang Rong and her female escorts.

When Lu Niang Rong saw him, she has a mixed expression on her face. She curled up her mouth proudly and whipped her horse, cruising past Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong detests her.

Knowing that he is poisoned, she did not show the slightest pity. Like father, like daughter. She is an evil woman just like her father Lu Buwei.

Hng!

She will get her just deserts later.

The open space in front of the main royal tent is filled with loud cheering. It appears that Xiao Pan is practicing his archery while Lu Buwei, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Lord Changping and the other officials are cheering him on.

Li Si caught sight of him and moved to welcome him. "It is time!" he whispered.

Xiang Shaolong knew that Li Si is referring to the blood test. From Li Si's anxious expression, Xiang Shaolong is certain that he is worried about the test results. If Xiao Pan is Lu Buwei's son, it would be disastrous.

Xiang Shaolong squeezed to where Lu Gong and Xu Xian were standing and took out the special needle while winking at them.

Both men started to breathe heavily.

Xiao Pan has shot ten arrows with four hitting the bull's eye and the remaining near the bull's eyes. This has surpassed his usual record and no wonder the officials are so happy for him. As long as he manages to hit the target board, it is enough to make the crowd go wild.

As Wang Ben delivered another arrow to him, Xiao Pan detected Xiang Shaolong among the crowd. He turned over and raised his bow, exclaiming happily: "Grand Tutor! My archery skill has improved!"

Xiang Shaolong is certain that he is providing an opportunity for him to draw his blood. He greeted him and advised: "If Crown Prince uses less of his eyes and more of his hands, your results will improve dramatically."

Xiao Pan was surprised: "Archery is all about eyesight. What is the hand used for?"

Everyone including Xiao Pan was puzzled at his words and he became the centre of attention.

Standing besides Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and Mo Ao were staring viciously at him.

Xiang Shaolong respectfully got Xiao Pan to turn around and while he is turning around, he lightly poked the special needle at his neck. As Xiao Pan is exercising, his blood circulation is very strong and the needle was filled immediately.

Behind him, Xu Xian, Lu Gong and Lord Changping witnessed everything but the act was hidden from the eyes of everyone else.

Xiao Pan yelped: “Ai!” He went to touch his neck and purposely cried: “There is a mosquito!”

Xiang Shaolong stuffed the needle into Xu Xian’s hands and advised: “The Crown Prince must focus on the synergy between the eyes and the hands when shooting an arrow. However, it is easier to aim with the hand than the eyes. When the eye sees the target, it informs the heart and the heart will instruct the hand to shoot. This is quite cumbersome. If the hand is used directly to aim at the target, you will not have this issue. Look!”

He simply drew out five flying needles and shot them towards the two hundred feet target board.

Nobody expected that he would be shooting flying needles

instead of arrows and were stunned. The five flying needles hit the target board neatly in a straight row and the centre needle hit the centre of the bull's eye. The distance between each needle is exactly one inch. It was a result that even Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate.

His flying needles may be famous but no one has actually seen it in action.

Witnessing his accuracy on a two hundred feet target board, everyone agrees that he has a frightening and special way of throwing the needles with such deafening results. Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and Mo Ao have a horrified expression on their faces.

Everyone present clapped and cheered loudly at his excellent display of talent.

Lu Buwei and Mo Ao exchanged a smile, thinking that Xiang Shaolong would be dead in a matter of days despite his godly ability.

Wang Ben ecstatically wanted to retrieve the flying needles and return them to Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan stopped him. He instructed: "Leave the needles on the target board. I want to keep this as a souvenir. Let the target board stay like that for the next three days."

Xiao Pan was full of admiration: "I finally comprehend the essence of Grand Tutor's terrifying flying needles. They were thrown with the hand rather than with the eyes."

Xiang Shaolong may have been promoted to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander but he is still holding the post as a Grand Tutor so that he may still impart lessons to Xiao Pan the Crown Prince.

Xiang Shaolong secretly assessed Lu Buwei, Mo Ao and Lu Niang Rong's expressions. He noticed that Lu Niang Rong has a lingering fear in her eyes which is probably caused by his excellent shot. Frankly speaking, he has no confidence of repeating this feat.

During his usual practise, he was using his eyes to aim at the target. Only today did he really use his hands to aim at the target board.

Lu Gong praised: "I am afraid no one can match Shaolong's flying needles skill in the past, the present or in the future."

Lu Buwei laughed: "Rong'er! Now, you have seen Official Xiang's true abilities."

Lu Niang Rong lowered her face to prevent others from detecting the dilemma expression on her face. Xiao Pan took this chance to invite: "Grand Tutor, please have a chat with me in my tent!"

With Li Si in tow, they walked towards the main royal tent.

Before Xiang Shaolong could take a step, Lu Gong whispered: "After you have seen the Crown Prince, come to my tent

immediately.” He winked at him with a knowing expression.

Xiang Shaolong could not understand how he managed to draw Lu Buwei’s blood or that he has something else to discuss with him. With this concern, he proceeded to the main royal tent. Within the tent, Xiao Pan sighed: “Grand Tutor must teach me how to shoot the flying needles the way you did.”

Li Si praised: “No wonder Official Xiang has always been able to escape precarious situations and live another day to tell the tale. These flying needles are virtually undetectable when they are being shot and there is no way to parry them with a sword.”

Xiang Shaolong sat down on a thick carpet and bitterly smiled: “The Crown Prince and Official Li need not praise me to the skies. Last night, I made an about-turn at the gates of hell. That is what I call pure luck.”

Under Xiao Pan questioning, Xiang Shaolong revealed everything that has happened last night.

When Xiao Pan learned about Lord Gaoling’s rebellion and Lu Buwei’s scheming, he angrily swore: “These two men are atrocious! Do they still regard me as their King?”

Li Si hurriedly assured: “Please do not be angry. Official Xiang has plans to counter them.”

Xiao Pan looked over to Xiang Shaolong and Xiang Shaolong

noded: “When we know the time that Lord Gaoling is attacking the camp, we can use our army to wipe him out. Here, I wished that Crown Prince will lead the army personally. First, we can destroy Lord Gaoling’s forces and secondly, we can counter Lu Buwei’s schemes. In the future, no one will dare to challenge your authority.”

These words are what Xiao Pan wanted to hear. This future Qin Shi Huang loved to affirm his authority and he nodded: “Since Official Xiang is so confident, we shall act according to your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “This matter will require precise intelligence and acting according to circumstances. I will keep in contact with Official Li. When I have gathered the appropriate information, I will report to Crown Prince.” He secretly winked at Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan understood his meaning. Xiang Shaolong will prepare the army orders while he himself will execute them accordingly. Elated, his face became reddish and he nodded: “We will follow your advice!”

He continued: “Today, Empress told me that Lu Buwei wanted to marry his beloved third daughter to you. I thought Lu Buwei has a change of heart but it is all part of a trick. Ha! Mo Ao will die an unexplainable death. I am so happy.”

Li Si and Xiang Shaolong heard his words and knew that he is in great spirits. They did not hold back and joined him in laughter.

An attendant came to report that Lao Ai is here to report something. The three men immediately stopped laughing. Lao Ai came in and kneeled down, requesting: “The Empress wishes to see Crown Prince.”

With a scornful look, Xiao Pan replied: “I got it! Please return first. I will join you shortly.”

When Lao Ai has left the tent, Xiao Pan lowered his voice and asked: “Is Official Xiang ready to marry Lu Buwei’s precious daughter?”

Xiang Shaolong coldly smiled: “When Lu Buwei saw me still well and alive, he will try to annul the marriage. But that is his problem!”

Xiao Pan understood his meaning and nodded: “I know what to do!” And stood up.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si hurriedly kneeled down in respect.

Xiao Pan went forward and helped Xiang Shaolong up, whispering into his ear: “Master, please be careful. If anything happens to you, the world will be meaningless.”

He turned around and left.

Book 14 Chapter 05 – A Heartless Man

Indeed

A drop of Xiao Pan's blood trickled out of the special needle and dripped into the bowl of special chemical.

Xu Xian retrieved another special needle filled with Lu Buwei's blood and brought it to the edge of the bowl but did not release the blood immediately.

Everyone was staring at Xiao Pan's drop of blood with excitement.

Inside Lu Gong's tent, there are ten over military leaders which are all important position holders. Except for Lu Gong and Xu Xian, there is Wang He, Jia Gongcheng, Lord Yunyang Ying Ao and Lord Yiqu Ying Lou. It appears that Xiao Pan's relationship with Lu Buwei is of utmost importance to them.

Xiang Shaolong was squeezed in the middle of all these generals and he inquired: "How did you manage to get Lu Buwei's blood?"

Lord Yunyang Ying Ao replied: "I dragged him out for archery while Lu Gong and Wang He were jostling with him. Thus, we took his blood without his knowledge."

Lu Gong is not interested in their casual talk and called: "Xu Xian!" Xu Xian hardened his resolve and poured the second drop of blood into the bowl of chemical.

The crowd became as silent as a dormouse and everyone has a choked feeling. For an instant, everyone held their breaths.

The drop of blood entered the chemical and swirled to for a while before it came into contact with Xiao Pan's drop of blood.

Amazingly, the two drops of blood separated immediately like the two different magnet poles repelling each other.

The tent was filled with mad cheering.

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief.

Knowing the future can be a burden. Even though he is certain that Xiao Pan will pass the blood test, he cannot help but be worried like everyone else.

Back in his own tent, Ji Yanran and the other girls are carefully cleaning Xiang Shaolong's wound and applying fresh medicine. Teng Yi came back from his duties and sat down, reporting: "We have located Lord Gaoling's men!"

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Where are they?"

Teng Yi is in a great mood and retrieved a map from his bosom, smiling: "The Qin hunting fair is child's play in front a seasoned hunter like me. If I hunt personally, all the tigers and wolves

would be frightened off.”

Xiang Shaolong assisted him in spreading the map and laughed: “Second Brother should have told me earlier. Then, I would prepare a large quantity of tiger ears for sale at ten times the original price. I guarantee that the amateur hunters will not go back empty handed and I can even make a ton of money.”

Ji Yanran and the girls instantly broke out in laughter and giggles.

Teng Yi laughed: “Amateur hunters! That is a unique description.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Where is the cave that Lord Gaoling’s men are hiding in?”

Teng Yi was stunned: “How did you know that?” Pointing to a group of mountains fifty miles from the campsite, he detailed: “This area has dense forests and is located at the upstream of River Jing. There are seven caves situated there which the locals have named the ‘Seven Connected Caves’. Lord Gaoling has planned their hiding spot well. Although we know that they are hiding there, it is impossible to locate their exact location. There is no way we can determine the size of their forces.”

Wu Tingfang innocently suggested: “Second Brother is exaggerating. Why don’t you surround the forest and set it on fire? I am sure they will be forced out by the burning.”

Xiang Shaolong loved her innocent and silly demeanour and smiled: “The forest is wet with the Spring dew. It is impossible to burn a forest. Ao!”

He caught hold of Wu Tingfang’s incoming fist but did not relent: “Unless we use the super fire that comes from the mouth of Wu’s First Mistress.”

Ji Yanran mocked: “Since our hubby came back from the jaws of death, he has become cheekier.”

Zhao Zhi clamoured over to help Wu Tingfang withdraw her fist from Xiang Shaolong’s grasp.

As Teng Yi took a closer look at Xiang Shaolong’s injury, he added: “But the moment they left the seven caves, they will not escape the detection of our Jing Village hunters. Hei! I think we should use our own men and allow them to gain more battle experience.”

Xiang Shaolong clapped Teng Yi’s shoulder and agreed: “We shall do as Second Brother advised. Fortunately, Du Bi is not in Xianyang City or things could be more complicated. Hee! In Lu Buwei’s eyes, I am someone due to die in two days. No matter what I do in these two days, he will just bear with me and even pretend to support me so as to allay the suspicions of others. Most crucially, he must put on a fine act in front of Zhu Ji. Thus, I must find some things to do so as to give justice to Mo Ao’s brilliant scheming.”

Zhao Zhi is bandaging his wound with Ji Yanran. When she heard this, she whined: “Before your leg has recovered, we will not allow you to participate in any fighting.”

Xiang Shaolong feigned surprise: “Who said that I am going to fight with someone?”

Ji Yanran smiled: “Sister Zhi, he is teasing you! Attack him now and see if he will retaliate or not.”

In the midst of their fun, the tent attendant reported: “Grand Tutor Qin is here!”

As the image of Qin Qing surfaced in his memory, he came to realise that everyone is so happy today because they have finally succeeded in countering Mo Ao. The presence of this man is a threat to their well-being.

Ever since he delivered the poison pill back to his throat, they have become more relaxed and even the usually serious Teng Yi is more jovial now.

But they must still keep their guard up. As long as Mo Ao is still alive, they must be careful and not allow the enemy to see through them.

The Tian sisters have just finished tidying up Xiang Shaolong's clothes when Qin Qing entered the tent with a heavy expression on her face.

After all his encounters with her, this is the first time she came to Xiang Shaolong's 'territory'. He had a strange feeling inside him. But eyeing her serious expression, he felt that something is amiss.

Wu Tingfang welcomed: "Sister Qin should have come earlier. We were having a big showdown!"

Ji Yanran noticed her expression too and frowned: "What is bothering Sister Qin?" Teng Yi greeted Qin Qing and took the chance to take his leave.

Qin Qing sat down opposite Ji Yanran and gently replied: "I need to speak to your husband privately."

The girls were slightly startled but Yanran firmly stood up and state: "We have to cross the river soon. We will be waiting for both of you outside."

Xiang Shaolong glanced at Qin Qing with astonishment and asked: "Why is Grand Tutor Qin so upset?"

Qin Qing stared at him coldly and retorted: "I dare not be upset but have to congratulate Official Xiang instead for being able to marry the beautiful daughter of Lu Buwei!"

Xiang Shaolong finally understood her concern and smiled: "Grand Tutor Qin is mistaken. This is a complicated affair. In reality, Lu Buwei does not want to marry her daughter to me and

neither do I want to marry her.”

Qin Qing was shocked: “Then why did Empress tell me that Lu Buwei has asked her to arrange the marriage and that you have agreed to the wedding?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled at her and softly pleaded: “Will Grand Tutor Qin please trust me this once? After the hunting fair, you can find out the truth from sister Yanran.”

Qin Qing’s face tightened and she shot with displeasure: “Why is Official Xiang always so secretive and says things halfway? Are you treating me like an outsider?”

Xiang Shaolong did not mean to hide things from her but looking at her enthusiasm, he was tempted and asked: “Do you think I treat you like an outsider?”

Both Qin Qing’s cheeks turned red and she wailed: “Official Xiang is going to be rude to me again?”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that day when he hugged her slender waist. He coughed: “I dare not.”

Qin Qing noticed his eyes focusing on her own waist and was infuriated. Lowering her head, she bit her lips and demanded: “Are you saying or not?”

Xiang Shaolong saw her pouting like his lover and was aroused.

Leaning forward towards her body, he moved his lips to her jade ears and enjoyed her nice fragrance. He whispered: "This is a big secret which cannot be known to a third person. Please forgive me for speaking to you in this manner."

Qin Qing trembled slightly and her ears were red already. Feeling itchy at the ears, she wailed: "Does Official Xiang know what he is doing?"

Since Qin Qing did not shy away, Xiang Shaolong is even more excited at approaching this untouchable woman. He teased: "Shall I go ahead and tell you the secret then?" Qin Qing dared not look at him and nodded slightly.

Xiang Shaolong held back the urge to kiss her earlobe but cannot resist staring at her fast heaving chest. He gently divulged: "Lu Buwei has sent someone to poison me and estimate that I will not survive these two days. Therefore, he decided to marry his daughter to me and even proclaim it to the whole world so that when I am killed, no one will suspect him and he can even deceive Empress."

Qin Qing shook strongly and her face became as white as a sheet. She turned to face him and their lips nearly met.

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and retreated half a feet. Feeling regretful, he apologised: "I am sorry for alarming Grand Tutor Qin. Luckily, I have the poison removed from my body and Lu Buwei still has no idea. He will try his best to annul the marriage later and the Empress will know that he is trying to deceive her. That is the reason why I accept the marriage proposal."

Qin Qing sighed with relief and put her hands on her heart, scolding: “You gave me such a fright.” Her face began to regain some colour and it was a captivating sight.

Xiang Shaolong was appreciative: “Thanks for Grand Tutor Qin’s concern.”

Her face may still be slightly red but she has recomposed herself. Smiling lightly, she gently state: “I have mistaken you! And I forgive you for being rude to me but you must not do it again in the future. Oh! My ear is so itchy.”

Xiang Shaolong is fully intoxicated and nodded with a smile: “Let me consider about whether I will be rude to you in the future and tell you my decision later. This is a big secret which you must keep it to yourself.”

Qin Qing giggled and shot him a lovely look. She gingerly stood up and sighed: “You! You are incorrigible.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up with her and shrugged his shoulders: “I will be thanking the heavens as long as Grand Tutor Qin is not always angry at me.”

Qin Qing slowly sighed: “You are the reason for my anger! You are always so secretive and I always have to force you to tell me the truth. Right! When you shot the five flying needles earlier, it has caused such a commotion that now the whole camp knows about it. When I came out of the Empress’s tent, I saw Guan Zhongxie

and Ying Ying analyzing the needles on the target board.”

She lowered her head and softly pleaded: “Can Official Xiang give me one of your flying needles as a gift?”

Without hesitation, Xiang Shaolong drew out a flying needle from his waist belt and smoothly grabbed her hand and pressed the needle in the centre of her palm. He coaxed: “Please forgive me for being rude to you again.” In normal circumstances, no man is allowed to touch her hand.

Qin Qing was taken by surprise at his molest and quickly withdrew her hand, wailing: “You...”

Xiang Shaolong put a finger to his lips and signalled her to keep quiet. He pointed outside the tent to indicate that he is afraid that others will hear her wailing. He then smiled: “This is the price to pay for being my confidante. In the future, I will look for you and will be polite and rude as I please.”

Qin Qing’s expression became annoyed and walked towards the tent exit. At the exit, she stopped and coldly state: “You have arms and legs and you can visit me if you like and not visit me if you don’t like. Who cares!” She left in a huff.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head with a bitter smile. He and Qin Qing are losing more and more of their self-control. One fine day, they will land up in bed and the consequences will be disastrous.

But if he can conduct an illicit affair with her, it will be tremendously thrilling!

The hunting parties crossed the river in different batches.

Under Xu Xian's instructions, another two more bridges were built so there is now a total of four bridges.

The plains were filled with sounds of hunting dogs barking. Those with hunting eagles sent the eagles up in the air to showcase their grandeur and might.

Xiang Shaolong thought about Zhou Liang's Warrior Eagles and was very interested in them. In the future, he will have his own eagles to help his fight and they will be remarkable toys too.

Ji Yanran, Qin Qing and the girls joined Empress Ji's hunting party while he himself left to join Xiao Pan's party.

It is better for him to avoid Zhu Ji so as to prevent any awkwardness and it will also prevent Lao Ai from being jealous of him.

When he came to the river bank, Xiao Pan has begun crossing the River Jing under the protection of the palace guards. Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians rushed to the back of the queue and ran into Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I thought Official Guan has joined the

Female Warriors!”

Guan Zhongxie knew that he is teasing him for spending all his time with Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er. He plainly state: “Work is more important. If I do not chase them off, Official Xiang will blame me for neglecting my work.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization. Since they are killing Lu Gong, Lu Dan’er will no longer be of any use to them. That is why Guan Zhongxie is disregarding Lu Dan’er now.

Ying Ying is Guan Zhongxie’s way to spy on the Lord Changping brothers. But since Xiang Shaolong, Lu Gong, etc will be killed during Lord Gaoling’s ambush, the Changping brothers will be blamed for their incompetence and Lu Buwei will force Empress Zhu Ji to execute them. Lu Buwei will then be able to fill up the posts of the leader of the palace guards with his own subordinates.

After all, the Imperial Infantry army is behind protecting Xianyang City and will not be involved with Lord Gaoling’s ambush. Thus, Guan Zhongxie will be not implicated.

As a result, this heartless man Guan Zhongxie cannot be bothered with Ying Ying anymore.

Mo Ao’s devious scheme is truly formidable. Originally, Xiang Shaolong and the rest would have suffered a huge defeat. It is due to pure luck that they now have the upper hand!

Guan Zhongxie saw that Xiang Shaolong is silent and thought that he is angry. He frantically flattered: “Official Xiang’s wondrous flying needles skill is unparalleled. I submit to your superior talents.”

Xiang Shaolong dished: “It is nothing great!”

As both men rode across the wooden bridge, heavy sounds of hoof beats can be heard as the horses are now stepping on wood.

A strong wind blew towards them and Xiang Shaolong is in a great mood. The sun is slowly setting in the west horizon and its last rays shone across the flatlands like a sheet of gold.

Guan Zhongxie reminded: “I nearly forgot. Premier Lu is looking for Official Xiang.”

Xiang Shaolong grunted a reply and rode back to shore towards the main tents.

Book 14 Chapter 06 – Campfire Banquet

The east shore of River Jing is an unending wilderness for hundreds of miles. With occasional hills, thick forests and small streams, it is a hunter's dream come true.

Even with ten thousand hunters threading on the plains, they looked like small animals from the bird's eye view. In an instant, everyone was split apart as they began hunting for animals.

Xiao Pan's hunting party is the largest as it includes Zhu Ji's party as well as other members of the royal family. They did not participate in the hunt directly but were leisurely standing near the river bank and admiring the activities.

Lu Buwei led Xiang Shaolong up a small hill and they looked down at the hunting dogs chasing and barking at a prey while Xiao Pan, Wang Ben, the Changping Brothers and a group of palace guards chasing behind them. He joyfully remarked: "I have spoken to Empress. During the campfire banquet later, she will personally announce the marriage of you and Niang Rong."

Xiang Shaolong is full of admiration at his convincing acting skills.

Lu Buwei asked: "You should be agreeable, right?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: "I am only concerned that I am not good enough for her."

Lu Buwei chortled: “I have always been appreciative of your humbleness. When I move into the new Premier Residence, I will see to the marriage immediately and fulfill one of my greatest wishes.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sniggered that he will instead have a big headache when that really happens. Visioning their future troubles, he was jumping for joy inside.

Lu Buwei asked again: “Has there been any news about Lord Gaoling?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be worried: “I have sent someone to spy on him but we have yet to detect any ambushing army. We may have been overly suspicious.”

Lu Buwei agreed: “Well, it is better to be safe than sorry. I shall put you fully in charge of this.”

He then softly sighed: “Shaolong! Are you still suspicious of my sincerity?”

Xiang Shaolong was caught unaware and he was speechless for a while. He stuttered: “Why does Premier Lu say so?”

Lu Buwei bitterly smiled: “Shaolong need not deceive me. When Zhongxie invited you for drinks at Drunken Wind Brothel last night, he saw you discarding the wine Dan Meimei poured for you.

Ai! Do you think the wine is poisonous?”

Xiang Shaolong took his hat off him. He knew he must give a reply and smiled bitterly in return: “As what Premier Lu says, it is better to be safe than sorry.”

They exchanged a glance and burst out laughing at the same time.

Lu Buwei clapped Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and mentioned between his laughs: “When Niang Rong marries you, you will be my son-in-law. By then, you can drink all the wine you want with peace of mind.”

Xiang Shaolong has to acknowledge his prowess. Lu Buwei’s words is trying to convince him that he has been overly suspicious with Dan Meimei and gain his loyalty even at the last moment before his death. This brainwave must have come from Mo Ao to prevent Xiang Shaolong from working with Xu Xian to attack them before the third hunting day.

Thinking about this, he laughed happily.

Under the shimmering stars and the bright moon, the camp is in a celebratory mood.

The animals that were hunted were being promptly roasted over fire spits. Different campfires scattered around the campsite has made the entire camping ground glowing with a beautiful red.

The ten best hunters have been invited to the royal tent to be rewarded by Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan and will join their table at the Campfire Banquet.

Wu Tingfang is the best hunter among the girls and is busying cleaning her catch with Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters. Ji Yanran and Qin Qing are seated on one side and are in deep conversation.

Xiang Shaolong and the Lord Changping brothers have just come back from their patrol. They reminded the soldiers not to neglect their duties despite the festive mood and keep their guard up at all times. Teng Yi and Jing Jun came back shortly after them.

Both men had just led the Wu Family Elite Army into battle positions and they are now spying on Lord Gaoling's men. Xiang Shaolong can finally relieve this burden of ambush from his mind. After some discussion with them, he left to find Xu Xian. Just as he crossed the defending gates, he was detained by Ying Ying.

This lass has an unfriendly expression on her face and she coldly state: "Xiang Shaolong! Come with me!"

Puzzled, he followed her down the slope and they advanced deeply into a group of tents. Compared to the lights and sounds of the assembly grounds, they are now in a place where it is much more quiet, dark and serene.

Ying Ying leaned against a tent and stared at him viciously.

Her long hair was let down and it is still wet in some areas. She carries a fragrance that is associated with a woman's scent after a shower. Needless to say, she must have had a nice shower in the nearby river.

Out of a sudden, his mind is filled with various questions.

Since he got to know Ying Ying, he has been troubled with her and it is hard to establish their relationship properly. Moreover, he was busy with work and countering Lu Buwei. Thus, he did not spend much time to think about her.

Now that Mo Ao is going to die, he has some room to think about the future.

Since he is opposing Lu Buwei, he should ruthlessly snatch her from the hands of Guan Zhongxie. Additionally, it is common for men in this era to have multiple wives. After all, she is a rare beauty too. When they are married, he will share a closer relationship with the Lord Changping brothers. The Qin military and the royal family will see him as their own family. At the same time, it will deal a blow to Guan Zhongxie.

If Lu Gong is not going to die, the Lord Changping brothers will keep their jobs. Guan Zhongxie will then try to woo Ying Ying to secure his position in Xianyang City.

For Lu Dan'er, Lu Gong has opposed their relationship and Guan Zhongxie cannot disregard this powerful general. Even if Zhu Ji

interferes, Lu Gong will not budge. Ying Ying, on the other hand, does not have this issue.

Whoever marries Ying Ying will only stand to benefit. Thinking about this, he cannot help but smile bitterly. There is a price to pay for marrying this stubborn girl. He wonders if he should harden his heart.

If he wants to woo Ying Ying, the hunting fair would be his best opportunity as Guan Zhongxie will be disregarding her. After the hunting fair, he will have to contend with Guan Zhongxie for her attention. Frankly speaking, he could not be bothered about Guan Zhongxie's antics.

As these thoughts ran through his mind like a shooting meteor, Ying Ying hatefully exclaimed: "Xiang Shaolong! Do you hate me a lot? Whenever I look for you, you are always so apprehensive and even use your leg injury as an excuse. Now, you can even perform your flying needles stunt in front of the Crown Prince. Now, the whole camp thinks that you are out to annoy me. How are we going to settle this debt?"

Xiang Shaolong realised that she had seen his exceptional flying needles and is now full of admiration for him.

She may be putting on an aggressive front but is actually trying to mend fences with him. Thus, she came to find him alone without the rest of the female warriors.

Xiang Shaolong took two steps forward and reached an intimate

distance with her. They are now so close he can hear her breathing. He smiled: "Fine! It is my fault. But my leg is really injured! If you don't believe me, I can take off my pants and show you!"

Ying Ying's face reddened immediately and she stomped her feet: "Who wants to see you without your pants? I want you to throw the flying needles again."

Xiang Shaolong was agonized and knew that he cannot match up to his earlier performance. He bitterly smiled: "When I threw the flying needles earlier, my wound reopened. Can we find some other things to do instead?"

Ying Ying's attitude to him has indeed improved. She innocently asked: "What shall we do?"

Xiang Shaolong was inspired as he recalled her brother saying that the people of Qin are uncivilised barbarians who are more open minded. His eyes cannot help but strayed to her full bosom. He asked: "Where is your tent?"

Ying Ying's face is burning red and she wailed: "What are you looking at?" She retreated half a step and her back is fully up against the tent.

Xiang Shaolong mocked: "Every man loves to look at the figure of a beautiful woman and Miss Ying need not over react! At dawn, I am going to your tent to seek your forgiveness and this should give you enough face already."

Ying Ying was delighted and stretched out her pinkie, smiling: “You promise?”

Xiang Shaolong stretched out his own pinkie and hook onto hers. Admiring her large and attractive eyes, he cautioned: “You must not ambush me in your tent. Hng!”

Ying Ying knows that this man is eyeing her chest and yet she props her chest up even more and hissed: “Who wants to ambush you? Remember! If you do not show up, I will hate you for the rest of my life.”

Using his pinkie, Xiang Shaolong pulled Ying Ying towards him. Ying Ying let out a shrill cry and fell on him and her pert breasts pressed against his muscular chest without any reservations. She was shocked and moved away hastily out of his bosom but did not appear to be annoyed. She shot him a look and described: “My tent is to the west of the Royal Tent with a purple flag. There is a purple flower sewn on the door of the tent door. Do not forget.” Smiling sweetly, she skipped away like a child.

Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate that their grievances can be so easily settled and was pleased. He guessed that the people of Qin love hunting fairs because it is also a good time to date as well.

The main assembly ground is used for the campfire banquet. It is an outdoor dining concept with tents, defending gates and defending walls surrounding it.

Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji were the hosts of the banquet and took the northern seats. In front of them are three rows of sixty odd tables and each table can seat four to six men. Torches were placed between each table which adds to the atmosphere of the banquet.

Wine was free flowing and food is naturally their hunting prey. There are all kinds of barbequed and fragrant fowl meat and animal meat.

Except for Lord Gaoling and Tian Dan who excused themselves, everyone from the royal family is present. Besides some special guests like Lu Dan'er, Ying Ying, Ji Yanran, etc, the remaining participants are the ten best hunters. Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and Qin Qing are sharing one table which caused Lu Gong to stare at their table occasionally. The younger men with less willpower are almost staring at them non-stop. Heading one of the rows is Prince Dan and Xu Yi Ze, who chatted with Zhu Ji once in a while.

Ji Yanran and the ladies are adopting a carefree attitude and disregarded the fact that they are the centre of attraction.

This is the first time Xiao Pan is hosting such a grand and unique banquet. He was fidgeting in his seat and his expression looked unnatural.

But the most nervous man is Lao Ai who is seated behind Zhu Ji. Zhu Ji had informed him that the Crown Prince will personally announce his promotion later.

The most unfortunate man is Xiang Shaolong. He was allocated to Lu Buwei's table and was squeezed between Lu Buwei and the heartless Lu Niang Rong cum Guan Zhongxie. Mo Ao is not invited as his status is not high enough and it also suits his low profile.

Everyone toasted Xiao Pan first before Lu Buwei gave a welcome speech. Following that, Xiao Pan took the stand and announced the start of the banquet.

Lu Buwei toasted Xu Xian and Lu Gong first before he sat down and commented to Xiao Pan: "I heard Crown Prince shot a condor earlier. This is a good omen. We shall enjoy a year of bountiful harvest and peace within the nation."

Xiao Pan joyfully raised his cup: "Right Premier, let me toast you."

Lu Buwei quickly drank up.

Besides them, Xiang Shaolong was cheering in his heart. Lu Buwei's acting could have won him a Lifetime Achievement Award while Xiao Pan could have won the Best Male Actor Award. After all, he will be the main leader during this era.

Guan Zhongxie spoke out: "Will Official Xiang perform his flying needles stunt again to honour the banquet hosted by the Crown Prince?"

Xiang Shaolong cursed secretly and turned his head around. He

could sense intense awkwardness from Lu Niang Rong and he weakly smiled at her before telling Guan Zhongxie: “Mine is a lousy skill not worth mentioning. I have yet to see Official Guan with his iron bow. Will Official Guan fulfill my wish?” He laughed to himself. He is sure Guan Zhongxie will somehow display his talent and impress the people of Qin just like what he did with the flying needles.

Guan Zhongxie laughed loudly: “As long as it is an order from Official Xiang, I will not dare to disobey. If not for Official Xiang’s injury, I would love to spar with you and learn from an expert like yourself.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong is certain that he will show off his skill at the assembly ground after the dinner.

Behind him, Lu Buwei leaned over and instructed Lu Niang Rong: “Niang Rong, you must serve Official Xiang well.”

Lu Niang Rong batted an eye at Xiang Shaolong and replied: “But Official Xiang has not spoken to me yet!”

Lu Buwei patted Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and exclaimed: “Shaolong! Make her happy.”

Xiang Shaolong can sense Zhu Ji, Ji Yanran, Qin Qing and everyone else looking at them. Totally uncomfortable, he bitterly smiled: “I got it.”

Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie began to chat among themselves and provided an opportunity for them to interact.

Xiang Shaolong looked at Lu Niang Rong and she happened to look back. Xiang Shaolong forcefully smiled: “What did Third Mistress catch today?”

Initially, Lu Niang Rong managed to force out a smile but her face darkened when she faced his penetrating eyes. She lowered her head and shook it, replying: “I am not in the mood to hunt today.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that she is not so bad after all as she is suffering from a guilty conscience. He wondered aloud: “Am I the one behind your bad mood?”

Lu Niang Rong trembled slightly and raised her face, assessing him with a look of dilemma on her face.

Under the illumination of the torch, Lu Niang Rong looks youthful and charming. Her beauty can be compared to Ying Ying’s but her figure is not as good as hers.

He sensed that something is amiss. Apparently, Lu Niang Rong’s eyes have turned red and she is crying.

Even Lu Buwei saw her crying and frantically exclaimed: “Niang Rong! Do you want to go back to your tent and rest?”

As Lu Niang Rong unsteadily stood up, she attracted the attention of Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan, Qin Qing, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Lu Gong and Xu Xian. As the tears begin to fall from her face onto her clothes, she wailed: "I am not marrying him!" Despite Lu Buwei's coaxing, she ran off into the tents in the background after finishing her words. As the majority of the crowd is busy engaging in wine and revelry, not many people are aware of her outburst. The lively mood of the banquet is not affected by her disturbance.

Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie watched helplessly as she ran off into the darkness.

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to have a better opinion of her. She is not totally like her father who can lie with his eyes wide open. At the same time, he concluded that she has some feelings for him.

Lao Ai came over to invite Lu Buwei on Zhu Ji's instructions. Lu Buwei winked at Guan Zhongxie before he left.

Guan Zhongxie is about to chase after Lu Niang Rong when Xiang Shaolong grabbed him and reasoned: "Let her go! Love cannot be forced."

Guan Zhongxie was taken aback and returned to his seat, smiling bitterly: "Official Xiang is right!"

Lu Buwei came back to their table and sighed in a deep voice: "We will postpone the wedding until further notice! Ai! Shaolong! I do not know what to say."

Xiang Shaolong is secretly delighted but feigned sadness: “Premier Lu need not fret. Hei! I wish...” He wanted to find a reason to slip away from Lao Ai approached their table again but it was Xiang Shaolong he invited this time round.

Xiang Shaolong feared Zhu Ji the most and forced himself to go to her table. When he came to her, Zhu Ji plainly stated: “Shaolong need not pay his respects. Have a seat!”

Xiang Shaolong sat down adjoining her and whispered: “What instructions does Empress have?” he noticed Lao Ai seated five feet behind Zhu Ji trying to listen to their conversation. The environment is quite noisy and he is sure Lao Ai cannot eavesdrop very well.

Under Lao Ai’s nourishment, Zhu Ji is like a brand new person and is even more enchanting than before. She slowly assessed him and sighed: “Shaolong! Both you and Zheng’er have changed.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to say these words. Shocked, he exclaimed: “Empress!”

An irritated Zhu Ji scolded: “I do not want to hear any hypocritical words from you. Ai! Are both of you blaming me?” At the last sentence, she softened her tone and her words carried some tinge of helplessness.

Xiang Shaolong is filled with emotions. He knew that he can prevent her from being seduced by Lao Ai but he cannot go against

fate and allow himself to replace Lao Ai. That is why he did not succumb to her and allowed her to sink deeper into Lao Ai's love trap. Guilt-ridden, he was dumbfounded.

Zhu Ji leaned closer and whispered: "Every time we did it, I imagined that I am doing it with you, understand?"

Xiang Shaolong shook uncontrollably and cannot help but look up to her pretty face.

Zhu Ji's eyes turned slightly red and she avoided his gaze. Recomposing herself, she calmly ordered: "Commander Xiang, you are dismissed!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a moment before he returned to Lu Buwei's table.

Before he can say a word to the two men, Lu Dan'er and Ying Ying were holding each other's hands and skipped up to them. They insist on bringing Guan Zhongxie to their table to compete on wine-drinking but their eyes were mainly fixated on Xiang Shaolong.

Guan Zhongxie is not in the mood and evaded: "I am been ordered by Official Xiang to perform later." He faced Xiang Shaolong and continued: "If Official Xiang does not want to see me screw up, he will have to substitute me in accepting the challenge of these two ladies."

Xiang Shaolong is afraid that Lu Buwei will interrogate him on what Zhu Ji has said to him and laughed out loud: “Official Guan is so eloquent!” He turned around and left with the girls.

Lu Dan’er is pleasantly surprised and happily pinched him, cooing: “Looks like you are a clever man. Shall we bury the hatchet?”

Xiang Shaolong was amused that Ying Ying did not tell Lu Dan’er what had happened between them earlier. He winked at Ying Ying and is about to reply her when two men appeared and blocked their path. It was Lord Changwen and Jing Jun. Jing Jun smiled: “Are the two Mistresses trying to make my Third Brother drunk? You have to challenge me first.”

The two ladies saw him with a wine flask in his left hand and a wine cup in his right hand. Stopping, they accepted: “Do you think we are afraid of you?”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Jing Jun to be so familiar with them and guessed that they have crossed paths before.

Lord Changwen faced Xiang Shaolong and smiled: “Has Official Xiang received the red flower from Sister and Dan’er?”

The face of both girls immediately became red and they stared ferociously at Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Dan’er put her hands on her waist and wailed: “What is the

use of giving it to him? He is a useless cripple.”

Perplexed, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “What is the red flower?”

Jing Jun joked: “You can give him the flower but I will represent him in doing the deed.”

Both girls started to laugh and protest. Their faces are thoroughly red and they looked even more enchanting under the illumination of the torches.

Lord Changwen stepped forward and explained to Xiang Shaolong: “It is our Qin custom. During the hunting fair, an unmarried girl can present an embroidered red flower to a man she likes. The man can then visit her in her tent to spend the night. Hei! Now you understand!”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect the Qin ladies to be so open minded and was flabbergasted. He unconsciously shifted his gaze to the two ladies. Ying Ying stomped her foot and yelled: “Second Brother, you are spouting nonsense.”

Lu Dan’er charmingly smiled: “I have not decided who to give my flower to. Let’s see what happens later.”

Xiang Shaolong was visibly excited. The open-minded Qin girl is something the other six states can never offer. He smiled at Jing Jun: “Little Jun! Miss Dan’er is dropping you a big hint.”

Lord Changwen joked: “So if your Fifth Brother gets the flower, are you performing the deed for him?”

Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er may be the butt of their jokes but did not mind them at all. They only coquettishly protest which makes them even more interesting.

Jing Jun loves to flirt with women and smiled: “If I managed to get both red flowers from both ladies, I will leave Miss Ying to my Third Brother and keep Miss Dan’er for myself. Ao!”

Lu Dan’er sent him a kick. Jing Jun sprang up and flipped to the side. His two hands were still holding the wine flask and wine cup but not a single drop of wine has spilled. The other four persons were amazed at his agility.

The banquet is still in progress and the two hundred odd guests are still having a good time. Here, they are also having their own fun.

This is the first time Lord Changwen had seen Jing Jun’s skills and he breathes in heavily: “Based on this skill, Dan’er should give you her red flower.”

Lu Dan’er enthusiastically stared at Jing Jun: “You monkey! Flip one more time for me.”

With a lazy and annoying look on his face, Jing Jun cheekily glanced at Lu Dan’er and joked: “If you become a female monkey, I

will become a male monkey and bring you to the trees and somersault non-stop.”

Lu Dan'er let out a war cry and rushed forward with two clenched fists. Jing Jun actually managed to drink his wine and avoided her blows at the same time. With Lu Dan'er hot at his heels, they soon disappeared among the tents.

Xiang Shaolong was moved. Jing Jun may not be a Qin native but he is a sworn brother of him and Wang Jian. Moreover, he holds a military post. Lu Gong may agree to let him date Lu Dan'er.

Lu Dan'er is a teenage girl and it is a stage where she is very indecisive. She is interested in Guan Zhongxie because of his heroic air. If Jing Jun can humour her and with Lu Gong's support, coupled with their compatible age and their similar love for fun, they may eventually fall in love. This will prevent Guan Zhongxie from using Lu Dan'er to penetrate the influential circles of the Qin military.

A bell was struck and everyone quietened down.

The three persons stood still and listened to Xiao Pan's speech.

Xiao Pan stood up and greeted the Empress. He then proclaimed the ten best hunters to be promoted to the rank of Captain with immediate effect.

The ten young men were overjoyed and hurriedly kneeled down,

giving thanks to Xiao Pan and swearing their loyalty to him.

Xiao Pan continued to announce a slew of promotions, including promoting Teng Sheng as the new Outer Custodian and Lao Ai as the Inner Custodian.

Some officials felt that Lao Ai's promotion is undeserved. But looking at Empress Zhu Ji fawning over him and the lack of objections from Xu Xian and Lu Gong, they accepted the changes reluctantly.

It was followed by 'ShowTime'. First, Xiao Pan listed Lu Buwei's achievements in conquering the three provinces and promoted him to become the new Premier Mentor. It is just a post without any authority. Needless to say, it was Li Si who prepared this speech for him.

Although Lu Buwei wields plenty of power in the Qin Court, as long as the two influential men Xu Xian and Lu Gong do not object, this promotion will be official.

Finally, everyone toasted one another and the banquet came to a conclusion.

Lord Changwen frantically excused him and rushed forward to escort Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji.

Slightly fearful, Ying Ying retreated two steps and whined: "Remember what you promised."

Xiang Shaolong objected: “I take my word back. We have decided to reconcile but you flirted with another man in front of me. Now that he is gone, you are using me as a substitute.”

Ying Ying stomped her feet: “It is not what you see. I actually wanted to... Ah! Who do you think you are? Why must I explain things to you?”

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was infuriated and she is beginning to cry. Beside them, everyone is leaving the banquet area. He softened and smiled: “All right! I surrender. I am fine with being a substitute.”

Ying Ying is so incensed she nearly wanted to draw her sword. She roared: “I said that you are not a substitute. I have always... Forget it! You try skipping our appointment!” She turned around and stomped away.

Xiang Shaolong shouted: “What about the red flower?”

Ying Ying increased her pace away from him.

Xiang Shaolong turned around and came face to face with Ji Yanran. The beauty batted an eye at him and sighed: “Hubby has regained his flirty ways.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed and pulled her to one side, explaining the real reason behind Ying Ying’s seduction.

Ji Yanran sighed: “Hubby must be careful. Earlier, Guan Zhongxie has been paying close attention to all of you. He may try to sow discord between the two of you. After all, Ying Ying belongs to the royal family and Guan Zhongxie will only stand to benefit if he marries her.”

Xiang Shaolong assured: “Since the demise of Princess Qian and the maids, I have lost my interests in girls and only hope to spend the rest of my life in peace with all of you. If Ying Ying chooses to marry Guan Zhongxie, so be it.”

Ji Yanran dragged him aside to avoid the men riding horses in their direction. She whispered: “Do you swear that you have no feelings for Sister Qin?”

Xiang Shaolong’s face reddened: “Why did you bring her up?”

Ji Yanran questioned: “Why did the two of you say in the tent? When she left, her face is thoroughly red and full of joy.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I speak normally! It is her skin which is too thin.”

Ji Yanran slightly whined: “Sister Qin is someone with lots of self-control. She is in love with you and that is why her skin has become thin.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “It is my fault! Ai! Why do I always

get into this kind of trouble?”

Ji Yanran smiled: “You are good looking, kind hearted and eloquent. Otherwise, I will not have been won over by your antics and become your wife.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “How dare you say I use antics to seduce you? I am not going to let you off!”

Ji Yanran charmingly giggled: “Who needs you to let me off?”

Xiang Shaolong was aroused and cheerful Jing Jun happened to come back. He laughed: “The night performances are about to begin. Are Third Brother and Third Sister going to stay here and enjoy each other’s company?”

In the midst of laughter and scolding, the three people walked towards the defending gates.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to ask him about Lu Dan’er.

Jing Jun happily recalled: “This lass is really bitchy. Even after I molested her, she still came after me. Finally, I protected my head and allowed her to trash me. She may have a fearsome look on her face and her blows are definitely controlled to avoid hurting me. So exciting!”

As Xiang Shaolong waved to acknowledge everyone around them, he reminded: “To win her heart, you must take advantage of these

two days. Do you understand?”

Jing Jun nodded his head vigorously and instantly disappeared into the crowd in an unknown direction. Behind him, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran could not help but break out into smiles.

Book 14 Chapter 07 – Exchanging Pointers On The Duelling Ground

Four young lads were riding handsome horses and entered the assembly ground from the east. When they arrived at the centre of the grounds, they picked up speed and strung an arrow to their bow at the same time. It was a neat formation and the crowd of ten thousand people is cheering for them. Just as everyone expected them to shoot their arrows at the target boards, the four men actually flipped upside down and fire their arrows while they were positioned under the horses' belly. Zng! All the four arrows managed to hit the centre ring of the target board while one arrow nearly hit the bull's eye. While the arrows are still quivering on the target board, the four men have flipped back onto their saddles and rode across the grandstand, saluting Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. The crowd burst out into loud cheering and applause.

Most of the crowd were seated on the slope between the assembly ground and the royal tents. As they are looking down from a higher place, they actually enjoy a better view compared to those at the stands.

After the four riders have left, everyone was still fascinated by their amazing performance. Since no one is confident of performing a better show, the stage was unoccupied for the time being.

Xiao Pan stood up from his grandstand and threw four arrows down to the four riders.

The four men are mad with glee. They leapt down the horse and

picked up the arrows. They proceeded up the grandstand to receive their rewards from Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong, his three wives, two maids, Teng Yi, Qin Qing and the Eighteen Guardians were seated on the slope and watching the activities from afar. They are finally beginning to understand the importance of this hunting fair to the people of Qin.

It is equivalent to the Olympic Games of the modern world.

Every ambitious man will use these three days to showcase his talent so as to win military promotions and gain the favour of the royal family as well as the various high ranking officials.

The really capable ones will even win the affection of girls from prestigious families like Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er. They will stand to benefit in their love life and career paths.

The annual hunting fair is a highlight of Qin. But not everyone is eligible to participate. Except for the royal family and families of high ranking officials, other participants must go through a selection by their various departments before they can take part in the hunting fair.

Among his three wives, Wu Tingfang is the most boisterous. She clapped and shouted nonstop at the performances.

Xiang Shaolong was about to say something to Teng Yi when he noticed his brows furrowed. Curious, he implored: "Is something

bothering Second Brother?”

Teng Yi composed himself and replied in a deep voice: “I was just wondering – Lu Buwei has such a confident demeanour; isn’t he concerned that Lu Gong, Xu Xian and you might summon the Qin army to annihilate him? Although he is protected by first rate fighters, they are only numbering around one hundred. Even with a few more Guan Zhongxie, he is considered careless about his personal security.”

Xiang Shaolong guessed: “I think he is sure that I cannot manipulate the palace guards to attack him. Moreover, the Crown Prince will protect him as the new Premier Mentor and he knew that we will not act hastily.”

Teng Yi shook his head: “This is unlike Mo Ao’s usual methods. From the start, they have always been one step ahead of us while we are struggling to defend ourselves from them. In such a crucial juncture, it is less likely that they will be neglectful.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed that his words make sense and began to think deeply too.

Teng Yi stared at the grandstand opposite them where Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei are sitting and shifted his gaze to Prince Dan and Tian Dan beside them. He mused: “It is such a grand occasion. Why is Tian Dan’s favourite general Dan Chu absent?”

Xiang Shaolong gestured Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu to his side and instructed them to spy on the Qi people, smiling: “It is no use

thinking about it. Let's spy on them and see what is going on."

On his other side, Wu Tingfang elbowed him: "That's great! Hubby! Look! It is Little Jun!"

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were rejuvenated and looked down to the assembly ground.

Under Jing Jun's leadership, a few hundred cavalry soldiers rode out. Half of them are from the Wu Family Elite army. Everyone has a lance in their right hand and a shield in their left hand. Using only their legs to control their horses, they performed a variety of stunts and poses.

Jing Jun is even more imposing. Barking command after command, he directed his men with utmost confidence, evoking loud cheers and whistles from the crowd.

The female warriors were squeezed on one side of the crowd and they acted as Jing Jun's cheerleaders under the leadership of Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er.

On the grandstand, Lu Gong and the other military leaders nodded their heads in acknowledgement and praise. Once in a while, they will pass favourable comments.

In these warring times, only a well-trained army can gain their attention.

Zhao Zhi happily cried: “Little Jun is really something!”

Suddenly, the soldiers split into two groups and carried out a mock attack on each other. As the horses brush past each other, sounds of weapons clashing can be heard. After a few exciting demonstrations, everyone in the crowd has shouted until their voices were hoarse.

After the final clash, both groups combined into one group and face the grandstand resolutely. At the head of the group is Jing Jun armed with a shield and a lance. He first stood up on his saddle and executed a somersault over the horse’s head. While in mid air, his shield was moving rapidly to protect his body while he pierced his lance several times at an invisible enemy. When he finally landed, he kneeled down in a swift motion and paid his respects to Xiao Pan. It was a fluid movement altogether and there was no sign of breathlessness from him.

The crowd exploded into their biggest cheers and applause since the beginning of the night performances. Even the cold Qin Qing could not hold back and cheered for Jing Jun too.

Xiao Pan saw that he is Xiang Shaolong’s sworn brother and is highly-skilled at the same time. Delighted, he actually jumped up, withdrew his personal sword and threw it down to the ground.

Jing Jun picked up his sword joyfully and howled another command. The cavalry troops marched neatly out of the assembly ground while he himself ascended the grandstand to claim his reward.

Xiang Shaolong could see that the crowd is still high after Jing Jun's performance. He turned his head to Ji Yanran and suggested: "If Talented Lady Ji will perform her incredible spear technique, I guarantee that the crowd will cheer loudly for you."

Ji Yanran and Qin Qing looked at him at the same time. With two of the world's most beautiful faces looking at him simultaneously, Xiang Shaolong was aroused.

Ji Yanran batted her eyes at him: "Yanran only needs Hubby's love and not the crowd's cheering."

Xiang Shaolong shifted his gaze to Qin Qing. She shot him a look and turned her face back to face the assembly ground.

After a few performances by the Palace Infantry and the Palace Cavalry, Ying Ying's female warriors took to the stage.

They may not be as well trained as Jing Jun's cavalry army but the two hundred young girls have their fair share of horse riding and archery experiences. Viewing their performance is also one of life's pleasures.

Among the crowd, the girls are clapping nonstop and the guys are even more generous with their cheering. Naturally, the cheering is even louder than the cheering for Jing Jun.

A gong was sounded.

Lu Gong stood up and paid his respects to Empress and Crown Prince. He proceeded to announce the main event of tonight – the Sword Duel.

As the crowd became serious, he solemnly barked: “Whoever can win three consecutive fights will be rewarded with ten taels of gold from the Crown Prince. You may even win a promotion. Gentlemen, show us what you are made of!”

Under thunderous applause, two men scrambled out.

Lord Changping and several palace guards stepped forward and helped both men put their armour on and each man is given a wooden sword.

After the two men bowed to each other, they began fighting. Within three strokes, one of the men was hit by his opponent.

A gong was sounded and Xu Xian the referee announced the winner.

After ten over fights, only a young man named Huan Qi managed to win three consecutive fights and he earned loud cheers from the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong is trying to locate Guan Zhongxie among the crowd. To Teng Yi, he checked: “Will Second Brother enter the fight later to test Guan Zhongxie’s skills?”

Teng Yi smiled: “Why not?”

Both men exchanged a smile as another man entered the dueling ground. It is Lao Ai.

There are not many people who recognized him but they were impressed with his sturdy built, imposing air and alert expression. It was only until he announced his position and name did everyone realised that he is the Empress’s pet Inner Custodian Lao Ai.

In this instant, another man entered the dueling ground. Everyone is surprised at the challenger. Apparently, it is the expert swordsman Lu Chan. This man is one of the best fighters from Lu Buwei’s group after Guan Zhongxie.

Teng Yi observed: “This will be spectacular. Lu Buwei is purposely out to ruin his reputation and put him down.”

Xiang Shaolong focused on the grandstand and noticed the concerned expressions of Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, Lu Gong, Xu Xian, etc. He was glad that Lu Buwei is now officially opposing Lao Ai. If not for the body armour, Lu Buwei would have instructed Lu Chan to injure Lao Ai’s groin and destroy his usefulness to Zhu Ji.

Lu Chan has a rigid face, a fierce demeanour and is dark-skinned. Whoever sees him would be frightened by his appearance. After they have put on their armour, both men circled the assembly ground once and are viewing each other with caution.

Ji Yanran sighed: “Lu Buwei is familiar with Lao Ai’s strengths and weaknesses. Since he sent Lu Chan, he must have a high chance of winning.”

Xiang Shaolong saw the Lu Chan is expressionless and hard to fathom. He nodded: “This man’s strength should lie in forceful attacks. Lu Buwei must have wanted him to attack Lao Ai relentlessly and make Lao Ai lose face in front of everyone. This will lower Lao Ai’s standing in the eyes of Zhu Ji and the people of Qin.”

Before he can even finish speaking, Lu Chan roared and attacked Lao Ai.

Qin Qing praised: “Official Xiang is truly a genius to make such accurate predictions.” No one spoke out anymore as everyone is fixated on the intense fighting.

Sounds of the wooden sword swishing through the air filled everyone’s ears. Everyone held their breaths as they witnessed the most intensive fight since the beginning of the duels.

Lao Ai may realise that his arm strength is not as good as Lu Chan or he is out to waste Lu Chan’s energy. He did his best to avoid his blows and did not meet his attacks head on.

Until Lu Chan’s fourth stroke brushed past his head did Lao Ai roar loudly and deflected his blows. He focused on defending and deflecting his blows rather than attacking him.

Lu Chan's killing aura grew and he changed his sword styles, attacking Lao Ai mercilessly.

Lao Ai changed his sword styles too and defended himself well. He deflected his blows and retreated at the same time. After circling the assembly ground a few rounds, their steps were still firm and did not show any signs of exhaustion.

It is truly different when expert swordsmen fight.

Ying Ying's female warriors are impressed with Lao Ai's handsome looks and began cheering for him. Whenever he executed a skilful defensive stroke, they will cheer wildly for him. Teng Yi sighed: "Lu Chan has been tricked!"

Xiang Shaolong knew what he meant. Lu Chan and Lao Ai's swords skills are about the same level. Lu Chan has superior arm strength while Lao Ai is more agile. From the ongoing battle, it appears that Lao Ai is gaining the upper hand while Lu Chan is losing his energy very quickly. When he is exhausted, it will be Lao Ai's opportunity to defeat him.

Zhao Zhi was astonished: "Why didn't Lu Buwei send Guan Zhongxie?"

Xiang Shaolong looked over to her and noticed the Tian sisters nervously keeping their eyes closed as they were too afraid to watch the fighting. He cannot hold back but smiled: "Sending Guan Zhongxie will be the final straw."

Lu Chan is anxious to win and increased the intensity of the fight. Everyone is taken aback by his ferocity and their eyes followed his movements. Sounds of heavy clashing of the wooden swords filled the air.

Lao Ai suddenly stopped retreating and yelled madly. Like an angry dragon rising from the sea, his sword sliced forward and with a loud 'Pak!' he actually forced Lu Chan to retreat half a step. He continued with a flurry of attacks that sent Lu Chan into a defending position. Loud cheers and whistles were heard from the crowd.

Teng Yi shook his head and sighed: "There are so many advantages if you are handsome."

Lao Ai's attacks became more and more fearsome and his sword is almost everywhere, forcing Lu Chan to take several steps back. But Lu Chan has high endurance. Despite being at a disadvantage, he did not panic and everyone is also impressed with his resilience.

Out of the blue, Lao Ai ceased his attacks and took a few steps back. He bowed: "Brother Lu is highly-skilled. I cannot hope to defeat you."

The entire crowd quietened down.

Lu Chan was stunned for a while before he returned his greetings. Both men then paid their respects to the grandstand.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi glanced at each other. They did not expect Lao Ai to end this beautifully. He gave face to Lu Buwei and at the same time, he retreated when he was gaining the upper hand. Otherwise, if Guan Zhongxie challenges him in the next round, he will be in deep 5hit.

Xu Xian decided that it is a draw and rewarded each man with five taels of gold. The crowd was slightly disappointed.

Fortunately, the next fighters were all experts from the cavalry army and the palace guards. After several battles, the last fighter is Great General Wang He's Assistant General Bai Chong who has beaten two challengers. If he can win one more round, he will win the ten taels of gold.

Xiang Shaolong felt that the present fighters are all men from prestigious backgrounds, causing all his cavalry soldiers to hold back from participating. He commented to Teng Yi: "Guan Zhongxie should be fighting soon!" Teng Yi reminded: "Not so fast! There is still Zhou Zihen!"

Before his sentence ended, a short and stout Zhou Zihen stepped out of the crowd and entered the dueling ground.

Everyone witnessed Bai Chong's double victory and guessed that he will too defeat this nameless man. Energized by this thought, they cheered even louder and the atmosphere is electrifying.

As everyone watched on, Zhou Zihen lifted the wooden sword

and tested its weight. Abruptly, he brandished a dagger and swiftly sliced downwards. The end of the long sword was severed off, leaving only one and a half feet of sword length.

Everyone was blown away by his way of shortening his sword. Moreover, he used a small dagger to sever the heavy wooden sword in one blow and it takes a very sharp dagger to achieve that. Everyone was flabbergasted.

Zhou Zihen begged Xiao Pan's pardon: "Please forgive me as I am used to using short swords." Xiao Pan's interest was piqued and he gestured his approval.

Bai Chong has a suspicious look on his face as he brandished his sword and awaited his attack. With a serious expression, he was ready to counterattack anytime.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong deemed him to be a coward.

There is a saying: An inch shorter is an inch of danger. If Zhou Zihen is using such a short sword, his sword skills would be unorthodox and hard to defend against.

With only these two fighters, Lu Buwei is already instilling fear in others. Moreover, he still has Guan Zhongxie the champion swordsman.

Zhou Zihen snorted and moved forward at lightning speed. His wooden sword has morphed into a flurry of quick sword stances

and his sword seemed to be everywhere. Clashing head on with Bai Chong, this is the first time anyone has seen such a queer move.

Bai Chong was stunned and roared. He took half a step back before sweeping his sword horizontally across.

Du! Zhou Zihen's short sword parried away Bai Chong's long sword while his entire body crashed squarely into Bai Chong's chest.

Bai Chong was taken by surprise and suffered a heavy blow to his chest. He lost his grip on his long sword and he fell down in a sitting position.

Nobody expected Bai Chong to lose in one blow and everyone forgot to cheer.

Wang He and Bai Chong were disgraced while Lu Gong and the other generals were embarrassed. It was an awkward moment.

Finally, Lu Buwei took the lead in clapping and cheering for Zhou Zihen.

Like a dishonoured man, Bai Chong stood up and walked away.

Xiang Shaolong sucked in some cold air. He deduced that Zhou Zihen is someone well-versed in fighting at close proximity and he may have a hard time fighting him himself.

The atmosphere was tensed as Zhou Zihen proudly stood at the centre of the dueling ground, awaiting the next challenger. After some time, there were still no takers. Xiang Shaolong caught sight of Lu Buwei talking to Zhu Ji and he must have been bragging about his skilful subordinate. He had a brainwave and inquired: "Where is Little Jun?"

Teng Yi had the same inspiration that only Jing Jun's agility can counter Zhou Zihen and groaned: "I do not know where he has sneaked off to. Without our consent, he dared not fight."

At this time, Xu Xian announced from the grandstand: "If there are no more challengers, we will assume that Zhou Zihen from Premier Lu Residence has won three consecutive fights."

The crowd became so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. If Zhou Zihen 'won three consecutive fights', the military would lose face as they cannot even defeat someone from Lu Buwei's forces.

At the instant, someone shouted: "Where is Commander Xiang?" The moment the shout ended, the crowd of ten thousand people were chanting his name.

Ever since his duel with Wang Jian, he has been the number one swordsman in the eyes of the people of Qin. Moreover, he is a 'Qin native'. With this outsider arrogantly waiting for a challenger, everyone naturally hope that he will take the stand and regain

some glory.

Cries of 'Xiang Shaolong' filled the mountains and valleys.

Xiang Shaolong saw that everyone around him was now staring at him. He was agonized. Even without his leg injury, it will be a difficult task to overcome Zhou Zihen. Now that his movement is limited, what should he do?

Book 14 Chapter 08 – The Mighty Jing Jun

On the grandstand, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan have unnatural expressions on their faces as they did not expect Xiang Shaolong to enjoy such high standing among the people of Qin. In addition, Lu Buwei can clearly feel the racism of the Qin people against him and his family warriors. He felt a tinge of regret for trying to eliminate Xiang Shaolong. If they had been on good terms, the people of Qin may eventually accept him and he need not use Lao Ai to manipulate the Empress. He suppressed this thought from his mind. After all, Xiang Shaolong has only two more days to live and it is a fact that cannot be changed.

Xiao Pan saw that Xiang Shaolong enjoys a favourable reputation among the military forces and the younger generation of Qin and was delighted for him. At the same time, it indirectly lowers Lu Buwei's standing. However, he was concerned about his leg injury and that he will disappoint the crowd by being unable to battle. While everyone is shouting his name incessantly, a figure somersaulted from within the ranks of the female warriors. This person cart wheeled continuously over ten rounds quickly and his face is a blur. No one can identify him but everyone was flabbergasted at his agility.

After a final mid air somersault, the person landed in front of the grandstand, kneeled down and pleaded: "Assistant Cavalry Commander Jing Jun asks to fight on behalf of my Commander. Will the Crown Prince please give your approval?"

Xiao Pan was overjoyed: "I approve Assistant Commander Jing's request."

Everyone saw that he was highly-skilled and volunteered himself first. Moreover, he is Xiang Shaolong's assistant commander and rewarded him with thunderous applause. Everyone anticipates a good fight between him and Zhou Zihen.

Jing Jun did not stand up yet. He loudly declared: "If I happened to win, all the glory of the victory belongs to Miss Dan'er."

Xiao Pan was stunned and exchanged a glance with an equally shocked Lu Gong. He laughed: "Fine! I approve."

The people of Qin are open-minded. Witnessing the public love declaration of Jing Jun, everyone's spirits rose greatly and cheered even louder. Their cheering sounds resonated throughout the plains.

The female warriors are laughing uncontrollably. Ying Ying and the other ladies forcefully pushed an embarrassed but thrilled Lu Dan'er to the front of the crowd so that she will not miss any part of the action.

Zhou Zihen still maintained his cool expression. He slowly glanced up at Lu Buwei who nodded slightly, indicating that he wants him to deal a heavy blow to Jing Jun and tarnish his reputation. He smiled to acknowledge this silent command. His eyes were shining like electricity as he shifted his gaze to Jing Jun who is putting on his armour and receiving his wooden sword.

Unexpectedly, Jing Jun made a monkey face, stared straight back

at him and joked: “So Brother Zhou needs to seek Premier Lu’s consent for every little thing.”

Zhou Zihen was taken aback as he did not anticipate Jing Jun to see through their communication method. He plainly replied: “Assistant Commander Jing must be joking!”

Lord Changwen is personally helping Jing Jun to put on his armour. Overhearing their conversation, he lightly patted Jing Jun and advised: “Be careful!” He led his men to the side of the dueling ground and left the two men standing there facing each other.

The crowd became silent as everyone watched with abated breaths, wondering how Jing Jun can counter Zhou Zihen’s unorthodox fighting methods.

There may be ten thousand pairs of eyes staring at him and it will be a crucial fight but Jing Jun maintained his aloof expression and stared lazily at his opponent. His sword is still resting on his shoulder and he seems to disregard Zhou Zihen.

While everyone is anxious for him, the most anxious person is not Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi or any of the ladies. It is Lu Dan’er. She may be annoyed at him but now, her reputation is tied to the outcome of this battle. If Jing Jun loses, she will lose face too. Her palms became sweaty and she almost cannot continue watching the fight.

Out of the blue, both men began to move.

Originally, it was Zhou Zihen who moved first. But like it has been prearranged, the moment he made his move, Jing Jun's sword has left his shoulder and is now halfway through the air.

Zhou Zihen withdrew his sword and kicked out at the same time. Jing Jun somersaulted to the back and avoided his blow effortlessly.

Zhou Zihen was taken aback at this peculiar move. He is an experienced fighter and he knew that Jing Jun's strength lies in his agility. He dared not be complacent and instantly changed his battle tactics. He quickly rolled forward to where Jing Jun is about to land. When Jing Jun is landing, he will deal a heavy blow and break his legs.

The ever-changing fighting techniques have captivated everyone.

On the slope, Teng Yi smiled to Xiang Shaolong: "If Zhou Zihen is a few years younger, Jing Jun will be in trouble."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head slightly and focused hard on their fight without replying.

Jing Jun flipped twice in the air and actually has his hand embracing his legs against his chest. At the same time, his sword swished down at Zhou Zihen below him with lightning speed.

Zhou Zihen used his waist to prop himself up and flipped to the

side. Using his backhand, he struck out with his short sword at chest area to hit Jing Jun's long sword.

Every one of their attacks was beyond comprehension and everyone was watching intently without any sounds.

Jing Jun knew that he is trying to deal a heavy blow to his long sword and use this opening to further attack him. He let out a shrill cry and his leg kicked out towards Zhou Zihen's face forcefully.

Zhou Zihen is blown away by his agility and could not be bothered to attack his long sword anymore. He shifted his sword to attack his leg. At the same time, he took a step backwards to avoid the incoming kick.

Amazingly, Jing Jun has enough momentum to retract his kick and Zhou Zihen's sword hit empty air.

Everyone roared out in loud cheers and praises.

As Jing Jun landed, he rolled into a ball. Keeping the momentum, he rolled towards Zhou Zihen.

Zhou Zihen did not panic and roared. He adopted the horse stance and his sword exploded into a flurry of stances. Under the illumination of the torches, he maintains his steely expression and is truly an expert swordsman.

After all, he needs true talent to outshine the other eight thousand family warriors of Lu Buwei.

As impossible as it seems, Jing Jun leapt up from the ground and struck down at Zhou Zihen with his full body weight.

Ta! The wooden swords clashed.

Even with his solid horse stance, Zhou Zihen cannot withstand Jing Jun's heavy blow and staggered backwards.

Everyone forgot their inhibitions and shake their fists in the air, cheering loudly for him. The loudest cheers come from Lu Dan'er and the female warriors followed by the soldiers from the Cavalry Army. Lu Buwei and his men's cheering were drowned by their voices.

Jing Jun fought ferociously. The moment he landed, he flipped forward with his long sword trailing and he followed up with another blow at Zhou Zihen.

Zhou Zihen is forced to defend himself and kept retreating. He cannot keep up with Jing Jun's flexible attacks that sometimes come from the air and sometimes when he was rolling on the ground. He has finally met his nemesis.

Under Jing Jun all out combo attacks, Zhou Zihen was panting as he tried to defend himself without the slightest chance to counter attack. Like a flower that has withered, he cannot salvage the

situation.

Ta! Ta! Ta! Jing Jun made use of the advantage of his sword length to deliver three continuous blows to Zhou Zihen's short sword, causing him pain and numbness in his hands.

Everyone is siding Jing Jun in their cheers, causing Zhou Zihen to be mad and disappointed.

After another ten successive clashes, Zhou Zihen finally lost his grip on his sword and his sword flew out of his hands after receiving another heavy blow. As he groaned to himself, Jing Jun sidestepped to his back and delivered a back kick to his back.

Jing Jun's kick carried so much strength that Zhou Zihen can never block given his disadvantageous situation. Before he realised what happened, he has fallen flat on his face.

Lu Dan'er joyfully ran from the sidelines to Jing Jun's arms and they paid their respects to the boisterous crowd. No one is bothered with the defeated warrior leaving the dueling ground.

After a short discussion, Xu Xian happily asked: "Is Assistant Commander Jing ready for another challenger?"

Jing Jun respectfully answered: "I only fight on behalf of my Commander. I wish to end here while I am still the winner and have no desire to be kicked out by someone else!"

Everyone burst out laughing but no one blamed him for not accepting new challengers. Xu Xian smiled: “Assistant Commander Jing has done well. Have a good rest!”

Jing Jun paid his respects to the grandstand occupants and went back to the female warriors group with Lu Dan’er.

On the slope, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a smile. With Jing Jun’s success, he will win the heart of Lu Dan’er sooner or later.

Teng Yi state in a deep voice: “It seems like Guan Zhongxie will not fight tonight. As long as he did not defeat you or Jing Jun, he is still not the best swordsman in the eyes of the people of Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. He was interrupted by Wu Shu who came up behind them with a flustered look on his face. He anxiously reported: “The people of Qi have packed their luggage and are ready to go home.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were stunned. They looked at the grandstand and noticed that Lu Buwei and Tian Dan have indeed disappeared.

All of a sudden, they realised that they have been tricked by Mo Ao and Tian Dan.

Tian Dan’s decision to leave Xianyang City tonight is exploiting Xiang Shaolong’s greatest weakness.

Lu Buwei must have anticipated that he will chase after Tian Dan. This will ensure that the Wu Family Elite warriors leave Xianyang City together with him and when he dies of poisoning on the trip, Lu Buwei will not be implicated. After his death, he can even accuse him of neglecting his duties and take over the Wu Family assets. Lu Buwei the heartless man will stand to benefit with this course of events.

Ji Yanran and the other ladies will have to submit to him. What a devious plot!

Without Xiang Shaolong here to counter him, he will have lesser obstacles in pursuing his ambitions. When Guan Zhongxie is reinstated, he can promote him to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander as well. Everyone in Xianyang City will have to dance to his tune by then.

But how can he simply watch Tian Dan escape? Ever since Tian Dan tried to assassinate him, he has been keeping a low profile. He must be secretly planning this escape route. Thus, he must have been conspiring with Lu Buwei all along.

During his assassination, Lu Buwei swore that he did not have time to inform Tian Dan. It is all bullshit. In fact, he was the one who told Tian Dan to assassinate him.

This is called ‘inflicting injury on oneself to trick the enemy’. When everyone thinks that it is Lu Buwei’s enemy trying to kill him to get Lu Buwei into trouble, it was actually Lu Buwei who

masterminded his assassination.

He has been too careless and was tricked by Lu Buwei. He even suspected Wang Wan or Cai Ze to be in cahoots with Tian Dan, which resulted in his oversight.

Teng Yi solemnly suggested: “Let me go after him! You must stay here to deal with Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Lu Buwei may not be able to send his own men to escort Tian Dan but Tian Dan has an army of four thousand men which matches the strength of our own army. After taking Lord Gaoling’s rebellion into consideration, I can only give you two thousand warriors. This makes both situations unfavourable for us. Don’t forget that Lu Buwei has eight thousand family warriors. Who knows what tricks are up their sleeves?”

Teng Yi kept quiet.

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “But there is still hope in this matter. I must persuade Prince Dan first. As long as he can try to delay Tian Dan’s journey, we can catch up to him. After all, An Gu has promised to make the Chu and Qi army retreat by ten miles away from the border.”

There are no more challengers going up the dueling grounds so amidst all the fanfare, Xu Xian announced the end of tonight’s performances.

In the main tent of Yan, Prince Dan listened to Xiang Shaolong's explanation and hesitated: "It is inappropriate for us to act alone on this matter. In anything goes wrong, Qi and Chu will come after us. With the three allied states not providing any assistance, our state of Yan will be in peril!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Tian Dan's existence is the real danger to the state of Yan. I am not asking your men to fight Tian Dan openly but to create opportunities to disrupt his traveling once he leaves the Qin borders. As long as you can delay him for a few days, we will catch up to him."

Pausing, he strengthened his tone: "I will send my men to liaise with your general Xu Yi Luan. At the time, the people of Wei and the Pass Commander General An Gu will also lend us a helping hand."

Listening in on the side, military advisor You Zhi advised: "This can be done. As long as we lay traps and conduct night raids, Tian Dan cannot tell whether his attackers are from Commander Xiang's forces or not. Even if Tian Dan manages to escape with his life, he will not be able to pin the blame on us."

Great General Xu Yi Ze came in from outside and bellowed: "No one is stalking Commander Xiang."

Prince Dan was relieved and decided: "Fine! We will do our best to delay the meeting between Tian Dan and the two armies of Qi and Chu. If we do not see Commander Xiang by the time they meet up, we shall have to let that traitor live for a few more years."

Xiang Shaolong profusely gave his thanks. He secretly thought that everyone has their own secret weapons. Even with Mo Ao's brilliance, he can never expect Xu Yi Luan's wandering army to come into the picture. After two days, his brilliant mind with cease to exist.

After he left Prince Dan's tent, he glanced around him and saw that there are still burning torches everywhere. The young men and women of Qin are gathered in groups, singing, dancing and drinking to their heart's content. It was a joyous time and no one wanted to go back to sleep.

On his way back to his tent, he was distracted by happy cheering of some young ladies. He looked in the direction of the sounds and saw a large purple flag about a hundred yards away from him and was reminded about Ying Ying's appointment.

Will Ying Ying be waiting for him in the tent with the purple flower? There are still two hours until daybreak and she must be having a good time with Lu Dan'er and her female warriors.

After learning about Tian Dan's departure, he was disillusioned and wanted to discuss with Teng Yi who they should send to liaise with Xu Yi Luan to attack Tian Dan.

Somehow, he felt like paying a quick visit to Ying Ying's tent!

Thinking about this, he made use of the shadows of the tents and slipped towards Ying Ying's tent. He hoped to speak to her

privately. Otherwise, if he gets intertwined by the female warriors, he will be stuck there for hours.

As most of the people are gathered around the assembly grounds, the tents were not well-illuminated. Without much difficulty, Xiang Shaolong managed to find his way around the tents without anyone detecting his presence

On an open area, he saw ten odd campfires. Enjoying themselves around the campfire were Lu Dan'er and over a hundred female warriors. They were accompanied by over two hundred young men and they are having a good time singing, clapping, dancing and flirting. Ying Ying was surprisingly absent.

Xiang Shaolong sighed, thinking that he may want to skip the appointment. As he stepped backwards, he saw a light coming from a tent behind him and there were some sounds coming from it.

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look and discovered that there was a large purple flower sewn on the tent door which looked exactly like the one on the flag.

Pleased, Xiang Shaolong walked over and was about to call her name. He changed his mind and since he wanted to win her heart, he will sneak into her tent and give her a surprise. She is an open-minded girl who is used to surprising others so she should not mind. He can then make love to her and win her affections without waiting till daybreak.

Aroused, he stepped into the tent.

A large figure which was prone on the floor leapt up swiftly and viciously howled: "Who is it?"

As Xiang Shaolong faced this person, both of them were equally shocked. Under the illumination of the lamp, it was a naked Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie saw that it was him and a murderous look flashed across his eyes. He moved to one side and began to put on his clothes.

Xiang Shaolong looked down and saw horrified Ying Ying sitting up under the cover of a blanket. Her face was deathly white and she stared at him with a lost expression. Beyond the blanket, her jade white legs can be seen.

In his wildest dreams, Xiang Shaolong did not expect that they will be making out in the tent. He bitterly laughed: "My apologies!" and left the tent.

After he took several steps, Guan Zhongxie chased up to him and apologised: "Official Xiang. I am sorry. She said she is meeting you at daybreak and did not expect you to come so early."

Xiang Shaolong is certain that he purposely seduced Ying Ying to sow discord between them and hated Ying Ying for being unable to resist him. He accepted his defeat and forced a smile: "It is my fault

for spoiling Official Guan's happy moment and even gave you a fright."

Guan Zhongxie was astounded: "Hasn't Official Xiang seen Premier Lu? Earlier, he sent someone to look for you."

Xiang Shaolong casually responded: "I am walking everywhere aimlessly and I am afraid his men have not been able to locate me yet."

Walking besides him, Guan Zhongxie whispered: "The ladies of Qin are very open minded even before marriage. I hope Official Xiang does not take it to heart!"

Xiang Shaolong thought that with these words, Guan Zhongxie is ridiculing Xiang Shaolong should he ever have the courage to wed Ying Ying. He pretended to be unaffected and laughed: "Official Guan must be joking." Pleased, Guan Zhongxie recommended: "Let's visit Premier Lu together!"

Xiang Shaolong is at a loss.

All along, he has been at the losing end because unlike his enemies, he did not resort to unscrupulous methods to achieve his goals.

He is a man of principles and values relationships. If he carries on like this, even with Mo Ao dead, he may still die in the hands of Guan Zhongxie.

It is time to change strategies.

Book 14 Chapter 09 – Blessing In Disguise

When Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie arrived at Lu Buwei's tent, he was seated outside the tent and enjoying the singing of two stunning courtesans. With him are Mo Ao, Lu Chan and ten over escorts. Zhou Zihen and Lu Niang Rong are not around.

Lu Buwei pretended to be happy to see him and instructed Xiang Shaolong to sit beside him. For the first time, he introduced Mo Ao and Lu Chan to him.

As Xiang Shaolong exchanged some meaningless conversation with Mo Ao and Lu Chan, Lu Buwei dismissed the courtesans and leaned towards him, revealing: "Tian Dan is leaving tonight. What does Shaolong plan to do? If you want to go after him, I will fully support you. He actually tried to harm me by trying to assassinate you. I will not protect him anymore."

Everyone stared at Xiang Shaolong, waiting for his reaction. Xiang Shaolong felt like he is an animal being surrounded by tigers and wolves.

They must be laughing inside that he is still ignorant about being poisoned by them.

Thoughts raced through his mind at the speed of light. If he decides to give up his decision to pursue Tian Dan, Mo Ao may be suspicious and deduced that he has a secret plan. But it would be ridiculous for him to chase after Tian Dan now. He was in a dilemma.

Recalling his determination to ‘achieve his goals at all costs’, he acted awkward and divulged: “Actually, I wanted to kill Tian Dan because he killed a female friend that I got to know in Handan City. It turned out to be a misunderstanding as I received a letter from her yesterday. I am not really out to kill him but just wanted to scare him. This fellow has always been trying to kill me and it is lucky that he has failed in all his attempts.”

It is a complete lie to prevent Lu Buwei from forcing him to pursue Tian Dan and also give him an excuse not to pursue him himself. Fortunately, Tian Dan has left and there is no one to validate his words.

Lu Buwei, Mo Ao, Guan Zhongxie and Lu Chan all have a strange expression on their faces after hearing his words. After they exchanged glances, Guan Zhongxie began: “Why did Official Xiang think that the lady has been killed?”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Tian Dan did not tell them the full details. He was secretly delighted and told them about the weak-looking eyes in the painting compared to Shan Rou’s usual energetic eyes. He bitterly laughed: “I may have been too rash and concluded too early that she was killed without further thinking. When I received her letter yesterday, I realised that it was a complete misunderstanding. She did try to assassinate Tian Dan but managed to escape with her life. Naturally, I will not tell these things to Tian Dan!”

Lu Buwei shook his head and sighed: “We already know it is a misunderstanding. In actual fact, Tian Dan was puzzled that you

concluded that she was dead based on the painting. He saw that you were furious and did not clarify things with you.”

Mo Ao cut in: “The painting is drawn by one of Tian Dan’s artist from his memory. It is not unusual to draw the eyes incorrectly due to the short interaction.” Now, it is Xiang Shaolong who trembled strongly and he exclaimed: “What?!”

As everyone is staring at him with astonishment, he tried to cover up and asked: “Since Premier Lu knows about this, why didn’t you tell me earlier?” He tried to suppress his emotions so that his joy will not show up on his face.

Heavens!

So Shan Rou is really not dead. It is really a misunderstanding.

Lu Buwei leisurely replied: “I thought Tian Dan is spouting nonsense and is trying to use me to scare you so I did not bring it up. Now, we have proven that he has been lying all along.”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that it made sense. But under those circumstances, there is no need for Tian Dan to lie to Lu Buwei. Moreover, it is not Tian Dan’s style to showcase his weaknesses. Thus, there is a high probability that Shan Rou is indeed alive.

Lu Buwei saw that he cannot persuade Xiang Shaolong to pursue Tian Dan and disappointment is written all over his face. He stood

up and asked: “Shaolong! Will you visit Niang Rong in her tent? You may be able to persuade her to change her mind.”

Xiang Shaolong is not in the mood to see Lu Niang Rong at all. He stood up together with Mo Ao and the rest and replied: “There is an early morning hunt tomorrow. Let Third Mistress have a good rest! I will see her again when she is feeling better tomorrow.”

It may be due to his failure to cajole him that Lu Buwei is in a terrible mood. He did not hold him back and allowed him to leave.

Xiang Shaolong returned to the Cavalry Camp near the Royal tents and saw Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Liu Chao in the middle of a secret discussion.

He pulled Teng Yi to one side first and told him about Shan Rou’s likelihood of being alive.

Teng Yi was mad with joy. He then frowned: “Then are we still going after Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong resolutely decided: “We must kill him to avenge the injustice done to the Shan Family. Moreover, Tian Dan has tried to kill me several times and is in cahoots with Lu Buwei. It is time to eliminate this threat once and for all! This present opportunity is once in a lifetime chance to kill him. If we missed it, it will be gone for good. No matter what, we must never allow him to return to Qi alive.”

He added with a smile: “Moreover, I made a vow that day to change my name to Long Shao Xiang if I did not kill him. It is such an ugly sounding name!”

Teng Yi broke out into a smile and waved Jing Jun and Liu Chao to join them. He instructed Liu Chao: “Go ahead and explain your findings.”

Liu Chao reported: “We have discovered Lord Gaoling’s men building rafts secretly at the river upstream and are collecting large quantities of firewood and dried grass. I am sure that they are preparing to burn the bridges.”

Jing Jun added: “If they build shelves on the rafts and spray the entire raft with oil, it is tantamount to a live volcano speeding down the river towards us. Its destructive impact will be tremendous. Shall we attack them first to prevent this from happening?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “This time round, we need to put up a show to allow the Crown Prince to show off his godly ability in leading an army to war. We must project a favourable image of him in the hearts and minds of the people of Qin. This is called Branding. Only through this can we prolong our fight with Lu Buwei until the day he is coroneted.”

Teng Yi smiled: “You use really funny terms such as Godly Ability and Branding. But it does make sense to me.”

Jing Jun excitedly said: “I understand. We need to find out about

the enemies' schemes and plan a full counterattack strategy. The Crown Prince will issue military orders while pretending that this is a new encounter. Thus, he can convince everyone of his talent."

Liu Chao mused: "So we must not only win but win beautifully."

Knowing the Shan Rou is still alive, Xiang Shaolong is in great spirits. "That's right!" he laughed.

He continued to praise: "We must win beautifully just like how Jing Jun beat Zhou Zihen beautifully."

Jing Jun gave his thanks and shone with pride.

Teng Yi joked: "Have you gotten Lu Dan'er's red flower?"

Jing Jun was agonized: "She is a tough one. She allowed me to hug and caress her but still refrain from letting me pass this final barrier."

Liu Chao is experienced with women and gleefully joked: "I think Master Jing is lacking in experience and may have made a few wrong moves."

Jing Jun laughingly scolded: "Damn you. Do you think this is my first girl? My moves are always the best. Unfortunately, there is no way we can prove this by dueling. Hng! You are mistaken."

The other three men broke out into laughter.

Xiang Shaolong laughed as he agreed that no man will ever say that he is bad at chasing girls.

After knowing that Shan Rou is alive, Teng Yi is in an excellent mood. He remembered something and reminded: “Yanran and the girls are in the royal tents accompanying Widow Qin. Tingfang wants you to fetch them before returning back to your tent.”

Jing Jun smiled: “Third Brother had better spend more time with sisters-in-law. Leave these tasks to us!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled as he chided him. Summoning the Eighteen Guardians, he rode towards the royal tents.

After entering the wooden gates, he ran into Xu Xian who is escorted by several men carrying torches. Together, they rode to one of the slopes to speak in secret.

Below them, tents were pitched everywhere on the plains. Despite the loud gushing sounds of River Jing, laughter and cheering can still be heard as there are still many people who have not retired to bed.

Xu Xian whispered: “For the past two days, Lord Gaoling has been trying to persuade me and Lu Gong to work join forces with him against Lu Buwei. He swore that he has no intention to usurp the throne but only wanted to force this outsider out of the Qin

court.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Lord Gaoling can never return from this path that he is taking. Lu Buwei has spies around him and he is still ignorant about it. Based on this point, he will only suffer in the hands of Lu Buwei.”

Xu Xian reminded: “I am puzzled that Du Bi chose to leave Xianyang City during such a crucial juncture. I guessed he knew about Lord Gaoling’s rebellion and purposely left so that he can watch us from the sidelines. This man is extremely scheming and is much more talented than Lord Gaoling.”

He added: “Is Shaolong really confident? Don’t forget that Lu Buwei will create some internal chaos.”

Xiang Shaolong confidently explained: “The Crown Prince will lead the fight personally and Lu Buwei will have no chance to interfere.”

Xu Xian frowned: “The Crown Prince is still young and lack battle experience. I am concerned...”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Crown Prince only needs to know how to delegate his work to the correct persons.”

Xu Xian saw through him and laughed: “Let’s make it a practice round for him! When that happens, Lu Gong and I will stand on his left and right, showing everyone that he has our full support.

Shaolong must plan everything well.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head joyfully.

Xu Xian praised: “Your fifth brother is highly-skilled and clever, undermining Lu Buwei’s reputation. He is a rare talent whom Lu Gong and I admire very much. Right! Have you decided to give up your plan to kill Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong cannot reveal his relationship with Prince Dan. He replied: “I have asked the people of Wei to help me to delay his traveling speed. If they can hold him back a few days, I am sure I can catch up to him. When I am gone, Jing Jun will be in charge of the Cavalry Army. Please help me take care of him.”

Xu Xian was stunned: “Why would the people of Wei help you?”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Except for Chu, the other states have some form of enmity with Tian Dan. Moreover, I was the one who freed the Crown Prince of Wei. Lord Longyang will surely lend me a helping hand in return.”

Xu Xian was satisfied with his answer and patted his shoulder to show his appreciation. They then parted.

At the defending gates, the door attendant informed him that Xiao Pan is looking for him. He went to look for Xiao Pan first.

Xiao Pan is in a secret discussion with Li Si and has a happy

expression on his face. The moment he saw Xiang Shaolong enter his tent, he waved him over and together, they analyzed a map on the table. It was a map of the entire campsite. Lord Gaoling's tents were marked in red.

Xiang Shaolong understood his excitement and is happy for him. It is a rare chance for him to command the Qin army and show his prowess.

Xiao Pan began: "Earlier, I have summoned Subject Jing (Jun) and he has told me the location of the rebel soldiers. I am now discussing a counter strategy with Subject Li. Subject Li, why don't you explain first!"

Li Si is about to speak out when Xiang Shaolong kicked him lightly under the table. Li Si understood his meaning and reported: "I only contributed a small part and the majority of the plan was crafted by Crown Prince. Why don't Crown Prince explain it instead?"

Xiao Pan was thrilled and smiled: "For Lord Gaoling to succeed, he must use unconventional methods and take us by surprise. With so much information about their plans, we must annihilate them or my study of military books would be in waste!"

He pointed to River Jing and detailed: "If I am Lord Gaoling, I will first make use of the natural surroundings to my advantage. For example, I can create dams and store water from the nearby rivers that connect with River Jing. When it is time to attack, I will open the dams and let the huge amounts of water flow downstream. The torrents will tear the bridges apart and with a

timely attack, I can achieve victory.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. When Liu Chao mentioned he saw rafts being built, they can be used for building dams too. A water attack is even more powerful than a fire attack and there is no way they can prevent flooding. He could not help but turn to look at Li Si.

Li Si clarified: “I have nothing to do with this. This is really Crown Prince’s idea.”

Xiao Pan proudly continued: “Subject Li guessed that they will use a fire attack but I felt that a water attack is more powerful. If they add a few logs on the water, all kinds of bridges will be destroyed. Then, they only need to shoot some fire arrows and our whole camp will be burnt to the ground.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed at Xiao Pan’s intelligence. This is truly the first time he is fighting a war based on his own abilities.

Xiao Pan proceeded to explain the different scenarios where Lord Gaoling can send in his attackers and how Lu Buwei can try to kill his opponents using different strategies. His explanations made sense and both Xiang Shaolong and Li Si were completely blown away by his intricate thinking and rational explanations.

Finally, Xiao Pan bitterly smiled: “My biggest flaw is that I have too many scenarios with their own strengths and weaknesses. I have no idea which is the best plan. Will my two subjects please advise me?”

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and laughed: “The most powerful attack is the attack that always changes to suit the changing battle conditions. Crown Prince can rest at ease. When we know their attacking time, we will attack first and annihilate all of them before Lu Buwei even know what is going on. Leave this to the Changping brothers and myself. Then, Crown Prince only needs to issue the orders and we will put up a good show for everyone.”

Xiao Pan slapped the table and sighed: “Only Grand Tutor and Subject Li understands me. We shall do as you say!”

Li Si respectfully added: “Official Xiang and I will bring you the latest battle reports so that you can make the necessary changes.”

Pleased, Xiao Pan nodded his head. Changing the subject, he asked: “Grand Tutor’s Fifth Brother Jing Jun is a rare talent. He is skilful, loyal and honest. I admire men like him. Can Grand Tutor Xiang give any suggestions on how I may reward him?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “His official post is already quite high and still lacks real experience. We must let him hone his skills further before we promote him again.”

Xiao Pan smiled: “Is he really interested in Lu Dan’er? If Lu Gong does not object, I will see to their marriage. After all, it is better for her this way than to land in the hands of Guan Zhongxie the traitor.”

Xiang Shaolong recollected the ugly expression on Guan Zhongxie's face as he leapt up from a naked Ying Ying. He felt like there were needles pricking his heart. He nodded: "I have to bother Crown Prince."

Xiao Pan gladly assured: "It is my pleasure. For the time being, I am not interested in marriage as there are too many important things to do."

When he left Xiao Pan's tent, he ran into Lord Changwen and was detained by him and dragged to a corner. He cheered: "My sister is no longer hostile towards you. You must grasp the opportunity and win her heart. If you marry her, you will be relieving us of a big burden."

Xiang Shaolong was very uncomfortable. Luckily, he was not deeply intertwined with Ying Ying yet or it will be a heavy blow to him. He remembered the one night stands in the 21st century and realised that what Ying Ying is not that atrocious after all. Both males and females have the right to sleep around. The question is that in this case, it is Guan Zhongxie purposely out to seduce Ying Ying from him.

To Lord Changwen, he bitterly smiled: "I have lost. Can we stop talking about this?" Lord Changwen was astounded. "Guan Zhongxie?" he stammered.

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head slightly and patted his shoulder apologetically before he took his leave.

Qin Qing's tent is located behind the main royal tent and is beside Zhu Ji's tent. Here, there are ten odd tents which all belonged to the females of the royal family. Wooden walls are erected between these tents and the other tents and security is very tight.

Xiang Shaolong may have the authority to go wherever he wishes but he still respects their rules and announced his arrival to a palace guard. Soon, one of Qin Qing's personal maids came to report that Ji Yanran and the ladies have left and Qin Qing has retired for the night.

Xiang Shaolong understood that Qin Qing does not want to see him given the present circumstances. He shrugged his shoulders and left.

Book 14 Chapter 10 – Killing Four Birds With Two Arrows

Before dawn, Xiang Shaolong is roused from sleep by the Tian sisters.

He did not sleep a wink the night before and was working non-stop yesterday. He was so exhausted he slept like a log the moment he hugged Wu Tingfang in bed.

Outside the tent where it is still dark, Ji Yanran and his other two wives changed the medication on his wound. By now, the injury is almost completely healed except for a scar. He already has several scars on his body and an additional one is inconsequential.

This moment, Jing Jun led a young man to see him and introduced: “This is Huan Qi. Commander Xiang should have seen him yesterday. He is the best hunter from the first hunt yesterday and the only fighter to win three consecutive fights last night. The Crown Prince has promoted him to be a Major and assigned him to our Cavalry Army. Commander Xiang will be in charge of grooming him.”

Huan Qi knelt down and greeted: “Huan Qi pays his respects to Commander Xiang.”

‘No wonder he looked so familiar’, Xiang Shaolong thought. He gently instructed: “Stand up!” Like an agile leopard, Huan Qi sprang up from his kneeling position.

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has clear and shining eyes, a confident aura and a well-built body. He was tall, muscular and has an imposing air. Even with the three pretty wives besides himself, he did not stray his eyes to look at them. Pleased, he inquired: “Huan Qi, what is your background and do you have any military experience?”

Without hesitation, Huan Qi replied: “I come from the North and spend my youth studying martial arts and military warfare. I was a Captain serving General Wang Jian in the north as he protected our borders.”

With a sincere expression, he awkwardly revealed: “It is General Wang Jian who sent me to represent the Border Guards in the hunting fair. General Wang advised me to seek out Commander Xiang should I ever get the chance to be promoted as Commander Xiang will be the right person who can groom me.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Based on Brother Huan’s talent, it will be hard to keep you from excelling.”

Huan Qi’s face darkened slightly and he continued: “There is something Commander Xiang must know. My ancestors are from the Quanrong tribe. Thus, regardless of my achievements, I have always been overlooked when it is promotion time. If not for General Wang’s support, I will still be a miserable sergeant. General Wang has the intention to promote me to become a Major but his recommendations are rejected by the military headquarters. Therefore, General Wang sent me here to try my luck and instructed me to work for Commander Xiang at all costs.”

Xiang Shaolong came to realise that racism exists even within the people of Qin. He was thrilled. If Wang Jian recognizes this man to be talented, there is surely some substance in him. Additionally, Wang Jian must have learnt about his situation from Big Brother Wu Zhuo and as a result, he sent this capable man to assist himself.

Now that his leg has been bandaged properly, he stood up and grabbed his shoulder, swearing: “Brother Huan can rest at ease. I will never have a different opinion about you because of your ancestry. As long as you work hard and stay loyal to the state, I will see that you get what you deserved. From today onwards, you will be my Assistant Commander and I will issue you your letter of appointment within these two days.”

Huan Qi was stunned at Xiang Shaolong’s generosity and gratefully kneeled down and kowtowed.

Jing Jun held him up and smiled to Xiang Shaolong: “The moment I saw Brother Huan, we hit it off very well. I already told him that Commander Xiang will take good care of anyone recommended by General Wang Jian.”

Xiang Shaolong officially state: “Little Jun should not speak like that. I have absolute trust in General Wang’s judgement and moreover, Brother Huan did perform well at the hunting fair. That is why I gave him a chance to showcase his talent.”

Jing Jun winked at Xiang Shaolong, asking: “What should be his duties over the next two days?”

Xiang Shaolong understood what he meant. Jing Jun was asking whether he can tell Huan Qi about Lord Gaoling and Lu Buwei's issues. After a short contemplation, he acknowledged that it is someone that Wang Jian sent to assist him and should be reliable. He hardened his heart and replied: "Since he is one of us, I see no reason to hide anything from him. Only when he has complete knowledge can he do his best."

Huan Qi is so touched that he nearly cried. Jing Jun happily dragged him to see Teng Yi.

Ji Yanran came to Xiang Shaolong's side and predicted: "If Yanran is not mistaken, another capable General is about to surface in Qin."

Different hunting groups led their hunting dogs to cross the wooden bridges over River Jing. They then spread out into the wide hunting grounds to begin the morning hunt.

Lu Buwei, Xu Xian, Wang He, Lu Gong, Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, Guan Zhongxie and other important officials are accompanying Xiao Pan on his hunt.

Zhu Ji is only interested in the first hunt.

Lord Changwen and Teng Yi are in charge of protecting the campsite while Jing Jun and Huan Qi went to spy on Lord Gaoling's rebel soldiers.

There is another hunting party made up of members of the royal family which includes Lord Gaoling and his escorts. Qin Qing, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters formed another group while Prince Dan and his men formed another group. They were spread out among the other groups on the hunting grounds.

Xiao Pan rode his horse towards a huge lake and was in great spirits.

Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie and Lord Changping followed him closely. Behind them are the rest of the officials.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Xiao Pan is slowly growing up to be a young man and assessed his extraordinary features and aura.

His most remarkable features are his two high and round cheekbones, making one feel subservient. It may be due to the numerous secrets that he is hiding that his eyes are becoming more and more mysterious looking. When he is looking straight at you, even Xiang Shaolong who is so familiar with him will feel his goose pimples standing. His lips are thick which does not make him handsome but his mouth is well-defined which gives people a sense of determination and resolution. As a result, his appearance is very different from other people and he does have a dominating aura around him.

As he continue to grow older, these attributes become more and more significant. Xiang Shaolong can no longer see any signs of the

childish Xiao Pan he saw back in Handan Palace.

This future Qin Shi Huang shares a common height but he has wide shoulders and his hands and feet are bigger than most people. When he moves, he carries an aura of might and invincibility. If there are any fortune tellers, they can easily tell that he is of noble birth.

At this point, there is a flock of water eagles that began to fly into the sky from the lakeside. Xiao Pan shot an arrow but only hit empty air. Xiao Pan laughed: “So many birds! Someone shoot them down.”

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in these aimless killings and he watched as the other men began to shoot arrow after arrow.

Qiang! Xiang Shaolong eardrums resonated with a loud sound. Beside him, Guan Zhongxie took out his iron bow and rushed in front of everyone, shooting two arrows in succession. However, the bow only rang out once, showing his incredible firing speed.

Over a hundred arrows flew through the air.

The water eagles cry out tragically and twenty odd birds fell down from the sky.

The escorts quickly released the hunting dogs to bring the birds back. The loud barking of the dogs shattered the tranquility of the plains.

Xiao Pan was ecstatic and rode towards the lakeside. Everyone has to follow him in his pursuit.

Xiao Pan finally stopped on a little hill that overlooks the entire lake.

As everyone stopped behind him, Lu Buwei rode up to his side and laughed: “The Crown Prince has good horsemanship!”

Prince Dan and his men arrived at the hill around the same time.

Xiao Pan smiled: “Thanks for your compliment. Look, our Qin has such beautiful scenery with large plains and abundant animals.”

He pointed to the west mountains and continued: “Can every one of you see the famous western waterfall? It falls down from a height of a few hundred feet down and resembles a brocade of white silk. I can imagine that when the water finally land on the rocks below, the water will splash with a tremendous impact and become thousands of shimmering water drops.”

Behind him, Xiang Shaolong glanced around the wilderness with interest. It is like a scene from a beautiful dream with the lake in front of them and the mountains in the background. The green vegetation and the mountains are stack in their natural layers, resembling a landscape painting. Although Xiao Pan is still a teenager, he is fully immersed in his role as the King of Qin. He is analyzing his territory with pride and joy.

Lu Gong came to the other side of Xiao Pan and described: “I often go there to hunt myself. When the waterfall finally reaches the bottom, it flows to the east and take a turn, running through two mountains and valleys. Finally, it will run in the southwest direction and form the west river. After another ten miles, it will merge with the Jing River. It is a spectacular sight to behold.”

Xiang Shaolong scanned everyone’s expression and saw that everyone was intoxicated in their emotions. Only Prince Dan is eyeing Xiao Pan with suspicions. He was shaken and thought about Jing Ke’s assassination. He secretly believed that this is the time when Prince Dan is beginning to harbour thoughts about assassinating Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan resolutely declared: “That shall be our goal for today. If I do not witness the splendour of the western waterfall personally, I will not be able to go to sleep tonight.”

Xu Xian smiled: “If this is the case, we must set off now. It will take us six hours to go there and come back.”

They were interrupted by the escorts and the hunting dogs who came back with the water eagles. In total, there were a total of twenty-seven birds that were shot down. The arrows are marked with names so everyone can tell who shot the most number of birds. There are two arrows that went through two eagles each. It is truly killing two birds with one arrow.

The birds are displayed on the floor for everyone’s assessment.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the two arrows that killed the four birds are similar. Shocked, he stared at Guan Zhongxie.

Everyone is starting to notice the two special arrows.

Xiao Pan was astounded: “May I know who it is that possessed such amazing archery skill?”

Guan Zhongxie leapt down his horse and kneeled down, reporting: “Crown Prince, please do not mind my lowly skill.”

Lu Gong and Xu Xian exchanged a look and they have a concerned expression on their faces.

It is already very challenging to fire two arrows at the same time. It takes even more skill to shoot down four eagles with only two arrows. Among the hundred odd flying eagles, one must aim both arrows concurrently so as to score two kills each. It is a feat that cannot be topped.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his whole body turning cold. If they happened to duel, he would be unable to avoid his powerful arrows. Looks like Guan Zhongxie is superior to Teng Yi in both arm strength and archery skill.

Xiao Pan tried to hide his unnatural expression and forced a smile: “Subject Guan’s archery skill is peerless. I want to reward you. What suggestions do the rest of you have?”

Lu Buwei will not let this chance slip by. He smiled: “If Crown Prince can reinstate him to his former position, it will be good enough.”

Xiao Pan had agreed to this matter earlier when Empress had spoken to him about it. She wanted to support Lu Buwei and curb his ambitions. Xiao Pan nodded: “From this moment on, Subject Guan will resume his former duties and assist me in protecting Xianyang City.”

Guan Zhongxie hurriedly kowtowed with thanks.

Xiao Pan pointed his horse whip to the western mountains and exclaimed: “Let’s race there!”

Leading the group of riders, he sped down the slope.

Short after noon time, Xiao Pan and his followers came back with their mission accomplished.

Back at the camp, Xiang Shaolong had some free time and went to find Li Si. He told Li Si about Huan Qi’s appointment and Li Si agreed wholeheartedly. Other than him, there is no one who knows how close Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong are.

Xiang Shaolong was amused.

When he came to this ancient world through the time machine, he did his best to locate Qin Shi Huang in Handan City so that he can gain his friendship and enjoy a life of luxury. After so many twists and turns, he became the one who ‘invented’ Qin Shi Huang. There is no other miracle bigger than this in the past or in the future.

Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi came up to him and were chirping non-stop like two little birds. They told him about the interesting stories during their own hunt and Xiang Shaolong praised them for their abilities. By now, Qin Qing, Ji Yanran and the Tian sisters have joined them.

While they were busy talking, the hunting groups are slowly returning back to camp.

At the main assembly ground, everyone is occupied with reporting their catch and inspecting the animals. Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi hurriedly joined in the fun.

Ji Yanran is very observant and told Xiang Shaolong: “Little Jun is back and is chatting with Lu Dan’er besides the assembly ground. Hubby, you can spend more time with Sister Fang and Zhi Zhi. I wish to take a nap back at our tent. When I wake up, let’s go for a shower in the river!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that she has a habit of taking afternoon naps and consented.

After Ji Yanran left with Qin Qing and the Tian sisters, Xiang

Shaolong jumped down his horse and instructed Wu Shu to bring his horse back to camp first. He finally saw Jing Jun with Lu Dan'er. Jing Jun appears to be saying some teasing words and Lu Dan'er is raining blows on him. Jing Jun turned around and allowed Lu Dan'er to hit his back. After a short while, her blows softened and nearby, the female warriors are laughing at them.

Xiang Shaolong is happy for them. "Commander Xiang!" Huan Qi came up to him.

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and smiled: "Brother Huan, why didn't you join Little Jun in having fun? Based on your talents, you should be highly regarded by the female warriors."

Huan Qi paid his respects and answered: "This is the time for me to contribute to my country and I am not interested in women or family planning. Hei! Commander Xiang can just call me Huan Qi."

Xiang Shaolong reckoned this the difference between him and Jing Jun. One of them is a dedicated worker while the other is all out to enjoy life. He smiled: "How young are you?" Huan Qi respectfully responded: "I am nineteen."

Xiang Shaolong decided: "You are only one year older than Little Jun. I shall call you Little Qi!" He led him away from the assembly ground towards a secluded spot, enquiring: "Any new discoveries today?"

Huan Qi detailed: "Assistant Commander Jing and I went deep into the mountains to spy on the enemy. The weather has been

good for the past few days and there is no fog. Thus, we can see everything very clearly. From what I observed, there is about ten thousand rebel soldiers but they are disunited and in disarray. Their formation is untidy; their banners are in a mess; they have tired looks on their faces; they dragged their feet wherever they go and their morale is very low. I only need one thousand elite soldiers to attack and overpower them.”

Xiang Shaolong was blown away: “How can Little Qi make so many conclusions with just half a day of spying?”

Like a different person altogether, Huan Qi explained: “Before a battle, it is important to observe the enemies’ activities from higher ground. From the small details, we can draw important conclusions about their strength and strategies. Lord Gaoling’s men may be hidden in the dense forests but we can still observe which areas of the forest are populated with birds and beasts and which areas are void of them. From there, we can gauge the size of their camp and the number of men they have. We can proceed to look at the ground for clues. From the rising dust, I am sure that they are cutting trees and accumulating rocks to be used to attack us later.”

The more he spoke, the more enthusiastic he became. Squatting on the floor, he used some stones to display the enemies’ formation. He was extremely detailed and left nothing out, showing his extraordinary memory and observation skills.

Xiang Shaolong was moved: “If I give you a group of two thousand elite soldiers, what will you do? You must remember that you can only attack them after they have made the first move.”

Huan Qi stood up and used his leg to destroy the stone formations on the ground. He seriously state: “Besides knowing the food supplies and strength of the enemy, the most important thing is the motivation behind their fighting spirit. If we manage to convince them that their fight is meaningless, we will defeat them without losing a single soldier. Now, our enemy is inconvenienced by the river so their communication is hindered. They are based in the uncomfortable wet areas of the forest where there are many thorny plants. I am confident that they are ill-prepared which caused the soldiers to be exhausted and their morale to be low. We can attack them from the river and on land simultaneously. Even if they manage to destroy the bridges, there is no loss to us. We can fortify ourselves along the river and remain undefeated.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but improve his opinion about him. Jing Jun may have other strengths which he cannot match but in terms of wisdom and military warfare, Jing Jun lags far behind him.

If these words come from Lu Gong or Xu Xian, it is to be expected. But Huan Qi is only nineteen and has such capabilities. There is only one word that can describe him: Genius.

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “Let me bring you to see someone. When you see him, you must tell him everything you told me earlier. It will benefit your career in the future.”

Huan Qi was astonished: “Who are you bringing me to see?”

Xiang Shaolong clapped his shoulder and pushed him towards the royal tents, laughing: “Of course to see the Crown Prince!”

Huan Qi trembled and halted. He lowered his head and muttered: “Why don’t I tell you my ideas and you can report them to the Crown Prince?”

Xiang Shaolong continued to nudge him forward and smiled: “That would be wrong as I don’t deserve the credit for your work. Stop hesitating. I like men who are easy-going.”

Huan Qi is so touched his eyes start to redden. He sobbed: “No wonder General Wang always say Commander Xiang is the most generous man and the number one hero of our Qin Empire. I will never forget your kindness.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “It is what you truly deserve. I am just the introducer. But you must remember that this round, we must make the Crown Prince show off his might in front of his people. We must not take any credit for ourselves. Understand?”

Huan Qi naturally understood and hurriedly nodded his head.

Book 14 Chapter 11 – The Special Elite Forces

Xiang Shaolong left Huan Qi in the royal tent with Xiao Pan and Li Si before he rushed back to the assembly ground to fetch his two alluring wives. He was too late and they had left already. When he was about to leave himself, Ying Ying appeared from the crowd and held onto his sleeve, dragging him to a spot near the river.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that her expression was forlorn and is certain that she is feeling terrible inside. Therefore, she did not exhibit her usual stubborn characteristics.

Ying Ying did not say a single word until they reached a little wood near the river. She released him from her grip and turned around with her back facing him, whining: “I know that you must despise me now and regard me as a wanton woman.”

Xiang Shaolong walked up to her and held her firm shoulders, turning her around slowly. Pressing her against a tree, he scanned her pretty face and saw large drops of tears flowing down her face. He smiled and use his sleeve to wipe her tears, coaxing: “Why would I despise you? Men can sleep around and so can women. Moreover, you are still a single girl. Didn’t you say that you are more capable than men in all areas? Why are you so despondent now?”

Ying Ying was in a daze: “You really forgive me?”

Xiang Shaolong casually shrugged his shoulders: “It is human nature to react to seduction. When you are emotional, anything

can happen. If you are really in love with Guan Zhongxie, I will give both of you my blessings and will not cause any trouble for you.”

These are his true and sincere thoughts. When he was still in the 21st Century, he knew many women who have multiple partners and he himself was one of their partners. Now, it is similar to the attitude of the Qin ladies so he need not take it too seriously. Although he did feel uncomfortable at the beginning, it is just a natural reaction. After some time, it did not really matter.

Some colour returned to Ying Ying’s face and she lowered her head, confessing: “Last night, I was only waiting for you. Somehow, he showed up and I succumbed to his seduction. I am really sorry. You are really willing to forgive me?”

If he can choose, Xiang Shaolong would not want to get involved in any new relationships. But to counter Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie, he must win Ying Ying’s heart no matter what happens. Moreover, he is not bothered about her personal life. Leaning forward and smelling her fragrance, he assured: “I still prefer your stubborn attitude. That is the real you.”

Ying Ying sighed: “But I still feel that I committed a wrongdoing. After all, I get to know you first. When I saw you in the market fighting off the bullies, I just cannot forget you. But you are so proud and indifferent! Ai! What should I do? If he comes to look for me again, I am afraid I cannot resist him. Can you help me?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. He knew that Guan Zhongxie has achieved his goal. But making love to Ying Ying first, he has

secured an irreplaceable place in her heart that makes it hard for her to resist him. If Ying Ying becomes pregnant, she will have to marry him. What will be the consequences if that happened?

The first to suffer will be the Lord Changping Brothers. Xiao Pan will be suspicious of them and their official posts will also be in peril.

The only way out is to satisfy Ying Ying in a love relationship or marry her officially. Then, Guan Zhongxie will be unable to interfere with her anymore.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Has Miss Ying tried bush games?”

Ying Ying was stunned: “What are bush games?”

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward to her ear and softly whispered: “That means making love in the wild.”

Ying Ying’s face became as red as a beetroot and she lowered her head and shook it furiously.

Xiang Shaolong intentionally teased her: “When you shake your head, does it mean that you have not tried it or is not willing to try it?”

Like an exploding volcano, Ying Ying leapt into his bosom and embraced his neck smiling sweetly: “I want to try but I can’t. My period is here.”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “It is all right as this is considered the safety window.”

Ying Ying was taken aback: “What is a safety window?”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for spouting nonsense. Without explaining himself, he hugged her well-proportioned body and kissed her passionately for some time before releasing her. With her face and ears completely red from his teasing, Ying Ying returned back to the campsite.

When Ji Yanran woke up, she joined Wu Tingfang and the other ladies as they happily accompanied Xiang Shaolong out of the camp. They head to a nearby valley where there is a clear stream for them to take a bath. The Eighteen Guardians stood guard to prevent outsiders from peeping at them.

The ladies are not totally naked but are dressed in their undergarments and shorts. Xiang Shaolong is highly aroused when he saw all the exposed flesh.

The water is very clear and unique rock formations lined the sides of the stream. Among the rock formations are the tangled roots of wild trees that resembled a bonsai plant. At sunset, the golden rays of the sun shone through the leaves and reflected off the water in a stunning display. It is simply heaven on earth.

Listening to the girls squealing and playing, Xiang Shaolong rested on a piece of rock and felt that he was in paradise.

Ji Yanran came to his side and squeezed into his bosom, asking: “When Hubby is going to assault Tian Dan, will you bring me along? Zhi Zhi already indicates that she must come along as this concern her family vengeance.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled Zhao Qian’s death and hesitated: “Is Tingfang coming along too?”

Ji Yanran replied: “Nope. She will stay behind to take care of Bao’er. Little (Tian)Zhen and Little (Tian) Feng will stay behind too.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and kissed her mouth, smiling: “So this has already been decided. How can I bear to reject your requests?”

Ji Yanran did not expect him to be so agreeable. To Zhao Zhi, she exclaimed: “Zhi Zhi, Hubby has given his consent.”

Zhao Zhi shouted with joy and swam up to him, presenting him with a passionate kiss.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Shan Rou. If she knows that they are going to attack her sworn enemy, she will be delighted. But where in the world is she?

At the evening banquet, Teng Yi finally came back and reported that Pu Bu and You Zhi (Prince Dan’s military advisor) have left

this morning to meet up with Xu Yi Luan. They are escorted by over a hundred experts from the Wu Family Elite Army.

Xiang Shaolong updated Teng Yi about Huan Qi's analysis of Lord Gaoling's rebel troops and added: "It seems like Lord Gaoling is truly useless. We will only need two thousand Cavalry soldiers and defeat him soundly. The palace guards will deal with Lord Gaoling and his escorts. When the rebellion is suppressed, Lu Buwei will not be able to reap any benefits. For the time being, let's not use our Elite Army yet or Lu Buwei will learn about its strengths."

Teng Yi suggested: "If that is the case, why don't I lead them to chase after Tian Dan first? It is better if I can get the official approval from the Crown Prince. Otherwise, there may be some misunderstandings with the border guards. Third Brother, the moment you can leave Xianyang City, you must join us as quickly as possible."

Xiang Shaolong agreed: "We shall act as planned. Second Brother has to travel through the night and must take care." Teng Yi assured: "I am someone who never underestimates my opponent. You can put your mind at ease."

They went to find Jing Jun and discussed things further before Xiang Shaolong rushed to attend the royal banquet.

As he climbed the slope leading to the Royal tents, he met some palace guards who are looking for him as ordered by Xiao Pan. He hastily entered the main royal tent. Xiao Pan is sitting alone beside a table and analyzing a map on the table.

When he caught sight of Xiang Shaolong, he gestured: “There is no one else. Master, please have a seat.”

Recently, it is quite rare for them to meet up alone. Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart warming up. Sitting beside him, he remarked: “I am so happy to see you becoming a capable and useful man.”

Xiao Pan praised: “Master is an excellent judge of character. First, there is Li Si, then Wang Jian, followed by Huan Qi. Huan Qi is someone we can definitely groom.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Don’t forget Lao Ai.” Both men exchanged a glance and started laughing.

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Why did Crown Prince suddenly mention Wang Jian?”

Xiao Pan explained: “Earlier, I questioned Huan Qi about Wang Jian’s situation and learnt that Wang Jian has conquered large amounts of territories towards the west. Now, the terrified Xiong Nus are all hiding in their rat holes. He even rebuilt the Great Wall and accomplished many other feats. Unfortunately, his contributions have gone unreported because of Lu Buwei. He requested a transfer back to Xianyang City many times but was rejected by Lu Buwei. Hng! This man is a threat to me as long as he is alive.”

Xiang Shaolong advised: “Most importantly, Crown Prince must

bear with him for the time being. If you oppose him now, you may stand to lose out in the end. Even if we managed to eliminate him, there will be other rebels. The best plan is to wait for him to eliminate all your opponents and then we will eliminate him for good.”

Xiao Pan frowned: “The moment he saw Lao Ai being promoted to be the Inner Custodian, he is out to ridicule him. He is an ambitious man and I am concerned that it will be hard to control him in the future. As he is on good terms with Empress, there are many officials that have pledged their loyalty to him.”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “Why don’t Crown Prince set up a special elite force that reports directly and only to you. Using training as an excuse, you can send them to stand guard at a place near Xianyang City. If there is any trouble, Crown Prince can easily command them back to the city and quash your enemies.”

Xiao Pan was revitalized: “You are right. As Master has said, governing authority comes after military might. But I only trust you and you are busy with the City defences. Ai, but this is the best plan. I am sure that there are Lu Buwei’s spies among the Cavalry and Infantry armies. In the future, there will be Lao Ai’s spies too. Only soldiers recruited outside Xianyang City can be trusted. By then, I will not be afraid of Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Why don’t we use Huan Qi and get Wang Ben to assist him. This is the safest plan.” Xiao Pan was surprised: “Wang Ben is only seventeen. Isn’t he too young?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “Because Huan Qi and Wang Ben are

young, they are more courageous and loyal. They are fearless and Lu Buwei is nothing to them. Now, we enjoy the support of Xu Xian and Lu Gong. Using the rebellion as an excuse, we will create this special elite force. Then, Crown Prince can summon Wang Jian back to the capital and replace the aging Meng Ao and Wang Ci. When the time is ripe, they can attack Lu Buwei. After Lu Buwei has been disposed of, full military control lies in your hands and everyone will have to submit to you.”

He had a good laugh and knowingly added: “You have Li Si to be your advisor and three powerful generals Wang Jian, Wang Ben and Huan Qi. The world will be yours.”

Curious, Xiao Pan asked: “Why didn’t Master mention about himself?”

Xiang Shaolong stretched out his hand and patted his shoulder lightly: “After your mother’s death and Princess Qian’s tragedy, I have lost my fighting spirit. Now, I am staying put to help you. When you are fully in control of Qin, I will leave here for the northern plains and live the rest of my life in peace.”

Xiao Pan trembled uncontrollably: “Master, how can you leave me?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled helplessly and whispered: “I represent your past. It is only when I am gone can you truly forget your identity as Xiao Pan and conquer the world, becoming the first Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang. If you respect me, you must accept this piece of advice.”

Dumbfounded, Xiao Pan stared at him for a while and repeated ‘Qin Shi Huang’ twice. Amazed, he asked: “Why are Master’s casual words so full of deep meanings?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely swore: “Trust me. In the future, the world will belong to you.”

Xiao Pan thought over his words and implored: “Is Master going to pursue Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong recollected that Teng Yi is leaving tonight and quickly updated him. Lord Changping came by to escort Xiao Pan as it is time for the banquet.

Tonight, Xiang Shaolong is more comfortable and natural compared to last night. The two Lord Changping brothers are sharing his table and Li Si is on his other side. He is seated five tables to the left of Xiao Pan.

Ji Yanran and his wives were absent from the banquet. If not for Zhu Ji’s pleading, the reclusive Ji Yanran would not have attended the banquets.

Qin Qing is even more introvert. In fact, this is the first year she took part in the hunting fair. Did she join the hunting fair to support Ji Yanran, Xiao Pan or Xiang Shaolong?

Prince Dan is the only foreign guest and was seated on the first

seat to Xiao Pan's right. Following his table is Lu Buwei's and Lord Gaoling's table.

Lord Gaoling is quite tall and his face is slightly pale. He gives people the impression that he is a playboy and his eyes are pretty dull. With him are two middle-aged men in official robes. From his observation, Xiang Shaolong deduced that they are members of the royal family.

Occasionally, Lu Buwei will speak to Guan Zhongxie who is seated beside him. Surprisingly, Lu Niang Rong is present and she will peep at him intermittently.

Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan are seated behind them with two other advisor guests. Xiang Shaolong has seen them before but could not remember their names.

The number of guests was about the same as last night. Lu Dan'er, Ying Ying and the female warriors occupied four tables in a far corner. With this arrangement, it shows that the Qin court values the female warriors as well as honour the prestigious families of Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er.

Without the two top beauties Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, the atmosphere is less lively.

The barbequed meat and wine was served by the palace guards to each table and the air is filled with the aroma of the piping hot food.

To prevent anyone from adding poison to the food, the palace guards paid special attention to the cooking.

Once in a while, Zhu Ji will talk to Xiao Pan. She may be taking this opportunity to repair their strained relationship.

Due to the noisy chatting and sounds of cutlery clattering, Li Si leaned to Xiang Shaolong's ear and whispered: "The Crown Prince is very satisfied with Huan Qi. This man is well-versed in military warfare and is an extraordinary man. Moreover, he is only at a tender age. With proper grooming, he will be another capable general."

Xiang Shaolong is greatly comforted. With Wang Jian, Ji Yanran and Li Si's praising Huan Qi, this man will surely rise to the occasion.

This is part of his long term plan to counter Lu Buwei. By grooming talented Qin natives, it is easy for the Qin military to accept them and they will form a powerful force to counter Lu Buwei and Lao Ai in the future and will also help to secure Xiao Pan as the rightful King of Qin.

At this point in time, Prince Dan toasted Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. Everyone else followed suit.

When Xiang Shaolong put down his wine cup, Lord Changping turned to him and reported: "The Crown Prince has told us about the rebellion. Let's work together and do a good job. You will take care of the external threats while we take care of the internal

threats. We will eliminate every one of them.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “You are mistaken. The Crown Prince is charge of both internal and external threats. We are only following his orders.”

Lord Changping was stunned: “The Crown Prince is barely fifteen, I...”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Aren’t you aware that the Crown Prince is a natural born talent in terms of warfare and governance? Don’t tell me you need the Crown Prince to remind you personally?”

Lord Changping understood what he meant and corrected: “Hey, you are right. Come. Have another drink.”

Lord Changwen leaned over: “Last night, Brother Xiang mentioned that he has lost to Guan Zhongxie. What really happened?”

Lord Changping noted that it is something that concerns Ying Ying and listened with a serious expression.

Xiang Shaolong is willing to sacrifice himself for these two friends. Moreover, Ying Ying is considered a rare beauty. He frankly replied: “Just now, I had a talk with your sister. We will forget about the past but the future is unpredictable. This is because your sister does have feelings for Guan Zhongxie and I

have to leave Xianyang City for a period of time after the hunting fair. No one can tell what will happen during this period of time.”

Lord Changping concluded: “Why don’t the two of you get married officially? If Guan Zhongxie still dares to harass Ying Ying, we have the right to interfere.”

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart: “If Ying Ying is agreeable, we shall act as you wished.”

The two brothers are overjoyed and touched at the same time, understanding that Xiang Shaolong is also doing this for their sake.

Lord Changwen cannot sit still anymore and left immediately to look for Ying Ying.

Lu Buwei suddenly toasted Prince Dan and asked: “I heard that the swordplay of Yan is exquisite and focused mainly on soft stances. I wonder if you can demonstrate a few stances for our viewing pleasure.”

Everyone quietened down and everyone is now staring at Prince Dan.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed. His secret meetings with Prince Dan have been leaked to Lu Buwei.

Now, he is trying to ridicule the people of Yan and broadcast his own talents.

If he is forced to act, he will walk straight into their trap.

Because whoever that can defeat Xiang Shaolong now will be crowned the number one swordsman of Qin.

Book 14 Chapter 12 – A Chaotic Banquet

Seated between Physician Leng Ting and General Xu Yi Ze, Prince Dan did not show any signs of surprise and smiled: “I heard Mister Guan Zhongxie from your esteemed residence has defeated the experts of Qi. I wonder if he will show us some of his skills.”

Prince Dan, the successor to the Yan throne, is used to such challenges and difficulties. He knew that he cannot shy away from dueling. Otherwise, it may be a sign of cowardice and in this foreign state of Qin, he must fight or Qin may use this as an excuse to attack Yan. Success and failures are common in fighting. Even if he loses, he will be disgraced but it is something that is inevitable. However, Prince Dan intentionally singled out Guan Zhongxie to counter Lu Buwei. If Lu Buwei sent Guan Zhongxie out, it shows that Prince Dan has good foresight. If Lu Buwei did not send Guan Zhongxie out, he can only send Lu Chan as Lao Ai has left him and Zhou Zihen was defeated by Jing Jun last night. Prince Dan has seen Lu Chan’s sword skills and can choose a fighter from his team to counter his weak points. It is only two simple sentences but it has highlighted the intelligence of Prince Dan.

Lu Buwei did not expect Prince Dan to counter him so effectively and began laughing. He winked at Guan Zhongxie and Guan Zhongxie acknowledged his order with another laugh and stepped out to an open area beside the banquet grounds. He paid his respects to Prince Dan: “I am flattered by your high opinion of my lowly skills. Here I am and will Prince please send your expert and let us learn from each other.”

Now, it is Prince Dan’s turn to be agonized. Lu Buwei carried out a chain attack and now, it seems like Lu Buwei has no intention to

send Guan Zhongxie but did so to appease Prince Dan. Everyone was excited at the martial arts competition as well as the chance to ridicule the people of Yan and cheered loudly. After all, Guan Zhongxie's swordsmanship is one of the best in Xianyang City and it is possible that he is even better than Xiang Shaolong. With his amazing archery that killed four birds with two arrows, he is now as respected as Xiang Shaolong who threw the five flying needles. But as most people have never seen him fight, everyone is waiting eagerly in anticipation. The crowd is cheering loudly and the mood is extremely lively. Before he even start fighting, Guan Zhongxie has impressed the crowd with his muscular frame, solid built and imposing air.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but glanced over to the female warriors. Every one of them including Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er was whispering at each other and has an intoxicated expression on their faces. He could not help but trembled strongly. If Guan Zhongxie is allowed to show off his might, the two fickle ladies Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er may surrender to his seduction. Now that his injury is more or less healed, should he enter the fighting ring? If he lost, the consequences will be disastrous. But if he did not fight because he was afraid of losing, it will prick his conscience and affect his self-confidence. As he was thinking furiously, Prince Dan pretended to be pleased and sent a fighter from the back seat. This man announced his name to be Yan Du. Everyone was alarmed as this man is a reputable fighter too.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but asked Lord Changping about Yan Du. Lord Changping happily explained: "This man is one of the top three fighters of Yan. We have no idea that he came to Xianyang City with Prince Dan. It is rumoured that his sword speed is as fast as lightning and can cut open swallows that are flying in mid air. That is how good he is."

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at Yan Du. Yan Du is a tall and thin man with a lump on each side of his forehead. His eyes are brimming with energy and he is around the age of twenty five. He is not considered a handsome man but has an extraordinary air around him. The most remarkable thing about him is that he is clothed fully in yellow. With a crooked nose like an eagle, he radiates calmness. However, Guan Zhongxie is even more eye-catching than him. In a snow white outfit, his head is tied neatly in a red bun and is half a head taller than the tall Yan Du. If Yan Du is a well-prepared fighter, Guan Zhongxie is casual-looking fighter. On his arrogant face is an irritating smile that shows his despise for everyone. No wonder Ying Ying may be in love with Xiang Shaolong but still succumbed to his advances. Both men paid their respects to Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji, asking permission to begin their fight.

Xiao Pan may not realise that this duel is ultimately aimed to ruin Xiang Shaolong's reputation but he did not want Guan Zhongxie to have any chance to show off his skills. But with Zhu Ji supporting at the side, he helplessly consented: "The duel is a friendly match and shall cease when a winner has been determined. I do not want to see any bloodshed or deaths tonight."

Both men kneeled down and accepted his order. However, everyone knows that it is a real duel with real weapons being used. It is really hard to avoid injuring the opponent.

Some brought out two armour suits from the crowd and Guan Zhongxie smiled: "I do not need the armour. Brother Yan, please help yourself."

Yan Du had no choice but to reject the armour too as it will affect his agility. Before they drew their swords, both men stood still under the illumination of the torches. Their killing aura immediately flooded the area as everyone held their breaths in silence so as not to affect their concentration.

Jiang! Yan Du drew his sword first and displayed a magnificent pose with the sword across his chest. True experts like Xiang Shaolong could tell that he is actually succumbing to Guan Zhongxie's pressure and needed to draw his sword and stabilised himself. It is something that only experts can sense. Just like during a battle, an experienced General can predict the victory based on the morale and the determination of the soldiers.

Guan Zhongxie laughed loudly and his left arm patted the sword that was hanging around his right waist. He solemnly state: "My sword is named Longstrike and it is forged by the blacksmiths of Yue. The sword is five feet and four inches long, which makes it one foot longer than most swords. Brother Yan must not neglect its length."

Jiang! Longstrike was drawn out by his right hand in a flash. While everyone is dazzled by the stunning brilliance of the flashing sword, Guan Zhongxie stepped forward and sent his sword towards Yan Du. Xiang Shaolong was reminded about something when he saw Guan Zhongxie patting his sword with his left hand. He summoned the Guardians and instructed them to retrieve his Mohist Sword.

Yan Du's sword flew out and clashed heavily with Guan

Zhongxie's sword. DANG! Both men withdrew their sword and retreated a few steps, eyeing each other with caution.

Everyone was still holding their breaths. The first strike is both men testing each other's skills. The real show is yet to come. Xiang Shaolong noticed Yan Du's hand is shaking slightly and guessed that his arm strength is much weaker than Guan Zhongxie. Yan Du may have a very good martial arts foundation but unfortunately, his opponent is Guan Zhongxie.

Glowing with confidence, Guan Zhongxie let out a cold snort and sent another strike towards Yan Du. Although the attack is similar to the one before, the onlookers can sense that it is an earth-shattering attack that will be quite impossible to defend no matter who you are. Yan Du roared and his sword flicked out from the side, drawing an arc before clashing with Longstrike with a loud KENG! Despite making a later move, his sword hit first and did not disgrace the reputation of Yan swordplay. Even so, he was shaken and had to take a small step back. Guan Zhongxie was about to press on with another attack when Yan Du roared again and took three steps back. In his hands, his sword drew circles in the air which reflected the torches. Now his sword appears to be on fire. It is an amazing swordplay and everyone finally broke the silence and exploded in loud cheering.

Guan Zhongxie did not expect his swordplay to be so exquisite and it prevented him from advancing further. Summoning his heroic courage, he let out a long roar and withdrew his sword. He swing it strongly forward like a trail of rainbow and the sword rung loudly as it sliced through the air. His pose is awe-inspiring and exudes a godly aura and a sense of invincibility. The feeling is so intense that even Yan Du is affected and his battle strength

dropped by twenty percent. The two weapons clashed in a blink of an eye and they exchanged several strokes spontaneously. Like a bolt from the blue, both men suddenly retreated at the speed of light. As no one can see their earlier fight very clearly, it is still a mystery who the winner is.

Jiang! Guan Zhongxie sheathed his sword. Despite both his eyes still focusing on his opponent, his sword accurately entered the tiny gap of his sheathe like a poisonous snake with eyes. Everyone was shocked at his gesture while the female warriors are cheering at the top of their voices.

Yan Du's sword is still aimed at Guan Zhongxie but his face has turned completely white and there are large drops of perspiration on his forehead. He shook and lowered his sword on the floor, leaning against it like a walking stick. It seems like he has over exerted himself. On his forehead, there is a horizontal sword wound. It is only a surface wound as Guan Zhongxie has been merciful. However, such a prominent injury and resulting scar will only constantly remind Yan Du and the people around him that he was once defeated by this heartless man.

Guan Zhongxie cupped his hands: "Thanks for allowing me to win."

Someone came out from the crowd and helped a furious Yan Du out. In the midst of all the cheering, Guan Zhongxie paid his respects to Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. Prince Dan and Leng Ting maintained a calm expression but Xu Yi Ze and the other men were incensed at Guan Zhongxie's offending injury.

Lu Buwei laughed loudly: “Guan Zhongxie, you disobeyed the Crown Prince’s order and blood is seen. I punish you with this cup of wine.”

By now, even Prince Dan and Leng Ting have an ugly expression on their faces as Lu Buwei has gone too far with this insolent remark.

Sitting at Lu Buwei’s table, Cai Ze exclaimed: “Zhongxie’s swordsmanship had aroused our interest. I wonder if Assistant Commander Jing is around. I would love to see him pitting his skills against Zhongxie.”

Guan Zhongxie received his cup of wine from Lu Buwei and toasted in the direction of Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and the crowd. Everyone in the crowd raised their wine cups and toasted to him in return. Xiang Shaolong is more sure than ever that Lu Buwei is out to get him. He guessed that Lu Buwei believes that Xiao Pan holds him in high regard because he is a national hero. Thus, before he ‘dies’, Lu Buwei wants to disgrace Xiang Shaolong in public and make Xiao Pan shift his hero-worship to Guan Zhongxie instead.

With Cai Ze’s comment, it is hard for him to remain silent. He plainly state: “Assistant Commander is attending to some duties and is not present at the banquet. I am sorry for disappointing Official Cai.”

Cai Ze is well-prepared for his answer and continued his digging: “Last night, there is also a man named Huan Qi who won three consecutive fights. Let’s have a taste of his skills again!”

Lu Buwei's supporters begin to cheer supportively at his suggestion. Obviously, they are trying to instigate a fight between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie.

Lord Changping sensed that something is amiss. He whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ears: "They are trying to embarrass you! Hng!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that this fight is inevitable. There is no way he will let Huan Qi fight Guan Zhongxie. If Huan Qi is killed or heavily injured by Guan Zhongxie, he would have let Wang Jian down and Xiao Pan's dream of a special elite force will be dashed. Even if Huan Qi did not suffer any injuries, his newly minted reputation will be destroyed. He glanced quickly at the female warriors and saw that every one of them including Ying Ying are totally mesmerized by Guan Zhongxie. If he did not fight now, Ying Ying will be lost to Guan Zhongxie and Jing Jun will lose Lu Dan'er too. Moreover, if he came up with another excuse that Huan Qi is away for work, Lu Buwei's men will spread rumours that he, Xiang Shaolong, is afraid of Guan Zhongxie. Finally, he looked at Xiao Pan. Xiao Pan is looking back at him with a hopeful expression.

Rejuvenated, Xiang Shaolong let out a long laugh. He stood up and casually said: "Since Official Guan is so enthusiastic, let me have some fun with you!"

The crowd was completely silent for a split second before erupting into loud clapping and cheering.

Guan Zhongxie smiled: “Official Xiang’s leg is injured and should not fight. If the wound reopened, I will feel guilty.”

Zhu Ji interrupted: “Shaolong should not force yourself!”

Xiang Shaolong unbuckled Bloodwave and handed it to Wu Shu behind him. He received the Mohist Sword and felt his fighting spirit rising. He thought that since he will have to fight him sooner or later, it might as well be tonight. He smiled: “If Official Guan can make my wound reopen, I will surrender the fight to you!”

The crowd saw that his words are full of dominating spirit and clapped loudly for him, adding to the liveliness of the situation. Xiang Shaolong exchanged a knowing glance at Prince Dan and Leng Ting before he walked to the centre of the fighting arena. Standing side by side with Guan Zhongxie, they paid their respects to Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan has full confidence in Xiang Shaolong’s amazing swordplay. Pleased, he advised both of them: “Weapons are blind, please fight with caution.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that Xiao Pan wanted him to kill Guan Zhongxie. Inspired, he thought of a winning strategy. Guan Zhongxie believed that he will be dying tomorrow and will not sacrifice his own life to defeat him. Based on this point, he is at a serious disadvantage. Another benefit is that he has seen Guan Zhongxie fight but Guan Zhongxie has no idea about his own swordplay but only managed to hear it from other people’s experiences. If he demonstrated his full Mohist swordplay, he is confident of giving Guan Zhongxie a run for his money. Thinking

about these points, he formulated a winning plan.

Both men stood apart from each other. As the crowd looked on, they stared at each other's eyes and thus, the ultimate battle has begun! By now, there are many onlookers who have gathered around when they heard about the dueling. Now, the whole place is extremely packed. When Wu Shu went back to retrieve the Mohist Sword, Ji Yanran and the girls were alarmed and hurriedly rushed over. Now, they managed to squeeze themselves at Lord Changping's table. Qin Qing is here as well and joined their table. Everyone is in a great mood. Zhu Ji is worried that Guan Zhongxie will injure Xiang Shaolong and her expression is grave. She nearly wanted to leave as she could not bear to see the fight.

Guan Zhongxie humbly state: "Being able to fight with Official Xiang is one of the highlights of my life."

Xiang Shaolong coldly replied: "I wonder if Official Guan will use his best skill today – the Left Hand Swordplay?"

The moment he said this, the crowd went: "Wah..."

Nobody expected that in all his past fights, Guan Zhongxie had been concealing his true ability.

For the first time ever, Guan Zhongxie's face changed colour and he dryly smiled: "Official Xiang is truly observant."

This is the moment Xiang Shaolong has been waiting for. The

Mohist Sword leaning on his shoulder sprang into the air and he advanced forward quickly. Using the heavy weight of the Mohist sword, he attacked Guan Zhongxie face on.

Jiang! Indeed, Guan Zhongxie pulled out his sword using his left arm and adopted the horse stance. As quick as lightning, he blocked the Mohist sword. Instead of following up with another attack, Xiang Shaolong withdrew and adopted one of the three Mozi killing stances: Defending Attack. The wooden sword was flying everywhere and Guan Zhongxie could not decipher if it is an attacking stance or a defending stance. Moreover, he was distracted by Xiang Shaolong earlier and did not know how to counter him. Reluctantly, he took two steps back to recompose himself. Everyone saw that Xiang Shaolong performed a miraculous first attack befitting his reputation and broke out into loud cheers.

Xiang Shaolong entered the calm state of Mohist meditation and abandoned all his emotions, including the fear of defeat, fear of death, etc. His mind is completely clear and every single movement made by Guan Zhongxie cannot escape his eyes. Everyone saw that both are awe-inspiring warriors and resembled heavenly generals and could not help but feel even more excited than before. It is the first time Ying Ying and the female warriors witnessed Xiang Shaolong's fascinating skills and were completely swept away. For the moment, they did not know who to cheer for.

Guan Zhongxie can detect the increasing confidence and fighting power of Xiang Shaolong. The corner of his mouth curled in a smile and he coldly snorted before he sent his sword towards Xiang Shaolong. From this attack, everyone can tell that his left hand is indeed superior to his right hand. His head, arm, waist and feet

were in perfect coordination. Although it is only his left arm holding the sword, it felt like his whole body is part of the attack. It is a startling move that sends shivers down everyone's spine. It is an incredibly fast attack but it looks slow at the same time. Everyone can see his sword clearly and even can predict where it will hit. Even so, the attack is so powerful that it seems to be unavoidable. Such a unique move that is both fast and slow is the pinnacle of swordplay.

While everyone is worried for Xiang Shaolong, Xiang Shaolong maintained his calm expression and used his left hand to hold his sword instead. In a perfect counterattack, the heavy Mohist Sword landed squarely three inches away from the tip of Guan Zhongxie's sword. Xiang Shaolong is truly formidable. Using the heavy wooden sword, he has nullified Guan Zhongxie's stronger arm strength. At the same time, the blow hit the weakest point of Guan Zhongxie's sword and deflected it away.

Never in his wildest dreams would Guan Zhongxie expect Xiang Shaolong to use his left hand. All his earlier strategies have gone to waste. He was also alarmed at the heavy wooden sword's attacking power. Xiang Shaolong consecutively attacked him three times but Guan Zhongxie did not take a single step back but defend himself well. Using his strength and fast reflexes, he met each of Xiang Shaolong's heavy blows head on. Everyone was intoxicated by their grandeur and madly cheered for both of them.

Every time their weapons clashed, a loud sound was made. After the three heavy blows, Xiang Shaolong followed up with another seven blows. Before the crowd suffocated under the aura of his pressing attacks, the two men separated and stared at each other fiercely. Xiang Shaolong needed to catch his breath while Guan

Zhongxie needed to recover from the fierce attacks and did not dare to retaliate.

Xiang Shaolong is full of admiration. He crossed swords with Xiao Weimou before and often sparred with Teng Yi who has better arm strength than himself. Thus, he is familiar when dealing with people like Guan Zhongxie. In his ten attacks, he incorporated elements of biology, parabolic and rotation theory but Guan Zhongxie still managed to fend him off without taking a step backwards. Thus, Guan Zhongxie's defending skills are watertight and have reached an extremely high level. In addition, he attacked Guan Zhongxie when he is in a disadvantaged position but is unable to overcome him. Based on this point, he knows that he cannot defeat him. But this is normal under ordinary circumstances. Ultimately, fights are normally won on psychology factors and strategy which Xiang Shaolong happened to be an expert on both subjects.

Guan Zhongxie is horrified. Since the day he learnt sword-fighting, he has always focused on sword attacks. For the past ten clashes, he is painfully defending himself. This is something that he has never encountered all his life. The crowd became silent as everyone anticipated their second bout. Guan Zhongxie composed himself earlier that Xiang Shaolong and immediately sent his sword flying towards Xiang Shaolong. His sword swung up from below, aiming at Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Holding his sword horizontally across him, a steady Xiang Shaolong let out a long howl and ignored the incoming sword. He slanted his body to one side and sent his own sword towards Guan Zhongxie's forehead. Everyone was shocked but Xiang Shaolong knew better. He has yet to catch his breath from their earlier

exchange. If he insisted on defending himself, he will be forced to retreat. When that happens, Guan Zhongxie can follow up with more attacks and sooner or later, he will succumb to his stronger arm strength. But with his unorthodox move, he has avoided the attack partially and Guan Zhongxie will need some time to change the direction of his attack. It is a trick to stall for time. In the end, he may be heavily injured but his heavy Mohist sword will land on Guan Zhongxie's forehead and kill him instantly.

This is the first time in his life Guan Zhongxie is fighting a man who is willing to sacrifice his own life to win. As Xiang Shaolong expected, Guan Zhongxie will not sacrifice himself and frantically withdrew his sword to deflect his blow. DANG! A loud sound resonated throughout the area. Xiang Shaolong has used up every single bit of strength in his body in this attack. Coupled with the heavy wooden sword, Guan Zhongxie was badly shaken and could not hold back any more. He finally took a step back.

Xiang Shaolong will not let this golden opportunity slip by. He used the most powerful Mozi Killing Stance: Attacking and Defending at the same time. His sword aura became more powerful and his attacks are full of intricate changes. Like waves after waves of the majestic river, he assaulted Guan Zhongxie relentlessly. Guan Zhongxie saw that his moves are out of the ordinary and let out a long howl, defending himself from all his attacks. Every onlooker from Xiao Pan to the palace guards were shouting out their cheers and it was an emotional scene.

Xiang Shaolong's killing aura grew and he forgot all about the Mohist swordplay. He simply attacked Guan Zhongxie whenever there is an opening and his moves are unpredictable. Like a pouncing beast, he was full of energy, fast and every single attack

he made is vicious and out to take Guan Zhongxie's life. Against his own wishes, Guan Zhongxie is forced to retreat. When he took the seventh step back, Xiang Shaolong's attack became weaker and Guan Zhongxie managed to turn the tables around using a special move and blocked Xiang Shaolong's sword. After Xiang Shaolong attacked him one more time, he retreated and leisurely put his wooden sword on his shoulder. Guan Zhongxie sighed with relief and dared not retaliate. Again, the two men stared at each other fiercely.

With a shocked expression on his face, Lu Buwei stood up and shouted: "Stop!"

Everyone turned and looked at him.

end of Book 14

Book 15 Chapter 01 – Clash Of The Titans

Before Lu Buwei could say anything else, Xiang Shaolong interrupted with a laugh: “That was a good fight, isn’t it? If Premier Mentor wanted Official Guan and me to stop fighting, I am afraid I will not agree to it. Is there anyone in the crowd that want this fight to end like this?”

The whole crowd erupted in loud cheers and supported Xiang Shaolong’s decision to extend the fight.

With the shouting escalating to an unimaginable volume, Lu Buwei’s voice is totally drowned out.

Lu Buwei did not expect Xiang Shaolong to interrupt him. Obviously, he is out to kill Guan Zhongxie. He was angered but powerless to intervene. After all, he was the one who initiated the whole thing and forced Xiang Shaolong’s hand. He did not anticipate Xiang Shaolong to put up such a good fight.

Even Guan Zhongxie is at a serious disadvantage.

What shocked him the most is Xiang Shaolong’s desperate fighting method. He is willing to sacrifice his own life to have Guan Zhongxie killed.

Lu Buwei is sure that Xiang Shaolong will die tomorrow. Why should he allow Guan Zhongxie to accompany him in death?

He was infuriated at Xiang Shaolong's suggestion. Now, no matter what he says, there is no way he can prevent the fight from continuing. Otherwise, others will think that he is afraid of Guan Zhongxie losing to Xiang Shaolong. This will cause Guan Zhongxie's reputation to take a beating.

Guan Zhongxie understood Lu Buwei's intention. But in the present circumstances, he must never back down or he will forever lose the chance to challenge Xiang Shaolong to a duel. With a loud cough, he paid his respects to Lu Buwei.

Everyone knew that he has something to say and quietened down. Now, Guan Zhongxie has everyone's attention.

With a solemn expression, Guan Zhongxie coolly state: "I understand the good intention of Premier Mentor. Official Xiang and I will not harm each other as this is only a friendly match. I hope to continue our unresolved battle too."

Everyone exploded into loud cheers, knowing that the show will go on.

Xiang Shaolong propped up his sword with a smile. He is in a great mood.

He has finally conquered his fear of Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, he realised that if he did not defeat Guan Zhongxie tonight, he will never have the guts to do it in the future.

His biggest advantage tonight is that his opponent will not ‘sacrifice’ himself to defeat him.

In the future, he will not have any more opportunities like this.

Lu Buwei’s face was drained of colour, acknowledging that this fight must go on. He could imagine Xiang Shaolong’s determination to eliminate Guan Zhongxie and sighed secretly.

Tonight’s events have been very different from what he had visualized.

He looked at Zhu Ji with a pleading expression and was stunned to discover this Empress of Qin staring at Xiang Shaolong with an intoxicated look on her face. Thus, she did not notice him at all. Just as he hardened his resolve, Lu Gong happened to butt in: “Will the Crown Prince please decide if the fight should go on.”

Now, the matter is in the hands of Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei is out of the picture. This is equivalent to slapping Lu Buwei in the face.

Xiao Pan looked around him and saw that the area was packed to the brim with his Qin people. His eyes lit up and he calmly state: “Premier Mentor, please return to your seat first!”

Lu Buwei is a crafty man who always has a ready reply. He laughed loudly: “Everyone is mistaken. It is such an exciting fight and I will never dream of stopping it. I only wanted to provide a prize for the winning fighter. Whoever wins this fight will get to

marry my daughter.”

When he finished speaking, the crowd began to howl and the atmosphere is electrifying.

Lu Niang Rong did not expect her father to pull such a stunt. Shocked, her face turned red and she was at a loss.

Given the situation, there is no way that she can protest.

Guan Zhongxie’s eyes were filled with renewed energy.

If Xiang Shaolong is the winner, Lu Niang Rong will definitely marry him. When he dies tomorrow, Lu Niang Rong may resume her freedom to marry but will never marry a loser like him.

Lu Buwei’s words are to force him to win at all costs. Guan Zhongxie’s fighting strength increased dramatically and he abandoned all his earlier reservations regarding sacrificing his life for Xiang Shaolong.

All the while, Xiang Shaolong has been observing Lu Buwei. He noticed Lu Buwei winking to Mo Ao who is hiding among the crowd. Mo Ao gestured back to him and finally pointed at Lu Niang Rong. Xiang Shaolong had to acknowledge that Mo Ao is really formidable.

Mo Ao’s intelligence is second to none. He actually managed to determine Guan Zhongxie’s weakness to be his fear of sacrifice.

With Lu Niang Rong entering the picture, Guan Zhongxie will also be fighting for a lifetime of happiness with her. Thus, he will take the fight more seriously.

Since Xiang Shaolong entered the special elite commando unit, he has undergone many years of rigorous army training. His willpower and determination are without equal. He wasn't demoralised at all but instead, his fighting strength increased by leaps and bounds. With a smile, he glanced at Xiao Pan.

While Xiao Pan may have detected that Guan Zhongxie is now a more determined man with a strong killing aura; he cannot disobey the wishes of the crowd. He waved and proclaimed: "As Premier Mentor has indicated, the fight will continue."

All the cheering immediately subsided and the crowd became serious and quiet, focusing their attention on the two expert swordsmen.

At the side, Qin Qing, Ji Yanran, Jing Jun and the others were equally nervous. With all their hearts, they wished that they can lend Xiang Shaolong a helping hand but unfortunately, he must fight alone.

With a cool expression and his eyes shining like electricity, Guan Zhongxie fixed his gaze on Xiang Shaolong. In his hands, his sword slowly moved into an attacking pose and his killing aura is highly intense.

Everyone can feel the ferocity of his weapon and knew that if he

attacked, it will be an extremely ferocious move. For Guan Zhongxie to exude such an emotion to the crowd, his fighting strength has reached its peak.

Xiang Shaolong felt that his fighting strength is not as intense. Inspired by the samurais' intense fighting strength, he made up his mind to display a similar samurai attack pose. For Guan Zhongxie who has never seen a samurai, it will become an advantageous distraction.

He parted his legs and adopted a half squat position. He grabbed his sword with both hands and pointed the sword at Guan Zhongxie briefly before he slowly raised the weapon high above his head just like what a samurai warrior would do.

Everyone, especially Guan Zhongxie was taken aback at his unusual pose. The crowd began to whisper among themselves as everyone is puzzled by Xiang Shaolong's unique posture.

Guan Zhongxie was intimidated. He felt that no matter how he tried to attack Xiang Shaolong, Xiang Shaolong will swing down his sword and attack his forehead just like before. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is now holding the sword with both hands and the incoming blow will shatter his skull for sure. For a moment, he dared not attack.

His swordplay relied heavily on the opening pose. With this mental obstacle, his strong fighting strength has decreased by thirty percent.

Xiang Shaolong can sense Guan Zhongxie's energy dropping due to his trick. Grabbing this golden opportunity, he coldly snorted and advanced forward. Above his head, the Mohist Sword slammed down heavily in the direction of Guan Zhongxie's face. Although this is a sword stance from the Mohist Swordplay, Xiang Shaolong has executed it with two hands instead of one.

Guan Zhongxie is unwilling to retreat but did not want to use his sword with both hands. He let out a grunt and swung his sword upwards to defend against the Mohist Sword.

PONG! The Mohist sword was slightly deflected to one side. Xiang Shaolong managed to gain an opening and pressed on with five more attacks with each of them faster than the last one. Shaken, Guan Zhongxie was forced to take several steps back. If not for his superior arm strength, he will have succumbed to the vicious attacks and lose his footing.

Xiang Shaolong's supporters are cheering wildly for him. Eighty percent of the crowd wanted to see their hero defeat Guan Zhongxie.

Lu Buwei's and Mo Ao's expression became very ugly. They did not foresee Xiang Shaolong using such a strange strategy and overcoming Guan Zhongxie despite his superior arm strength.

But Xiang Shaolong knew that if he allowed Guan Zhongxie to attack him, he will be defending himself in agony.

In addition, Guan Zhongxie is blocking his moves using the least

amount of strength. Despite being in a disadvantaged position, his energy consumption is much lesser compared to Xiang Shaolong.

If not for his heavy Mohist Sword, it will be hard for Xiang Shaolong to force Guan Zhongxie backwards.

Xiang Shaolong knew that Guan Zhongxie is still being tricked by him. While he is still gaining the upper hand, he laughed loudly and retreated. Using only his right hand to hold his sword, he pointed the sword at the terrified Guan Zhongxie, stating: “Official Guan is a true expert. Thanks for showing mercy to me!”

Guan Zhongxie was publicly embarrassed. A cold murderous look flashed across his eyes and he coldly hissed: “Official Xiang is about to win. Why did you retreat out of a sudden? Has your wound reopened?!”

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to catch his breath. He smiled: “Official Guan is really good at telling jokes. We are not here to kill each other and must take turn showing our true abilities to Miss Niang Rong. Earlier, I attacked while you defended. Now, I will defend while you attack.”

Even though they have stopped fighting with their swords, they are still ‘fighting’ with their words. Everyone was thrilled and continued watching the excitement.

Guan Zhongxie lost the debate as he was angry with Xiang Shaolong’s remark. He knew that he has spoken out rudely and reminded himself not to underestimate Xiang Shaolong. He smiled

back: “If this is the case, I will attack as you instructed.”

The moment he finished speaking, his eyes shone energetically at his opponent.

Xiang Shaolong knows his opponent like the back of his hand. Guan Zhongxie is better than him in terms of arm strength and fighting experience.

Luckily, his earlier tricks have eroded his confidence. Otherwise, he will definitely lose.

In this life and death situation, he dared not take any chances. Clearing his mind of all thoughts, he adopted a defensive pose and eyed Guan Zhongxie with caution. Every single part of his body and mind is in a state of emptiness, displaying one of the three Mozi Killing Stances: Defending Attack. He guarded his body well and quietly awaits Guan Zhongxie’s attack.

Guan Zhongxie realised that this is the last opportunity for him to repair his reputation. Ideally, he wants to defeat Xiang Shaolong. It will be good to force Xiang Shaolong to retreat into submission. Otherwise, it is as good as losing the fight.

All along, he has complete confidence that he can defeat Xiang Shaolong. But from tonight’s fight, he was forced into a disadvantaged situation many times despite not losing the battle yet. As a result, his confidence is shaken and he cannot fight with his full potential.

The onlookers are increasing tremendously. From a banquet attendance of two hundred odd guests, now, there are more than three thousand people watching the fight. No one wanted a break as the fight is extremely exciting and nerve-wrecking.

Guan Zhongxie's Longstrike sword wavered slightly. When his fighting strength has reached its peak, his eyes focused ahead and he took large strides towards Xiang Shaolong. A strong sword and a stronger sword aura sliced through the air.

Xiang Shaolong stood as steady as a mountain and his eyes are shining coldly, giving the impression that he is as solid as a rock and is unafraid of the waves clashing in.

Guan Zhongxie took another step and is now ten steps away from Xiang Shaolong. Now his fighting strength is even higher than before. He coldly questioned: "Is Official Xiang determined to defeat me and win Lu Niang Rong's hand in marriage?"

Xiang Shaolong cursed him secretly. Guan Zhongxie is really a scumbag. Knowing that he is unwilling to marry Lu Niang Rong, he purposely said these words to distract him. If Xiang Shaolong is reminded that he has to marry Lu Niang Rong after winning the fight, his fighting spirit would naturally decrease and so will his fighting strength.

This is also part of Mo Ao's brilliant plan by asking Lu Buwei to marry Lu Niang Rong to the winner.

To defeat a man, you must first destroy his will. This is a fact that

Mo Ao knows very well.

Xiang Shaolong recomposed himself and laughed: “Miss Niang Rong is such a rare beauty; I believe Official Guan is trying to defeat me so that you can marry her.”

His words are out to distract Guan Zhongxie too. He wanted to remind Guan Zhongxie that he will die of poisoning tomorrow. Thus, it is not important whether he will marry Lu Niang Rong or not. But Guan Zhongxie cannot afford to lose. With this thought messing up his head, he will be unable to unleash his full potential.

Guan Zhongxie did have the intention and was slightly surprised. His sword resonated with a strong killing aura and his strong desire to win can be felt.

Xiang Shaolong was not alarmed but was delighted instead. Cha! He took a step forward and waved the Mohist Sword around, taunting Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie was forced to attack him with a troubled mind. As Xiang Shaolong is remaining in a defending position, he did not break his promise to let Guan Zhongxie attack him.

Everyone was inebriated at their intellectual contest and their swordsmanship contest.

Guan Zhongxie has no other way out. He howled and Longstrike transformed into a blazing trail and struck towards Xiang

Shaolong's face like a thunderbolt.

His attack is fierce, powerful and solid. Everyone was startled at his attack and forgot to cheer.

Xiang Shaolong has successfully forced Guan Zhongxie to strike earlier than he had intended. His Mohist Sword swung out like the wind and put up a watertight defence.

In a short span of time, Longstrike and the Mohist sword has clashed ten over times. PONG! PONG! PONG! Everyone was highly thrilled and was jumping up and down with excitement. Both men began to fight at an even faster speed and their movements are so fast it became blurred. The crowd was so immersed in the fight that everyone forgot to cheer.

Using the advantage of the heavy sword, Xiang Shaolong countered every blow head on to destroy Guan Zhongxie's confidence and pride.

Except for the three killing stances, the Mohist Swordplay emphasizes on defence rather than attack. Originally, it is meant to force the enemy to submit rather than destroying the enemy. However, every defensive move has an element of attack, which is similar to the Killing Stance: Defending Attack. Therefore, Guan Zhongxie cannot show off his powerful chain attacks.

In the past, when Mohist Juzi Yuan Zong is training Xiang Shaolong, he only used a few casual strokes but managed to make Xiang Shaolong retreat a few steps. Thus, the defensive Mohist

Swordplay is more than meets the eye.

Despite all his psychological tricks and strategies, he cannot defeat Guan Zhongxie, not to mention taking his life.

He intentionally retreated earlier and tricked Guan Zhongxie into attacking him now. With his invincible Mohist Swordplay defence, he can prevent himself from being defeated. Additionally, Guan Zhongxie must guard against the Killing Stance: Defending Attack. In the end, he will still be regarded as the winner in the eyes of the crowd.

Since there is no clear winner, he need not marry Lu Niang Rong.

Tonight, Xiang Shaolong has used up every one of his abilities in order to counter his nemesis Guan Zhongxie.

The more Guan Zhongxie fought, the more fearful he was. In front of the crowd, his attack is powerful, fierce and quick. But in his mind, he knows that his energy is depleting faster than Xiang Shaolong's. After thirty odd stances, he has yet to force Xiang Shaolong to take one step back. If this carries on, he will be drained and Xiang Shaolong can use this opportunity to finish him off.

He is a top swordsman and knows that he is committing a big mistake. He purposely slowed down and created an opening to trick Xiang Shaolong into attacking him.

Unknown to him, Xiang Shaolong's Mohist Swordplay is a gentlemen's swordplay with no hints of malice. Even if there is an opening, he will not take advantage of it. Guan Zhongxie was petrified, thinking that Xiang Shaolong has seen through his trick. His fighting strength dropped by another ten percent.

All around them, the crowd finally broke out into loud clapping and cheering. The noise produced is deafening.

PONG! After a final clash, Guan Zhongxie retreated while he still has some strength left. Otherwise, he will risk losing his life when he is completely drained of all his strength.

Xiang Shaolong did not wish to kill him. Moreover, his own strength is also heavily depleted. He wanted to retaliate but his body can no longer hold out.

At the same time, he sighed with relief. If Guan Zhongxie pressed on his attacks, he may be the one who will eventually succumb.

The fight still ended in a draw.

The crowd became extremely quiet.

Both men can no longer conceal their loud panting sounds.

Xu Xian stood up and announced: "Let me be the judge. This fight has ended without a clear winner. Miss Niang Rong's marriage will be arranged at a later date." The entire crowd exploded in a

thunderous applause and wild cheering, showing their appreciation at the exciting duel. Even after a long time, the cheering did not subside.

Book 15 Chapter 02 – Calm Before The Storm

When Xiang Shaolong returned to his table, he received a hero's welcome from his wives and men. But deep in his heart, he knew that he is inferior to Guan Zhongxie in terms of physical strength and swordsmanship. He managed to end the fight on a draw because he had the advantage of the heavy wooden sword. If he is using Bloodwave to fight him, he will be badly defeated for sure. Thus, he did not feel any sense of true happiness. In fact, his legs are still trembling uncontrollably.

Opposite him, Prince Dan nodded at him to show his gratitude for Xiang Shaolong taking revenge on Guan Zhongxie on his behalf.

Guan Zhongxie returned to Lu Buwei's table with an expressionless face and received compliments with a silent nod. Although he has a look of disappointment on his face, in actual fact, he has become the second man after Wang Jian to match Xiang Shaolong's fighting skills. As a result, his status is now elevated.

Everybody around them are debating among themselves and refused to leave the banquet area. Zhu Ji saw that the banquet has become a chaotic debating ground and announced that the banquet has come to an end. After Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji have taken their leave, Xiang Shaolong returned back to his own tent.

Ji Yanran and the ladies inspected his injury and discover that the wound has reopened and blood is pouring out. They hurriedly applied a fresh coat of medicine and tie a new bandage over the

wound.

Still in high spirits, Jing Jun, Zhao Zhi and Wu Tingfang are still discussing about the heart-stopping battle.

Xiang Shaolong enquired about Teng Yi from Ji Yanran. He learnt that Teng Yi has set off the moment the banquet started. Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Guan Zhongxie is really a top swordsman and he has the strength and power match his skills. It is not that I do not want to kill him but I am truly not capable of doing so.”

Jing Jun smiled: “But he still cannot overpower you.”

Ji Yanran shook her head: “Little Jun is mistaken. Guan Zhongxie failed to win tonight because from the very beginning, he did not fight with his full potential. After all, he believed that Hubby will die tomorrow. Why should he kill Hubby and earn the wrath of the Qin people?”

Everyone listened to her explanation and their expressions become serious. In this case, even if Guan Zhongxie cannot defeat Xiang Shaolong, he can still match him evenly in a fight.

Zhao Zhi added: “But the onlookers do not know this. I believed that everyone, including Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie are thinking that Hubby does not want to marry Lu Niang Rong. Therefore, when he is gaining the upper hand, he suddenly stopped and wanted to defend instead. Even until now, they still do not comprehend Hubby’s trickery.”

Pleased, Ji Yanran reminded: “Zhi Zhi speaks with reason. This fight has benefited us in some ways despite creating some problems too. Hubby must work harder. Sooner or later, Guan Zhongxie will use Lu Niang Rong as an excuse to challenge you again. If you can add more power to the strange and fast swordplay, I am sure Guan Zhongxie will ultimately succumb to you.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization. If he can get the Yue blacksmith to forge a samurai sword for him, that will be wonderful.

In this instant Huan Qi, who was out on patrol duty suddenly rushed into the tent. He came to Xiang Shaolong’s side and whispered: “Lord Gaoling’s men have started to take action.”

In Xiao Pan’s tent, Huan Qi has just finished his latest report on the movements of Lord Gaoling’s rebel army. When he was about to continue with his analysis, Xiang Shaolong interrupted him: “What does Crown Prince think about the enemies’ actions?”

Li Si’s face glowed with admiration. Xiang Shaolong is the only man in the Qin Court who understands the Crown Prince way better than anyone else.

Xiang Shaolong found it hilarious. He has two kinds of feelings towards Xiao Pan. On one hand, he is the person who watched Xiao Pan grow up and is familiar with his character. Xiao Pan became a changed person when his mother Lady Ni committed suicide after being raped. Filled with revenge and suspicions, he is hungry for power to ensure his survival. Even towards Xiang Shaolong whom

he trusted the most, he will still think about Xiang Shaolong's recommendation before going along with the idea. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong knew that one day, Xiao Pan will be the powerful Qin Shi Huang who unites the whole of China. Because of this, he has absolute trust in his capabilities unlike other people who continue to treat him like an immature youngster.

With these two factors combined, Xiang Shaolong is full of love and respect for Xiao Pan, trying his best to create opportunities for him to grow and learn.

Xiao Pan is delighted: "Subject Huan is well-informed of the enemy's situation. I will remember this. When everything is over, I will reward you handsomely."

Overjoyed, Huan Qi kowtowed and thanked him profusely, thinking that the Crown Prince is indeed an extraordinary man. If he said the same thing to Wang Jian, he will be more than happy if Wang Jian gives an approving nod. The chance of him getting a reward is even lesser.

After a short contemplation, Xiao Pan predicted: "Since Lord Gaoling is shifting his men downriver, they are likely to attack us with more than just fire or water. Since our forces are much bigger than his, I am certain that he will create different scenarios and throw us into disarray so that he can create an opportunity to overcome us."

Huan Qi saw how this teenage Crown Prince is making such a rational analysis and is full of admiration for his brilliance. His happiness in serving a capable ruler like Xiao Pan is written all

over his face. The sincere glow in his eyes is far more effective than any common flattery. He did not even display such an emotional expression when facing Xiang Shaolong.

His confidence swelling, Xiao Pan thought for another few seconds before adding: “Lord Gaoling’s first move is to set his own tents on fire. With the wind blowing the flames, the fire will burn upwards. The first tents to be burnt down will be those behind the wooden defending gates. He can easily shoot a few fire arrows across the defending gates and the royal tents will start burning too. To ensure the safety of the Empress and the Royal Family, everyone will head towards the Jing River. Once everyone crosses the river, the danger is over.”

After his presentation, even Xiang Shaolong is pleasantly surprised. This future Qin Shi Huang is truly formidable and can envision the battle as if he is there to see it personally. Before the fire attack, Lord Gaoling’s men can spray the tents and the ground with oil. Once the fire starts to burn, it will be an unstoppable inferno. If news of his rebellion wasn’t leaked to them, Lord Gaoling does have a high chance of success.

Xiao Pan explained the crux of the problem: “Lord Gaoling’s main goal is to get me. He will definitely dress up his own men as palace guards and plant them in strategic locations to assassinate me whenever possible. This is also another reason for him to create as much chaos as possible.”

Li Si and Huan Qi are smart enough not to interrupt him and allowed him to share all his thoughts. Xiang Shaolong intentionally inquired: “Crown Prince, in your opinion, what are

the possible tricks Lord Gaoling has up his sleeves?”

Xiao Pan gladly replied: “He will still use a water flood attack. Lord Gaoling will purposely exaggerate the fire situation and coerced the royal family and all the important officials to run for the opposite shore. When everyone is in a panic and rushing over the bridges, he will release the dams upriver. Adding heavy logs to the flood water, the bridges will be submerged by the water or smashed up by the logs. If I am on the bridge, Lord Gaoling’s scheme would have succeeded immediately. If not, he would still have succeeded in dividing our armies into two. By then, the rebel army will attack us. If they shoot fire arrows at us, it will make the situation even more chaotic. Among the confusion, he can assassinate me. It is the most poisonous scheme I have ever come across.”

Huan Qi is full of praise: “The Crown Prince is awesome! You have my full respect.”

Xiao Pan intimately continued: “During that time, Lu Buwei will send his killers and his divers to kill whoever he wants. In addition, Subject Xiang will die of poisoning and the Cavalry Army will be leaderless. In the end, Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie can claim their rewards for fighting off the rebels. At the same time, they will take over the main military command from the dead Lu Gong and Xu Xian. Our Great Qin will end up in their hands. Hng!”

The three men understood Xiao Pan’s meaning. Lu Buwei is making use of Lord Gaoling’s rebellion to kill whoever he wants. After Lord Gaoling’s rebellion has failed, all the credit and power will go to him. Lord Gaoling will die as a muddle-headed scapegoat.

Mo Ao's schemes are really chilling to the bone. Fortunately, he will be dying tomorrow. Otherwise, Xiang Shaolong will die under his poisonous hands sooner or later. This is all fated, just like fate will create a Qin Shi Huang.

Before the sun is up, the hunting groups have set off for their morning hunt. Prince Dan and his men are not participating as a sign of protest at Lu Buwei's humiliation.

Lu Buwei is in high spirits. He waved good morning to Xiang Shaolong happily as he believed that Xiang Shaolong's life will end today. When Guan Zhongxie ran into Xiang Shaolong, his previous air of confidence is much reduced and he no longer has the look of despise on his face. It was replaced by twenty percent of respect and thirty percent of regret.

For a man as highly skilled as Guan Zhongxie, it is hard for him to find a worthy opponent. Now that he has found a worthy competitor in Xiang Shaolong, he will also lose him at the same time due to the poisoning. Thus Guan Zhongxie is in a dilemma and regrets that he will never have the chance to defeat this Qin Number One Swordsman.

Zhu Ji, Qin Qing and Ji Yanran were all absent from the morning hunt. As Xiao Pan's party is leisurely hunting for the sake of hunting, they decided to return to camp earlier.

The remaining hunters continued their hunt.

On the way back, Lu Niang Rong intentionally rode to Xiang Shaolong's side and shot a vicious look at Li Si. Terrified, Li Si made up an excuse and took his leave by slowing down his horse. When Li Si is out of earshot, she scolded: "Xiang Shaolong! Did you purposely end the fight on a draw instead of winning it so that you do not have to marry someone you hated?"

Xiang Shaolong was agonized. This daughter of his arch enemy is stubborn and long winded. She already mentioned that she is unwilling to marry him and knew that he will not live past tonight; why did she come up now and accuse him of hating her? But he also learnt that she does have some feelings for him. Otherwise, she would not have bothered to come and make things difficult for him.

He bitterly replied: "Things are beyond my control. Strictly speaking, I have lost because my wound did reopen in the end. But I did not say it as I do not want to give up the opportunity to fight for your hand in marriage! Does Third Mistress understand my feelings?"

Lu Niang Rong's face turned red under his staring. Initially, her face brightened up before darkening again. She lowered her head and bit her lips as if she is trying to say something but held herself back. Xiang Shaolong guessed that her conscience is being pricked and is fearful that she may spill the beans about the poison pill. He was about to interrupt her when in front of them, Lu Buwei is waving at her to join him. Besides Lu Buwei is Mo Ao and he appears to share Xiang Shaolong's fear as well.

Lu Niang Rong shot him another look and sighed softly before

she rode ahead to join her father. At this point, Lord Changwen rode up to him and bitterly laughed: “Official Xiang can forget about our proposal last night. I spoke to Ying Ying about marrying you last night but was rejected despite my continuous pleading. Ai! Love cannot be forced. Nonetheless, my brother and I are very grateful towards you.”

Xiang Shaolong did not feel threatened but felt more relaxed instead. He secretly thought that Guan Zhongxie must have made her feel very good in bed. Without trying out his own love making skills first, she will not marry him. To think that he has to fight Guan Zhongxie on the battlefield and also on bed! Honestly speaking, he is not as jealous as before. She can marry whoever she wants and he is not in the least interested.

Back at the camps, Xiang Shaolong has just finished instructing his men to protect his wives when Lu Gong sent someone to summon him.

In Lu Gong’s tent, Xu Xian, Wang He and a few other loyal military leaders are having a secret discussion. Even Bai Chong who lost to Zhou Zihen is also present.

With a pleased expression, Lu Gong sat down beside him and intimately pat his shoulder, praising: “Shaolong put up a good fight last night and forced Guan Zhongxie to retreat like a coward. You even interrupted that traitorous Premier Mentor who tried to end the fight halfway. You have earned my respect. If you ever lead an army to war, you will be invincible.”

Wang He frowned: “Why didn’t you take the chance to kill Guan

Zhongxie last night? If he hides in the shadows and ambushed us with his arrows, I am afraid we will all die an unexplainable death.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that Guan Zhongxie’s marvellous archery skills have startled the whole of Qin. Since he created a favourable impression last night that he is a better fighter than Guan Zhongxie, he will hide the truth about his own inability to kill him.

He bitterly smiled: “Because my wound reopened, I was forced to defend instead of attack. Regarding Guan Zhongxie’s archery skills, I am afraid he will not get any chance to use them tonight.”

He proceeded to reveal Xiao Pan’s assessment of Lord Gaoling. In the same breath, he added: “For this battle, the Crown Prince will be the main leader and we will just act according to his orders!”

Lu Gong sighed: “In my lifetime, I have served five different Kings but none of them have the strength, wisdom and capability of the present Crown Prince. There is hope for us. I wonder if I can live to see the day the Crown Prince unite the world.”

Xiang Shaolong is relieved to hear his words. Xiao Pan’s daily performances plus the fact that he is not related to Lu Buwei has won him the loyalty of the Qin military. With this backing alone, he will succeed the throne without much difficulty.

Xu Xian praised: “Despite his young age, Crown Prince has performed well and is full of courage and intellect. He is like a

hidden gem. Although the two late Kings have been poisoned to death and the state is in peril, we now have a capable leader to guide us. It is truly our good fortune!”

After Wang He praised Xiao Pan too, he added: “It is easy to deal with Lord Gaoling but Mo Ao will be assisting Lu Buwei in his scheming. I am concerned that there will be some unexpected attacks which will take us by surprise. Why is Shaolong not paying any attention to Lu Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “To win every battle, you must know yourself and your enemy well. We have full information about Lord Gaoling’s plans and have made accommodations for Lu Buwei’s family warriors. After Mo Ao dies of poisoning, we will all be safe from his scheming. Under the leadership of the Crown Prince, Lu Buwei cannot salvage the situation even if Sun Wu comes back to life.”

Xu Xian suggested: “Shall we lay a trap to bait Lu Buwei? We can use this opportunity to get rid of him. If there is ample evidence, Meng Ao cannot obstruct us from executing him.”

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling a big headache coming, luckily, Lu Gong protested: “If we wanted to deal with Lu Buwei at the same time, it will make things even more complicated and I don’t think we are up to it. Now, the two bastards Cai Ze and Wang Wan are supporting this Damn Premier Mentor. If we failed to succeed, we may be counterattacked by him. With the Empress supporting him, I am afraid we will be the ones to suffer in the end. Old Xu, you must be more patient. Don’t forget that we still have to watch out for Du Bi and his powerful men.”

Wang He added: “Now, Meng Ao is leading the Qin army to the three new eastern provinces. He is fiercely loyal to Lu Buwei. If he knows that we are going after Lu Buwei, he may rebel and even declare the three provinces to be independent from Qin. When that happens, we’ll be in deep 5hit.”

Xu Xian sighed loudly but did not insist any further. Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand this thing called fate. He has a chance to kill Lu Buwei right now but cannot do so because of circumstances. After further discussions, Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang He left to see Xiao Pan. To avoid drawing attention to himself, Xiang Shaolong did not go along and left on his own.

The minute he came out of the tent, he came face to face with Lu Dan’er and Ying Ying. The two ladies must have had an enjoyable hunt judging from the happy expressions on their faces. They noticed that Xiao Shaolong is alone and their eyes lit up. Lu Dan’er playfully cajoled: “Good Morning, Superman!”

Because she had rejected his marriage proposal, Ying Ying awkwardly remarked: “I was about to look for you.”

She faced Lu Dan’er and begged: “Dan’er! Can you let me say something to Superman first?”

Lu Dan’er opposed: “You cannot keep him for yourself!” And whispered into her ears: “Have a good talk!”

Ying Ying helplessly dragged Xiang Shaolong two steps away and

whispered into his ears: “It is not that I do not want to marry you but this is all too sudden. Can you give me more time to consider?”

Xiang Shaolong felt that she is actually trying to stall for time for Guan Zhongxie and shot her a dirty look.

Ying Ying stomped her foot, scolding: “Don’t let your imagination run wild. I am not that kind of person that you think I am!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “If you really want to reject me, you can find all kinds of excuses. In the future, I will not pay any more attention to you. Please forgive me for being cruel.”

Ying Ying was stunned and stared at him without blinking. Lu Dan’er intercepted in and detained Xiang Shaolong, whining: “Come! Let’s go fishing. I wonder why everybody is behaving so strangely today. Even that playful monkey Little Jun says he has no time to keep us company. But Official Xiang can take his place!”

Even if Xiang Shaolong is free, he is not keen to fool around with them. Moreover, today is an important day for everyone. He did his best to coax them before slipping away.

Book 15 Chapter 03 – A Happy Turn Of Events

Just before noon, the hunting groups are making their way back to the camps and the atmosphere has become much livelier.

The palace guards and the cavalry army, taking charge of the internal and external security respectively, are quietly moving into their positions to counter the imminent rebellion.

On the whole, everything looks just the same. They will not make any large manpower deployments so as not to raise the alarm and alert Lord Gaoling's men.

Jing Jun has become Xiao Pan's chief intelligence officer. With a group of Wu Family Elite Warriors, they have formed an intelligence network spying on Lord Gaoling and Lu Buwei's activities.

There are no intelligence reports yet as Lord Gaoling will not dare to act before the night hunt has begun. Moreover, it will be ridiculous if he tried to set the camp on fire in broad daylight.

At lunchtime, the camp is reasonably peaceful.

The night hunters have retired back to their tents to get some rest so as to be in tip top condition later.

Time passed slowly.

When the horn is being sounded, the hunting groups start to gather at the main assembly ground. Finally, the air is filled with excitement again.

Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and the high ranking officials are watching the hunting groups from an inspection platform. As the hunters begin to set off for the hunt, those who knew about the rebellion are feeling more and more stressful.

Ying Ying and her female warriors have left to join the night hunt as well.

The sun gradually descended behind the western mountains.

The campsite torches are being lighted up and there is smoke in all directions. Within the defending gates, it is bustling with activities as the palace guards are setting up the place for the dinner banquet.

Prince Dan and his men have abruptly left for Xianyang City. Although this is something Lu Buwei did not expect, his suspicions were not raised. After all, they were ridiculed at the banquet last night and probably do not want to embarrass themselves again.

In the semi-darkness, the action has secretly begun.

The first column to move is the Cavalry Army led by Huan Qi.

Half of them quietly swam across the Jing River and took up strategic positions on both sides of the river. No one is allowed to leave their position to prevent any leakage of information.

Within the campsite, the palace guards have silently increased their defences at the Royal Tents.

Jing Jun's intelligence unit has finally come to life. Everything that is happening inside and outside the camp cannot escape their detection. These men have undergone strict and rigorous intelligence gathering training taught personally by Xiang Shaolong. To them, this is a task that they have been well-prepared for.

Before they entered the banquet area, Xiang Shaolong and Lu Gong stood on a slope outside the wooden gates. They were in great spirits as they enjoy the wind blowing against their skin and looking at the vast landscape before their eyes.

Lu Gong sighed: "After Bai Qi, we lack a capable general who can lead our army to countless victories. Now that we have Shaolong, I can finally rest easy." Xiang Shaolong humbly asked: "Lu Gong has been praising me non-stop. Since I came to Qin, I have yet to fight a single battle. What makes you think I will be a capable general?"

Lu Gong laughed: "You can judge a man accurately from small details. When Bai Qi first came about, he took care of every big and small detail just you. Everyone was full of admiration and his men fought hard under his leadership. Shaolong may not have fought a proper war yet but you have everyone submitting to you and willing to lay down their lives for you. This is a basic requirement

for every capable general.”

Pausing for a while, he added: “The first step to becoming a great general is soldier management. From your carefree appearance, I can tell that you are well-versed in soldiering. If laws are not enforced, there will be disorder; If training is insufficient, soldiers cannot fight; If you are carefree because you are well-prepared, you can fight ten thousand battles and win every one of them. So from Shaolong’s carefree and well-prepared outlook, I was reminded of Bai Qi in the good old days.”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Lu Gong’s words do make incredible sense. When he was fighting against Zhao Mu in Handan City, he has Teng Yi and Jing Jun to help him, the elite warriors are well-trained and he has Pu Bu and Liu Chao as spies. When everything is properly planned, he was indeed relaxed and carefree. However, at that point in time, he did not realise that it is a sign of good soldiering!

In Sun Zi’s Art of War, this is known as ‘proper delegation of appropriate work to the appropriate person.’

Lu Gong became more enthusiastic and continued: “A born genius is only good enough to last one generation. There is no lack of talent; only lack of people who can recognize talent. There is no lack of people who can recognize talent, only lack of people who can use talented men effectively. I noticed that Shaolong has recommended Li Si, Huan Qi and Wang Jian to the Crown Prince and know that Shaolong’s foresight is second to none. In the area, I am afraid even Bai Qi is not your match.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty at this undeserved praise.

They were interrupted by a palace guard who came to invite them inside the defending gates for the banquet. Thus, their conversation came to an end.

The sun has finally disappeared behind the western mountain.

Mo Ao is about to die.

As per normal, the banquet is extremely lively. As expected, Lord Gaoling has given an excuse to skip the banquet.

Ji Yanran and all the ladies are here, sharing a table with Qin Qing. They came here with the intention to watch a good show. After all, the safest place is here within the defending gates.

All the high ranking officials, including Xiao Pan are all dressed in their hunting outfits. This is the last banquet and according to the Qin customs, the banquet will last throughout the night while waiting for the night hunters to come back by dawn tomorrow.

Jing Jun, Huan Qi and Lord Changwen have their duties to attend to and were absent from the banquet.

Xiao Pan is very energetic and his two eyes are shining brightly, showing his excited mood.

Lu Buwei is in his usual great spirits and frequently toasted and chatted with Zhu Ji.

Mo Ao surprisingly showed up for the banquet and is seated at the back with Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen. It may be due to his desire to see Xiang Shaolong dying before his own eyes or that he need not conceal himself any further.

Seated between Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong kept her head lowered throughout the banquet and did not even take a single look at Xiang Shaolong.

After a group of palace guards performed an exciting sword dance and the air is filled with enthusiastic clapping, one of Jing Jun's fellow villagers Jing Shan came up to Xiang Shaolong's back and reported in a low voice: "Lord Gaoling's men are beginning to spray oil on the tents behind the defending gates. Master Jun has intentionally sent some men to patrol the area so only a limited area is affected."

Xiang Shaolong whispered back: "What about Lu Buwei's men?"

Jing Shan replied: "There are three hundred family warriors from Lu Buwei's side who have left the camp and dived into the Jing River. Master Jun is sure that they will begin to kill Lu Buwei's enemies when the water attack has broken up the bridges and everyone is in a state of panic."

When Jing Shan left, Xiang Shaolong remarked to Lord Changping beside him: "Bro! It is time!"

Lord Changping exchanged a thrilled look with him and quietly left his seat. On the other side, Li Si moved closer to Xiang Shaolong and whispered: “From Lu Buwei’s expression, he must be feeling puzzled because you have yet to show any signs of poisoning. Hei! This is interesting!”

Pausing, he added: “There is something I still do not understand. Lu Buwei knowingly allowed Lord Gaoling to run amok. Isn’t he afraid that he may be killed by Lord Gaoling among the confusion?”

Xiang Shaolong observed that Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan have left their seats. He smiled: “Firstly, there must be Lu Buwei’s spies among Lord Gaoling’s men so Lu Buwei already has a clear idea of Lord Gaoling’s ambush plans. Although Lu Buwei only has an escort of about one hundred men, he has another batch of men who will slip in during the confusion. When I die of poisoning, Guan Zhongxie will take over my Cavalry Army. All Lu Buwei need to do is to stand beside the Empress and the Crown Prince. With Mo Ao giving him advice on the spot, everyone will have to listen to his commands.”

He sighed: “He must take some risks to gain the benefits.”

Li Si cannot hold back his laughter: “This is so complicated and I have never thought of that. Hei! Look at the Crown Prince’s alert expression. Last night, he only slept for several hours and today is such a busy day. Despite all that, he is still looking fresh and vigilant. The late King is much weaker compared to him.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed. The most successful people are always the most energetic people. Otherwise, they cannot handle the multi-tasking and associated stress. Xiao Pan is Qin Shi Huang and his energy level is surely higher than ordinary people.

At this moment, Guan Zhongxie left his seat and took a detour to Lao Ai's table, engaging him in a conversation.

Xiang Shaolong nearly wanted to send someone to eavesdrop on them but suppressed this desire. He wondered if Lao Ai's name is on Lu Buwei's assassination list?

Jing Shan came again to report: "From the light signals, Lord Gaoling's men hiding upriver have pushed giant logs and rafts into the water. When the camp catches fire, they will lead a coordinated attack. Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan have left the campsite. One of them is heading towards the Jing River while the other one is likely to be liaising with another group of Lu Buwei's family warriors. Master Jun has instructed Pu Bu to trail him. If they tried to do anything funny, they will be killed without question."

After Jing Shan departed, Xiang Shaolong leaned towards Li Si and informed "It is time. Official Li must alert the Crown Prince now. I will go and have some fun with Lu Buwei."

The two men left to carry out their tasks. After finishing his deployment, Lord Changping came back and ran into Xiang Shaolong. He updated: "All the members of the royal family have been transported to a safe place and everything is going as planned. Now, I will protect Empress and Crown Prince. Shaolong

must be careful.”

Both men exchanged a smile and went on their separate ways.

Xiang Shaolong took a detour and came to Lao Ai's and Guan Zhongxie's side, smiling: “What are the two of you talking about? Both of you looked so happy.”

In actual fact, both men are speaking with a serious expression on their faces and there was no sign of happiness. Hearing his inverse description, they know that Xiang Shaolong has a hidden meaning in his words.

Guan Zhongxie smiled awkwardly: “Without Official Xiang, our conversation is indeed boring. Come! Let's have a drink or two!”

Their table is three tables away from Lu Buwei's table. But as Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie and Lao Ai were all well-built men; they managed to distract a surprised Lu Buwei who is speaking with Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong raised his head and looked at the crescent moon high up in the sky. He shook his head: “The sky is dark tonight which makes it favourable for a sneak attack. I am in charge of security and I should not drink. Official Guan, please forgive me!”

Despite Guan Zhongxie's iron nerves, his face changed colour slightly.

An ignorant Lao Ai smiled: “With Xiang Shaolong here, any attackers will suffer a huge defeat.”

Xiang Shaolong decided to use this opportunity to erode more of Guan Zhongxie’s confidence. He deliberately commented: “There are many strange occurrences in this world that can happen unexpectedly. One cannot change the will of Fate. Does Official Guan agree with what I said?”

Guan Zhongxie is feeling really uneasy. When his face lost even more colour, Xiang Shaolong left with a smile on his face.

Xiang Shaolong walked towards Lu Buwei and Mo Ao.

His mind is filled with endless thought and countless emotions.

Since the tragic death of Princess Qian and the four maids, he has always been suffering at Lu Buwei’s hands. All the anger and pain is hidden deep in his heart and he has suffered greatly.

When Wu Tingwei is executed due to Lu Buwei’s bribery and his beloved King Zhuangxiang died from Lu Buwei’s poisoning, his biggest wish is to insert a knife into Lu Buwei’s body.

But since he knew that Lu Buwei will live for a few more years, his passionate wish has transformed into a deep pain.

Although he managed to remove Lu Xiong from his official post, it only vented a small part of his frustration. He did not feel a great

sense of satisfaction yet.

But today will be different. Because Mo Ao is going to die.

Without Mo Ao, Lu Buwei may not use such a devious scheme to harm him. Since there is no way to be sure, Mo Ao is still considered as the main reason for his pain.

After tonight, he will not give Lu Buwei any face.

Only when he brings out his full potential can he last until the day when Xiao Pan is coroneted.

Before Mo Ao dies, he must make fun of Lu Buwei and Mo Ao as a way of venting his frustration.

With this thought, he went to Mo Ao's table.

Sitting in front of him, Lu Buwei and Lu Niang Rong turned around in astonishment. Lu Buwei smiled: "Shaolong is coming to drink with me?"

Zhu Ji turned her attention to Xiang Shaolong and was baffled at his solemn expression.

Guan Zhongxie followed Xiang Shaolong to Mo Ao's table. Observing that he is coldly staring at Mo Ao, his face lost more colour.

The lively banquet is still carrying on with wine drinking contests, chatting and joking. Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang He have received their secret signal and slipped away one by one.

Xiao Pan is behaving normally and is having a conversation with Zhu Ji. However, their eyes are focused on Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong scanned Lu Buwei and Lu Niang Rong before the corner of his mouth curled up in a smile: "I am here to present my thanks to Mister Mo."

Even with Mo Ao's intelligence, he has no idea what Xiang Shaolong is talking about. Nonetheless, he was taken aback and stood up in surprise, asking: "Why is Official Xiang thanking me?"

The banquets of Qin are casual and informal. There are many people who are standing and challenging each other's wine capacity. Although the three men are standing and talking, it did not attract any attention. Moreover, they are standing at one of the rear tables.

Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan have stopped speaking and are listening intently to their conversation.

Lu Buwei also felt that something is amiss. He stood up with a wine cup and came in between them, inquiring: "What does Shaolong want to thank Mister Mo for? I am also interested to find out!"

Xiang Shaolong took a glance at Guan Zhongxie who has a suspicious look on his face before officially stating: “First, I want to thank Mister Mo for getting Drunken Wind Brothel owner Mister Wu Fu to give me Flying Dragon. In the future, I will use it to kill my enemies on the battlefield to express my gratitude.”

DANG!

Lu Buwei's hand trembled and his wine cup fell down to the ground, shattering into pieces.

The three men's countenance changed instantly.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the broken pieces of the wine cup and broke out into laughter: “On the ground, a flower blooms. Wealth and riches to follow. That's a good sign. I pray that Premier Mentor will live to a hundred years and enjoy great health.”

With these words, the three men buckled. Even Zhu Ji's expression changed drastically as she can sense that something is very wrong.

Mo Ao suspiciously questioned: “How am I related to Brothel Owner Wu Fu who gave Official Xiang the precious spear?”

Lu Buwei's face darkened. When Xiang Shaolong wished him to live to a hundred years, he is obviously stating the reverse. Thinking that Xiang Shaolong will soon die of poisoning, he will

not clash with him in front of Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan.

Cai Ze, Wang Wan and a few other guests from the neighbouring tables are starting to notice their exchange. All of them have stopped their activities and are looking in their direction.

Xiao Pan is certain that Xiang Shaolong is creating an opportunity for him. He excused himself and left.

Lu Buwei and the others knew that Xiao Pan is leaving but as Xiang Shaolong has their full attention with his shocking statements, they could not be bothered about other matters.

A cold murderous look flashed past Xiang Shaolong's eyes. He stared at Mo Ao and interrogated: "The wisest man will slip one day. I only mentioned that I was given Flying Dragon but did not say what it is. How did Mister Mo know that it is a precious spear?"

When Mo Ao is speechless after realising his mistake, Guan Zhongxie enquired in a deep voice: "What is the second thing that Official Xiang wants to thank Mister Mo for?"

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and laughed: "Of course it is for Miss Guiyan's kiss. Mister Mo has kissed her many times and should know better than me."

The three men lost control and the faces were drained of colour.

Mo Ao is truly a genius. Clutching his throat, he coughed: “You...”

Xiang Shaolong continued looking at the sky and sighed: “It is almost time. Mister Mo’s calculations are infallible. You should know the exact time of your death.”

His eyes shining icily, he indicated to Mo Ao and state one word slowly after another: “When you count others, don’t forget to count yourself. Does Mister Mo understand the meaning of these words?”

Lu Buwei coldly snorted: “Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong coldly faced him and shot back in a deep voice: “Where are Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan? It is very chaotic outside. I hope they don’t get killed in the confusion.”

Lu Buwei’s face darkened even further and roared: “Commander Xiang, what do you mean by these words?”

YAH!

The colour on Mo Ao’s face is changing rapidly. With his two hands clutching his throat, he kept coughing but cannot say a single word. His eyes were filled with dread.

Petrified, Guan Zhongxie rushed forward and supported him, asking: “What is going on?”

Mo Ao shivered for a while and large beads of perspiration is flowing down from his forehead. In the corner of his mouth, blood is seen trickling out. It was a hideous scene.

Xiang Shaolong threatened Guan Zhongxie: “Official Guan had better stay right here. Otherwise, do not blame me when I punished you for AWOL.”

He faced Lu Buwei and plainly smiled: “This sky is dark tonight. Premier Mentor must be careful when he crosses the bridge.”

When Mo Ao collapsed into Guan Zhongxie’s arms, Xiang Shaolong has already left a long time ago.

Torches and war cries can be detected simultaneously from the direction of the river. The first rebellion since Xiao Pan took over Qin has finally begun.

Book 15 Chapter 04 – Lifetime's First Victory

While all the Qin officials and Royal Family members are in a state of panic, Xiao Pan, under the escort of Xu Xian, Lu Gong and Wang He, gracefully returned back to his seat. He loudly commanded: “Lord Gaoling has rebelled. I will now personally lead the fight against his rebel army. All of you can remain in your seats for the time being. After I have taken care of him, I will come back and drink with all of you again.”

Although everyone is alarmed by the loud shouting and fire burning, they are situated safely within the defending gates and noticed that the palace guards around them are all armed and well-prepared. Calming down, they cheered loudly for Xiao Pan.

Zhu Ji stood up and had a quick look at the pale-faced Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie who is supporting a dying Mo Ao. She questioned: “Crown Prince! What is going on?”

Xiao Pan coldly replied: “Empress can rest assured as I am in control. Men! Escort Empress back to the tent for a rest.”

Zhu Ji understood that given the present circumstances, it is not suitable to ask any further questions from her elusive son. Still at a loss, she left under the escort of the palace guards cum palace maids and returned back to her tent.

Xiao Pan faced Lu Buwei, assuring: “Premier Mentor and Third Mistress must have suffered a shock. Please have a rest in my tent. When the rebellion has been quashed, I will invite both of you out

for a celebratory drink.”

Lu Buwei glanced at the wheezing Mo Ao helplessly. A dozen palace guards came up to him and invited him to rest in the main Royal Tent.

Loud crashing sounds can be heard from the direction of River Jing as the giant logs collided into the bridges. Sounds of water rushing down the river can also be heard, pushing the fear in everyone’s heart to the maximum.

But after looking at Xiao Pan’s confident composure and swift issue of military orders, everyone was slightly comforted.

Lu Buwei knew that if he disobeyed his instructions, he will lose his head on the execution ground. Sighing, he took a last look at Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao before he left with Lu Niang Rong.

By now, the palace guards have prepared the warhorses. Xiao Pan pacified the banquet guests one more time and mounted his warhorse. Under the protection of the three generals and the palace guards, he courageously galloped out of the defending gates.

Mo Ao finally breathed his last.

Guan Zhongxie’s body went numb. For the first time, he can feel the real fear of having Xiang Shaolong as his enemy.

Tonight, they have suffered multiple defeats. Lu Buwei and Lu

Niang Rong are as good as under house arrest. Mo Ao is poisoned to death and he has lost his bearings. If he tried to leave the banquet area, he will die an unexplainable death under the hands of the palace guards.

At the same time, he knew that Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen were as good as dead. Xiang Shaolong will never let them off.

When the fire attack has just begun, the Lord Changping brothers led five thousand of their palace guards into Lord Gaoling's rebel army camp and began a killing spree.

The fire fighters have prepared wet sand in advance and hid them among the grass and the trees. They managed to prevent the fire from spreading.

When Lord Gaoling tried to attack the campsite with three thousand soldiers, they discovered that they have been surrounded by Xiao Pan's army. Like a trapped beast, they fought a losing battle.

Leading two thousand cavalry soldiers, Jing Jun intercepted a group of Lu Buwei's family warriors led by Lu Chan. He fired a string of arrows and killed many of their men and horses before he attacked them using a pincer formation. It was an onslaught.

At this point in time, all the four bridges haven been smashed to smithereens. As another army of rebel soldiers ventured down river on wooden rafts, they were crushed by large rocks that were catapulted down by Huan Qi and his army of five thousand cavalry

soldiers who were ambushing them from higher ground. Tragic cries filled the air.

Their shields may have helped if it was an arrow attack but it was large rocks that were being hurled at them. Moreover, there was nowhere they could hide in the middle of the river. More than a hundred rafts were squarely hit and they sank immediately. The rest of the rebels hurriedly rowed to the shore but were mercilessly slaughtered by another group of cavalry soldiers hiding among the trees.

With an air of authority, Xiao Pan traveled between the two battle sites and used torch signals to issue commands to his men.

Xiang Shaolong himself led another two thousand cavalry soldiers and conducted a search along the Jing River. He could not find any traces of Zhou Zihen and the divers. He guessed that they must have sensed that something is amiss and swam to the other side of the river and slipped away.

He could not help but sighed. Lu Buwei will survive this episode. If Zhou Zihen and the divers are apprehended, there will be sufficient evidence to nail Lu Buwei. Despite all his work, he cannot change the course of history. But what role does he play in this thing called fate?

Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei are invited to join the banquet again. Lu Gong and the other two generals are already seated at their tables.

Ji Yanran and the other ladies were overjoyed to see their

beloved husband return safely. Even the aloof Qin Qing smiled sweetly at him.

All the officials kneeled down and paid their respects to Xiao Pan, pledging their loyalty to him. Xiao Pan is so overwhelmed that his face is totally red and he toasted them in return.

Xiang Shaolong is comforted. After tonight's event, Xiao Pan has secured an infallible position in the hearts of the people of Qin.

Jing Shan came up and reported: "Lu Chan managed to slip away. The people receiving him are from outside the capital and are definitely not Lu Buwei's family warriors."

Xiang Shaolong was forced to accept this fact. With Mo Ao's intelligence, they will not leave behind any traces of evidence.

Thinking about this, he could not help but looked towards Lu Buwei.

Mo Ao has been carted away and Guan Zhongxie is expressionless. However, Lu Buwei is acting as per normal and drinking happily with Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. Xiang Shaolong gives him two thumbs up for his acting skills.

Shouting at the top of their voices, Lord Gaoling and his military leaders were dragged into the centre of the banquet ground. They were tightly bounded by strong ropes and were forced to kneel down by Lord Changping and the palace guards.

Everyone became silent.

Firstly, Xiao Pan asked Zhu Ji for instructions. Zhu Ji sighed: “You do as you deem fit.” Lord Gaoling’s hair is untied and in a mess. With traces of blood on his clothes, his eyes were burning with hatred as he stared viciously at Xiao Pan.

A palace guard was about to press his head down in a kowtow when Xiao Pan stopped him. He plainly state: “You tried to rebel and scheme against the rightful King. Lord Gaoling, do you realise your mistake?”

Lord Gaoling loudly scolded: “Pei! Since when is a bastard like you fit to call yourself...”

Before he finished his sentence, Lord Changping who is standing beside him stuffed a piece of cloth into his mouth. A palace guard on the other side hit him heavily on his back. Lord Gaoling moaned in pain and fell down to the ground. It was a pathetic sight.

Acting as if nothing has happened, Xiao Pan faced Lu Buwei and asked: “Premier Mentor, what is the punishment for staging a rebellion?”

Lu Buwei generously state: “It is punishable by death. The Crown Prince should lock him up behind bars and announce his crimes to the people. Then, you can proceed to execute him.”

With everyone solemnly watching him, Xiao Pan nodded: “Premier Mentor speaks with reason. But there is no need to wait any longer before we execute them. Men! Bring all of them to the shore of River Jing and cut off their heads at once. Do not bury their bodies but let them lay exposed in the wilderness and be ravaged by wild beasts.”

Nobody expected this teenage Crown Prince to be so ruthless. After all, Lord Gaoling is a member of the royal family. If not for King Zhuangxiang, he would have been the King of Qin. Now, he has to die in the wild without a proper burial place. Everyone is shocked and subdued by the dominating character of this future Qin Shi Huang.

Lord Gaoling raised his head in surprise. As his hands were bound and his mouth was stuffed, he is unable to protest.

Some of his conspirators were shaking with fear while some others have fainted on the spot.

Under Lord Changping’s command, the palace guards dragged Lord Gaoling and his men out of the defending gates to be executed.

Maintaining his strict expression, Xiao Pan coldly added: “Arrest every family member of the rebels. The males shall be sent to work in the western territories and the females shall be palace maids. Every descendant of Lord Gaoling is to be arrested and executed without pardon. Let this serve as a warning to those people who harbour ill intentions.”

Every Qin official was as quiet as a dormouse and it was so quiet you can even hear a pin drop.

Xiang Shaolong felt that Xiao Pan is too high-handed but when he noticed that everyone behaved normally, he realised that it is a common practice for the family members to be punished together with the criminal.

If it was Lord Gaoling who captured Xiao Pan, Xiao Pan and himself will suffer a similar fate.

There is nothing more that he can say.

This punishment method is one of the ways to maintain law and order. With such a harsh punishment, everyone will be a law-abiding citizen.

Xiao Pan continued: “The person who scored the most merit this time is Huan Qi who has just joined the Cavalry Army. He was the one who discovered the enemies’ scheming which allowed me to prepare an effective counterattack. Now that we have successfully triumphed over our enemies, we must not forget his contribution. I will bypass the standard protocol and promote him to the rank of General. General Wang Jian did a good job of grooming him and also accomplished several feats in the northern war against the Xiong Nu. He shall be promoted to Great General with immediate effect.”

Xiao Pan has proven himself by quelling the rebellion. Now that

he is promoting the men who have fought well, there is no way Zhu Ji can intervene. Lu Buwei can only wallow in self misery.

Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang He have been consulted regarding these promotions. Obviously, they will not voice any opposition.

Huan Qi is now busy chasing after the remnants of the rebel army with Jing Jun. For the time being, this wonderful news has yet to reach him.

Xiao Pan words are partly true. His real motive is to adopt Xiang Shaolong's suggestion and use Huan Qi to set up a special elite force that will report directly to himself. In the future, this will assist him greatly in countering Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

Originally, Xiao Pan wanted to promote Xiang Shaolong to be a Great General too but was rejected by Xiang Shaolong because he lacked military contributions.

He is not interested in power and authority.

Xiao Pan continued: "General Huan Qi shall stay in the vicinity of the capital and construct training camps. He shall be tasked with training new soldiers that are drafted from all over Qin. This will aid us greatly when we set out to unite the world in the future. Wang Ben is a valiant fighter who killed the first twenty enemy soldiers. I will promote him to be General Huan Qi's Assistant General and they will work hand in hand to serve the nation. Empress, Premier Mentor, Lieutenant General, Great Generals and Officials, does anyone have anything to add?"

Zhu Ji can see that her precious son has finally grown up but the gap between them is widening day by day.

Xiang Shaolong is the main mastermind behind tonight's event and Lu Buwei has a part to play too with his scheming. However, both men did not tell her anything about their plans. Feeling dejected and lost, she cannot help but looked over to Lao Ai. Is he the only man that she can really depend on?

Xiao Pan repeated himself: "Empress! I am waiting for your instructions."

Suddenly, Zhu Ji felt that she is very tired of everything. She shook her head: "Crown Prince can make your own decisions."

Lu Buwei took this chance to cut in: "The Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry are more than enough to defend the capital. Why do we need another army? Will the Crown Prince please reconsider."

In his heart, Lu Gong is cursing: Damn you bitch! He chortled: "Premier Mentor's words have highlighted the problem. The Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry are limited to the capital defences. If there is any trouble in the vicinity of the capital, we will be at a loss. Take the uprising of the three eastern provinces as an example. All the Qin soldiers near the capital have been deployed away, providing Lord Gaoling with this opportunity to ambush us. It is absolutely necessary to create this new army."

Xu Xian added: “Now, the three allied states are hostile towards us. We have to face the harsh reality that we may have to fight them along the official roads. With this new army, we will not be afraid of any uprisings in the new eastern provinces.”

Lu Buwei was flabbergasted.

This is his biggest flaw. He is an academic official. Without Meng Ao by his side, he is not fit to debate military matters with these Generals who have years of military experience.

The support of the Generals is extremely crucial for Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan concluded: “It shall be decided then. Commander Xiang, receive your order.”

Everyone was startled. What does Crown Prince want Xiang Shaolong to do?

Only Lu Gong, Li Si and the rest of the Great Generals know what is going on.

Xiang Shaolong left his table and went forward to Zhu Ji's and Xiao Pan's table, kneeling down.

Xiao Pan retrieved a token of authority which a palace guard helped to pass to Xiang Shaolong. He instructed: “Lord Gaoling managed to assemble an army with over ten thousand men and even brought them so close to Xianyang City. I am sure there is

someone helping him in the background. I want Commander Xiang to leave the capital and investigate this matter. If you discover any men who are supporting the rebels, kill them without mercy. In your absence, Assistant Commander Jing will temporarily assume your main duties.”

In a loud voice, Xiang Shaolong accepted his command.

Xiao Pan barked: “The banquet shall end now. My dear Subjects, please have a good rest in the meantime. When the bridges have been repaired, we will go to the River Jing shore and await the night hunters to come back with their catch.”

When Xiao Pan is sending Zhu Ji off, all the officials knelt down respectfully and submissively.

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong is moved to tears.

All his years of hard work has finally paid off.

From tonight onwards, Xiao Pan will build his legacy as Qin Shi Huang.

The authority of the Qin Court is no longer in the hands of the officials. Even Lu Buwei has to submit to him.

When he comes back after killing Tian Dan, he will sow discord between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei, making them fight among themselves.

After all that he has gone through, he should finally enjoy some peace of mind.

Book 15 Chapter 05 – Mysterious Attackers

By the time the hunters returned from their night hunt, Xiang Shaolong has left with Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and the Eighteen Guardians. They rushed toward the Qin / Chu border to liaise with Teng Yi.

Since the death of Zhao Qian and the four maids, this is the first time he is enjoying true happiness.

Mo Ao is gone; Xiao Pan has the full support of the Qin military and even impressed the people of Qin in a successful battle.

Because of Lao Ai, Zhu Ji will be less supportive of Lu Buwei.

With these turn of events, he should finally enjoy some days of peace.

However, there is still a scar left in his mind.

When he left with Zhao Qian and the other ladies on the last mission, he did not anticipate any danger to befall him. Out of a sudden, his nightmare began. It was only tonight when he defeated Lu Buwei soundly can he finally catch his breath.

Still, he was fearful of the uncertain future.

Following the traveling path he had decided earlier with Teng Yi,

they traveled as quickly as they can for seven days and seven nights. They crossed the Eastern Ridge and the terrain has become flatter. On this night, they set up camp and lit a campfire beside a small river.

Somehow, Xiang Shaolong is feeling very restless. He did not have any appetite for the food hunted by Wu Yan Zhu, Jing Shan and the other Guardians.

Ji Yanran was surprised: “Is something bothering Hubby?”

Zhao Zhi smiled: “Are you thinking about Sister Fang and Bao’er?”

Xiang Shaolong eyed the cackling fire suspiciously and replied in a deep voice: “No. I am feeling very uneasy recently. In fact, this feeling came about when we left Xianyang City. Tonight, this feeling is even stronger than before.”

Ji Yanran’s face lost some colour and she warned: “Hubby is not an ordinary man. If you have this feeling, then something must be amiss.” She turned to the Guardians who are cooking some wild animals over the fire and asked: “Did you guys hear what he said?”

Jing Shan stood up: “Let’s spy on our surroundings.”

The Guardians respected Xiang Shaolong as if he is a deity. When they heard his words, everyone raised their self-awareness and left accordingly.

After the Guardians have left, Zhao Zhi remarked: “Logically speaking, there should not be anyone following us, especially Lu Buwei’s men. Little Jun and the Palace Guards should be watching them closely and it is almost impossible for them to slip away and attack us. This is a complicated issue.”

Ji Yanran gently asked: “Is it possible that Hubby’s restlessness is due to other reasons? From the way it looks, it doesn’t seem like anyone is following us!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I am not a superhuman who can detect things that are happening far away from me. But after so many years of living in a dangerous environment, I am extra sensitive to ambushes or stalkers. We will have our answer soon enough. Jing Shan’s nose is better than a hunting dog’s nose.”

Zhao Zhi weakly leaned into his bosom, whispering: “I am scared!”

Xiang Shaolong understands that she is thinking about that terrible night when Zhao Qian was killed. Hugging her shoulder to calm her fears down, he assured: “With me around, no one can harm you.”

Ji Yanran looked up to the dark sky and softly commented: “If there is really somebody following us, then it is a valid reason for Hubby to feel extra restless tonight. After all, this area is generally flat and...”

AH!

A tragic cry shattered the tranquility of the wilderness, proving that Xiang Shaolong's worries are not unfounded.

Zhao Zhi's countenance changed: "Isn't that Wu Da's voice?"

Wu Da is one of the Guardians. He is known for his nimble limbs and his quick-wittedness. If he was ambushed just like this; either the enemy is very highly-skilled or the trap is very well-laid.

Xiang Shaolong and the two ladies jumped up on their feet. They proceeded to arm themselves and disengaged the horses from one another.

They dared not put out the fire or they will lose touch with the rest of the Guardians.

The burning fire serves to remind them about the impending danger because they are now the targets of some mysterious attackers.

Until now, they have no information about the enemies.

Suddenly, the Guardians returned in a state of panic and their faces are filled with grief. Wu Yan Zhu is carrying Wu Da on his back. Wu Da was heavily injured with one arrow through his back and another arrow through the side of his body. He was breathing laboriously and his clothes are soaked with blood.

An emotional Zhao Zhi began to cry after seeing the usually energetic Wu Da so badly injured.

Wu Shu is about to put out the fire when Xiang Shaolong stopped him. He instructed: “Yanran, please stop the bleeding first. Break the arrow but do not touch the arrow head.”

Before he finished speaking, Yanran is already trying her best to save Wu Da.

Wu Yan Zhu and the other Guardians are close to Wu Da and their relationships are like real brothers. Their eyes turned red and they spat at the fire which betrayed their location.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this is a matter of life and death. He cannot afford to be careless. He calmly asked: “Who are they and how did they attacked you?”

Everyone’s attention focused on Wu Yan Zhu. Apparently, he and Wu Da are a team and they ran into the enemies together while the others did not run into any enemies.

Wu Yan Zhu took a deep breath and suppressed his grief, explaining: “Wu Da and I headed to the east. Just when we wanted to climb a cliff and look down from there, the arrows were fired at us.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed. The road to the east is the direction

to Chu. In this case, the mysterious attackers may have surrounded them completely.

But it is pitch black now. He is certain that the enemy will not dare to attack them before the sun comes up tomorrow.

When the sun comes up tomorrow, they will all be killed.

Zhao Zhi suddenly cried out even harder. Everyone was shaken and looked down at Wu Da. True enough, Wu Da has stopped breathing.

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave and prevented the Guardians from hugging Wu Da's corpse in grief. He hollered: "Let me do something first!"

He thought hard about emergency resuscitation in the 21st century.

Wu Da has always been strong and fit. Moreover, the arrow did not penetrate any of his organs. He has stopped breathing because he has lost too much blood and the heart has temporarily stopped pumping. It may be still possible to resuscitate him.

First, he laid Wu Da on a piece of flat ground and strongly pressed down on the area where his heart is. After several pushes, Wu Da's body shook once and he resumed breathing and his heart resumed pumping. In the end, Xiang Shaolong did not have to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Ji Yanran and everybody else were completely blown away. Exchanging glances at one another, no one can believe what they just witnessed. They even forgot to cheer at Wu Da's recovery.

Xiang Shaolong took out a dagger and warned Wu Da: "You mustn't fall asleep. If you do, you'll be dead."

Hardening his heart, he dug the arrowheads out with his dagger. Ji Yanran quickly applied some medicine to stop the bleeding.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and instructed his men to cut a few young trees to construct a stretcher. The Guardians saw that he can even bring a dead man back to life and can feel their confidence soaring. They viewed Xiang Shaolong like an immortal from heaven and their fighting spirit increased dramatically.

After Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi bandaged Wu Da's wounds, they came to Xiang Shaolong's side. Zhao Zhi was full of admiration: "Hubby is full of miracles. You can even bring a dead man back to life!"

Ji Yanran smiled: "I have seen so many of his outrageous methods that this is nothing new."

Her eyes scanning the pitch black surroundings, she whispered: "We have neglected somebody! Can Hubby guess who it is?"

Xiang Shaolong was pondering how to escape this impending

attack. Hearing her words, he guessed: “Du Bi!”

Zhao Zhi exclaimed: “Ah!”

Ji Yanran deduced: “It must be him. Lord Gaoling’s men and horses can reach such a short distance away from Xianyang City without any detection. It must be Du Bi supporting him.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization: “Now I understand. All along, he is watching from the sidelines. If Lord Gaoling is successful, he will try to reap some side benefits. Now, he thought that we are really out to look for rebels working with Lord Gaoling. He took this opportunity to trail us and tried to find a chance to kill us.”

Ji Yanran softly sighed: “Since we never considered about this possibility, we have been too careless and ended up in the present situation. But I am certain that there are not too many men on our trail but they are all expert fighters.”

Zhao Zhi’s face turned pale and she bit her lip: “It will be daylight in another four hours. What shall we do?”

Wu Yan Zhu and Jing Shan have constructed a stretcher and are using it to carrying Wu Da while waiting for Xiang Shaolong’s instructions.

Xiang Shaolong leaned over and kissed Ji Yanran’s face. He gladly commented: “Yanran’s words have saved all of us.”

He faced everyone and announced: “When the enemy tried to kill Wu Da with arrows, it is because they lacked manpower and cannot surround the forest to ambush us. They wanted to scare us into staying here.”

Everyone’s spirits lifted after hearing his words but were perplexed at the same time. It is pitch-dark everywhere. It is impossible for the enemy to attack them but it is equally impossible for them to escape because no one can see what is ahead of them.

Xiang Shaolong state in a deep voice: “If the enemy wishes to ambush us with limited soldiers, they will be based in high positions. We will slip away by walking in the river. Firstly, we will not lose our way and secondly, the high mud banks on both sides of the river can protect us from the enemies’ arrows.”

He then smiled: “Without any lights, what can they hit by shooting blindly into the darkness?”

With their horses, everyone walked down the river slowly. The river water is about waist deep.

In this kind of rigorous conditions, it has shown that their years of strict training have not gone to waste.

To prevent others from learning about the Wu Family Elite Army, eighty percent of their training is conducted during the night. Walking through the water in the dark is nothing to them.

It is even more challenging to have their horses following them obediently without a single sound.

Leading the way is Wu Shu and Jing Shan. They are holding onto a shield each in case of an attack and Jing Shan is the best wilderness navigator. He is the best person to spy on the situation ahead of them.

Another two Guardians are in charge of ferrying the wounded Wu Da while another Guardian is leading the horses. Everyone else including Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi are holding their crossbows in their arms. In case of any confrontation, they will fire their arrows mercilessly.

After traveling for ten over miles without any interruption, everyone knows that the most crucial moment has come and raised their alertness.

Coincidentally, the river has flowed to some uneven ground and the water level rises and falls accordingly. The sounds of gushing water are able to cover the sounds of their wading.

They were surrounded by dense forests in all four directions. Although stars can be seen beyond the canopy of the trees, the river area is still pitch black. The air is filled with the stench of mud and rotting leaves.

With his animal-like instincts, Jing Shan continued to lead everyone forward.

After walking for another ten odd steps, the river bed sinks even lower and the mud banks are even higher as a result.

The trees here are even thicker than before and the stars are hidden from sight. Like a bunch of blind men, everyone is moving forward based on their intuition and sense of touch.

Right at this moment, strong coughing sounds can be heard on the left bank.

Everyone was shocked and immediately stopped moving and increased their guard.

Although they have anticipated that they will encounter some enemies, they did not expect it to be so sudden and without any warning at all.

They are stuck below in the river. If the enemies fire their arrows down at them, no one will be able to stay alive.

All it takes is for one of the horses to whinny and everyone will be dead.

Luckily, they cannot see the enemy and the enemy cannot see them too.

From the right bank, a voice scolded: “Are you trying to scare me

to death? All the spirits and ghosts would have been frightened off by your coughing.”

On the left bank, someone softly laughed: “All of you are intimidated by Xiang Shaolong and are so easily agitated. After we have shot his men, I am sure that he will not dare to wander around recklessly. Moreover, we have laid horse-tripping ropes in all the strategic locations, including the river.”

Still standing motionlessly in the river, everyone was feeling extremely nervous but was relieved at the same time.

While the enemies were talking and distracted, Jing Shan used a dagger and felt his way under the water. He cut three horse-tripping ropes in succession and cleared the obstacles away.

Just as they were about to continue moving, footsteps can be heard from the forests on the left side.

In a short while, an enemy messenger arrived and announced: “Orders from Master Bai. Tomorrow morning, we will attack them according to plan. Whoever killed Xiang Shaolong will be rewarded with five hundred taels of gold and whoever can catch Talented Lady Ji alive will be rewarded with one thousand taels of gold. Everybody clear?”

In the river, everyone was stunned. Ji Yanran’s body is actually worth twice as much as Xiang Shaolong’s life.

It is meaningless to debate with the enemy over the reward amount. With Jing Shan leading the way, they left the enemies further and further behind.

At daybreak, they were only two miles away from the danger zone.

They climbed up a little hill and observed the enemy from afar.

Wu Da's condition has stabilized and everyone's spirits rose.

The Guardians stood guard in all four corners while Jing Shan climbed up a tree and analyzed the surroundings.

Below the hill is a vast expanse of grasslands and there are trees all over. Once in a while, the river can be seen flowing among the grasslands and flocks of birds are flying across the orange sky, forming a colourful and vibrant panorama.

Xiang Shaolong and his two pretty wives were leaning against a large rock, sighing that the scenery is indeed beautiful but they are not in the mood to enjoy it. Ji Yanran whispered to Xiang Shaolong: "Last night, the enemies mentioned that their leader is surnamed Bai. Among Du Bi's family warriors, there is a man named Bai Fei. He is well-known in Qin for his tracking and ambushing skills. Originally, he was a horse thief in the northlands but offended the King of the Xiong Nu so he escaped south and started working for Du Bi. If this is the man who is ambushing us, then we are in deep trouble."

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: “Why is Yanran so familiar with Du Bi’s men?”

Ji Yanran kissed him lightly and gently replied: “I am concerned for you! I am helping you to do these things that you are too busy to do. Don’t simply dismiss Sister Qin as a simple woman. She is actually very well-informed about everything happening inside and outside Qin. This information about Du Bi is from her sources.”

Xiang Shaolong glanced at their campsite last night and decided: “If this is the case, we now have a chance to ambush Bai Fei. He will be the man that is leading the group chasing towards us sooner or later. We must present him with a shower of arrows and this will take care of all our worries.”

As the morning sun is showing more and more of itself from the east, sounds of human talking and horses neighing can be heard from afar. A group of roughly five hundred men are riding through the dense woods towards them.

The men are split into five groups and the leading group is the smallest one with about fifty men and their speed is incredibly fast.

What is even more startling is that they only spent a short amount of time and managed to determine that they have traveled down the river and are now chasing in their direction.

But this is something they anticipated as Bai Fei is an expert horse thief.

Ji Yanran is using a special bow that needs to be supported with her leg. The shooting range is one thousand feet but as they are shooting down from a higher ground, the range is even further.

Since Bai Fei will lead the chase and be the first rider, they will know who exactly to shoot.

As their enemies approached them, everyone's heart is thumping wildly and they are having difficulty breathing.

If they cannot kill Bai Fei who is the tracking expert, coupled with their superior numbers and highly-skilled fighters, it will be an extremely precarious situation for them. Additionally, they have the burden of Wu Da who is injured.

Over the two mile chase, Bai Fei only stopped three times briefly before they entered their firing range. Because of the thick vegetation, they did not have the chance to get a clear firing target.

Bai Fei is indeed an extraordinary man. He weaved in and out of the forests, making it hard for anyone to shoot him.

Bai Fei the professional horse thief cum assassin must have some true abilities to be able to survive until today.

Right now, Bai Fei happened to stop in a forest clearing. Without hesitation, Ji Yanran fired her arrow. The moment the bow sounded, Bai Fei evaded to one side and the arrow brushed past the

horse and hit the grass below.

The shooting mechanisms rang out continuously.

Wu Yan Zhu and his fellow Guardians sent their arrows flying non-stop at Bai Fei. Bai Fei's horse may have been struck down but the man himself has disappeared among the trees.

Bai Fei must have a keen sense of sight, smell and hearing.

The enemies are thrown into disarray. They quickly dismounted from their horses and hid among the trees and bushes.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.

He will now have to play a challenging cat-and-mouse game with them in this wilderness.

If he let his guard down, this will be his final resting place.

Book 15 Chapter 06 – Borrowing A Raft

The warhorse let out a long grunt and its front legs kneeled down before it collapsed on the ground, throwing Zhao Zhi onto a grass patch. Xiang Shaolong and everyone hurriedly dismounted and helped an exhausted Zhao Zhi up. Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to release Wu Da who is tied to another horse and could not help but feel a huge sense of loss. For three days and three nights, they had been riding non-stop but were still unable to shake off their pursuers. Now, the worst-case scenario had happened: Their horses were beginning to break down.

Far ahead of them were the Qin Ridges which were made up of several ridges intertwining between one and another. The more he looked at them, the lower his spirits sank. But he knew if they managed to reach there, their chances of survival would increase tremendously, unlike the flatlands where there was no place to hide. Regrettably, even with fresh horses, they would need at least three days and three nights of endless riding. Assessing the long distance between themselves and the Qin Ridges, everyone could not help but feel dejected.

Jing Shan who was spying behind them came back and reported: “The first enemy soldier has been sighted about five miles behind us and their riding speed is decreasing. This is so infuriating. We have already laid some traps to distract or mislead them but Bai Fei has seen through all of them.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling lost, so he went over to accompany Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi who were applying new medication to Wu Da’s wounds. Ji Yanran pulled Xiang Shaolong to one side and advised: “Wu Da’s body is burning hot and he is delirious. If we

continue to ride non-stop like this, I am afraid he will not be able to make it to the Qin Ridges alive.”

With all these problems plaguing him, Xiang Shaolong glanced over to the Qin Ridges again. The magnificent ridges numbering by the hundreds are carved by the wonders of Mother Nature. If they can reach there safely, they can engage the enemy in a series of hit and run attacks as they made their way to meet up with Teng Yi. But in order to hide from their pursuers, they had strayed from their original route. Nobody was actually sure where they were exactly.

Ji Yanran noticed him staring at the Qin Ridges and understood his intentions. She pointed to a unique snow-capped peak and explained: “If I am not wrong, that should be the first peak of the Qin Ridges known as Mount Taibai. As a result, we have gone off course for almost a hundred miles. No wonder we did not see any signs of Second Brother!”

Even under such depressing circumstances, this top beauty can still maintain her cheerful demeanour and excellent disposition. Listening to her assuring words and pleasant voice, Xiang Shaolong calmed down and gathered his fighting spirit. Instructing everyone to take a rest, he pulled Ji Yanran up a small hill and scanned their surroundings.

As the sun slowly set behind the Qin Ridges, thousands of its rays shone across the plains. In the northeast, the enemies were also exhausted and had stopped chasing. Once in a while, sounds of horses neighing could be heard from their direction.

On their left, a river was flowing from the northwest direction

towards the east. Ji Yanran remarked: "I heard that there is a magical fountain on Mount Taibai. The water temperature is high enough to cook food and is known for their healing properties. If we can get there, there will be hope for Wu Da." Xiang Shaolong affirmed: "That is called a hot spring. The water is hot because of the lava beneath a dormant volcano and it carries a large amount of minerals which gives it healing properties."

Ji Yanran was stunned: "What is a dormant volcano and what are minerals?" Xiang Shaolong knew that he had said too much. Hugging her shoulder, he pacified: "I will explain to you later. Our priority now is to escape to the Qin Ridges."

Pointing to the river flowing towards the Qin Ridges, he asked: "If Yanran is Bai Fei and you saw such a river which makes traveling extremely convenient, what would you do?" Ji Yanran's eyes lit up and replied: "I would be afraid that you will build rafts and sail down the river."

Xiang Shaolong asked again: "What will you do about it?" Ji Yanran exclaimed: "I will attack on both fronts. I will send some men to continue chasing on foot and build rafts at the same time. On the rafts, I will give chase down river. If we can sail ahead of you, we can then attack you from the front and the back simultaneously. It will be a hopeless situation for you."

From afar, a group of birds flew up into the air in fear and circled the air for a while. Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Based on Yanran's suggestion to use rafts to escape, we will win a decisive battle tonight." Ji Yanran was astounded: "Do you really want to build rafts to escape? There are not many trees here and we probably need the whole night to build enough rafts to ferry so many men and horses. By then, the enemies would have attacked us."

Xiang Shaolong's hand snaked down to her tender waist and pinched her playfully. He romantically smiled: "I thought we are telepathically connected? Why can't Talented Lady Ji guess what I am thinking about?" Ji Yanran let out a whine and leapt into his arms. Using all her strength to hug him, she charmingly smiled: "Telepathically connected, this is the most romantic sentence I have ever heard."

However, she did understand that after her beloved husband has spent the last three days running away from their pursuers like a wild animal, he had at least regained his confidence. The attacks have come about too suddenly and he was temporary lost due to his lack of preparation.

But in this life and death situation, Xiang Shaolong finally summoned his fighting spirit. The moon tonight is slighter bigger than the moon three days ago. However, it is still quite dark as there are many clouds blocking the moon in the sky.

The forest is filled with a strong killing aura. Xiang Shaolong and his men are prone on the opposite shore some distance away. All their crossbows are loaded as they waited for the enemy to arrive. The warhorses have been led to another area so as to give them as much rest as possible. When the moon is high above them, frightened birds take to the skies, showing that the enemies are slowly approaching their positions.

By now, their horses are exhausted too and cannot move any more. The enemies are attacking them on foot. Some sounds can be heard from the river and true enough, ten over rafts flowed down the river. Bai Fei is really attacking them on both fronts.

Because of the river separating them from the ground invaders, Xiang Shaolong is not worried about them. Moreover, he faked some woodcutting activity half a mile away from the opposite river bank, misleading the enemy that they are building rafts. The ignorant ground invaders will focus their assault in that direction and by the time they realise that it is a trick, Xiang Shaolong and the others would already have enough time to deal with the enemies on the rafts.

If they had tried to compete with the enemies on raft-building, they will be seriously disadvantaged because of their lesser numbers. It is proven after witnessing the enemies' ability to construct ten over rafts within several hours. Although the enemies numbered more than five hundred, they need everyone to participate in the raft building to achieve such efficiency. The moment the rafts were built, they set off immediately without any rest. In addition, they have just finished riding for three days and three nights, and must be terribly exhausted. Compared to Xiang Shaolong and his men who have had several hours of rest, they are at a disadvantage.

Xiang Shaolong need not say anything as everyone automatically pointed their crossbows at the enemy rafts. From their higher ground, the arrow attack will be much more effective against the invaders below them. There may only be twenty of them but they are situated nearly a hundred feet above the shore. With large rocks and trees protecting them, they are in a state of invincibility.

Human silhouettes can be seen on the rafts. All the attackers are prone down with the men surrounding the rafts holding up protective shields and the men in the centre of the rafts holding onto bows that were already mounted with arrows. Xiang

Shaolong and his men kept quiet and allowed the rafts to sail nearer to them. Five feet, four feet, three feet...

When the first raft has entered a close firing range, two men on both sides took out a long pole and prevented the raft from colliding with the huge rocks along the shore. This stretch of the river is filled with giant rocks and the current is quite strong. That is also the reason Xiang Shaolong chose this part of the river to lay his ambush. In the dense forests on the opposite shore, loud battle cries can be heard and fire torches were being lit, illuminating the forest.

Xiang Shaolong knew that it is time to attack. He pulled the trigger and his arrow sliced through the air. On the first raft, the enemy soldier who is holding onto the long pole gave a tragic cry and fell into the river with the arrow embedded through his body, signaling the beginning of the river battle.

The enemies did not panic but hurriedly raised their shields above their heads and shot their arrows blindly towards both sides of the river. This was exactly what Xiang Shaolong wanted them to do. He did not fire his crossbow anymore but sat back and watched the show.

OH!

Awful sounds filled the air as everyone on the first raft is thrown into the air and eventually landed in the river. Xiang Shaolong had tied a few thick vines across the river. As the raft is traveling at quite a fast speed, everyone was swept off the raft when they collided into the vines.

The second round of arrows was finally fired. The men on the second raft met with the same fate and were all knocked down into the river, losing their grip over their shields and weapons at the same time. Arrows rained into the river and the river is filled with fresh and blood and tragic cries. The two rafts continue to flow down the river.

The men on the third raft saw that something was amiss and hurriedly rowed to shore. However, the fourth raft behind them could not stop in time and crashed into the third raft, sending more men falling into the river. Those men still on the rafts are stumbling all over one another.

More arrows rained down. The men are simply too tired to defend themselves and were felled by the arrows. The river is not very wide and the two rafts are blocking the majority of the sailing route. Behind them, more than ten rafts crashed into one another in a chain collision. The enemies are in a state of panic and the air is filled with cries of death and pain. Those who are still alive tried their best to run away on shore or swim away in the river.

Another two empty rafts flowed down the river. Xiang Shaolong knew that it is time. He signalled his men and led them away from their ambush area. After running as fast as they can for half a mile, they met up with Wu Guang and Wu De who are waiting for them at the downstream. Wu De happily reported: "We managed to hook four rafts which are sufficient for our own escape."

Everyone boarded the rafts with their horses and sailed down the river gallantly. Zhao Zhi kissed Xiang Shaolong joyously. Ji Yanran

sighed: “This trick of borrowing the rafts from the enemy is truly brilliant and credit goes to Hubby. This time, unless Bai Fei can really fly (Fei=fly), there is no way he can catch up to us.”

Xiang Shaolong looked up at the star-studded sky and smiled: “Don’t forget that they still have another ten odd rafts. Assuming that each raft can hold fifteen men, over a hundred men can still continue to pursue us. Luckily, each one of us is capable of fighting ten men. Let’s imagine that they are all expert fighters and each one of us is capable of fighting five of them. Moreover, they are all very tired by now. We shall teach them another lesson at the Qin Ridges. After that, we can all have a good rest and enjoy the scenery of the Qin Ridges. Isn’t life wonderful?”

Beside him, all the Guardians were taken aback as they did not expect Xiang Shaolong to continue his revenge plan after just scoring a huge victory. Clenching their fists, they realised that he is right. For the past few days, the enemies have been causing them more troubles than they could have imagined.

In a new twist of thinking, everyone is now hoping for the enemies to give chase. The forests are very dense along the way to the Qin Ridges. A three day’s journey is completed in one night.

Early in the morning, they abandoned their rafts and climbed onto shore. After walking some distance away, they settled Wu Da and the horses down in a location and left Zhao Zhi and Wu Guang behind to watch over them. The rest of the men returned to the shore and loaded their crossbows in anticipation of the arrival of the enemies. Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran are comfortably sitting down together behind a pile of rocks. With their shoulders

touching, they could not help but feel a strong sense of love.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Ji Yanran's eyes were shining brightly and asked: "What is my pretty wife thinking about?" Ji Yanran nestled her head on his shoulder and wistfully replied: "I was thinking what if I had insisted on staying single and reclusive? I would still be stuck in Daliang leading a boring life and pining for you every day. That would have been a tragedy." Xiang Shaolong was moved: "I would also suffer for my whole life without you as you are such an important part of me."

Ji Yanran mused: "I don't think so. Men are only concerned about their careers and are fickle minded by nature. You need not pacify me. Xiang Shaolong mocked: "It doesn't help if you continue to think this way. Moreover, every word that I said are my honest feelings. Don't forget that the reward for you was twice for that of mine. Ji Yanran angrily replied, "Di Bi is such a despicable cad. Not only did he want to kill you, he also wanted to insult your wife's modesty. In the future I will settle this score with him."

At this time, a secret bird whistle signal was sounded. The enemy has finally come. It may be due to the fact that several rafts had been damaged in the encounter last night that there were only seven rafts that came into view. There were twenty men on each raft, and the heavy load caused the rafts to be heavily submerged in the water. As a result, the rafts were sailing at a slow speed. The rafts had just made a turn when they crashed straight into the three rafts that Xiang Shaolong had purposely left behind to block their way. It was a chaotic scene as all the seven rafts piled into one another. Three of the rafts sank immediately and it was a pitiful scene for the enemy. Amidst all the confusion, the enemies jumped into the water and tried to swim towards the shore. Xiang

Shaolong issued a single command and from all four directions the guardians who were hiding in ambush began firing their arrows. As Xiang Shaolong had predicted, these invaders had not slept a wink for the past three days and had been working throughout the night. With their low morale compounded by this sudden attack, everyone was only interested in running for their lives and were not interested in defending themselves or putting up a fight. Fresh blood dyed the river red.

Those men on the shore could not avoid the incoming arrows, much less those in the water. In the blink of an eye over thirty men were shot dead while the rest tried to escape by swimming upriver. In all the confusion, no one could tell which of the enemies was Bai Fei. Xiang Shaolong unsheathed Bloodwave and leaped out towards the few lucky enemies who managed to climb up the river shore. It may be due to the fact that the enemy was in awe of Xiang Shaolong's famous name, the moment they saw him, they lost their will to fight and jumped straight back into the water, joining those who were trying to swim upriver. It was a very chaotic scene. The intense battle they expected did not happen at all. Xiang Shaolong restrained the guardians from pursuing the enemies and they left the area. The four days of murderous pursuit had finally come to a conclusion.

Book 15 Chapter 07 - Ferocious Wolves Of The Remote Mountains

High in the Qinling mountain range, springs flow into mountain streams and the vegetation is lush. Yet most remarkable is the lake on top of the mountain that prompts one to imagine how countless years ago, as the glaciers receded, the waters collected in the glacial valley to create this miraculous phenomenon. Higher up, the climate turned cold and piercing winds came in waves. The pine trees appeared as if they were floating in a sea of clouds.

Since the party has strayed countless miles from their planned route, they are well and truly lost. Their energy and determination have nonetheless increased since inflicting heavy damage on the enemy. More so, their fear of further pursuit by the enemies' potential reinforcements prompted them to enter the mountains, holding on to the hope that once they've crossed the Qinling range, they would be at the Chu border. They can then decide what to do next at that point.

They climbed and meandered upwards till dusk before setting up camp in a misty valley. Everyone put on their leather coats against the cold, and started getting busy. Some of the guardians cut firewood and started a fire while the rest gathered fodder for the horses. Ji Yanran the two ladies focused on changing Wu Da's dressing. Wu Da awoke to find that he had escaped danger and was moved to tears. The mood of the camp improving greatly.

At this point, Jing Shan and Wu Shu came back with a mountain deer they had hunted, and excitedly reported that they had found a hot spring, adding to everyone's excitement. Ji Yanran and Zhao

Zhi, without an ounce of restraint, ordered Jing Shan and Wu Guang to pick Wu Da up, and towed Xiang Shaolong towards the largest of the hot springs. Once they exited the valley, an amazing vista appeared before their eyes. Countless peaks faced them while plants bisected the landscape. A stream of steaming hot spring-water flowed from the valley mouth.

They traced the stream upwards and within two hundred steps, they found a large warm pool that was more than five feet wide* and than ten feet deep. Nestled in the mountains, it looked like the playground of immortals, fascinating and elegant. The spring flowed from a hole in the purplish-black granite, the sight of which caused everyone to relax.

"Ai yo!"

Zhao Zhi, who had been testing the water, suddenly pulled back her hand. She pouted, "Its so hot, how can we bathe in it?" Wu Shu respectfully suggested: "Let your servant get a bucket. We can draw some water and wait for it to cool, after which you can use it."

Ji Yanran dejectedly said: "If we cannot immerse our whole bodies, it will not be as thrilling."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Please do not fret, Talented Lady and Zhi Zhi. We have been going in the wrong direction. This spring will yet bear us fruit if we go downstream. As the water is exposed to the air for a longer period, the temperature will become more suitable." The two ladies brightened immediately and led the party downstream in search of a better spot.

Five hundred steps downstream, past a few piles of closely spaced rocks, they found a large emerald-green pool that looked like the face of a precious mirror embedded in a stone platform. Surrounded by dense trees, waters deep and clear, temperature lower than before, the two ladies cheered. They went to test the lake water and found that Xiang Shaolong was indeed right, the water was at a temperature suitable for humans. They were almost unable to resist jumping into the water immediately.

Wu Guang the two guardians set Wu Da down immediately. The two ladies took off his jacket and washed his wounds in the warm spring water. Xiang Shaolong noticed that his wounds were seventy to eighty percent healed and let out a sigh of relief: "As long as Little Da's fever recedes, he should be able to recover rapidly."

Wu Da moaned in comfort as his wounds were being washed by the hot water: "The two Madams, your servant feels like immersing himself into the water, is that ok?" Ji Yanran, face turning red, stood up facing Jing Shan the two guardians and said: "Did you hear your brother's request? Quickly come and serve him!" The two young men came immediately and undressed Wu Da. Xiang Shaolong and his wives then moved to the cliff at the far end of the pool. They leisurely sat down to enjoy the majestic mountain scenery.

The spring water flowed down into a thousand feet deep valley that was flanked by two steep cliffs topped by towering pine and cypress trees. The misty mountains against the glow of the setting sun made for an intoxicatingly beautiful scene. The two ladies speechlessly held on to Xiang Shaolong's two arms. Looking at the

scenery, Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is Yanran familiar with Chu's history?"

Ji Yanran flashed him an angry yet charming look, and refused to reply. Xiang Shaolong could not figure out what he had said wrong. Zhao Zhi came to the rescue, saying: "Hubby dares to question sister Yanran's learning? You deserve a beating!"

As Wu Da's moans of comfort floated over in the background, Xiang Shaolong turned his head and found that even Jing Shan and Wu Guang the two guardians had taken off their clothes and jumped into the pool, and were signaling to him their happiness. Speechless, he laughed: "My good wife the Talented Lady Ji, please forgive your hubby's deficient speech. Please, may I ask about Chu's glorious history as well as its present condition?"

Ji Yanran finally turned from anger to happiness, using her clear sweet voice, said: "Chu was indeed strong once, almost conquering all the fertile land in the South." At this point her eyes revealed a look of sadness, perhaps recalling her lost home, since it was a strong Chu that finally annexed her country Yue. Xiang Shaolong bent down and kissed her face, showing his tenderness, said: "The hills are still green, the setting sun is still red, whats gone is gone. Yanran should not think too much."

Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi were both touched. Xiang Shaolong knew he had once again plagiarized the work of latter people and signed bitterly. Ji Yanran said: "The hills are still green, the setting sun is still red. Such deep meaning that it causes one to lament. Who is able to express himself as deeply and as eloquently as hubby?"

Zhao Zhi is swept by the strong currents of emotion, and gushed: "Hubby sat facing the setting sun and spontaneously composed classic poetry. Zhi Zhi loves you to death!" Xiang Shaolong was ashamed in his heart and diverted the conversation: "Yanran has yet to explain Chu's present situation."

Ji Yanran's beautiful eyes dreamily looked into the distant setting sun, speaking as if she was sleep-talking, said: "During the final years of King Huai of Chu, Qin used Shang Yang's political reforms to strengthen itself and, using the policy of conquest with the Horizontal Alliance (clique of the School of Diplomacy during the Warring States Period), was successful for a season. Chu's Vertical Alliance to resist Qin proved a failure. Dan Yang and Lan Tian counties were both defeated by Qin. The greatest set-back was the ceding of six hundred miles of land near the two cities Han Zhong and Shang Yu. Wei also took the opportunity to attack Chu's neighboring country Zheng. It was not until Chu transformed their national policies that they began to have some victories amidst the losses. Is hubby interested in the details?"

Ji Yanran's exposition was clear and concise. Even though Xiang Shaolong did not know where Dan Yang, Lan Tian, Han Zhong and Shang Yu were, he could make a guess. Nodding his head, Shaolong said: "Since those three kids are not going to leave the pool so quickly, we should chat a bit more."

Zhao Zhi did not know that Wu Guang and Jing Shan were both naked in the water, couldn't help but looked over and turned her head back immediately with a blush. Xiang Shaolong secretly mused that if it was Zhao Ya or Shan Rou, they would not have been so shy and might even have joked about it. As he thought about the two women, he could not help feeling aroused.

Ji Yanran continued: "Once King Huai of Chu was tricked into coming to Qin and died of deprivation, Chu became even more of a failure. When King Qing Xiang ascended the throne, he no longer had the strength to expand towards the Northeast. He expanded into the Southwest instead, sending the Great General Zhuang along the Yuan river into Yunnan, out of Qie Lan and overcoming Ye Lang, creating a series of vassal states that abided by Chu's rule. Leveraging Yunnan's resources, Chu continued to push towards the Southwest, occupying large tracts of land from Ba and Shu countries, dominating territory on both sides of the river."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong begin to understand why the people of Chu continuously advance and retreat again when defending against Qin in Zhu - simply because they were too occupied to worry about the North.

Zhao Zhi asked curiously: "This should be a good thing for the people of Chu, why does sister Yanran think that this is both a boon and a bane?"

Ji Yanran replied: "Its definitely a good thing for a country to increase its territory, but this requires a large powerful military to establish and maintain. The people of Chu have been compelled by the people of Qin to shift their capital three times. After losing Wu and Qian counties to Qin, the lords of the prominent families in Chu took the opportunity to advance themselves as king. Yunnan, Ye Lang, Min Shan and Qie Lan provinces awaited the outcome and disregarded the capital. Although King Qing Xiang once counter-attacked Qin, wrestling back fifteen villages by the river as if it was a county, Chu remained under the constant battery of Qin. That is why today King Xiao Lie has to hand over the Na province

to Qin in order to sue for peace. Because of this, they had to cede half their territory and to move their capital Southeast to Ju Yang. After that, though they managed to exterminate the country of Lu, they continued to lose every time they were matched against Qin's troops. With Qin's influence continuously increasing, Chu had to move the capital Southeast yet again, this time towards Shou Chun, the territory West of Qing Yang falling into the palm of great Qin. Now they can only wait at death's door like a dog panting its last breath. That is why whenever Li Yuan talks to me about his plans to revive Chu, I can't even accept half a sentence he says."

Zhao Zhi said: "Li Yuan is so muddle-headed that he didn't realize that sister Yanran dislikes the Chu people most of all."

Ji Yanran replied: "You can't really say that either. Although there is some regret for the loss of my country, large countries have been swallowing smaller ones for the past few hundred years. No matter how the conquered countries argue against it, Chu is able to rise to the top because of its size, unifying more than half of the Southeastern territories. It has also had the most profound and long lasting influence on the civilizations in the central plains, especially after absorbing my country Yue, when its influence extended to the lower reaches of the Huai river, Si and the South China Sea."

She stopped for a while, then continued: "There isn't a country in the central plains whose culture is more colorful and beautiful than Chu's, the main reason being that after annexing a few tens of countries and tribes, all the different cultures have been mixed together through inter-marriage. However, this presents a problem politically. Even though Chu has the largest territory and

influence amongst the nations, King Xiao Lie is oftentimes unable to do as he pleases. Chu may seem to have revived and demonstrated resistance to Qin, but this belies unspeakable difficulties."

This really shows that an evening of conversation with his beloved is better than ten years of study. Xiang Shaolong's understanding has now extended to the whole of the presently nonexistent China. Thinking that the future Qin Shihuang whom Xiao Pan becomes will unify so many different countries, cultures, ethnic groups and talents under his banner, moving the distant heavens and broad earth, and thinking that he himself created this Qin Shihuang, Xiang Shaolong began to have an on-top-of-the-world feeling.

Amidst the sound of whistling, the three guardians including Wu Da had stopped bathing and were lighting a fire for them to replace the light from the fading twilight. The two ladies jumped up happily. Wu Da looked like someone born again, with a radiant glowing face, able to leave with just a supporting arm. This caused Xiang Shaolong to click his tongue in surprise. The hot spring now belonged to Xiang Shaolong and his wives. Looking at the two ladies remove their coats and open their belts, Xiang Shaolong became aroused, following them into the steamy water.

Climbing high and going low, uphill and downhill.

After walking in the Qinling Range for five days, everyone finally realized that they were lost. Even though the Qinling Range presented a majestic and mysterious mountain scene, they had lost

the desire to enjoy themselves. This was especially so with wild wolves howling near and far, as if they were continuously spying on the party, causing them to sleep uneasily. The only good news was Wu Da's gradual recovery such that he was able to move on his own, greatly reducing everyone's physical and psychological burden.

Xiang Shaolong has a lot of experience in route marching and is able to navigate using the sun, moon and stars. Heading Southeast, he calmed down a little, knowing that the day they crossed the Qinling Mountains, they would be somewhere on the Chu border. Over the next two days, after losing another two warhorses to the ravines, the terrain began to slope downwards with the climate getting warmer. They can no longer see the soul freezing ancient glacier. The treetops were now also free of snow, improving everyone's mood.

That night, they set up camp on a tableland beside a mountain. After dinner, everyone except the assigned sentries hid in their tents. With no incidents on the mountain, Xiang Shaolong relaxed and took to the two ladies like fish to water, feeling not the least bit lonesome. While Ji Yanyan is romantic and passionate when alone with Xiang Shaolong, she is very aloof in front of his other wives and maids, much less when living in the same room. Nonetheless, under the exceptional circumstances, and also because she had grown closer to Zhao Zhi, she released herself to enjoy the proximity of being wrapped in a tent, treating Xiang Shaolong to amorous pleasures.

While they were about to sleep in each other's arms, Zhao Zhi remarked: "Why is the wolf pack howling especially ferociously tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong turned his ear and listened carefully, realizing that the wolves' howling was concentrated below the slope to the South. While this raised his curiosity, leaving the warm sleeping pad and the touch of his beautiful wives and the tent was too much to ask. Laughing, he replied: "Maybe its because they know that the two smoothest, most tender-fleshed and tasty women hidden here are about to leave them, so they decided to organize a sending-off party!" The two ladies took the opportunity to be petulant and bunched up with him, putting up all kinds of x-rated scenes.

While they were at their busiest, a human shout was heard amidst the wolves' howls, causing a burst of frantic movement. Xiang Shaolong jumped up and hurriedly rushed out while urging both ladies to remain in the tent. The two ladies wanted to follow, but regretted they were powerless and hence remained obediently. As Xiang Shaolong threw himself out of the tent, all the men had also emerged from their tents. Xiang Shaolong instructed all except five men to remain guarding the camp. Clutching a torch, together with his five most capable men, Jing Shan, Jing Qi, Wu Guang, Wu Yan and Wu Shu, he rushed towards the sound of the human voice.

After climbing over a mountain top, everyone readied their crossbows and went down the long slope together. The wretched bugle of the howling wolves became clearer, indicating that the wolf pack was about to attack their target. They had not reached the bottom of the three hundred feet long slope when ten over wolves caught their scent and rushed over. Rushing at full speed, it seemed as if more than ten sets of electric bulbs were coming at them. The ghastly sets of white teeth and flaming green eyes horrified them. Six crossbow bolts were released. Six of the wild

wolves were hit and fell into the valley at the bottom of the slope with a miserable hiss. The remaining ten odd wolves fearlessly rushed them. There wasn't enough time to reload the crossbows. Everyone drew their swords and dashed headlong into the wolf pack.

Fresh blood splashed and the wild wolves cried miserably. The wild wolves were extremely quick-witted. Thankfully all six men were highly talented, occupying strategic locations. They still found it hard to cope nonetheless. Xiang Shaolong had just cleaved one of the wild wolves when another wolf followed by jumping up, aiming to bite his throat. Xiang Shaolong let out roar and kicked out his right leg towards the pit of the vicious wolf's stomach. The alert wolf responded by lowering its head and biting his boot. Thankfully, his sword was able to circle to the wolf's eyes, prompting the wolf to hiss and retreat. However, there were two fresh tooth marks on his boot, showing the sharpness of the wolf's teeth.

Jing Shan and Jing Qi were both accustomed to hunting and understood the situation best. They were not only fearless, but rushed forward with a shout, slashing with their swords and kicking with their legs. They used their superior ground to press their advantage while brandishing their torches, forcing the newly arrived wolves back. With an exclamation, Wu Guang was pushed to the ground by a wolf that rushed him from the side. This youngster who has always believed himself to be strong unleashed his aggression and threw the entire wolf down the slope into a pile of rocks. His sleeves were nonetheless ripped open and fresh blood flowed down. By the time Xiang Shaolong kicked away another wolf that was attacking Wu Guang, more than ten wolves had been killed, wounded or driven away. Taking a look around, he found that aside from Jing Shan, all the rest had been injured with bites

or claw marks. He couldn't help but be shocked at the ferocity and heroism of the wolves.

As the howl of the wolves had decreased noticeably, they heard a faint whoop from the bottom of the slope. Everyone was surprised at running into another human being in such a deep and remote mountain range. Their curiosity and sympathy aroused, they disregarded the violent wolves, formed up their ranks, loaded their crossbows and rushed downhill. The terrain at the bottom of the slope was flat and level, surrounded by mountains. Close to a hundred hungry wolves had gathered at the Eastern end, endlessly rushing up the rocky slope.

At the top of the slope was a nearly extinguished fire. They could only hear the sound of voices in the shadow of the fire, but could not see any of the people. The hungry wolves, seeing a rush of people approaching, spread out in caution. Those that rushed over were all shot by the crossbows. This time the party had learned its lesson. Half the men kept the wolves at bay with the torches while the other half continuously loaded and fired their crossbows. The hungry wolves dropped one by one.

When Jing Shan and Jing Qi reached the short rocky slope, the wolf pack had already dispersed into the distance, not daring to approach again. Nonetheless, Jing Shan and the rest's killing spirit had been aroused and they continued to pursue and shoot down the wolves, giving vent to their earlier resentment. Xiang Shaolong knew that the wolf pack was now afraid, and so let down his guard. Facing upwards, he shouted: "Who is the friend up there? Is anyone injured?"

One person appeared at the top of the slope, fist in palm, replying: "Many thanks to all the heroes' assistance and kindness. Three of us have been bitten by the wolves, but we are not in any danger. As long as we can gather dry wood to keep our fire burning, we can survive till dawn."

Xiang Shaolong perceived that his speech was formal and proper, yet appeared to be evasive and cautious, hence he did not request to be allowed to go up for a meeting. Thinking that this was nothing unusual, he loudly shouted: "Since this is the case, we will chase the wolves away. Elder brother may come down and fell some trees to keep the fire going." He then paid his compliments and proceeded to pursue the wolf pack.

Book 15 Chapter 08 - Joining Company And Journeying Together

As the morning broke the next day, the two ladies rose early and emerged from the tent.

Xiang Shaolong was exhausted from the hard work of killing and repelling wolves all night, so he slept until noon before crawling out of bed.

While he was still washing his face and combing his hair, a guest arrived.

This person had a dignified face and large ears, appearing formidable. He was dressed in a warrior's outfit, displaying outstanding skill that must have been the result of a lifetime's training. His left arm was bound up, evidence of the last night's battle with the wolves.

When he found out that Xiang Shaolong was the leader, the man hurried forward and said: "Your humble servant is Zhuang Kong, what is the hero's honourable name? I was criticized by my Madam for not asking after benefactor's name last night. I have come to apologize humbly this morning."

Xiang Shaolong saw that, as before, he still hadn't revealed his status and origins, but at least he now knew there were womenfolk in his company. He was astounded, and said: "Elder brother, since you do not wish to reveal your status and origins, why come up to ask after ours? Why don't we treat each other as strangers who met

by chance, and go our separate ways?"

Zhuang Kong did not expect Xiang Shaolong to be so direct as to point out the deliberate concealment of his origins and felt embarrassed. He was nonetheless an extraordinary person also, and shamefully said: "Benefactor is right to rebuke me. Regretfully I am under strict orders from my Madam not to freely reveal her identity. However, since I have met benefactor, I am delighted. Would benefactor be willing to allow your humble servant to ask Madam for instructions? I will see benefactor again."

At this point Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi emerged from the forest hand in hand and returned to the camp. Zhuang Kong stared at them in a daze, obviously not believing that he would get to see such unmatched beauties in such a place.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "This matter can be avoided. We have pressing matters at hand and need to leave immediately. Lets leave it at that! Here's wishing brother Zhuang and your Madam a smooth journey."

Zhuang Kong was shocked, withdrew his gaze and earnestly asked: "Is benefactor going through the Chu border?"

Ji Yanran the two ladies saw Shaolong talking to him and could guess what was happening. They stood to one side and listened attentively.

Xiang Shaolong stared blankly: "Isn't this the route to Han Zhong county? It should still be Qin's territory."

Zhuang Kong was startled and pointed out: "I'm afraid benefactor has lost his way. These are the spines of the Qinling mountain range. To reach Han Zhong and Nan Yang counties, you need to skirt Chu's border for five days even if you have the correct directions. Your humble servant has traversed the route twice and am definitely not mistaken."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help cursing Du Bi in his heart. He would have caught up to Teng Yi ten days ago if he had not been compelled by Du Bi's men to abandon his route. He has instead ended up in this accursed place. Thinking about the hard journey behind, he did not have the courage to turn back. He had better continue towards the Chu border before thinking about how to meet up with Teng Yi.

He signed: "Are you guys going towards Chu too?"

Zhuang Kong replied: "Indeed so. If hero does not mind, let us join company and journey together. It is good to have people to talk to along the way."

Xiang Shaolong guessed that the other party must have been frightened by the pack of wolves the night before. After muttering to himself for a while, he asked: "How big is your party?"

Zhuang Kong replied: "Aside from the Madam, there are five women and one child, and including your humble servant, fifteen servants."

Xiang Shaolong thought about all the wrong turns and wasted miles he would have had to walk if he did not have Zhuang Kong as a guide. He also figured that if they parted ways immediately after leaving the Qinling mountains, his party would not be overly burdened. He finally nodded his head in agreement.

Zhuang Kong was so happy that he forgot all about asking for Xiang Shaolong's identity and origins. They arranged to meet at the bottom of the slope in a short while. Zhuang Kong then hurried away.

Ji Yanran smiled and drew near, saying: "From this guy's style of clothing and accent, we can be sure that he is a Chu nobleman. Hubby had better be careful."

Xiang Shaolong said: "For the time being, I shall be known as Xiang Ran. You will be my first wife and Zhi Zhi will be the second. This trip to Chu is for business. Even if they do not believe us, it will be difficult for them to discern the truth."

By the time Xiang Shaolong's party had de-camped and led the horses down the hill, Zhuang Kong's group of fifteen men, five women and one child had already assembled and were waiting respectfully. There were a few wounded amongst the fifteen servants, two of whom had wolf claw marks on their necks and faces, causing trepidation to onlookers.

On inspection, besides Zhuang Kong, there were at most two others who could barely be classified as experts.

Most of the women were wearing cloaks and had their faces covered with muslin veils. Even though one could see a vague outline of their faces, it was indistinct.

The two women who did not cover their faces were as thick and solid as bulls, and while they could not be regarded as ugly, were exceedingly plain.

The other three women all had graceful postures, and one could tell that they were noblewomen from a single glance. Under the semi-transparent muslin, they exuded a sort of hazy and mysterious yet beautiful charm.

One of the women was especially tall. She also appeared to be the eldest, aging just above thirty. From appearances, she had to be Zhuang Kong's Madam.

The child, on the other hand, had pretty delicate features and a pair of spirited eyes. He looked like he was between eleven and twelve years old. On meeting Xiang Shaolong and his party, he opened his curious eyes and sized them up.

The five women bowed on seeing them, their eyes falling on Ji Yanran. The Madam spoke first, saying: "Your servant's husband is named Zhuang. Your servant will not forget hero's assistance and benevolence last night even when old, but does not yet know the hero's honorable name. Please enlighten so that your servant can engrave it in the heart and mind."

Xiang Shaolong arrived in front of her and returned the courtesy.

He laughed, saying: "My humble self is named Xiang Ran. These two are my wives. I'm on this trip to try my luck in Chu. Looking to see if I can obtain some high quality gold. Didn't think that we would lose our way. However if we did not lose our way, we would not have met Madam and your noble family. Is this little boy your esteemed son?"

Madam Zhuang scrutinized Xiang Shaolong from behind her veil, saying: "Indeed he is my son Zhuang Bao Yi. The other two ladies are your servant's third and fourth younger sisters You Cui and You Ning. The rest are my family servants."

The other two ladies shyly rose as one.

Madam Zhuang's gaze fell on Ji Yanran's face, seeming to think of something, but kept the thoughts hidden, merely saying: "Its hard to believe that the wild wolves around the mountain are so heroic and unafraid of people. We had prepared defenses but almost had a calamitous brush with the wolves. It was fortunate that hero relieved the siege. Now that hero is traveling with us, we are very much relieved."

Xiang Shaolong noticed the time of the day, smiled and said: "We woke up late today. We should set off immediately!"

As Madam Zhuang nodded her head, Zhuang Kong hurriedly ordered horses to be brought forward and helped Madam Zhuang, her sisters and her son to get mounted. Even though he was still young, this Zhuang Bao Yi was as stable as Mount Taishan on horseback, without any fear.

Everyone then started to descend the mountain.

Zhuang Kong was indeed not bragging. He really knew the route well, saving Xiang Shaolong's party much time and effort. Nonetheless the three ladies and child required guides to lead their horses, hence they progressed slowly. This was unavoidable after all.

The two parties did not make conversation on the road. Only that Zhuang Kong kept pointing out the directions and the landmarks en-route, causing Xiang Shaolong to have the pleasurable feeling of being in a tour group.

When they en-camped at night, Madam Zhuang's party retreated to their tents to eat their dinner, presenting even less of a chance for conversation.

They proceeded like this for five days, until they set eyes on the Chu border.

That night, they en-camped to rest as usual. Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran his two wives together with the guardians surrounded the campfire roasting the hunted game and engaging in cheerful banter.

Zhuang Kong and his party stayed at the other end of the camp eating their dry rations, having declined Xiang Shaolong's courtesy invitation.

The full moon in the middle of the sky cast a golden hue on the surrounding mountainous landscape. The snowy peaks in the distance shimmered mysteriously.

In time they heard the howl of the wolves, and couldn't help but feel that the tranquil and placid mountain and fields were nonetheless surrounded by danger. To lighten her husband's burden, Zhao Zhi pointed out: "After we cross two more mountains, we will step into the plains. Isn't it exciting? I wished it was morning already."

Ji Yanran sidled up to Xiang Shaolong and softly said: "The other party is nervous."

Xiang Shaolong looked over to Zhuang Kong's party. Sure enough, while they remained silent, they were a little fidgety. He nodded his head in agreement, but couldn't think of anything else to say.

Since the other party already refused to divulge anything, it was useless to ask. Moreover, once they reached the Chu border, they would be too busy with their own business to worry about somebody else's.

At this point, a burst of howling appeared nearby. Wu Guang turned to Jing Shan and laughed, saying: "Your old friends are here again. Do not be merciful when you execute, if not they will use their teeth to be intimate with you."

Jing Qi's expression darkened, saying: "I think the wolf pack is here for revenge."

Jing Shan also frowned silently.

Wu Yan was puzzled, asking: "Do you really think that wolves are like humans, able to hold grudges?"

Jing Qi replied: "There is nothing fantastic about this. Horses have their nature, recognizing their masters. Wolves have their nature, knowing their enemies. Whats so strange about this?"

Zhao Zhi is the least courageous, and worriedly said: "In that case you guys should quickly think of a way to deal with them."

Xiang Shaolong is also alarmed because even though they have camped on a platform beside a cliff, the other three sides were slopes with dense trees. If a few tens or a few hundreds of the wolves were to break through, it would be no laughing matter. If only he had a heavy machine gun! Wu Shu, who was the wisest and most cool-headed of the guardians, smiled saying: "We do not dare to disobey second Madam's command. Could we nonetheless fill our stomachs to regain our energy before going to work?"

Zhao Zhi pouted and complained to Xiang Shaolong: "Wu Shu this little kid is trying to play punk with moi. Zhi Zhi never said that he could not eat."

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud saying: "That sheep's leg is

going to be burnt soon, quickly take it down and put it on the plate. As long as my two wives have something to eat, all will be forgiven."

Ji Yanran playfully said: "Is Zhi Zhi a glutton? You have maligned her so. I want to seek justice on her behalf."

They passed the time like that.

After dinner, Jing Shan and the rest went to deploy animal traps in good spirits, seeming only to fear that the wolves would not come, causing everyone to be happy and in good humor.

Ji Yanran the two ladies also joined in the fun. Ironically, it was Xiang Shaolong who managed to steal some free time. He sat in front of the fire staring blankly and lost in thought. Past events and the future, likes and dislikes all flitted through his mind.

At this moment, Madam Zhuang opened her tent, came out and sauntered towards Xiang Shaolong. She was dressed in a plain white jacket, a white cloak and a hat with an inlaid pearl. With her veil down, she looked like a beautiful spirit from the netherworld.

Xiang Shaolong was a little startled and continued gazing at her. Only when she arrived at his side, greeted him and sat down did he open his mouth to ask: "Is Madam Zhuang unable to sleep?"

Since she was close enough for him to smell her breath and since she was under the glare of the fire, the veil was no longer effective.

He saw that the silhouette of her face was elegant, graceful and beautiful. Though her beauty was not as soul shaking as Qin Qing's, she was a still rare beauty.

Her bright and intelligent eyes, reflecting the bright and flickering bonfire, gazed at Xiang Shaolong. She suddenly sighed faintly: "My heart is troubled so how can I fall asleep?"

After all this while, this is the first time that Xiang Shaolong has talked to her up close. It was a new sensation for him. He nodded and said: "Madam does not need to reveal her matters to my humble self."

Madam Zhuang noticed that he was looking at her face intently and softly asked: "Is hero able to see your servant's appearance?"

Xiang Shaolong was slightly embarrassed and said: "At this angle and under the light, I can more or less see a little."

In his heart, he felt that these words carried a hint of romance intent. Was she trying to seduce him to do something for her?

This Madam Zhuang reminded him of Lady Pingyuan and Empress Jing in that they were all mature and older beauties. They were no longer as pure as young maidens but were instead extremely practical. They knew how to use themselves and their beauty to accomplish their objectives.

Madam Zhuang lowered her head and continued saying: "Is hero

really on this trip to Chu to look for gold?"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so perceptive and direct. He did not dare hesitate, and replied: "Men die for wealth, birds die for food. If not for gold, why would I weary myself with the long and difficult journey?"

Madam Zhuang pondered these two wise sentences "men die for wealth, birds die for food" silently for a good while before raising her head again to say: "Hero Xiang's words are poetic and meaningful. Definitely an extraordinary man. Moreover, your two elegant and beautiful wives are second to none, and not one person in your household is not an expert. Should I believe that you are bustling all over for something as trivial as wealth?"

Xiang Shaolong refused to admit it, replied: "How can gold be a trivial matter? Madam must be joking."

From behind her veil, Madam Zhuang stared at him without blinking and said unhurriedly: "Since this is the case, as long as Hero Xiang escorts us to Yunnan, I will thank hero with one thousand teals of gold. Your servant is prepared to swear a fell oath, and will definitely keep her word."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, recalling Ji Yanran's discourse about how Chu was thwarted in its Eastern invasion and was compelled to expand Southwestwards. The protagonist was one Great General Zhuang, who shared the same family name as Madam Zhuang's husband.

Later when Chu's power waned, that Zhuang together with the vassal states attempted to take over the throne. Could it be that that Zhuang was the king of Yunnan?

After recovering from his shock, he said unenthusiastically: "Is Madam related to the king of Yunnan in some way?"

Madam Zhuang softly replied: "The former king is my father-in-law."

Xiang Shaolong figured that this was another fight for the throne, and another royal tragedy. He lost the mood to listen further. He gasped: "Madam's suggestion is indeed tempting, but this thousand teals of gold is too difficult to earn. Moreover, I am not willing to endanger my two lovely wives who are only on this trifle sightseeing. Please forgive me, for the heart is willing but the body is weak."

Madam Zhuang also signed, and gently said: "Xiang Shaolong has the backing of the Wu family, how can he be interested in a thousand teals of gold?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: "So you already knew who I was, yet toyed with me deliberately."

Madam Zhuang giggled: "A person of your appearance and body shape cannot be found amongst ten thousand men. The Talented Lady Ji is even more difficult to pass off. You are both so famous all over, your servant finds it strange that Mister Xiang thought he could fool all of us."

Again she smiled and said: "If you were some common man, your servant might have used her body to buy your favour, but I know that this would not be effective on you. Why don't we openly strike a mutually profitable deal instead?"

Xiang Shaolong had an uneasy feeling. This Madam Zhuang did not only have Lady Pingyuan and Empress Jing's qualities, she also had Zhao Ya's smartness that was not afraid of opposition, causing him to be provoked.

He took a deep breath, collected his mind, and said: "Honestly, I do not know what you can use to trade with me."

Madam Zhuang had a card up her sleeves, said: "This trip to Chu, is Mister Xiang after Li Yuan or Tian Dan? If its the latter, I do not fear that you will refuse to deal with me."

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned and tongue-tied. He knew that although many people knew about his plan to attack Tian Dan, it was limited to a small circle of people in the royal family and the military in Xianyang. How did this Madam Zhuang know this secret?

Madam Zhuang softly said: "If Mister Xiang knew that Lady Huayang is my aunt, he would not be so surprised."

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and said: "Did Madam come from Xianyang?"

Madam Zhuang refused to answer, and said: "Could Mister please tell me whether this trip is due to Tian Dan. If the answer is not, then your servant does not have the necessary means to do business with Mister. It would then be best to drop this matter."

Xiang Shaolong tried to discern with his heart. Her tone seemed to suggest that she knew something about Tian Dan. He could not help being startled, gasping: "Madam is formidable. Please continue your discourse."

Madam Zhuang happily said: "Your servant trusts that Mister is an upright nobleman. Once he knows your servant's secret, even if he does not accept the deal, he would not reveal the secret. Is this the case?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Don't tell me that I, Xiang Shaolong, will harm you women and children?"

Madam Zhuang's spirit was roused: "The reason I know so many secrets is all because I have an agent amongst Li Yuan's confidantes. Mister should understand now!"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that Madam Zhuang was herself from Chu, was also Zhuang's daughter-in-law and what's more was Lady Huayang's close relative. For one of the spies from her intelligence system to infiltrate Li Yuan's confidantes was not unreasonable. No wonder she knew that he wanted to deal with Tian Dan.

Madam Zhuang smiled: "Could Mister Xiang lift your servant's veil? Your servant wants to tell you an unfathomable secret face to face."

Xiang Shaolong frowned and said: "Madam belongs to another man, I am afraid that it would be improper for me to do so."

Madam Zhuang sadly said: "My late husband has already been beheaded by the rebel army in the chaos five years ago. Your servant does not belong to anyone presently. Why else would I flee my home village and go to Qin? If not for Lady Huayang's protection, your servant would have been captured by the Chu people long ago."

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh and lifted her veil. A face that was half happy and half angry, and filled with the charm of a mature beauty appeared before him.

Her jade-like face was a little too long, but matched perfectly with her slender and graceful swan-like neck, producing a uniquely attractive charm.

In addition she had a cute little mole on her lower jaw that balanced the whole package to perfection.

Her eyes were indeed bright and intelligent, causing men's hearts to race.

Even though she did not have Qin Qing's classical beauty, she had

the audacity and wild nature that Qin Qing lacked, causing men to want to bed her impulsively.

No wonder she needed to veil her face.

Madam Zhuang saw him sizing her up unabashedly and was pleased, drawing back her shyness, said: "Mister thinks that your servant's appearance is pleasing!"

Xiang Shaolong mentally put on his guard. While she insisted from the beginning that she had no intention of seducing him, she was actually doing so. Yet it was difficult to fault her. For a frail woman like her to return to her home country to help her son ascend the throne, besides relying on the gifts that heaven has bestowed on her, what else could she rely on?

One could image from the time she left her country till today how many times she had used her beautiful body to barter for help from men.

He couldn't help but sigh again: "Madam does not need to lower herself. You have not yet revealed the big secret!"

A look of amazement flitted across Madam Zhuang's eyes. She softly said: "Only till now do I understand why even the Widow Qing finds it difficult to restrain herself with Mister. A person's words reveals his inner cultivation. From Mister's restrained words, I can tell that Mister is extraordinary."

Xiang Shaolong silently admitted his shame, forced a bitter laugh and said: "Returning to one's country is a serious matter, Madam had better not fall for me. You might cause trouble to yourself."

Madam Zhuang covered her mouth in an enchanting smile, saying: "You have confidence in yourself. Why should you be afraid of other people's admiration? Even to the point of warning us off, ai! Nobody will believe that in this world there really exists a man like you who is afraid of women's affections."

The more Xiang Shaolong interacts with this Madam Zhuang, the more he is enticed by her. At this moment, he realized that Zhuang Kong and his party had gone to the slopes to help out, leaving the two of them single man and woman alone at the space outside the tents. Secretly alarmed, he turned serious and said: "Your servant is listening intently."

Madam Zhuang restrained her smile and softly said: "Tian Dan has already returned to the Chu capital Shou Chun."

Xiang Shaolong shook uncontrollably: "What?"

Madam Zhuang leisurely explained: "As Tian Dan has enemies everywhere both inside and outside of Chu, he has an identical standin that follows him everywhere. Once he realized that you were not willing to let him go, he hid himself amongst Li Yuan's troops and departed. The person you saw thereafter was his standin!"

Xiang Shaolong was covered in cold sweat. No wonder Tian Dan

kept such a low profile during the hunt and tried his best to avoid attending the public events. To think this was the reason.

He knew he was short by one move in this game of chess and could not defeat the old fox.

He needed to notify Teng Yi and Xu Yi Luan immediately to prevent them from being wiped out by a Chu counter-attack.

Once he thought about this, he lost the mood for anything else. He has now failed completely and needs to write his name backwards.

Suddenly Madam Zhuang's face seemed to get bigger. While he was still in a daze, Madam Zhuang approached and kissed him lightly on the lips before sitting back, saying: "As long as you help me return to my country, I will help you kill Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong woodenly said: "You are powerless to defend yourself, how can you help me?"

Madam Zhuang solemnly said: "This villain Li Ling is able to murder his master and betray his country only because of King Xiao Lie's support in the background. Now that King Xiao Lie is dead, there are many people in Shou Chun and Yunnan who support us. Circumstances have changed entirely. If not how would I dare to return to Chu?"

Xiang Shaolong recovered from his shock and said: "Did you also

obtain the news of King Xiao Lie's death from Li Yuan?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "Of course not. Our family's roots in Chu are deep. Zhuang Kong came to us from the faraway Chu precisely to inform us and to bring us back."

Xiang Shaolong almost lost his voice, said: "What? King Xiao Lie is really dead?"

Madam Zhuang looked at him uncomprehendingly.

Xiang Shaolong could not stop shuddering. It was hard to believe that his scheme had accidentally helped Li Yuan rush back in time to seize power. Otherwise Li Yuan would still be in Xianyang.

This matter was so strange as to exceed everyone's expectations.

After taking a deep breath, he said with resolve: "If I can kill Tian Dan, I will use all my strength to help your son take hold of the throne."

Book 15 Chapter 09 - Setting Sail On The River Huai

All their original plans have turned out to be based on wishful thinking and have been messed up.

The wolves never came that night. After some discussion, Ji Yanran also figured that Madam Zhuang should not be lying. This was because Tian Dan's performance during the hunt really was abnormal. Besides, with Tian Dan's farsighted thinking, he would not have surrendered the initiative so passively that he required Lu Buwei's protection.

In the grand scheme of things, Tian Dan would not have believed that Lu Buwei could kill Xiang Shaolong, although Lu Buwei was almost successful.

That is why Dan Chu's returning troops would have made the necessary arrangements to support him, even counter-attacking by laying traps for any tailing enemies. It was nonetheless unlikely that they knew of the existence of Xu Yiluan's troops in waiting in ambush.

Finally, Xiang Shaolong decided to dispatch two guardians, the recently recovered Wu Da and Dan Quan (from Pu Bu and Liu Chao's unit), to use fast horses to intercept Teng Yi. They were to advise Teng Yi to change his whole battle plan into delaying Tian Dan's troops but not attacking.

This will delay Tian Dan's return to Qi, giving them more

opportunities to kill him.

As the Liu Shi brothers and Dan Chu are not at Tian Dan's side, Tian Dan's defensive web is now at its weakest.

Early the next morning, before they de-camped, Madam Zhuang led her two sisters over to discuss the details of Shouchun City.

They had all removed their veils. You Cui and You Ning turned out to be outstandingly beautiful sisters, but they were still half a step below the uniquely charming Madam Zhuang.

Madam Zhuang smiled and said: "They are indeed my younger sisters, just that they are not my blood sisters but belong to the Zhuang family."

She then warmly greeted Ji Yanran the two women and expressed her admiration before turning back to the main topic, mentioning: "Li Yuan has no lack of underlings who recognize Mister Xiang. The Talented Lady Ji is an even more renown personality in Shouchun. Therefore we need to rely on some disguises to fool the Chu people."

Xiang Shaolong caressed his cheek and jaw, saying: "I can grow a full beard and restrict my movements to the night. That way I can avoid the eyes and ears of people."

Madam Zhuang said: "Avoiding people is not difficult. The problem is that if we cannot move about freely, it will be even

harder to find an opportunity to kill Tian Dan. Fortunately these two sisters of mine are most familiar with the techniques to change appearances. They can play some tricks with Mister Xiang's face. Unless you come face to face with familiar people, you should be able to deceive anyone."

Ji Yanran said: "What identity should he use when meeting people?"

Madam Zhuang said: "You can act as my brother Wan Ruiguang. Because he was seriously injured during the mutiny, he escaped out of Chu's borders, but never recovered and passed away three months ago. There should not be anyone in Shouchun who recognizes him."

While she spoke normally, everyone could detect an unappeasable hatred and enmity in her voice.

Zhao Zhi sorrowfully pointed out: "As Madam returns to Yunnan to deal with the enemy, how confident is she?"

Madam Zhuang replied nonchalantly: "Originally I did not have half a hope. But since I had my back to the wall, I had no choice but to take advantage of Chu's period of weakness and return with my son to fight a life and death battle with the thief; but now that I have Xiang Shaolong, I have every confidence of success."

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "Madam thinks too highly of me."

Madam Zhuang smiled and said: "You'd better start addressing me as your elder sister from now on and I will address you as Ruiguang. It is still another month's journey from here to Shouchun. I will describe Ruiguang's bitter life story to you in detail. Thankfully Ruiguang is famous in the Northwest as a heroic general. He's always had a formidable reputation. It is most appropriate for you to pass off as him. Because we are originally from Yunnan, we do not speak with the Chu accent. As long as you study diligently, we should be able to fool the Chu people."

Xiang Shaolong mused that the last time he disguised himself as Dong Horse Fanatic, while this time he is playing the heroic general Wan Ruiguang. It would be so thrilling if he could fool Tian Dan again.

Ji Yanran, being the most attentive to detail, asked: "What identity is Madam Zhuang using to enter the Chu capital this time?"

Madam Zhuang said: "I have a good friend in Lord Chunshen's house by the name of Weng. In those days, as King Xiaolie feared our Yunnan's growth to become the hegemon of the Southeast, he forced Li Ling to conspire with the Ye Lang people to overthrow the Zhuang family. In one night, close to ten thousands of the Zhuang clan was murdered. Lord Chunshen tried to prevent this, but could not prevail over King Xiaolie. If he had not sent people to assist us, we could have forgotten about escaping from Chu's borders. That is why on this trip we should first visit Lord Chunshen's home."

Xiang Shaolong and Yanran exchanged a glance and let go of

their worries.

Now that King Xiaolie is dead, Chu is going to become a battleground between Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan. To someone like Madam Zhuang who is close to Lord Chunshen, killing Li Yuan's associate Tian Dan is naturally no big deal.

Xiang Shaolong's spirit rose, saying: "Good! Let us leave!"

Zhao Zhi was displeased, saying: "Madam has yet to say how Sister Yanran and I should disguise ourselves!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Of course it is to be me, Wan Ruiguang's lovely wives. Covering your faces with thicker veils will solve all the problems."

All along, before a strong Qin arose, amongst all the states, Chu was in the South with no enemies nearby. That is why regardless of the physical security or the economy, they have had safety and stability where the other states hadn't.

In addition, the soil in the South was fertile. Surrounding Lake Dongting were endless tracts of fertile land waiting to be developed by the Chu people. This caused the Chu people to be rich and worry free.

At their peak, Chu possessed all the territories from Yuan and Xiang rivers in the South to Ying and Si in the North, and from Ba and Shu in the West to the Tan city and the river Huai in the East.

Treating Ying and Ru as ditches and Jiang and Han as ponds; as flat as Zhenglin, as continuous as Fangcheng. By the time the Warring States Period began, they had almost unified the entire South, becoming the largest and most powerful state.

Besides swallowing numerous smaller countries, they had also expanded into large tracts of land belonging to the non-Han barbarians in the East, South and Southwest, subjecting these lands and peoples to Chu's culture and civilization.

Just as Ji Yanran had analyzed nonetheless, to govern so many ethnic groups and such a vast expanse of land required a powerful and competent government.

It was a pity that after King Zidao and King Xuan, Chu had never had a competent ruler again. In addition, with King Huai dying destitute in Qin, the central authorities lost their power while the regional powers rose up.

King Xiaolie's subsequent instigation of the mutiny in Yunnan reduced central control even further. In the end, he did not manage to change anything, merely changing the name of the Yunnan king from Zhuang to Li, that's all.

Now that King Xiaolie has passed away, internal strife has appeared once again. And due to the freak combination of factors, Xiang Shaolong is compelled to join this "game".

While the news of Chu's chaos may be unexpected, it was actually inevitable. If not for the fact that Qin had just lost two kings in

quick succession, and that Xiao Pan was still immature, and for the Qin military's free-for-all fight with Lu Buwei, and even more for Qin's need to concentrate on defending the three Eastern counties, Chu would have been forced even further South.

Chu's people have become leisurely and carefree due to their wealth, and have been at odds with the solemn and tense Northerners all along.

This was very vividly described by Ji Yanran.

After leaving the Qinling mountains and after two days march on uneven roads, they finally reached the Hanzhong plains.

While one of Madam Zhuang's household chiefs led the two men Dan Quan and Wu Guang to meet Teng Yi, everyone else set out for Shouchun.

Ji Yanran rode alongside Xiang Shaolong and started discussing Chu's culture, saying: "Even though Chu is the enemy of my lost country, I have always admired Chu's culture. Looking at their religious beliefs, they do not follow the callous god of farmers, but worship the aspiring and high flying god of fire; their river goddess is a beautiful woman that makes the soul long for her. The other gods are either colorful and bewitching girls or passionate and self-sacrificing heroes. Even more, the songs of Chu are full of euphemism and rhetoric, melancholic yet beautiful, leaving one with lingering emotions." Xiang Shaolong became a little jealous, said: "But I've never found any trace of such beautiful things on Li Yuan."

Ji Yanran laughed delicately and rolled her eyes, but could not help smiling, said: "He wasn't trying to woo you, why would he want to show you his literary talent?"

Exhaling her breath of magical air, she smugly but joyfully said: "Its good that Hubby rarely speaks with such jealousy."

At this moment, Madam Zhuang sent someone to ask them to fall back, and taking advantage of the uneventful journey, to teach them the local accent. Xiang Shaolong and his party could only bear with it and took instructions.

During that period in the Warring States era, the most fashionable language was Zhou. All the different states' royalty and anyone with any amount of status used this language to communicate.

Nonetheless, due to differences in the regions, the Zhou language was always mixed with local dialects and slangs.

That is why one could guess a person's origins just from his speech.

Of the Warring States, the most alike were Zhao, Wei and Han. This was because these three states were splintered from the former Jin state.

Because Qin's culture was shallow, and also because of its

proximity to the three Jin states, the Qin accent and slang was similar to the three states'.

The most distinctive state was actually Chu.

Up to today, Chu's people have been ridiculed as the "Southern Barbarians", and their difference in choice of words is even greater. That is why it is important for Xiang Shaolong's party to swallow this little bit of pain to learn the Yunnan variant of the Chu language.

Chu's locus of influence centered on the vast regions on the Yangtze River's two banks and the vast Lake Dongting, stretching South.

Shouchun is North of the Yantze River on the West bank of the River Huai. This is more than a thousand miles East of the old capital Ying, which was originally situated on the Northwest corner of Lake Dongting. Although this allowed the capital to be safely removed from Qin, it demonstrated a lack of fighting spirit on the part of the Chu people. It was no wonder that even though Chu was big, it was the most contemptible in the eyes of the three states.

After a three day journey, having crossed the Tongbai mountains, they reached Chengyang city on the Western end of the River Huai. They found a guest house to lodge in before sending Zhuang Kong out to buy a boat. The boat would reduce the ardor of their journey.

Since they had to adopt high ranking identities to enter the city, the current governor Qushen sent staff to pay an official call right after they had let down their luggage and stabled their horses

Xiang Shaolong naturally left Madam Zhuang to manage this, choosing to remain in his room and amusing himself with his two lovely wives, greatly enjoying this return to civilization.

Madam Zhuang soon came over and sat down on a mat, happily saying: "We have solved the problem of the boat. Once the governor Official Qu found out who I was, he was very helpful."

The Madam Zhuang who had put on a long robe once again exuded charm.

The robe she was wearing was the most fashionable at that time, a dark robe. It was a one piece robe stretching from top to bottom with the right lapel joined at an angle. Wrapping from the front to the back, it caused beautiful women to exude a certain charm. She had combed her hair in a 'descending horse topknot', pulling her delicate hair behind her forehead in a low-hanging knot, looking very much like she had just descended from horseback. Adding to her charming demeanor, she bent her waist in a graceful step, creating a sight not to be missed.

Xiang Shaolong cautioned himself never to fall for this beautiful woman, else he would be giving himself a lot of trouble in the future. Moreover, as a man from the 21st Century, he is already very satisfied to have his many lovely wives. He should be more devoted to Ji Yanran and all his wives. Ji Yanran was also sizing up this enchanting and elegant beauty. Apparently feeling a little

threatened, she said unenthusiastically: "I once stayed in Shouchun for a short while. I wonder at present, which of the four peoples, Dou, Cheng, Yuan and Qu hold the most power?" Xiang Shaolong immediately thought of Qu Yuan (a famous Warring States statesman). So this lord is actually from one of the four main ethnic groups in Chu. No wonder he is able to become an important official.

Madam Zhuang's beautiful eyes swept over Xiang Shaolong before saying: "The four big ethnic groups are no longer as industrious as before. It is Li Yuan's ethnic group that has been rising up. Of course it is the most powerful group outside the four big groups. Moreover since Li Yuan became the crown prince, the Li clan has been rising with the tide. Now that Li Yuan has actually managed to counter the Empress Dowager who wields real power, who will not curry favor with the Li clan?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that Madam Zhuang understood Shouchun's situation thoroughly and could not help but ask: "Did Li Yuan bring back Guo Kai's daughter Guo Xiu'er as wife?" Madam Zhuang nodded and said: "Indeed. I even heard that she is expecting, earning Li Yuan's considerable affection."

Xiang Shaolong's attention couldn't help drifting to the phoenix shaped jade pendant hanging on his chest. This was the object that Guo Xiu'er gave to him before obeying her father's command to marry Li Yuan. Thinking about it, he couldn't help feeling a little torn and dejected!

Madam Zhuang gazed at him deeply, then lowered her head, as if trying to discern what secret reason he had to ask about Guo

Xiu'er.

The two ladies Ji and Zhao knew about the relationship between him and Guo Xiu'er and paid no notice to it. The former asked: "Did Guo Zhong move his business over?" Madam Zhuang cracked her eyebrow, saying: "I am not too sure about this."

Xiang Shaolong felt that the atmosphere had changed, and changing the topic, he asked: "Is there one Madam Xie amongst the Wang people? Lady Huayang once asked me to deliver a gift to her, but I never reached Chu in the end."

Madam Zhuang nodded her head and said: "I can't be sure, but if she has some connection to my aunt, it must be Madam Qing Xiu. Her good looks are famous in Chu. She was married to the great general Dou Jie. Initially Dou Jie loved and pampered her, but later he was enchanted by the Minister-of-State Cheng Suning's concubine Yan Fei. In a fit of anger, Madam Qing Xiu left and moved to a house beside the Huai river in the outskirts of the city, thereafter leading a secluded life. With the threat of suicide, she forbade Dou Jie from entering the front gate by even half a step. Her resolve earned the Chu people's respect. Dou Jie lost King Xiaolie's favor after that. Now that he has attached himself to the Li clan though, his trajectory seems to have improved somewhat."

Zhao Zhi was puzzled and asked: "Since that Yan Fei was the Minister-of-State Cheng Suning's beloved concubine, how did she get involved with Dou Jie?"

Madam Zhuang contemptuously replied: "Of all people this Cheng Suning spineless. Dou Jie was an important military

official. With just a hinted request from Dou Jie, he obediently offered up Yan Fei. As our Zhuang family returns, the greatest obstacle to us is the group of people led by Li Yuan. This is because Li Ling is precisely Li Yuan's older paternal cousin and fellow clan member."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help feeling excited, but before he could open his mouth, Wu Yan knocked on the door seeking an audience. As he entered, he had a serious look on his face, saying: "Something is not right. Just now we detected a suspicious person in the vicinity investigating us. Later when official Qu Shen left, he hid in a carriage with another suspicious person on the streets outside and had a long discussion. Afterwards, all those suspicious people withdrew." Madam Zhuang's expression did not change as she listened.

Xiang Shaolong was able to smile unhurriedly and said: "Looks like they intend to deal with us while we are on the boat. As long as they bore a hole in the boat and sink us, their men can murder your son in the water. Our plan to return to your country is about to fail. We must think this through carefully."

Madam Zhuang said: "What should we do then? The boatman and helmsmen are all their people."

Ji Yanran wittily said: "As long as we can leave Cheng Yang, we can have the boat without the people. We'll see what Qu Shen is able to do to us then." At dawn, the official Qu Shen came personally to send them off. Three sails were masted on the large boat. They set sail following the current.

There were thirty boatmen on the boat, all valiant and strong. On the surface they looked respectful, but one could tell that they had malicious intent. Nonetheless Xiang Shaolong did not worry about them, having scheduled twelve of the guardians to spy on them continuously for twelve hours. They spent their time alternately learning Chu with the Yunnan flavor and taking the chance to rest. All this to allow them to reach Tian Dan as quickly as possible once they reached Shouchun, and then to quickly leave after.

He was not too worried that his real identity will be revealed. This is because Tian Dan and Li Yuan and their associates were all high officials. Even if he, being a general who had lost his home, deliberately sought an appointment with them, it would be difficult to get an opportunity. That is why the odds of bumping into them accidentally are tiny.

The only difficulty is how to obtain Tian Dan's whereabouts.

The scenery of the South is not much different from that of the Northwest, picturesque and mesmerizing.

It is the time between Spring and Summer and the boat is sailing freely. The distant forests of Pingshan divided on the left and right. In the middle of the peaceful landscape, the crystal clear waters of the river flowed in a torrent.

As they followed the river down, they frequently saw fishing boats fishing in the middle of the river. it was hard to associate this scene with the endless ferocious battles of the Warring States era.

Over the meandering river, as they negotiated each bend, a different scene appeared before them, preventing them from being bored.

As there were outsiders present, the two ladies Ji and Zhao wore caps which covered their faces, adding to their yearning, mysterious beauty.

Those malicious boatmen kept eyeing their silky bosoms and curvy buttocks, evidently harboring lewd intentions on the women, in addition to murder.

It is not clear whether it was because of Chu's forced relocation, but of the cultural differences between Chu and the three Jin states plus Qin, the most obvious was that in Chu when married women left the house, they would put on all kinds of veils, being unaffected by the inconvenience and obstruction.

Besides putting on a cap and a veil, they also used a handkerchief to cover their bunned up hair. They then lengthen these once again to cover their faces. These are invariably thinly spread and made of muslin. The texture is frivolous and once it is put on the face, it gives the wearer mysterious aura with its translucence, adding to the wearer's fascination and attractiveness.

If beauties like Yanran and Zhao Zhi put these on, they would become exceedingly beautiful, causing Xiang Shaolong to wish for night to come so that he could see more.

After the last few days, Xiang Shaolong has grown an inch-long beard, not only changing his appearance, but also increasing his imposing aura. It was very common for people in that era to leave beards, with scholars and officials sporting especially long beards; but with military leaders leaving short ones, therefore bare-faced men were instead uncommon.

As Xiang Shaolong was enjoying the beautiful scenery with his two women at the front of the boat, Zhuang Kong came over to his side and said in a low voice: "Before we reach the upper reaches of Qi Si county, there is a stretch where the water is rapid and deep, with dangerous interlinking shoals and precipices. It is the best place for those thieves to make their move."

Xiang Shaolong said in a low voice: "When will we reach that point?"

Zhuang Kong replied: "We should reach there after dark."

After Zhuang Kong left, Xiang Shaolong faced the river and sighed. Zhao Zhi was instantly surprised and said: "Is Hubby worrying over these few petty thieves?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "They may be petty thieves, but they have ruined my grand plans to carouse on the couch with my two lovely wives tonight. How can I not let out a sign of resentment?"

The two ladies laughed excitedly, looking unspeakably captivating.

Book 15 Chapter 10 - Another Sudden Change

The evening brought sudden showers which lasted half the night. Though the rain lightened eventually, an unending sheet of water covered the ground, and the sky was covered by thick dark clouds, creating a heavy dreary atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong together with his two lovely wives, Madam Zhuang, Youcui and Youning, and the child Zhuang Baoyi were all in the cabin sharing a meal.

This is the first time the two parties have shared a meal together since they met, demonstrating that they have grown a little bit closer.

Zhuang Baoyi periodically looked at Xiang Shaolong with earnest admiration. Ji Yanran favored the child the most and couldn't help but ask: "What is the Little Master thinking of?"

Zhuang Baoyi blushed instantly and lowered his head, replying: "Baoyi hopes to be Mister Xiang's disciple, to learn the sword." Madam Zhuang and Youcui Youning the two women smiled and silently awaited Xiang Shaolong's response. Xiang Shaolong could not bear to hurt a little child's feelings, not to mention that his circumstances were desperate. He smiled and said: "Are you able to endure hardship?"

Zhuang Baoyi puffed up his little chest boldly and said: "Baoyi is most able to endure suffering. If you do not believe me, you may

ask my mother."

Madam Zhuang exultantly said: "If he is able to learn from the number one swordsman West of Qin and the master of the king of Qin, this woman will be grateful to tears. Baoyi, quickly go pay your respects and offer the formal rites."

Baoyi immediately raised his clasped hands in the formal rite before sitting down again. The atmosphere had turned even friendlier. Xiang Shaolong knew that his spiritual and mental responsibility to the Zhuang family has now increased by three parts.

Recalling that even if Zhuang Baoyi is able to ascend the Yunnan throne, he cannot escape his other disciple Xiao Pan's destruction of his country. He did not know whether to be happy or sad.

Madam Zhuang kept glancing at him with her charming eyes. The other two ladies Youcui and Youning also ogled at him occasionally. Thankfully they were noblewomen, else their looks would have been even more seductive and their words more suggestive.

Xiang Shaolong did not mind responding, but it was more important to honor Ji and Zhao the two lovely wives, so he was careful that his bearing and words did not overstep his boundaries. Hence, while the meal appeared exciting, only he was aware of his difficulties.

At this moment, Wu Guang rushed in and whispered into Xiang

Shaolong's ear: "We found chiseling tools and a large jar of flammable oil at the bottom of the boat. It seems that this pack of sons of bitches wish to sink the boat and set fire to it at the same time, attacking us from both angles."

Madam Zhuang and the rest quietly listened to the exchange between Xiang Shaolong and Wu Guang.

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Did you manage to listen in on their conversations?"

Under Xiang Shaolong's planning, they had been equipped with all kinds of original eavesdropping devices, like the so named 'next-door ear' which was a copper cylinder shaped like a horn. This can be placed on a wall to amplify sounds from the other side, allowing one to listen in secretly.

Wu Guang indiscriminately said: "Of course we heard. Even their sounds of taking a dump and taking a leak cannot escape us."

The women all blushed at those words. Zhao Zhi was annoyed and said: "Little Guang, can you please restrain yourself a little?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed and said: "Quick, say it out!"

Wu Guang first apologized to Zhao Zhi, then said: "Their leader is called Cheng Xi, and he is the relative of the Minister of State Cheng Suning's relative. From their tone of voice, it seems that they already knew Madam and her party would be heading for

Shouchun these few days, and have deliberately waited here patiently for an entire month, seeking to murder everyone. Hei, I also feel like saying the same to them."

As Madam Zhuang heard this, her expression changed slightly, but she lowered her head and remained silent. Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is there anything else? Did they mention when they would make their move?"

Wu Guang joyfully said: "Of course not. But they were not able to hide from us experts that they had prepared sedatives and mixed it in the water. Once they have drugged us, they would rape all the women then scuttle the boat while setting fire at the same time."

As Madam Zhuang the three women heard the sensitive word 'rape', even their eyelids turned red.

This time even Ji Yanran scolded: "Wu Guang, your mouth is really dirty, and you are extremely lacking in manners!"

Zhao Zhi was actually worried about something else and asked: "Is there anything wrong with the water we are drinking now?"

Wu Guang replied: "Of course there is no problem. Water that has been drugged has a strange smell/taste that needs to be masked by tea. Later if they bring a pot of tea over to entertain Madam, you definitely mustn't drink it."

Wu Guang's vulgar humor reminded Xiang Shaolong of Wu Guo's

refined humor, and even more couldn't help thinking of Zhao Ya. Has Wu Guo been able to bring Zhao Ya safely to Xianyang? This beauty has suffered greatly.

Amidst the laughter and scolding, Wu Guang was chased away by Zhao Zhi. Ji Yanran apologized to Madam Zhuang and the rest for Wu Guang's vulgar words.

Madam Zhuang did not mind, and even said: "People like little brother Guang are authentic. Your servant has met many people who are sanctimonious and verbally full of benevolence, but have been secretly harmed by them without even knowing what it was all about."

Ji Yanran said: "Madam's present trip back to Chu should have been a secret, how did Cheng Suning hear about this, such that he even sent men here to plot against you?"

Madam Zhuang said in distress: "Nowadays I am unable to fathom who my enemies really are."

At this moment, someone did indeed knock on the door. This person knelt down and said: "Your servant has specially come to offer Chengyang's speciality, 'soothing tea'. The flavor may be a bit odd, but once you've drunk it you'll be relaxed and unafraid of the wind and the waves. It is a special offering from the governor Official Qu to Madam and the young master."

Madam Zhuang pretended to be elated and accepted the gift.

After the person had left, Xiang Shaolong leaned over to Zhao Zhi's delicate ear and said: "Those people are really cooperative. We will have unbridled enjoyment tonight!"

Zhao Zhi could not imagine that Xiang Shaolong would say such naughty things to her in such a public setting and blushed instantly.

As she saw their loving exchange, Madam Zhuang's originally bright and sparkling eyes started to tear.

Before the battle has started, she has already lost.

As Xiang Shaolong and the rest pretended faint from drinking the drugged tea, the pack of scoundrels finally revealed their ferocious faces. Using silent and lightning quick moves, the guardians knocked them down, subdued them and tied the lot of them up.

The boat has landed in their hands.

Xiang Shaolong followed Madam Zhuang up on deck. He instructed the guardians to put the murdering scoundrels in a row and proceeded to interrogate them.

The two banks of the river are shrouded in darkness. Though the rain has stopped, there was not a star in sight.

Xiang Shaolong coldly said: "Who is Cheng Xi?"

The thirty bound enemies could not imagine that they already knew the name Cheng Xi, and were all startled. Nonetheless they all closed their mouths and remained silent with a defiant expression that implied 'do you really dare to kill me?'.

Xiang Shaolong quietly sighed, turned to Madam Zhuang and said: "Madam, please turn your head and avoid looking."

Madam Zhuang steadied herself and said: "I am not afraid!"

Xiang Shaolong made a signal, and Wu Shu who was behind the prisoners put his leg on the back of one of them. As the prisoner's arms and legs were tied together, he fell forward immediately and rolled on the floor.

From Xiang Shaolong's side, Jing Shan rushed over and put his foot on the prisoner's back, drawing his long sword with a 'Qiang' sound. Coming close to him, he said: "This is your last chance, who is Cheng Xi!"

That person would not yield and spat with a 'pie!' sound, giving a disdainful look.

Jing Shan laughed coldly and waved his long sword. Blood splashed from that person's throat and he died violently under the long sword.

With a 'dong dong' sound like rain, two of the prisoners were so

frightened that they fainted on the floor. The legs of the rest of the prisoners started to tremble and their faces turned pale. They did not think that the other party would be so merciless.

Madam Zhuang's face turned deathly white. She did not expect them to kill for real. She unconsciously leaned her delicate body against Xiang Shaolong. Jing Shan nonchalantly wiped his bloodstained blade on the dead man before allowing the corpse to be brought aside.

Zhuang Kong and the rest of Madam Zhuang's servants all bugged their eyes and stared blankly. Although killing in this era is no big deal to soldiers, but Jing Shan's calm cold-blooded attitude before and after the killing shocked both the enemy and themselves.

In those days when Xiang Shaolong selected his eighteen guardians, his one criterion was persistence and resolve. Only those who were not afraid to kill and be killed were entitled to be selected. In this era of conflict where the weak are eaten by the strong, showing mercy to the enemy is as good as being merciless to oneself. If it were them who were captured today, they would not have died so easily. This was especially so for Ji and Zhao and all the beauties.

Xiang Shaolong pointed at another person and said in a dead-pan voice: "Which one of you is Cheng Xi?" That person's legs went limp and following his two colleagues slumped in a faint. His eyes went to a particularly dark and well built man. That man, knowing that his cover had been blown, stood forward and shouted: "You do not have to investigate any further, I am Cheng Xi. If you dare..."

'Peng!' Wu Guang kicked forward and hit his nether regions. He bowed down in pain and collapsed on the floor, unable to speak anymore.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and said: "Bring him below deck to await punishment. Lets see how long he can hold out." Wu Shu, Jing shan and the rest happily forced him away.

All the other captives looked as if their faces had been wrapped in mud, bodies trembling.

Xiang Shaolong said: "Split these guys up and interrogate them separately. Allow them to confess, but if anyone speaks half a sentence of falsehood or deliberately conceals anything, kill them immediately without pardon."

Zhuang Kong and the rest immediately swarmed around with the other guardians and brought the captives to different corners of the boat for interrogation.

Madam Zhuang's delicate body weakly leaned on Xiang Shaolong, and she said softly: "This is the first time I have seen this kind of heavy and terrifying methods. Mister must have been too gentle with people in the past."

Xiang Shaolong lightly held her shoulders for a while and using a gentle voice, said: "Please return to the cabin and rest. By breakfast time tomorrow, we will have news from the interrogation."

Madam Zhuang looked like she was very reluctant to leave Xiang Shaolong's side and softly said: "What are we going to do with these people?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said: "I really wish to release all of them, but this will be the most foolish thing to do. Especially since they have seen our methods, they will be suspicious. Madam Zhang should understand my meaning."

At dawn there wasn't a captive left on the boat. The bloodstains had all been scrubbed away. As they were having breakfast in the master cabin, Xiang Shaolong said to Madam Zhuang: "It is not just Cheng Suning behind this matter, it also includes Dou Jie and a man called Fang Zhuo. Does Madam have any impression of him? It is reported that it was Fang Zhuo who reported Madam's return to Shouchun to Dou Jie and Cheng Suning."

Madam Zhuang's face turned white, saying: "Of course I recognize Fang Zhuo, he is one of Lord Chunshen's hangers-on. He has always been responsible for transmitting news to us. He has unexpectedly betrayed us."

Youcui said in a trembling voice: "Could Lord Chunshen be the mastermind behind the plot?" Madam Zhuang shook her head determinedly and said: "Lord Chunshen definitely will not do such a thing, much less if Baoyi is able to regain the throne, it will bring him hundreds of benefits and not one drawback. Even more he is not this kind of base and despicable person. Looks like Fang Zhuo has been bought by Cheng Suning."

Ji Yanran asked: "Why does Cheng Suning and Dou Jie want

young master dead?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "There are presently more than ten vassal states within Chu's borders. Amongst them, the four states Yunnan, Yelang, Minshan and Qielan are the biggest and strongest. They all have more than ten thousand troops each. The king of Chu is bound to have deep misgivings about them. While he would like to abolish the vassal lords, he does not dare to act rashly, fearing that the vassal lords will band together to resist Chu. And since our Zhuang family's prestige is highest in the country, we have the standing to lead all the vassal lords. That is why we were the first group that Xiaolie needed to deal with; nonetheless he does not dare to do this openly, and can only conspire with the traitor Li Ling to revolt. However, the Yunnan people's hearts are with us the Zhuang family. The other vassal lords are also vigorously supporting the restoration of the Zhuang family. If not how would the Li clan that Li Yuan represent allow us to return to our home country?"

Zhao Zhi said: "Since this is the case, as Madam heads to Shouchun on this trip, isn't it akin to sending the sheep into the lion's den?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "Right now, the most of the decision makers in Shouchun do not follow Li Yuan, but follow Lord Chunshen. Moreover, amongst the four big clans, besides legless people like Dou Jie and Cheng Suning who rely on the Li clan, the people are mostly dissatisfied with Li Ling as king of Yunnan. Even Li Yuan does not dare to support Li Ling openly. In fact the reason your servant's party is heading for Shouchun first is to formally request the Chu court to censure the illegal conduct of the traitorous Li Ling. This is because my deceased husband's family

friend Weng is precisely one of the Chu court's policy makers."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly gleeful and said: "This is the best. I think Li Yuan must definitely try to delay matters. This is because if it is revealed that he had a hand in Li Ling's betrayal, all the vassal lords will realize their danger and seek to secede. Especially so, if we meet any unexpected misfortune, everyone will know who did it. That is when everything is revealed to the heavens, we will be safest."

Youning let out a giggle, and delicately laughed: "Mister Xiang's choice of words is very odd. What 'unexpected misfortune' and 'revealed to the heavens'. Nonetheless having heard these words, the description fits very well."

Of course Xiang Shaolong is aware of this problem, and obscured the issue by saying: "We should be able to relax a little these few days."

Madam Zhuang laughed: "No, it is actually time for you to put on your disguise."

Xiang Shaolong sat in front of a dressing table in the cabin looking at the mirror's reflection. His nose detected the fragrance of Youcui and Youning's body and clothes, feeling as if he had entered a nation of fragrances.

Youcui affectionately pressed on both his broad shoulders and knelt behind looking over his left shoulder, also looking at the reflection, saying: "Older sister did not exaggerate the skill that we

two sisters once learned from Chu's number one makeup artist Miss Su Liu. We can turn any beautiful face ugly and any ugly face beautiful."

Xiang Shaolong felt her bosom pressing generously on his back. He was unable to endure it, yet was too embarrassed to ask her to move back, and to be honest, he really enjoyed it. He said: "But I am a man!" Youning who was on the other side working with a few makeup kits said: "Chu's men love to make up. We used to do makeup for the great king everyday!" After she said that, her expression turned gloomy. She must have remembered her late husband.

Youcui then said: "There are two kinds of face powder. One kind is made from ground rice grains infused with perfume. The other kind is pasty face resin called 'lead powder'. The latter is longer-lasting. As long as we apply it once per day, we can guarantee that no one will recognize you."

Xiang Shaolong secretly realized: No wonder the Chinese word for makeup 粉 comprises of the words 米 meaning rice, and 分 meaning separate. It turns out that in this era, makeup is made from rice. He replied: "Has nobody ever met Wan Ruiguang?" The more Youcui looks at Xiang Shaolong, the more she was attracted to him, almost pasting her face on his cheek, her charming eyes like silk, said: "Wan Ruiguang is from Yunnan, belonging to a clan from South Yunnan. Older sister is South Yunnan's number one beauty. She once followed our late father to Shouchun to meet the Chu king. Before escaping to Qin, Wan Ruiguang had never set foot out of South Yunnan. Even Li Ling has never met him. It is difficult to find one person in Shouchun who recognizes him."

Xiang Shaolong reflected: No wonder the Yunnan people gave the Zhuang family so much support. It was because they used system of marriage. It need not be said that Zhuang wives all had the status of being the local clan leader's daughters. No wonder the Chu people were so fearful of Zhuang Baoyi's return to Yunnan.

Youning then came in front of Xiang Shaolong and carefully examined his face.

Xiang Shaolong said: "It is three more days to Shouchun, do the two Madams really need to start work now?" Youning rolled her charming eyes once and an said angrily: "We need to experiment to find out which method is best to change your appearance! We might even have to come up with a special formula. A few days might not even be enough."

The Youcui at his back sighed into his ear and with a 'ne' sound she asked: "Doesn't uncle like to be waited upon by us sisters? We know the techniques of Chinese massage and know best how to serve men."

Once she has finished speaking, she began to knead his shoulder muscles.

That is undeniably a very pleasurable experience. Moreover she is definitely an expert at this. Xiang Shaolong could not help laughing and groaning.

Youning flashed her charming sister an annoyed look, then raised a small cup with a glue-like white substance and started to

stir it with a pestle. She said: "Your skin is relatively dark. Your servant will make it look like you have not been in the sun for a long time. This will allay people's suspicion."

She then carefully applied the 'lead powder' on his face. It was very cool and refreshing, plus she was using her delicate finger to massage it on, so for a moment, Xiang Shaolong forgot where he was.

Youcui who was at his back deliberated with her younger sister: "I think it is best to use some rouge to make his lip colour lighter and to make his eyebrows coarser. Then dye his beard and hair would be most appropriate.

Xiang Shaolong jumped in surprise, saying: "What if I can't return to my original appearance? Wouldn't that be terrible!" Youcui laughed until her whole body collapsed onto his back and panted, saying: "What a vain man! You only have to use a special lotion to wash it, guaranteed everything will disappear."

Xiang Shaolong nervously looked at the person that was gradually materialising in the mirror and said: "If I become some gaudily made up guy, you can forget about me appearing outdoors in broad daylight." The two ladies laughed until they had to bend down. Youning took the opportunity to bury her head in his chest.

Youcui then said: "The highest form of makeup is to cause people to think that there is no makeup. If you do not believe, take a look at us and elder sister!" Xiang Shaolong looked at the two of them a few times. Indeed they did not look heavily made-up. He then put his mind at ease, whole heartedly enjoying the two delicious

women's service.

After Youning had completed his facial make-up, she began to draw on his eyebrows and emotionally said: "Of the men that my sisters and I have met, Mister Xiang is the nobleman who observes the most propriety. But do you know that your two servant sisters are perfectly happy to wait upon Sir Xiang."

Youcui who was at his back then started to dismantle the hero's ornaments on his head and said: "Thinking that after we reach Yunnan, your servant sisters will have to split with Sir Xiang leads us to feel dispirited. But thinking about the love that our late father gave to us, your servant sisters' gain and losses count as nothing!" Xiang Shaolong did not think that they would reveal their feelings openly and felt a little moved. If they had not met him, Madam Zhuang's entire party would no doubt have been killed, and even more the women would have had to suffer insult. The three ladies are nonetheless returning to Chu on behalf of their late husbands without a second thought. Such real self-sacrificing valor calls for one's veneration.

As he was wondering how to answer them, Madam Zhuang came in with the company of Zhao Zhi to have a look at him.

Zhao Zhi almost couldn't recognize her husband. She was astounded and said: "Elder sisters Cui and Ning are brilliant, looks like I and Sister Yanran should get a makeover too."

Madam Zhuang said: "As long as you dye your hair a little grey, you will look approximately ten years older. And if you cover yourselves with a face towel, nobody will recognize you."

Xiang Shaolong looked at himself in the mirror. His confidence increased as he figured that even if he bumped into Li Yuan and Tian Dan face to face he could guarantee that they would not recognize him, especially if he put on some Yunnan style attire.

Book 15 Chapter 11 - Shouchun, The Chu Capital

After the old Chu capital Ying was taken by the Qin general Bai Qi, Chu's King Qu retreated East in defeat. Twice they moved their capital, getting further away from Qin.

The land East of the River Huai originally belonged to the Chen state, but was conquered by Chu. As a result, King Xiang absorbed Chen's soldiers, numbering a hundred thousand. After recovering their former strength, they seized fifteen cantons back from Qin, and regained their impetus.

Yesteryear when they united the other four states to attack Qin and defeated Meng Ao's soldiers, the Qin people sealed their passes and did not dare to face their attack. It appeared that overnight, Chu had regained the position of hegemony they enjoyed during the Spring and Autumn era.

In the end, even though Chu had lost a large piece of their territory, their territory was deep so it was difficult for the Qin people to continue attacking. This allowed Chu to rise again despite their retreat.

Shouchun is situated to the North of the Huai river. Compared to two other strategic posts Cai Cheng and Jia Jiang, it had better communication links. The Chu people also had deep foundations in this area, with no shortage of manpower and natural resources. Therefore they had another grand occasion (setting up a new capital). At that time, they really had greater momentum than all the other Northeastern countries. The capital Shouchun is

especially big, with walls that look like a winnowing basket. The city is more than thirty miles wide, and the outer walls are fifty miles wide. It could be said to be one of the greatest cities of that time, its scale being second only to Xianyang. It was also protected by four city walls. With more than twenty thousand households, it was unusually prosperous.

In addition, the river valley was fertile, hence there was abundant food. This caused Shouchun to become Chu's most bustling metropolis after succeeding Ying as capital. All the most important buildings were concentrated in the central inner castle; the palace, the court arena, government storehouses, government treasury, temple of the ancestors, the earth deity and the harvest deity, and lodging houses for high officials and foreign emissaries were all in this area. The outer city is criss-crossed with streets, with an orderly distribution of residences, mausoleums, guest houses and shops.

Shouchun's city defenses are tight. At the entrance of the city wall, there is a portcullis that could be raised or lowered. It is surrounded by a moat and is guarded by Chu soldiers day and night. All who pass through the city gates must pay taxes.

As Xiang Shaolong and his party approached the pier outside the city, they were cut off by a Chu warship. Only after inspecting Madam Zhuang's credentials did they allow them to anchor at the pier. They were still not allowed to go ashore while another group of officials entered the city to make a report.

They could only wait onboard the ship patiently.

At this moment, Xiang Shaolong had changed into a loose-fitting gown to disguise his healthy and beautiful body. His hair and beard was mottled with grey patches to simulate premature aging. His complexion was pale and his eyebrows were so thick as to obscure his eyes. Compared to the former Dong Horse Fanatic, he now looked even more unlike Xiang Shaolong.

After waiting half a day, they finally saw a convoy of carriages leave the city towards them. They were led by a big fatty, wearing official dress. He was about fifty with slender eyes and a big nose. He looked a little like a second generation lord whose spirit and body had been corroded by wine and women.

Madam Zhuang was waiting respectfully on board the ship, and spoke quietly to Xiang Shaolong who was beside her: "That fatty is Lord Chunshen Huang Xie."

Xiang Shaolong's heart took a turn. In the beginning he still thought it was some kind of lackey from Huang Xie's house, how was he to know that it was Huang Xie himself?

Amongst the four princes of the Warring States era, Xiang Shaolong has only met Prince Xinling. Nonetheless it looks like Huang Xie has the worst appearance amongst them. No wonder he is the least famous of the four princes.

As he thought about how Zhao Mu, who did not look like him at all, tried to kill him, he felt a little queasy.

Ji Yanran who was on his other side said: "He seems to have

grown a little fatter since the last time I saw him."

Xiang Shaolong finally awoke to the fact that Ji Yanran had been here, and trembled. If Chunshen spots her, since he was the enemy who killed his son, they will be exterminated immediately.

Thankfully Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi look nothing like the original after they had been made up and had put on Chu style clothes.

Compared to the other countries, the women's clothes of Chu look extra spacious and gorgeous. A long cheongsam that drags on the ground, with a white cummerbund on the waist, an oblique collar, pleats extending to the back, broad sleeves and lower hem, hats on top of the head with a ribbon under the chin. All these together with their heavily powdered faces gave the Chu women an exotic air.

As for the two ladies' hairdo, they were managed by Madam Zhuang and her two sisters. The fringes were neatly combed and the hair braided from the temples and pulled behind the head and the neck, forming two knots at the top of the head.

Just with this change of hairstyle, Xiang Shaolong failed to recognize them in a moment of confusion, much less with the slightly grizzled hair which caused them to look older by twenty years.

The five ladies' Chu style dresses were differentiated by their colours; vermillion, purplish red, firefly gold, plain green and natural indigo. In addition, there was embroidery with dragons,

phoenix, birds and other motifs accompanied by twigs and branches, leaves and grass, flowers and plants, and geometric lines. The compositions were unique and vivid. This was a good illustration of the Chu people's rich imagination, colorful mythology and culture.

Men's clothes were relatively plain. The robes were long with uncovered legs. With a right overlapping lapel that intersects with the collar and wide loose sleeves, a tight cuff, with lines from the robe to the cuff, relying on deep black, white and other colours to emphasize the design. The most eye-catching was the cummerbund, with different contrasting and alternating colours mixed together.

All the guardians changed into the uniform of Chu warriors. Jacket over the waist, crimp legged trousers, boots, with emblems sewn on the prominent places. Their hairstyles were all changed and they were all wearing Chu hats. They looked fairly interesting.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen arrived at the shore, made a signal to the men and invited them onshore.

Madam Zhuang, assisted by the two stout female servants, gracefully led the party ashore.

Perhaps Xiang Shaolong was overly sensitive, but he saw Lord Chunshen's narrow eyes brighten, firmly staring at her lovely waist, seeming to lust uncontrollably after the delicately beautiful Madam Zhuang, who looked like she could be broken by a light wind.

Huang Xie and his men descended their horses one after another.

Madam Zhuang has just paid her respects when she bitterly wailed: "The Lord needs to decide on behalf of your servant!" Huang Xie immediately flailed his arms and legs and said: "Princess Wan, please do not be troubled. The government will give everything due consideration later."

Next his two squinty eyes flitted over Xiang Shaolong, seeming to be wary of a skilled person, said: "It's an honor to finally meet Mister Wan, and indeed he displays great talent. This Lord is delighted.

Xiang Shaolong understood the principle that with a famous reputation, one did not need to be timid. Even though this Lord Chunshen indulges in wine and women, the moment one sees his eyes, one is able to tell that he is deep and shrewd, completely unlike his external appearance. He promptly controlled his voice and replied in his recently acquired Yunnan accented fashionable Zhou language of Chu: "Lord's formidable name shakes the whole earth. It should be Ruiguang who feels honored."

As Huang Xie's vision flitted across Ji Yanran and the various women, Madam Zhuang stopped wailing and introduced each member of the party.

Huang Xie realized that Ji Zhao the two women had "entered the sunset years" and did not pay them anymore attention, instead sizing up Youcui and Youning the two women spiritedly. Lastly,

his vision rested on Madam Zhuang. His voice turning gentle, he said: "Princess should first come to my home and rest. We can then discuss everything else at leisure.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought that if she had not met himself on this trip, Madam Zhuang and the two You sisters could only have relied on sexual entrapment. This was because given Lord Chunshen's present display, it was clear that he was not really interested in helping them return to their country. One could make that conclusion just by seeing how he paid no attention to Zhuang Baoyi.

There were a few people behind Huang Xie who looked like lackeys. The rest were all valiant warriors.

Amongst the lackeys, there was one who was tall and big, with a beautiful beard that reached his chest. He had a long face with a crooked nose, extremely thin lips and two shining benevolent eyes that gave one a sense of amazement. He was carefully sizing up everyone, especially the exiled young heir apparent of Yunnan Zhuang Baoyi.

Zhuang Kong, who was behind Xiang Shaolong, saw him noticing the man and said softly: "That is Fang Zhuo!" As Xiang Shaolong nodded faintly, Madam Zhuang's melodic voice said: "We should not bother the Lord. Your servant wishes to return to Yunnan's Prince's mansion.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest felt a little startled, and only then did they realize that the Zhuang family had an official residence in Shouchun.

Lord Chunshen betrayed an odd expression. He gave a dry cough and said: "Can we discuss this matter after we've returned to my home?" Madam Zhuang's lovely body trembled a little. The delicate eyes behind the veil gazing at Lord Chunshen, said: "Lord, please may I know what is the matter?" Lord Chunshen sighed and said: "Since the upheaval in Yunnan, Princess and the Little Prince hid in Qin, the Yunnan Prince's palace maids and servants have all dispersed. It was empty for a few years, but recently the Left Magistrate Li Chuangwen coveted the place, forced his way in and moved into the Prince's mansion. Although this Lord tried to negotiate with him many times, he held onto the late king's tacit promise and completely disregarded me. This Lord was also exceedingly dissatisfied."

Madam Zhuang's delicate body trembled severely and furiously said: "Where is heaven? The Lord must seek justice for your servant."

Lord Chunshen let out a bitter smile and softly said: "Sooner or later the Lord will teach this kid a lesson, but right now the situation is delicate. It is not advisable to act rashly. Princess is travel-worn, why don't you come to my home and rest first!" Xiang Shaolong quietly called for joy. There are countless people now in Shouchun who want to see Zhuang Baoyi dead. Nonetheless, because of the involvement of the ten over vassal states, nobody dares to make a move. Therefore as long as they can make a reasonable stand, they can wreak havoc. Riding on the wave, he laughed loudly and said: "I appreciate the Lord's good intentions. This time our return to Shouchun is precisely to get some justice. If we are timid and fearful, how can we accomplish this big task of returning to our country? The Lord please return home first. We have our own plans."

Lord Chunshen was startled and looked at Xiang Shaolong.

Wan Ruiguang is South Yunnan's famous general and even more is the South Yunnan people's famous leader, gifted in both civil and military arts. He has a definite position in Chu. But unbelievably, he is so daring, showing clearly that he means to retake the Yunnan Prince's mansion.

Madam Zhuang's delicate body froze, and she almost raised her voice to stop him. Fortunately she remembered that Xiang Shaolong was an extraordinary man who possesses extraordinary methods, swallowing her words back into her stomach.

Lord Chunshen was worthy to be called one of the four great princes in the Warring States period. After muttering irresolutely for a while, replied: "This arbitrary and absurd act by Li Chuangwen was unpleasant to many people. It is because the Li clan interceded that the vassal states sent an envoy to lodge a formal protest, just that the late king sat on the issue. If General Wan does retake the Prince's mansion, nobody will dare say anything. Its just that there are many experts amongst Li Chuangwen's family commanders. It is hard to predict the outcome if a conflict arises. General Wan had better think twice (actually in Chinese it is think thrice, but I think we should use the common English phrase). It is inconvenient for this Lord to participate directly."

Xiang Shaolong was exultant. Since the circumstances was such, it was even more difficult to pass up this opportunity to demonstrate the Zhuang family's power and prestige. Once the

common people realize that they have the ability to return to their country, because Yunnan is the chief of Chu's vassal states, even if the one holding power is Li Yuan, under the serious circumstances, he would have no choice but to help them settle this debt.

He coldly shouted and said: "On the contrary, I will go, even if up against countless people. Could the Lord first dispatch people to inform Li Chuangwen, saying we want the Yunnan Prince's mansion returned immediately. We will use 'diplomacy first then violence'." This celebrated phrase from Meng Zi was something he learned in secondary school. Luckily the present circumstances allowed him to employ it, giving his study practical application.

A mysterious light shone in Lord Chunshen's eyes and he said: "Mister Wan is truly a towering figure. I, Huang Xie, am convinced. Come men!" Fang Zhuo voluntarily stepped forward and greeted, saying: "Let your servant take care of this matter!" Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed. Of course Fang Zhuo was going to tell Li Chuangwen and his experts how to give them a stiff battle.

But since they had Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi these two politically sensitive figures with them, no matter how many experts Li Chuangwen had, he would not dare to insult the widow in front of the multitudes. When its one to one, he will teach him who's boss.

The Yunnan Prince's mansion is in the heart of the inner castle, next to the king's palace. The entire street was filled either with guesthouses for foreign envoys or offices of the vassal states' envoys. That is why Li Chuangwen's forced taking of the Yunnan

Prince's mansion was extremely offensive, being King Xiaolie's ploy to reduce the say of the vassal states and their power.

As King Xiaolie is already dead, Li Chuangwen's actions have lost all support, indirectly furthering the Zhuang family's cause to recapture the official residence.

All along, the court of the Chu king has always made the excuse that Li Ling's rebellion was an internal affair of Yunnan, having nothing to do with the Chu court. Of course they did not officially recognize Li Ling's position so as to avoid provoking the other vassal states into disgust and secession.

If the vassal states were to submit to a strong Qin, Chu will lose the protective screen of the Southwest, thus greatly endangering the country.

With the backing of these advantageous situations, Xiang Shaolong is resolved to free his hand and create an epic work. The first person to be operated on will be Li Chuangwen.

Since he was not able to raise his hands and kill for real, Xiang Shaolong had borrowed a bundle of heavy wooden staves from Lord Chunshen and hidden them under Madam Zhuang's carriage before heading for the Yunnan Prince's mansion.

When they reached the Yunnan Prince's mansion, they found the gates wide open. More than two hundred warriors lined up on the field in front of the mansion. The display was indeed meant to intercept and intimidate their trivial delegation of just over forty

people which included women and children.

It is the afternoon and the streets thronged with people, with no shortage of high ranking chancellors and ministers who live in the area, and also dignitaries from the Northeastern states and vassal states here to pay their respects to the late King Xiaolie. Seeing this kind of warlike display, everyone gathered round the mansion to watch the spectacle. Within a short time, there gathered a multitude of people. The atmosphere was boisterous.

With a solitary Xiang Shaolong at the head, the group determinedly tried to enter the Yunnan Prince's mansion.

There was someone on the stairs leading up to the mansion, shouting: "The approaching group please halt. Why are you breaking into my mansion?"

Xiang Shaolong and his party orderly and slowly dismounted their horses. The opposing two hundred over soldiers sealed off all their routes in a pincer movement. The main force was concentrated at the front gate of the mansion.

The sign at the top of the platform had been changed into horizontal tablet that said "The Honourable Magistrate Li's Mansion". He laughed coldly: "Who has plundered and occupied my Yunnan Prince's official residence? Report the name to me Wan Ruiguang."

That person, clearly being Li Chuangwen, was dressed in martial dress and looked quite powerful. Its a pity that he looked tacky and

vulgar and his eyes were disproportionately small. His hands grasped his sword hilt and, laughing aloud, he said: "This is really laughable. The Yunnan king was unable to rule his country and was killed by his people five years ago. Where did you find this Yunnan king?"

Xiang Shaolong's worries decreased even more. Even the people of the Li clan do not dare to admit brazenly that Li Ling has succeeded the throne to avoid the calamity of having all the vassal states' revolt.

At this moment, Madam Zhuang and the women and children are still in the carriage, being protected by the Ji and Zhao the two women guardians while Zhuang Kong and his party are outside guarding the carriage, allowing the rest to make their moves without worry.

Xiang Shaolong's eye gave a cold flash, and he shouted loudly saying: "What audacity! The heir apparent of my house is here. Who dares claim the king of Yunnan is not here? You, the mad man who has occupied the Yunnan King's residence by force, do you dare to follow me to debate this in front of the great king, to verify the state seal and official documents proving that Yunnan belongs to my family's heir apparent?"

Li Chuangwen smiled sardonically and said: "You are the mad man. Who knows if you are a confused official or a thief, manufacturing some false evidence to brag and swindle people. Quickly get lost. If not I will break all your dog legs." The street immediately burst into an uproar. All the observers expressed dissatisfaction with Li Chuangwen's harsh and barbaric ways. It

was apparent that this person was normally despotic and unreasonable, offending many and pleasing few.

At this point Xiang Shaolong deliberately exhibited a timid attitude and said: "If you still do not believe me, I will personally visit the Empress Dowager to fight for some justice right now." In order for Li Chuangwen to seize power, how could he spare them? He laughed heartily and said: "Do you think it is that easy for you to leave? I will first tie you up and then bring you to the Empress Dowager!"

Another round of heckling came from outside the mansion. Li Chuangwen was really too much. Xiang Shaolong already knew that Li Chuangwen would not let the matter drop so easily, and also knew he coveted the the seal of state and other items that he mentioned just now. With a cold laugh, he made a hand signal.

At this moment, the Li mansion soldiers on both sides have already started closing in on them.

Wu Shu and the rest immediately drew out the long staves from the bottom of the horse carriage and quickly tossed them to all the men.

Li Chuanwen finally felt that something was wrong, and gave a big shout: "Attack!" Xiang Shaolong, who had long been grasping his big staff, threw off his outer robe and exposed the warrior's outfit underneath. He jumped forward, leaping left and beating right. The enemies swords were being knocked out of their hands. In the midst of miserable cries, the encircling soldiers were counter-attacked by the guardians. One by one the enemy soldiers

fell in the boiling confusion. Breaking arms and legs sounded in quick succession.

The thousands of spectators had the 'robbing the rich to give to the poor' mentality and had always hated the evil Li Chuangwen, fueling the momentum of Xiang Shaolong's party.

This group of enemy warriors had been cloistered and coddled all along. There was an unbridgeable gap between their battle ability and that of Xiang Shaolong and his guardians. In addition, the latter were able to exploit the heavy staves' one tactical advantage, which was their length. Even though the enemy outnumbered them more than ten to one, the former could not react to the swift attacks and were utterly defeated.

After Xiang Shaolong and the guardians knocked down the seventy odd enemy soldiers in the field with their 'swifter than thunderbolt' methods, they regrouped and attacked up the stairs towards Li Chuangwen and his remaining hundred over soldiers.

Li Chuangwen could not imagine how formidable his attackers were and hysterically brandished his long sword while desperately ordering his underlings to rush forward to hinder the enemy.

Xiang Shaolong was like a tiger that had been let out of its cage. He was stepping on the enemies groaning on the ground and annihilating those remaining with his staff. He even sent two people flying more than ten feet before ascending the uppermost section of stairs.

Wu Shu and the rest of the guardians all gave a gratifying shout, beating down every enemy soldier they ran into. All who engaged them had their legs broken, falling in all four directions covered in blood. More than ten were even beaten half to death on the spot.

Xiang Shalong flew towards Li Chuanwen like wind. One by one, all the remaining enemy warriors realized their own peril and scrambled out of his way.

Li Chuangwen was greatly alarmed by the situation and retreated into the inner mansion under the protection of ten over of his household commanders.

As Xiang Shaolong kicked down another person, he rushed into the main hall of the mansion, man and staff as one moving like a tornado.

Outside the mansion lay more than a hundred fallen Li mansion soldiers.

When Li Chuangwen finally turned around, Xiang Shaolong, Wu Shu, Wu Guang, Jing Qi and the others had already arrived like his shadow. With an imposing air like the rainbow, they beat down the panicking soldiers in front of Li Chuangwen as if they were chopping melons and dicing vegetables.

Li Chuangwen stood on the spot staring blankly, and while still grasping his long sword, he did not know how to respond and could not help but abandon his resistance.

Xiang Shaolong withdrew his staff, stood back and smiled, saying: "It appears you are not only a madman, but also a cowardly man!" Li Chuangwen's expression flitted back and forth, but eventually sheathed his sword and harshly retorted: "I am great Chu's magistrate, if you dare to touch one of my hairs....."

Before he had finished speaking, Xiang Shaolong made a hand signal and two wooden staves heavily struck his calf bone, producing the sound of breaking bones. Li Chuangwen fell to the ground miserably.

Xiang Shaolong then ordered: "Throw all the wild thieves who are occupying my Yunnan Prince's mansion out onto the streets." All the guardians acknowledged with a loud shout.

Book 15 Chapter 12 - The Revival Of Prestige

The events that unfolded after the recovery of the Dian King's Mansion totally exceeded the expectations of Xiang Shaolong and the rest. The first to arrive and congratulate them was Lord Chunshen, followed by the maids, servants and warriors of the Dian King's Mansion who had been recently expelled. They were then followed by the representatives and even kings of each vassal state who had come for King Xiaolie's funeral, the envoys of each of the Eastern states, and finally the famous generals and chancellors who had esteemed the Zhuang family all along. This kept Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong busy with incessant receptions and parties.

At dusk, the Empress Dowager Li Yanyan summoned Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi, but did not include Xiang Shaolong. Xiang Shaolong knew that he had been successful in raising the power and prestige of the Zhuang family. With ease of mind, he left Madam Zhuang the mother and son under the escort of Lord Chunshen to enter the palace for the meeting with Li Yanyan and her two plus year-old crown prince. Fortunately, the two You sisters remained to receive and entertain the guests, reducing the chances for a slip-up on his part. As they were beginning to get dizzy and confused with the volume of guests, a servant announced: "Lord Longyang from Wei seeks an audience!" Xiang Shaolong was delighted and after exhorting the You sisters to continue entertaining the other guests, instructed the servant to usher Lord Longyang into the inner hall.

Lord Longyang was puzzled at this arrangement and could only stare blankly on seeing Xiang Shaolong once he arrived inside. Xiang Shaolong rose from his seat and welcomed him, saying: "This time I have fooled you again!" Lord Longyang could not

believe it and widened his 'graceful eyes', and in a small voice said: "Xiang Shaolong!" Xiang Shaolong pulled him to a seat in a corner and laughed, saying: "Who else could it be?"

Lord Longyang delightedly said: "You know that Tian Dan has arrived here!" Xiang Shaolong smiled and nodded.

Lord Longyang sighed and said: "You have the ability to know everything about heaven and earth. The last time it was Dong Horse Fanatic, now it is Wan Ruiguang. You've caused me to be worried for you. When I arrived here three days ago to discover Tian Dan flaunting himself spiritedly, I thought you had been killed by him!"

Xiang Shaolong then explained everything, not knowing why he trusts this 'boyfriend' wholeheartedly. Lord Longyang is finally aware of Tian Dan's escape using a body double. In a flash of realization, he said: "No wonder the Liu brothers, Dan Chu and the others have all disappeared. I must say, though, you can be proud of yourself, having caused him to be so frightened as to slip away so ignominiously!"

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is the Lord here to attend King Xiaolie's funeral?" Lord Longyang replied: "Of course it is so on the surface, but in reality I hope to wrest the Chu people from Tian Dan's hands. We now know that Tian Dan, Li Yuan and Lu Buwei have made a secret pact to divide the whole world between themselves."

Xiang Shaolong said: "If the Lord helps me to kill Tian Dan, wouldn't it solve all problems?" Lord Longyang thought that this

was reasonable, and nodding, he said: "If you can restore the crown prince of Dian to his throne, you will teach the Chu people to think twice about having malicious intents. Though the situation is so complicated! Eventually we will still need to deal with your Qin state, isn't this a great contradiction?" Xiang Shaolong replied: "That is a problem for the future. If we do not deal with Lu Buwei's plot, we will face immediate catastrophe. Therefore killing Tian Dan will definitely be beneficial for you and for me."

Lord Longyang forced a bitter smile and said: "I am afraid that under heaven, there is only one Xiang Shaolong that I cannot refuse. Soon you will be seeing a lot of old friends too!"

Xiang Shaolong said: "That's got to be Han Chuang, right?" Lord Longyang said: "This person Han Chuang is not very reliable, it's better not to reveal yourself to him, else he might betray you under certain circumstances."

Xiang Shaolong then asked about Zhao Ya. Lord Longyang said: "She has already followed your family members back to Xianyang. The crown prince has expended a lot of effort to do this because all along, Han Jing was not willing to let her go. Once women get jealous, they disregard the bigger picture."

This was a big weight off Xiang Shaolong's mind. Following up, he asked: "Who else is here from each country?" Lord Longyang counted on his fingers and replied: "From Zhao, it is Guo Kai. This guy is now highly favored. With him messing around, I think Lian Po will soon lose his position."

Xiang Shaolong knew that for him to be so certain, there must

have been some affair behind in his words. He couldn't help but give a gloomy sigh, but his hands were tied.

Lord Longyang continued: "From Wei, it should be Prince Dan. Nonetheless it is certainly odd that to date there has been no news of him." Xiang Shaolong was also unable to figure this out. If Prince Dan's men had sent news using swift horses from the Wei border to Shouchun, they would have arrived seventy days before he did. There was no reason for the lack of news.

All the envoys had to make official correspondence before arriving. If there was as yet no news of Prince Dan, it was possible that he would not be able to arrive in time for the funeral in half a month.

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Did Qin send anyone?" Lord Longyang replied: "Qin has always had a close relationship with Chu, not to mention that it was a rare time of peace, of course they will send someone. The odd thing, however, is that the person sent is not Lu Buwei, but Premier Xu Xian."

Xiang Shaolong's heart was jolted, with a faint feeling of unease.

Lord Longyang was astounded and said: "Is there any problem? Why did Shaolong's expression turn so ugly?" Xiang Shaolong replied: "I do not yet know what is the problem. Could the Lord do me a favor? Find out which route Xu Xian is taking to Shouchun. This is an urgent matter."

Lord Longyang understood immediately and his color began to

change, saying: "I will dispatch people to do this immediately. If they are passing through my Great Wei, I will send soldiers to protect him. Humph! This could be a plot to implicate my Great Wei."

Xiang Shaolong hadn't thought of this point. It did not matter whether Xu Xian chose to go through Han or Wei, if Lu Buwei caused him to be assassinated in either country, a tempest would ensue. Lu Buwei could then send the Army to attack Han or Wei.

He did not think that Lu Buwei would remain so formidable after Mo Ao died.

Both men no longer had the mood to talk, and Lord Longyang left in a hurry.

It was dark by the time they had sent off all the guests.

Xiang Shaolong was so hungry that his stomach growled and he hurriedly returned to the courtyard of his residence. The two ladies Ji and Zhao had just had a bath and were waiting for him to come in for dinner.

The Dian King's Mansion was medium sized and composed of a master house with six courtyard houses surrounded by high walls.

Each courtyard house was composed of houses in a square with a courtyard in the middle. It was an inward looking design, with practically all doors and windows opening into the courtyard.

There were trees planted all over the houses such that even though the hot summer was approaching, it was still very cool and shady.

The exits were all designed to face South, and the houses were symmetrical left and right with an obvious central axis.

The main buildings faced the main entrance, with wings left and right.

Xiang Shaolong and the guardians occupied two of the courtyard houses. The place was spacious and wide yet cozy and snug and gave one the feeling of having returned home.

After Xiang Shaolong had had his fill, he heaved a sigh and started relating his conversation with Lord Longyang and his worries about Xu Xian. After listening, Ji Yanran was speechless.

Zhao Zhi said: "Premier Xu is one of Western Qin's two big 'Tiger Generals'. He should be able to defend himself!" Ji Yanran said: "The most worrisome thing is if there are Lu Buwei's spies amongst his men. Premier Xu will least expect the attackers to be soldiers that Li Yuan has hidden on the borders of Han and Wei. That is a dangerous situation."

She knitted her eyebrows again, saying: "Although Qin and Chu have a close relationship, sending someone from the king's clan would have been more appropriate. There has got to be a reason for this."

Xiang Shaolong said: "It is easy to find some political pretext like having to sign a peace treaty with Chu to force Xu Xian to come. Even though the Empress Dowager's dissatisfaction with Lu Buwei is increasing steadily, it is difficult to rely on this discredited person to do anything. This is because the Qin military has always looked down on this Empress Dowager."

Ji Yanyran has the utmost respect for Xu Xian, and worriedly sighed, saying: "At this point we can only resign ourselves to heaven's will!" At this moment, Zhuang Kong came over with an invitation, saying that Madam Zhuang had returned and would like to speak to him in person.

Xiang Shaolong could only control his feelings and follow Zhuang Kong out.

Madam Zhuang is wearing a 'Swallow Tail Coat'. The long coat-tail of the garment is cut in a triangular shape and folded over, simulating a swallow's tail, hence its name.

She is reclining on a couch beside a louvered window at the central courtyard. She was in high-spirits as she watched Xiang Shaolong enter. Her fine hair was drawn in a weighted bun and fastened with a golden hairpin which shimmered under the lamplight, accentuating her grandeur, grace and allure.

Her waist was girded with a strand of distinctly shaped jade ornaments, increasing the magnificence and prosperity befitting her status as a noblewoman.

After Zhuang Kong left, Madam Zhuang stood up and moved in front of Xiang Shaolong's. Smiling sweetly, she said: "Your servant came back a long time ago, but wanted to take a bath and change her clothes before meeting you. Can you smell the bath fragrance on my body?" Saying that, she proudly stuck out her silky bosom. Xiang Shaolong figured that the women from the Tu clan of Southern Dian were especially liberal, straightforwardly and brazenly luring men. He also figured, though, that this was also her way of thanking him. He laughed faintly: "Seeing Madam's demeanor, one can tell that this trip to the Chu palace reaped a good result, is your servant wrong?" Madam Zhuang raised her pair of jade-like hands and pressed them against the pit of her stomach, and smiling enchantingly, said: "Shaolong, your pulse is racing."

As Xiang Shaolong was beginning to feel embarrassed, Madam Zhuang released her hands and glided towards the window in a movingly graceful and delicate step. With her back to him, she glazed at the moonlit courtyard, and gently said: "Xiang Shaolong truly enjoys a well-deserved reputation. With just one dazzling move, you have shaken the entire Shouchun. Now nobody dares to look down on us few stateless women and children. All the vassal states have made clear their position, supporting our return to our country. The only obstacle is actually the Chu court."

Xiang Shaolong had to make a move in the five steps it took for him to walk behind her. He asked: "How was Li Yanyan's attitude towards you?" Madam Zhuang replied: "I assumed initially that Li Yanyan would be a very formidable person, but besides being beyond my expectations, she merely came across as a gentle and emotional person, even hinting at some unspeakable grief and sadness. She is of course a rare beauty, even being comparable with your Talented Lady Ji. What surprised me the most, though, was

that she was closer to Lord Chunshen than Li Yuan. This is truly difficult to understand."

Xiang Shaolong was dazed as he heard this. Could Li Yanyan be such a pitiful character? Madam Zhuang turned around and leaned against the window. The corners of her mouth broke into an enchanting smile, with the tips of her eyebrows and the corners of her eyes exuding limitless charm. With both shoulders rising lightly, she said: "Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen are both interested in your servant's body. What should your servant do?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "What does Madam want me to say?" Madam Zhuang laughed in distress, saying: "I have seen the likes of such men countless times. If your servant had not fallen for you, in order to secure their support, she would not have been miserly with her body. Now instead, she feels like seeking your opinion first. Under heaven, there is no one else able to gain your servant's confidence."

As Xiang Shaolong was considering whether she was trying to confuse him, Madam Zhuang took a step toward him and pasted her body into his bosom and embraced his waist with all her strength, her pert face buried in his broad shoulders. She moaned: "Embrace me, ok? I need a big strong man to support me."

He would be lying if he said he wasn't moved under such a circumstance, when such a noble, lovable and charming rarity threw herself into his arms. Xiang Shaolong could not help but embrace her firmly and caressing her well rounded and elastic back muscles, gently said: "Madam does not need to do this. Even if we do not have a physical relationship, I, Xiang Shaolong, will never break a promise. I am determined to help the young crown prince ascend the throne.

Madam Zhuang looked up and smiled sweetly, saying: "Do you think your servant treats you like other men? No! You are wrong! I saw you in a dream last night. Ai! Its a pity that our fling of passion will have to end once my son ascends the throne. When I think of this I can't help feeling that there is no more joy in this life."

She suddenly left his embrace and pulled him to a seat beside her. Her expression turned solemn and she said: "Li Yanyan has verified the legitimacy of me and my son's status, but Li Yuan is using the excuse of pressure from a strong Qin to avoid sending troops to assist us mother and son. I do not know if Lord Chunshen is afraid of offending the Li clan, but he is vague and indecisive. Every other party's verbal support is just that. They are unlikely to lend substantial assistance. Our fate hence lies in Shaolong's hands."

To comfort her, Shaolong softly said: "I have a large and powerful army at the Qin-Chu border. At the appropriate time they can dress up as Dian people and invade the Dian capital. If I manage to kill Tian Dan, though, I will need to slip away immediately, else it will be difficult for me to leave Shouchun. At this point, the only way for Li Yuan to deal with you is to keep you under house arrest in the Chu capital. This way, he will also be able to play with your body, killing two birds with one stone."

Madam Zhuang's countenance changed, saying: "I haven't considered this problem."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help hugging her shoulders, and softly said: "The most critical thing for you to do now is to look like a 'damsel in distress'. Might as well play along with Li Yuan and

Lord Chunshen, pretending that you will be helpless if the Chu court does not send troops. You will be able to fool everyone this way."

Madam Zhuang nibbled her lip and said: "Are you suggesting that I should sacrifice my body? I was originally set on this course of action, but with you around, I no longer feel like doing it."

Xiang Shaolong discerned that her feelings for him were genuine, and since he is used to philandering, couldn't help but kiss her cheek, gently saying: "What is easily obtained is not treasured. You must be ambiguous with those who have designs on you, periodically leading them on and periodically resisting them. By the time their passions boil over, we would have left the Chu capital long ago. If I cannot kill Tian Dan before the Chu king's funeral, I will have no choice but to give up and wholeheartedly help you return to your country."

Madam Zhuang had an intoxicated expression, and said in a muffled voice: "The more I interact with you, the more I realize how fearsome and formidable you are. Yet you are also a passionate and righteous hero. This is such a contradiction. Shaolong Ah! I have fallen into your hands so easily, do you despise me?" Xiang Shaolong thought: I have yet to enter the room and mount the couch, how does this count 'as falling into my hands'? Of course he could not actually say that, and so he softly said: "Before the crown prince returns home, we cannot have a physical relationship. That will cause us to wallow in an ocean of lust, causing us to neglect the important matters. We must 'endure hardship to accomplish our ambitions'. Only by working assiduously and whetting ourselves, can we succeed in this great cause."

Madam Zhuang almost moaned: "You have beautiful women in your house, how can that be called 'enduring hardship'? Using this to describe me is just about right. Shaolong ah! Wu....."

Xiang Shaolong gave her fragrant lips a lingering kiss, saying: "If a woman is sexually satisfied, she will show it in her expression, and philandering old hands like Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen are sure to notice. It will then be hard for Madam to play her tricks with them. This is an extremely subtle matter. Madam must listen to what I say."

Madam Zhuang came to her senses, straightened her body and said: "Your servant understands, but please do not forget your promise. When the matter of returning to our country is accomplished, I will not let you go."

Xiang Shaolong gave her another lingering kiss, then left for his own courtyard, intensely wishing for Ji Yanran the two ladies. Only they can appease the lust that this outstandingly foxy and amorous woman has stirred up in him. In this dangerous place where life and death hangs on a hair, he did not wish for anything to affect his grand plan, and that includes male-female relationships.

If he is not able to kill Tian Dan in the next fifteen days, he will slip away immediately and without the slightest hesitation.

As important as killing Tian Dan is, it cannot compare to the lives of Ji and Zhao the two ladies and the guardians, not to mention his

family members Wu Tingfang and Xiang Bao'er, and the tragic Zhao Ya who was bitterly awaiting him at his home.

It is only now that he understands the meaning of the saying 'Heros have it difficult'.

Book 15 Chapter 13 - History Repeats Itself

The "Keng Qiang" sound resonated without pause.

Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and the guardians together with the You sisters watched the Dian Prince Zhuang Baoyi quite credibly exchanging sword moves with Jing Shan.

Of course all the ladies were cheering for this child. Jing Shan relied on his agility, defending but not attacking.

"Dang!"

In the end, Zhuang Baoyi was still small and weak, and the sword fell on the ground as he lost his grip momentarily.

He was however not discouraged and rolled on the ground, picked up his sword and continued fighting.

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised him, and called for a halt to the exercise. After imparting some basic skills for him to self-drill, he approached the You sisters for his make-up. Ji Yanran and the rest also retreated to the inner hall to avoid being spotted for their exceptional looks.

Having witnessed his godly exhibition the day before, the You sisters adored him even more. With fiery passions rising, it was fortunate that Xiang Shaolong had just fought a great battle with Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi the previous night, and was simply willing

but unable, else something might have slipped.

Xiang Shaolong had undergone strict military training so he understood that during a critical time of operations, too much licentious behavior brought mind and body much harm and little benefit.

The two ladies also understood Xiang Shaolong's difficulties from Madam Zhuang, and merely hinted at him with their usual affectionate chatter.

Once they had finished with the make-up, the two ladies were unwilling to let him go and compelled him to lie on the couch while they gave him a Chinese style massage.

After a few strokes, he became so comfortable and relaxed that he fell asleep.

When he awoke, the two ladies were on either side massaging his feet, causing him to feel as if he was floating in the clouds. It was an out of this world feeling.

Youcui laughed and said: "Did you sleep well?" Youning then said: "Lord Longyang came to look for you. He's been waiting outside for a good fifteen minutes."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and sat up, saying: "Why didn't you wake me?" Youcui then came over and helped him put his clothes on, and said with a voice as tender and soft as water: "We couldn't

bear to do it! When Xiang Sir takes his bath tonight, we will give you another massage!" Xiang Shaolong has gotten used to their meticulous and unfettered serving spirit, for which they even put aside all propriety between men and women. Nodding his head, he requested to get up.

Youning pulled at his sleeve and said plaintively: "Isn't Xiang Sir going to give us sisters a little reward?" Xiang Shaolong thought about how men in this era went about freely playing with beautiful women, and decided to go with the flow. Unable to resist the temptation, he gave both both of them a deep kiss before stumbling out to meet Lord Longyang.

Perhaps it was because he was meeting Xiang Shaolong today, this beautiful man's face had a special glow. After he had sat down, accepted some fragrant tea from a servant and taken a few sips, Lord Longyang said: "This matter with Tian Dan is particularly thorny. Tian Dan is now residing in the Chu palace with Li Yuan as his neighbor. He is thus very well defended. In my opinion, unless we are able to know when he leaves the palace, we are unable to assassinate him."

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming and said: "Is there any way to create a map of the imperial palace?" Lord Longyang said awkwardly: "It could be possible with a little more time, but in my opinion, Tian Dan will definitely rush back to Qi right after King Xiaolie's funeral..... Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong asked: "What kind of defences does the Chu palace have?" Lord Longyang replied: "I'm not too clear about this, but matters will be difficult even with just the moat, the high walls

and the sentry post, much less with the fact that we do not know where in the palace Tian Dan is residing.

Xiang Shaolong said: "All large aristocratic residences will have a secret passageway for escape....."

Lord Longyang interrupted: "You can stop thinking about this possibility. Even with our Wei Palace, there are people round the clock monitoring the ground for the sound of human activity. Else, wouldn't all the officials lose their lives once someone digs a tunnel into the palace?" Xiang Shaolong said: "Doesn't Tian Dan need to attend banquets? If we know when he is going to which meeting, can't we assassinate him en route?" Lord Longyang said disappointingly: "Even though the Chu people have been labeled as Southern barbarians, they abide by customs even more strictly than us people from the Northern states. All banquets and festivities have been forbidden before the Chu king's funeral. This tactic will get you nowhere."

Xiang Shaolong was extremely vexed, and said: "Is there anyone at all who is able to lure Tian Dan out of the palace? Ai! As long as we know where in the palace Tian Dan is staying, we may yet have a method."

At this moment he is thinking of how he used the sewers to infiltrate Zhao Mu's residence. The Chu Palace is much bigger though, and he does not have an answer for that. It was also unclear how convenient or suitable the Chu Palace's sewers were, therefore he had to admit that this method was unlikely to work.

Lord Longyang suddenly lowered his voice and said: "Is that Dian

Princess very beautiful?" Xiang Shaolong replied curiously: "She is certainly extraordinarily moving. Could it be that the Lord....."

Lord Longyang's 'pretty face' turned red, saying: "Please do not misunderstand. When I was at Lord Chunshen's residence last night, Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen were both praising the Dian Princess, saying that such a foxy and charming woman as her was rarer than one in ten thousand. At that time Tian Dan, Han Chuang and Guo Kai were all present. They were all moved. That is why I thought maybe the Dian Princess would be able to lure Tian Dan into our trap! Nonetheless it is still difficult to come up with a concrete and practical plan."

Xiang Shalong said: "Did they talk about me?" Lord Longyang flashed him a look and said: "How could I have leaked your secret? They were equally amazed at your skill, determination and movements. Only, no matter how much they crack their heads, there is no way they will associate you with Xiang Shaolong. Even your servant could not recognize you, the others can forget about it."

Because Xiang Shaolong thought of Lord Longyang as at least half a woman, and also because of their profound friendship, no matter how lasciviously Lord Longyang acted, he felt amiable friendship rather than disgust.

Laughing, he asked: "When Li Yuan talked about Wan Ruiguang, did he display any rage?" Lord Longyang replied: "On the contrary, he did not. In my opinion, there is a fierce internecine power struggle within the Li clan. Last night, Li Yuan actually rained curses on Li Chuangwen's ignorance, saying it served him right to

have both his legs broken."

Xiang Shaolong asked in confusion: "How was Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan's relationship?" Lord Longyang replied: "It was very good. When Li Yuan meets Lord Chunshen, its like when a mouse meets a cat, being excessively deferential and ingratiating. I think Li Yuan must have some plan to deal with Lord Chunshen, if not he would not need to prostrate himself so."

Lord Longyang continued: "Have you seen Li Yanyan? I think besides the Talented Lady Ji, there is none more beautiful and delicate. Nonetheless, her brows and eyes speak of an interminable sorrow, causing one's heart to ache on her behalf."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: "Its a pity that she has no intention of meeting me. Otherwise I would be able to validate the Lord's impressions."

Lord Longyang muttered to himself irresolutely for a while, then said: "I sent people to investigate the whereabouts of Xu Xian, but I am afraid we were late by one step, causing me to be extremely worried."

Xiang Shaolong lightly patted his shoulder, saying: "Do not worry. As long as I, Xiang Shaolong, am around, Qin soldiers will not invade Wei's borders."

Lord Longyang celebrated and said: "I will trust you with this matter then."

The two of them discussed a little more, only to discover that there and then it was difficult to think of a way to assassinate Tian Dan. Lord Longyang then left for a prior appointment.

Just as Lord Longyang had left, Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen arrived together.

Xiang Shaolong naturally let Madam Zhuang deal with them, but before he could return to Ji and Zhao the two ladies' courtyard, Zhuang Kong came to invite him to the main building to meet the guests. He could only brace himself and go.

As he raised his foot to walk into the main hall, he deliberately altered his gait and posture. He walked directly towards Madam Zhuang, Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan who were seated in a host versus guest arrangement. The hall was surrounded by the two men's personal guards.

As Lord Longyang expected, Li Yuan did not once suspect the Wan Ruiguang who was standing there and greeting him. Lord Chunshen acted according to his status and sat coolly.

Li Yuan greeted and said: "General Wan is indeed an extraordinary person. It is no wonder that the moment you stepped into Shouchun, you have become a household name."

After Xiang Shaolong returned the courtesy, he used his modified voice with the thick Dian accent and speaking in the Zhou language, and said: "Compared with the Lord and Imperial Uncle, I, Wan Ruiguang is only fit to be some small seat-bearing

manservant! Imperial Uncle is too polite."

Madam Zhuang, seeing that Li Yuan was totally unsuspecting, let go of her worries and happily said: "Imperial Uncle's visit to our home today is precisely to meet you Ruiguang!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly mused that the two of them were really just looking for an excuse to look for you the woman who is rarer than one in ten thousand. The smiling Li Yuan who was sitting on her left lowered his head.

After gazing deeply at Madam Zhuang, Li Yuan turned his head and said to Xiang Shaolong: "General Wan is a famous general from Southern Dian, does he have a grand plan to reclaim his country?"

Xiang Shaolong was paying attention to Madam Zhuang's motions. He saw that when Li Yuan was looking at her, she became subconsciously frenetic and lowered her gaze. He exclaimed mentally, knowing that Li Yuan was using his bright and handsome appearance, charming style of conversation and elegant demeanor to confuse Madam Zhuang's heart. That is why she is behaving so abnormally.

He replied directly: "This is precisely our objective for coming to Shouchun. If the King could divert a group of horses and men under the small official's command, there is hope that we can defeat the thief in one move and recapture the Dian land.

Lord Chunshen coughed drily, saying: "This matter needs further deliberation. Since the late King is newly deceased and the Crown

Prince (of Chu) is still young, everything should be decided after the funeral. I hope that Princess and Mister Wan is able to appreciate the circumstances."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was musing that things were going well, he saw Li Yuan once again using his meaningful glances to provoke Madam Zhuang, but Lord Chunshen did not notice this.

Li Yuan revealed a smile that even Xiang Shaolong had to admit was good-looking, and gently said: "The Empress Dowager treated the Dian Princess with familiarity at first sight. Whats more, she is now a little distressed in anticipation of the late King's funeral. Let me invite Princess and little Crown Prince (of Dian) to the palace to stay for a few days and let us show our hospitality as hosts.

Xiang Shaolong was startled and gave a silent cry of warning.

Once Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi enter the palace, they would no longer be able to step out freely. Moreover, with Li Yuan's ploy, as Madam Zhuang has not been 'cultivated' for a long time, obtaining her body would take little effort. When that happens, the consequences would be difficult to predict.

He busily tried signaling to Madam Zhuang with his eyes.

Madam Zhuang lowered her head in understanding and dimly said: "I appreciate Empress Dowager's kind feelings. I am but a person who has lost her country. It is difficult to extinguish the constant worry I have about the Dian restoration. How would I dare to serve the Empress Dowager with my worried countenance?

Hope that Imperial Uncle can convey my difficulties to the Empress Dowager."

Li Yuan stopped talking immediately, merely nodding his head slightly in agreement.

Lord Chunshen was also trying to push his agenda with Madam Zhuang, and gently said: "Princess should come over to my place for a couple of days so as to avoid staying in this place of mixed memories. Once the late King has been put to rest and affairs return to normal, this Lord will use all his strength to support the little Crown Prince (of Dian)'s restoration to the throne."

Madam Zhuang naturally understood the meaning behind Lord Chunshen's words. Remembering what Xiang Shaolong said about periodically leading on and periodically resisting, she first flashed Lord Chunshen a coquettish look, and then hung her head and lightly said: "After the funeral period, ok? Your servant suffered a minor illness on the way and have yet to recover up to today. She hopes to rest a few more days. Lets discuss this again after she recovers." Seeing her pitiful appearance and thinking about last night's kiss, even Xiang Shaolong's brain became feverish. Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan each showed an expression of 'communicating with loving glances'.

A beautiful woman's charm is irresistible to men.

Especially a beauty who has yet to be caught in one's hands.

Li Yuan appeared to be deeply concerned and said: "I will find the

palace's best doctor to come and look at Madam's illness!"

Madam Zhuang couldn't decline and could only give her thanks.

Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan could not find any other excuse to remain and could only stand up and leave.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was heaving a sigh of relief, Li Yuan warmly pulled his sleeve and said: "I have yet to have a proper chat with General Wan. Why don't you have a simple meal at my home!"

Xiang Shaolong was happy on the one hand but alarmed on the other. The happy thing was of course having the opportunity to go into the palace. The alarming thing was that without Madam Zhuang around to look after him, he could accident give the game away. Nonetheless however he feels, it would be difficult for him to get away from this.

Its just that he did not understand why Li Yuan would want to win him over.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan got into the latter's horse carriage while Lord Chunshen returned to his home on his own.

Li Yuan smiled slightly and asked: "Regarding Brother Wan's matter of reclaiming his country, what is his estimation?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "During the Dian rebellion, only a handful of us from the Zhuang family and the Wan family were

able to escape. Even though all the peoples of Dian wish for our return, Li Ling has the support of the Yelang people, hence our chance of success without external help is small."

Li Yuan ferociously said: "I have long despised this Li Ling person. Though we are clansmen, we share no affection at all. After stealing the country for himself, he raised an army and occupied land all around, clearly a man with the wild ambition of wolves. It is nonetheless difficult to expect the Empress Dowager to agree to dispatch a large army. Dian is just too far away. If we cannot capture the Dian capital in one move and the fighting is prolonged, things will be chaotic and Qin will seize the opportunity to invade. That would be extremely unfavorable to my Great Chu."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that there were at least two factions in the Li clan, and that Dou Jie and Cheng Suning were supporting Li Ling's faction.

Because Li Yuan could not reliably influence his younger sister Li Yanyan, it was clear that Li Yanyan would follow the imperial decrees that King Xiaolie left behind, intending to use Li Ling to subdue the vassal state, once again making it a part of Chu's territory.

Li Yuan has nonetheless seen through Li Ling's wild ambitions, and knows that Li Ling just wants to grow his own power. This is a menace to Li Yuan.

The situation could be even more complicated, but this would be beyond Xiang Shaolong's field of view.

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand that what's on the surface and what's underneath and reality are completely different.

Li Yuan noticed Xiang Shaolong's dumbstruck look, but mistook it for dejection at the diminishing chances him to reclaim his country. He grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulders, and putting on an earnest expression, said: "Brother Wan may not believe what I am going to say, but the one most opposed to sending troops to Dian is Lord Chunshen Huang Xie." Xiang Shaolong almost lost his voice, and exclaimed: "What?" Li Yuan replied: "That is why I said that it would be difficult for Brother Wan to believe. The circumstances now are very different. The vassal states have amassed armies and are now more self-assured. Imperial decrees are hard to pass. They are also beyond the reach of the court, and are hard to suppress by force. That is why Lord Chunshen opposes the restoration of your country."

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "Imperial Uncle is really forthright."

Li Yuan said: "However, I have a completely different viewpoint. The vassal states' rise is already fait accompli. To continue subverting them merely adds to the chaos and confusion, producing little results for much work. Worse, we will nurture even more new powers like Li Ling. That is why I have always fully supported your reclamation of Dian."

Xiang Shaolong actually believed his words.

This was because it was Lord Chunshen's lackey Fang Zhuo who actually leaked the news of Madam Zhuang mother and son's present Shouchun trip to Cheng Suning. It was hard to believe that Fang Zhuo would benefit from this if Lord Chunshen had not orchestrated the whole thing.

Lord Chunshen is playing the good guy on the surface, but is actually hamstringing the Zhuang family in the dark.

Politics is dirty after all.

Li Yuan is also not a saint, but is merely doing it for himself, since it appears that Li Yanyan is presently closer to Lord Chunshen. There are even people in the Li clan who are standing on Lord Chunshen's side, causing Li Yuan to feel extremely threatened. A further reason could be that he saw that Wan Ruiguang was perceptive and valiant, and wanted to rope him in to his side. He is sure to have an even more formidable plot in the background to deal with himself.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and said: "Actually I do not doubt Imperial Uncle's words. This is because we were almost harmed by villains on the way here."

He then related the entire account of how Chen Suning disguised his men as boatmen to sink their ship.

Li Yuan said happily: "In that case I can save my breath. If Brother Wan is willing to collaborate with me, I will guarantee the reclamation of your country. It is just a question of whether

Brother Wan has the courage." How could Xiang Shaolong not know what this was all about? He pretended to be unafraid and said: "As long as my Dian is returned, I, Wan Ruiguang will go through fire and water with no reservations."

Li Yuan lowered his voice and said: "Then you must first kill Lord Chunshen."

Xiang Shaolong immediately brought to mind the former incident where Prince Xinling asked him assassinate the Wei King. Unexpectedly, history has repeated itself again.

end of Book 15

Book 16 Chapter 01 - Empress Dowager Yanyan

Amongst the palaces Xiang Shaolong has seen, the scale of the Chu palace is second only to that of the Xianyang palace, but it is the most tightly guarded.

The palace city is surrounded by thirty foot high walls with an elaborate tower in each of the four corners. The walls are completely encircled by a fifty foot wide moat with clear waters that allow one to see the bottom. The most formidable are the wooden stakes that stick out of the middle of the moat, making it difficult for one to swim across. There are two city gates which can be raised or lowered for traffic.

Behind the high walls are layers upon layers of palace halls and rooms which are mostly either part of the outer Royal Court or the inner palace courtyard. The central enclosure is bounded by an inner wall with two bell drum-towers. An inner palace gate is set in the link-way between the outer Royal Court and the inner courtyard.

The overall layout is symmetrical about a central axis, with a main street connecting the North and South city gates and the inner palace gate. Eight large palace halls and close to sixty courtyard houses are laid out tidily around the central axis on both sides of the main street, with marble fishponds, foot bridges, running water and ancient trees reaching the sky, magnificent and handsome.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan entered the palace through the

North entrance. They traversed a large square and a bridge over a transverse brook before reaching the two main palace halls 'Political Discourse' and 'Rites and Ceremonies'. Both halls were built on white stone terraces with encircling paths and railings. The atmosphere was solemn and magnificent.

Of the six other smaller palace halls, four were part of the outer Royal Court and two were part of the inner palace courtyard. They were all named after characters from the Chu mythology. The outer Royal Court halls were named 'Fire God', 'River Goddess', 'The God of Punishment' and 'Fate'.

The inner courtyard halls were named 'Fragrant Martyr' and 'Witch'.

As he was listening to Li Yuan's introductions, the hall which left the greatest impression on Xiang Shaolong was the 'Witch' Hall. Simply going by these names, it can be seen that amongst the nations, the Chu people were the most ingenious and romantic. One could forget about such audacious and innovative names for palace halls in the other states.

At the same time, his heart was charged with electricity.

Earlier, Li Yuan had raised the issue of killing Lord Chunshen, then side-tracked to another topic, apparently to give him time to digest this hard-to-swallow proposal. He thus recalled Li Yuan's worries.

Lord Chunshen has wielded power for a long time after all, with a

thousand lackeys under his wing. He has a lot of prestige in Chu, is strong in every department, and has hard stems and deep roots.

If Li Yuan kills him personally, he could incite unrest. He therefore has to find a scape goat, that man being Xiang Shaolong.

Once he reached Shouchun, he had unyieldingly chased away the Li Chuangwen who had forcibly seized the Dian King's Mansion, appearing to be completely oblivious to the consequences. In Li Yuan's eyes, he looked like a heroic and straightforward person.

If he could prompt Xiang Shaolong to assassinate Lord Chunshen, he could push all accusations onto Wan Ruiguang. In this way, he could also neutralize the Zhuang family's attempt to reclaim their country and even take Madam Zhuang for himself, killing three birds with one stone. There was no stratagem that was more malicious than this.

Those who stood on the side of Chu all wished to use Li Ling's hand to flatten the vassal state and bring it back under Chu's control*. It appears that Li Yuan, Lord Chunshen and Li Ling were like snakes and mice in the same nest, merely paying lip service to the beauty Madam Zhuang!

* We need to remember that the vassal states had stopped abiding by Chu after King Xiaolie took over, and were subjects in name only.

The horse carriage entered the inner palace gate into the inner palace courtyard. This was where the Chu King handled daily government affairs and lived his daily life. The main buildings

were the two palace halls 'Fragrant Martyr' and 'Witch', and six palaces** to the East and West. Each palace was composed of four courtyard houses. There were also three gardens, the 'Imperial Garden' on the main street and the East and West Gardens on the East and West streets. The scenery was harmonious and boundless.

** Ok so there is the whole complex which is called the 'Palace'. Within the Palace there are many 'palaces'. To simplify everything, we will call everything 'palace'. The context should be sufficient to distinguish the two.

Li Yuan was clearly learned, explaining the folklore behind the names of the palace halls one by one. His style of conversation was elegant and filled with an enchanting charisma. It is no wonder that even though her heart belonged to him, Xiang Shaolong, and even knowing that Li Yuan was not a good guy, Madam Zhuang was unable to restrain her emotions with him.

At this point, he was talking about the River Goddess and the Witch, and with a laughing voice said: "Our two most beautiful goddesses. the River God and the Witch, do not inhabit Chu's borders, but are from Han's Luo River and Qin's Mount Wu respectively. Laughing with the lips and eyes, indistinct and abstract as spirits, inhabiting distant rivers and mountains, it is fascinating to think about."

(Ok so the Witch 巫女 is from Mount Wu 巫山. I can't really figure out whether it should be Lady Wu from Mount Wu or the Witch from Witch Mountain. Anyone?)

Xiang Shaolong said: "Regarding the matter about Lord Chunshen that Imperial Uncle mentioned...." Li Yuan patted his own brows amiably and said: "Lets discuss this again at a later date.

I think Brother Wan should first spend more time to clearly recognize Lord Chunshen's true face and verify that I, Li Yuan, am not slandering a good person. Brother Wan can then make his decision. Brother Wan should nonetheless remember that this is a matter between us men. If the ladies knew about this, not only will they reveal it in their countenance, it will cause them to worry all day, doing more harm than good."

Xiang Shaolong silently praised this brilliant move, and naturally nodded his head in agreement.

Li Yuan is trying to deceive him, he is also trying to deceive Li Yuan, tit-for-tat, both sides should not have any cause to grumble.

At this moment, the horse carriage was following the East road. The question was where was Tian Dan's location?

Li Yuan laughed and said: "I have an official residence outside the palace that is ten times the size. I prefer to stay within the palace nonetheless, and I spend the large proportion of my time here.

Xiang Shaolong mused: the real reason is that you want to be close by to control Li Yanyan.

As the guardian opened the carriage door, Xiang Shaolong collected his disparate thoughts and followed Li Yuan down.

Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong sat down within the main hall as host and guest. A pretty servant maid proffered some fragrant tea.

As Xiang Shaolong's eyes took a sweep of the place, he realized that Li Yuan was a man of taste.

In the direction of the Royal Court and the central axis is a row of eighteen doors with louvre windows. The pond on the terrace was adorned with miniature pavilions and rock mountains, and was forded by a stone bridge. The courtyard was wider than five hundred paces, and planted with Camellias and Chinese Cinnamon. It was just before summer and the Camellias were in full bloom. With the smell of cassia and tangerines floating in the air, the red and white strived with each other, creating a colorful scene of Spring.

The furniture in the hall were all made of intricately carved fragrant pear wood, with the seats were covered with brocade. All kinds of decorative ancient porcelain and engraved screens could be found everywhere. Xiang Shaolong knew that his taste was not at this level.

If not for the fact that he had obtained Ji Yanran's affections first and that they had shared all kinds of extraordinary circumstances, he might really have lost to Li Yuan in that contest for Ji Yanran.

Because the North hall faced away from the Sun and was close to the pond, it was cool and refreshing, relieving the summer heat.

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan sat calmly in the middle of the hall enjoying the fragrant tea, for a moment he felt it difficult to treat this apparently honorable, bright and talented man as an

enemy.

To think that this chap was so formidable, feigning closeness as family and brothers to attack the heart of this forsaken and homeless man. Of course he couldn't 'disappoint' him.

As he was about to feign thankfulness, Li Yuan clapped his hands lightly and said in a crisp voice: "Brother Wan should take a bit of time to observe the situation, then think over my story. Ai! Li Yuan is not afraid of having deep conversations with relative strangers because of righteous indignation for my Great Chu's future, nothing else."

Following his clapping, four well proportioned beauties wearing the Chu dress and veiled caps came from a side door with dancing steps. As they arrived in front of the two men, they knelt, paid their respects and with a graceful subservient posture, sat down within arm's reach of the two men.

The veils covering their faces caused them to be even more enchanting.

Only now does Xiang Shaolong realize that without Yanran, people will have an excellent way to bribe him.

He couldn't help having a cold sweat wondering what would have happened if he hadn't obtained Ji Yanran. It is all thanks to the fact that Li Yuan only knows the poems and songs of Chu but does not know any aphorisms like 'absolute power corrupts absolutely' nor any 'sweet honeyed stories'.

Li Yuan said: "When we seal friendships, if its not with beautiful women then its with gold. These four women come from different lands, each having windy passions, each being one out of a thousand women, and each being virgins who have never tasted sexual intercourse. Brother can take their veils off one by one, see which is the most pleasing to the eye and take that one as my meeting gift." Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in his heart 'formidable!', Li Yuan could be the most adept at psychological tactics amongst the people he had met.

With the opportunity to remove the veils of all the women and to select one, his curiosity was piqued and he felt the high level arousal of violating other people's private areas.

Even though he had no intention of accepting the beauties, he still felt a strong impulse to unmask the women for a look.

Of course he couldn't do this.

With a sinking countenance, he said: "I appreciate Imperial Uncle's kindness, but I, Wan Ruiguang, do not care for anything other than reclaiming my country."

On hearing this, Li Yuan was not angry but was pleased instead. Laughing out loud and chasing away the four women, he said: "Don't know if Brother Wan knew that the certain Li was deliberately testing you, seeing if Brother Wan would be distracted with sex. Since it is this way, I am even more relieved."

He clapped his hands again, and the pretty maid servant brought fine wine and food. Both men took a small swallow from the small wine cups and started talking freely.

Li Yuan spoke rapidly, continuously asking after the situation in Dian, expressing great concern. Thankfully Li Yuan was even more ignorant of Dian affairs than he was, and whenever Xiang Shaolong was unable to answer, he casually fabricated some exotic custom to bamboozle Li Yuan. Li Yuan also could not find any gaps in his story. In those days when he was undergoing military training, he had gone to many parts of China. Hence he recognized their terrain and culture, and could give a passable discourse.

As they were halfway through the meal, a sentry reported that the Empress Dowager had arrived.

Xiang Shaolong had a fright and was about to retreat when Li Yuan calmly and unhurriedly instructed his men to remove the food and wine, and then led him behind a screen and said: "Brother Wan can hide here. When you hear me ask about helping you reclaim your country, you will know who is getting in the way."

Xiang Shaolong asked in a low voice: "What if I am discovered by the Empress Dowager?" Li Yuan slapped his chest in guarantee and said: "When younger sister and I speak, there is never anyone else around. If there is any issue, I will bear all responsibility. I won't let Brother Wan suffer any grievance. But remember to just keep quiet and listen, do not look."

The last time as Dong Horse Fanatic, he had to play a vulgar hero. This time Wan Ruiguang has been seen as a brave and selfless hero

by Li Yuan. Xiang Shaolong could only pretend to foolishly and blankly accept this absurd arrangement. With the jingle of girdle ornaments, the incomparably delicate and graceful woman who had mesmerized King Xiaolie arrived.

With the sound of closing doors, he heard the footsteps of the imperial guards retreating outside the door.

As Xiang Shaolong recalled Lord Longyang and Madam Zhuang's description of Li Yanyan, how could he abide by Li Yuan's instructions? He placed his eye on the screen aperture, looking towards the center of the hall.

His one look took his breath away.

He could not believe that he would see a person whose beauty and demeanor were both comparable to Ji Yanran and Qin Qing.

To be honest, she was still half a step below Ji Yanran in terms of charm and beauty, and falls short of Qin Qing's grandeur and elegance. Nonetheless she has a whiff of that 'seep into the bones' kind of universally moving, frail and feeble look that causes all who meet her to sympathize with her. At this moment, she prettily stood at the center of the hall with a lightly crinkled brow. As long as one is a man, one will have a strong urge to rise up and embrace her in sympathetic and tender love. She is the kind of person that will cause honorable men to desire to pull her to a couch in search of happiness but not be able to bear adding to her the little more injury; the kind of woman who will overturn nations.

Madam Zhuang was right. Her refined and elegant-as-jade appearance was shrouded by an insipid wisp of indescribable sorrow, appearing as if there is nothing left in this world that can cause her to regain her happiness. Li Yanyan's head sported a cloud bun. Even her fringe was made like a cloud, placed on top of her long delicate eyebrows which reached her temples, really fitting the description 'cloud bun thick obvious fragrance dense eyebrow dye'. (I think this is some kind of classic look)

The hair on her temples are loosely combed in a curvy style, thin and translucent, and dimly discernible like cicadas' wings. This further emphasized her consummately beautiful almond-shaped face and her sorrowfully beautiful eyes.

Slim and graceful, with a delicate body in balance. Coupled with a phoenix crown and an emerald dress, this gave her a larger than life, hard to surmount, aloof and remote, immortal beauty.

She was adorned with all manner of ornaments, but the most eye catching piece was the necklace hanging from her powdered neck and sitting on her silky bosom. The upper tier was made from twenty plus jewel embedded gold beads while the lower tier held a piece of dew-drop shaped jade as the anchoring ornament, reflecting the sparkle from the jewel encrusted phoenix crown on her head, sparkling and translucent, dazzling and brilliant, but not at all diminishing her delicate and refined essence that transcended all riches and honor.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help feeling shocked at her beauty.

If she was willing to mount the couch with him, Xiang Shaolong

would be sure to do it immediately.

At this moment, Li Yuan came behind her and gently helped her remove her outer robe, exposing her gold-lined black long dress decorated with delicate phoenix motif embroidery. Her waist was bound with a jade belt, displaying a grand and magnificent attitude.

As Li Yuan's fingers touched her fragrant shoulders, this so-named Empress Dowager's delicate body shuddered visibly, and she even lowered her gaze with a very strange expression.

Xiang Shaolong's heart jolted, thinking that the two of them are not brothers and sisters, but also realizing that if this was the case, how could they have fooled Lord Chunshen?

Even if one wanted to, it was not possible to pass oneself off as someone of Li Yanyan's nationally renown class of beauty.

As Li Yanyan's plump and smooth sexy lips trembled lightly, she said: "Why is Elder Brother here? I made an appointment with Xiu'er to come see the latest embroidery!"

With a sweet and clear voice that carried a jingling and magnetic tone, heaven has truly been kind to her.

As Xiang Shaolong has gone through these many years of setbacks and calamities, he can actually meet outstanding beauties like Madam Zhuang and Yingying and remain calm and show no

interest like an old meditating monk. But this time as he is stealing a look at Li Yanyan, he knows he is about to lose his battle.

At the same time, he had a vague thought that perhaps Li Yuan wanted to obtain Ji Yanran simply because the Talented Lady Ji was the only one who could take Li Yanyan's place in his heart.

Could it be that the two brothers and sisters have an unmentionable relationship?

It was a given in this era that a husband has many wives.

When women are married to men of status and rank, some of their older and younger sisters and even nieces will follow to the groom's house as concubines, not to mention maid-servants as part of the dowry.

Even more discriminating, when a monarch marries off a daughter, lords of the same clan or even close friends will send some of their women over as gifts to be concubines.

Besides this, the aristocracy and ministers may bring any woman they fancy into the palace. It is obvious that they will have many concubines.

Families with many wives are chaotic, with fratricidal fighting and confusion over precedence happening easily.

It is very likely that Li Yuan and Li Yanyan have the same father

but different mothers. A talented man matches a beautiful woman, not to mention that Li Yuan is a wolf with a savage heart, desiring to use Li Yanyan to emulate Lu Buwei's devious plot. He even caused Lord Chunshen to think that he is old but still vigorous in mind and body, giving rise to a son in his old age, then switching her to marrying King Xiaolie this other muddle-head. One can imagine how once King Xiaolie met Li Yanyan, he forgot even his father's surname and given name. How would he know that the 'miracle' in her body is actually concocted by Li Yuan? If Xiang Shaolong had not found out about the relationships between Li Yuan, Li Yanyan, Lord Chunshen and King Xiaolie from Zhao Mu, and also understood Li Yuan's unscrupulous character, he would never have been able to arrive at this shocking deduction with just this one act between two people and their momentary expressions.

As he thought about how Li Yuan would rather have killed him than let him have the opportunity to see the two of them alone, Xiang Shaolong's breath quickened unconsciously.

As Li Yuan ushered Li Yanyan to a seat, he gently said: "Xiu'er is presently embroidering in the East wing. It is rare for us to have a chance to talk, let elder brother and Yanyan exchange a few words, ok?" With these words, Xiang Shaolong knew that even though it appeared that Li Yuan had run into Li Yanyan by accident, it was actually arranged deliberately to allow himself to listen in on some conversation that is slanderous to Lord Chunshen, to seal himself as the tool to assassinate Lord Chunshen.

This is because Li Yuan should have known Li Yanyan would have come after lunch to see Guo Xiu'er's embroidery. This perverse and sleep depriving relationship must have been difficult to bear, that is why this most powerful person in Chu condescends

to come here. It could be seen that her relationship with Guo Xiu'er is very good.

Li Yanyan sighed and said: "Speak!" Li Yuan pretended to tremble in fear in front of this sister of his, gave a dry cough, cleared his throat and said: "I wish to discuss the matter of the Dian Princess mother and son's request for troops to help them reclaim their country."

Li Yanyan coldly said: "Elder brother must have fallen for the chaste Princess."

Li Yuan, knowing that "Wan Ruiguang" was listening, became uneasy and unhappily said: "How can Yanyan look upon Elder Brother this way? I am but thinking on behalf of Great Chu. The late king has just passed away, if we remain unmoved by the Dian Princess mother and son's request, it could provoke the other vassal states' desire to secede. If they lean towards Qin, Chu will be in danger!"

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh, Li Yuan was giving such a fervent speech, he is really going through a lot of trouble on his behalf.

Li Yanyan was silent for a while, and laughed dully saying: "This is not something for you or I to decide. We must consult the generals and ministers, if not there will be controversy. Has elder brother raised this with Lord Chunshen?" Once King Xiaolie passed away, Lord Chunshen immediately became the person in the Chu court with the most decisive role in both military and civil matters. It was also because of this, that Madam Zhuang toiled to

rush to Shouchun to plead for Lord Chunshen's benevolent assistance. How could she know that Lord Chunshen is the one in the background trying to eliminate the mother and son?

Li Yuan played the savior, and said in an upright and unafraid manner: "Of course I have, but Lord Chunshen is adamant and determined to use Li Ling to control the vassal state. Madam Zhuang aside, he is also looking to eliminate the rest of her party. Ai! If Li Ling becomes dominant, do you think that he will follow the King's orders? That is why Elder Brother has to raise this issue with the Empress Dowager."

This is the first time he has addressed Li Yanyan as Empress Dowager.

The Xiang Shaolong who was peeking in rapt attention secretly exclaimed 'formidable!', no matter whether this speech is real or fake, when Li Yuan delivered it to the Chu Empress Dowager, even the false turned real. If he was the real Wan Ruiguang, he would definitely have believed without a doubt, dying with the horizontal stroke, following Li Yuan's orders to fight his fight.

Li Yanyan muttered irresolutely to herself for a while, then unhurriedly said: "I requested for Elder Brother to invite the Dian Princess mother and son to the palace for a few days. How is that coming along? If they come here, then nobody will be able to harm them. Ai! The widow and the fatherless child leads one to pity."

Xiang Shaolong was moved in his heart, and as he listened to Li Yuan explaining Madam Zhuang mother and son's reason for declining, mused that Li Yanyan's intention was actually so good.

Looks like all her past actions have been forced out by the Li Clan which is headed by Li Yuan, no wonder she is so unhappy.

As he was still in perplexed thought, he heard Li Yanyan's gentle voice saying: "Elder Brother, you must go see the Dian Princess immediately. No matter what you do you, you must get the mother and son to come into the palace together with all her people. By no means must we allow them to come to harm. Zhuang Jiao has made matchless contributions to our Great Chu. With their past loyalty, no matter what we must show them a little sympathy!" Li Yuan secretly celebrated for having achieved his goals, and only after getting up did he realize that Li Yanyan had no intention of getting up. He was puzzled and asked: "Isn't Yanyan going to meet Xiu'er?" Li Yanyan dully replied: "I would like to sit here alone to contemplate some issues, nobody is to disturb me."

Li Yuan couldn't help turning his head and glancing at the screen, scaring Xiang Shaolong into withdrawing his head quickly.

Li Yanyan was displeased and said: "Why is Elder Brother hesitating?" The next sound was of the opening and closing of the doors. One could imagine how frightened and distressed the Li Yuan was as he was compelled to leave.

Xiang Shaolong was also suffering. If this beautiful woman wants to sit for half a day, he would have to be cooped up there for the same period of time. Li Yanyan's voice sounded out: "No matter who you are, come out for me immediately!"

Once Xiang Shaolong heard this, he was instantly soaked in sweat. If he is beheaded by Li Yanyan just like that, it would

certainly be most pointless.

Book 16 Chapter 02 - To Meet Again In A Strange Land

Xiang Shaolong stepped out from behind the screen with dragon-like movements and tiger-like steps, not the least bit afraid. He knelt and kowtowed at a distance, saying in a deep voice: "The stateless official Wan Ruiguang is guilty and deserves ten thousand deaths. May the Empress Dowager convict him."

Li Yanyan coldly looked at him and blandly said: "Raise your head!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly pleased and raised his head while gazing deeply into her eyes, displaying a liberal demeanor, as if completely unafraid of death.

Li Yanyan's delicate pupils emitted a keen light and solemnly said: "Now I will question and you will answer. If there is any hesitation, I will order my men to drag you outside and behead you. Do not take advantage of the fact that I am a woman. I have learned equestrian archery and sword fighting since young. There are very few people who can even think about approaching me."

Xiang Shaolong mused: no wonder you are so daring. He let out a sigh and said: "Empress Dowager might as well behead me. If it is anything concerning the Imperial Uncle, how could I speak without his permission?"

Li Yanyan was displeased and said: "Who is in charge here in my Great Chu?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he couldn't push her too far, and sadly said: "I, Wan Ruiguang, am but a stateless official. I never hoped to survive this trip to Shouchun. I would have been content to put in some effort for my country before dying."

Li Yanyan furiously said: "Do you want to die? I want to keep you alive in vain hope of death, accuse your associates of conspiring against me and bring disaster to your family and clan."

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud and said: "It turns out that in the end you only wish to destroy our Zhuang family. Alright! I, Wan Ruiguang, will just have to accept fate."

He didn't really want to argue with her, just that the situation before him was complicated, and Li Yuan and Li Yanyan's relationship was even more unfathomable. If he surrendered obediently and betrayed Li Yuan, she would surely despise him. It would be more worthwhile to try to test the depth of her compassion for the Zhuang family.

Li Yanyan stared at him fiercely, her complexion flitting from bright to gloomy, obviously unable to decide what to make of this heroic, spirited and death defying yet talented and valiant man.

Xiang Shaolong pressed his advantage and kowtowed by knocking his head heavily three times on the floor, saying: "This is to thank Empress Dowager's compassion and desire to protect our Zhuang family just now. If Empress Dowager has changed her mind, the small official will still be very grateful. I just hope that

my death will appease the Empress Dowager's anger, and hope that the Empress Dowager will be magnanimous and spare Zhuang Jiao's few remaining descendants."

As his words ended, he quickly and nimbly retreated two steps and knelt down again. He then drew his sword and played as if he was going to commit suicide.

Li Yanyan said: "Wait!"

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not force his own hand. If Li Yanyan had not shouted for him to stop, he would have had no choice but to break through the window on the back door and escape as quickly as he could to the Zhuang Mansion, and then figure out how to escape (Chu).

As he was thinking about the close shave, he put his sword horizontally across his neck like it was done in the movies and laughed bitterly, saying: "What instruction does Empress Dowager have?" Li Yanyan heaved a sigh and said: "Sheathe your sword first, and then come sit in front of me!"

Xiang Shaolong silently sheathed his sword and moved to a point ten steps from her and sat down comfortably. His manner was neither overbearing nor servile.

In this era, heroes are esteemed. It was not certain whether Xiang Shaolong was truly heroic, but he came from the 21st Century where everyone was equal. Even though he observed the customs of the present era and stood on ceremony when needed, he

involuntarily displayed a 'fearing no one, neither heaven no earth' attitude. This caused others to feel that he is distinctively high-spirited.

Li Yanyan scrutinized him for a good while before sighing and saying: "Has Elder Brother ever asked you to assassinate Lord Chunshen?" This time it was Xiang Shaolong's turn to be startled. Li Yanyan was unexpectedly sharp, arriving at this conclusion from the fact that Li Yuan had hidden him behind the screen to eavesdrop and then deliberately slandered Lord Chunshen.

Pretending to mutter irresolutely, he said: "Imperial Uncle might have had this intention, but he has yet to mentioned it to the small official."

Li Yanyan's voice turned cold and she said: "Once you have murdered Lord Chunshen, do you think any member of your Zhuang family will be left alive?" Xiang Shaolong could not really fathom whether she was standing on Li Yuan's side or Lord Chunshen's side and said: "Of course I will become the scapegoat!"

Li Yanyan gazed blankly for a while before saying in puzzlement: "'Scapegoat'. What an odd expression. Having said it though, it does seem like an apt description. Lambs can only be led to the slaughter."

(Just a note that the Chinese word for scapegoat is actually 代罪羔羊 literally meaning 'assuming guilt lamb'. If I'm not wrong, lambs and goats have the same name 羊 in Chinese.)

By this time, Xiang Shaolong is very familiar with the attitudes of

people in the royal courts. Li Yanyan is just like another Zhu Ji, unbearably lonely. That is why once she ran into him, she is handily using him to while her time away. With sudden inspiration, he said: "This could also be described as 'A black dog's food is a white dog's calamity'. Isn't this even more apt?" Li Yanyan failed to comprehend initially, but thinking it through, she laughed with a "Pu Chi" sound. She knew that she had lost her bearing again and restrained herself, though her tone was now warmer, and she said blandly: "You really aren't the brave and straightforward person that you appear to be, only knowing how to use the sword. Ai! Please go! In the end, this has nothing to do with you. I was just angry that you actually had the guts to sneak a peek at me."

Xiang Shaolong did not dare to show his gleeful expression, and after kowtowing to express his thanks, stood up and said: "Would Empress Dowager please show me an open and honorable egress route."

Li Yanyan said: "After I leave, you may leave by the side door to the courtyard and then leave by the back rooms. If you do not wish for your head to roll on the ground, its best not to reveal our conversation to the Imperial Uncle. Otherwise I will not spare you."

Xiang Shaolong took her words as wind past his ears (a.k.a. in one ear and out the other) and casually muttered a response before attempting to retreat to the courtyard. Li Yanyan said in displeasure: "Stand still! Did you hear what I said?"

Xiang Shaolong calmly said: "The small official did not reply

because he does not take his head as a matter of concern and hence did not really take the words seriously. However if I had revealed this to Empress Dowager, she would have been unhappy. Even if I am torn apart by five horses, I will still abide by the ruling."

Li Yanyan's apricot eyes glared with fury initially, but gradually softened again as she heard the last few words. She sighed and said: "You are not a wicked and evil person, but are candid and honest. For Dian to have produced a talent like yourself, there is yet hope for your restoration. Go! I don't wish to see you again."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and said: "Didn't Empress Dowager ask Imperial Uncle to order us into the palace just now?" Li Yanyan was irritated and said: "Even then do you think you can meet me so easily? Quickly get lost!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "If the Empress Dowager really wants me to 'get lost', I would rather be killed by you. Has Empress Dowager ever heard of the expression 'Only to be killed, never to be insulted'?" Li Yanyan pretended that she did not hear it, but felt herself being attracted to this person's clever language. He was enchanting and fascinating, a kind of man she had never before seen in her life. Nonetheless, since it was not appropriate for her to continue being in contact with him, she turned around and walked out the main door with a look of exasperation.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to retreat to the courtyard and quickly walked to the rear room. Li Yanyan's beautiful visage has been crammed into his heart. As he pushed open the door to go out, the shadow of a figure floated in with the fragrant wind and bumped into him.

Despite his perturbed mind, he realized that it was a woman. Not daring to let the other party enter his embrace, he stretched out his hands to restrain the other party's shoulders.

The lady cried out in alarm, raised her own hands and pressed against the pit of his stomach, thus borrowing a little momentum to retreat a few steps.

The sound of an abusive female voice came out of the rear room.

Xiang Shaolong took a look at the face of the lady that almost crashed into his chest and got a fright. If she wasn't the GuoXiu'er who married Li Yuan, who could it be? As the servant girls behind Gui Xiu're started to swarm round, she cut them off with one hand and said in a loud but delicate voice: "Do not be rude. This is General Wan Ruiguang, a friend of Imperial Uncle."

After giving him a firm and meaningful look, Guo Xiu'er greeted and said: "Mister please forgive your servant for walking around without her eyes." Xiang Shaolong vaguely felt that Guo Xiu'er had recognized who he was, but could not tell where he had exposed himself. He felt a big headache coming, but was also secretly happy. Returning the courtesy, he said: "It should be I who should be asking Madam Imperial Uncle for forgiveness."

Guo Xiu'er shouted to the four servant girls behind her: "Why aren't you quickly going ahead to see if Empress Dowager has left?" The four servant girls have rarely seen this warm, graceful and elegant Madam use such an urgent and strict tone, so while

whispering amongst themselves about who this person was, they hurriedly rushed to obey their orders.

Guo Xiu'er gently said: "Is General leaving? Let your servant send the General some ways!"

She led the way, and reaching the back door, she said to the two sentries: "Go and help General find a horse carriage."

One of the sentries obeyed the command and left.

Guo Xiu'er then found another excuse to send the other sentry away. When only the two of them were left, she softly said: "Xiang Shaolong! I've been thinking about you bitterly. Why have you come here? Is it to deal with Xiu'er's husband?" Only now does Xiang Shaolong know for sure that she has seen through his disguise. He sighed, saying: "How did you know I was Xiang Shaolong?" Guo Xiu'er said softly: "When my hands pressed against your stomach just now, I felt that phoenix shaped jade pendant on you. I have been playing with it and handling it since I was young. Of course I can recognize it! Xiu'er is very happy, you have really been wearing it continuously."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong understand.

Guo Xiu'er serenely said: "Can Shaolong let Xiu'er's husband go?" Xiang Shaolong's heart was extremely moved. If Guo Xiu'er had wanted him dead, all she had to do was shout with her delicate voice, he would then be decimated. However, even though she had guessed that he was here to kill Li Yuan, she was not willing to do

so, merely pleading for his mercy. It was clear that she was someone who would not sell herself out once she had made up her mind.

He couldn't help but ask: "Does he love you?" Guo Xiu'er nodded affirmatively, but sighed and said: "What use is that? He has too many women!"

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew Li Yuan was promiscuous and liked to reward himself with women. He said seriously: "Xiu'er please do not worry, my trip here is definitely not because of him."

Only after the horse carriage had gone far away did Guo Xiu'er emerge from her dejected spirit and return to the courtyard.

As the horse carriage sped out of the palace gates, two mounted men flew over. Xiang Shaolong recognized one of them as the refined and delicate Dong Luzi. This person once created a stir in the Handan martial arts tournament. Together with the other swordsman Lou Wuxin, they were the two most famous experts under Li Yuan.

Dong Luzi reigned his horse deferentially and conveyed his regards, saying: "Imperial Uncle is waiting for Master Wan at the 'Red Embrace Mansion'. Allow your servant to lead the way."

The other person has already been ordered to defend the changed route. Xiang Shaolong laughed and said: "No need to lead. Isn't the carriage going there anyway? What is this hero's honorable name?"

Dong Luzi was a little embarrassed. They were accustomed to such people running amuck in Shouchun (another disconnect here, sorry). Dong Luzi gave a dry cough and reported his name.

At this moment, the sound of hooves arose. A group of twenty over horsemen were on a collision course with them. The leader was approximately twenty years old and was wearing a nobleman's battledress. His facial features were coarse but heroic. With one look, one could be sure that this man was braver than most other men. Both his eyes fixed their attention on Dong Luzi, emitting a pair of cold beams, showing an excited expression.

As Dong Luzi saw this youth, he gave a cold snort and said to Xiang Shaolong in a low voice: "Master Wan! This is Lord Chunshen's seventh son Huang Zhan. He is fond of bravery and fighting. In Shouchun, he is either number one or number two in equestrian archery and sword fighting. Imperial Uncle has given us strict orders forbidding us to offend him. If he is disrespectful in speech, could Master Wan please bear with it."

As Xiang Shaolong mused that it is actually one of Shouchun's tyrannical aristocrats, Huang Zhan has cut off the route in front. His people spread out to the left and right, cutting off the traffic on the entire road. Dong Luzi saluted and said: "Dong Luzi pays his respects to Master Huang." Huang Zhan gave a snort and played deaf. He urged his horse on and arrived at Dong Luzi's side, giving Xiang Shaolong an arrogant glance. Dong Luzi hurriedly said: "This is Dian's General Wan Ruiguang who has just arrived in Shouchun."

Huang Zhan's spirit rose and he gently laughed, saying: "So it is actually the Wan Ruiguang who swept Li Chuangwen out the door. Why don't we relocate somewhere and let Huang Zhan experience his brilliance so as to prevent outsiders from accusing my Shouchun of having no capable people."

Xiang Shaolong ridiculed in his heart, this is actually someone who merely likes to flaunt his military might, brave but guileless. No wonder Li Yuan is able to gain power.

Dong Luzi said in a deep voice: "Master Huang....."

Huang Zhan interrupted him in merciless disregard, saying: "Dog slave! Since when is it your turn to speak."

Dong Luzi lowered his head in silence, but it was clear he was furious in his heart.

Huang Zhan stared at Xiang Shaolong disdainfully and sneered, saying: "Is General Wan afraid?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and said: "Master Huang is overly praising my humble self. This humble self is even less likely to be so arrogant as to think that Shouchun is without capable people. But the sword under my hand is only used on the battlefield to defeat the enemy or perhaps to defend my state's fields and land. Master should understand this truth."

The colour on Huang Zhan's face changed and he said: "Are you

deriding that I do not know how to kill enemies on the battlefield?"

At this time Xiang Shaolong is even more certain that this is just a person who merely fond of bravery and fighting. He calmly said: "If Master Huang is interested, he can set a date for a public competition to compare notes. Nonetheless this matter needs the prior approval of your honorable father. Master, please!"

This speech was both hard and soft, a clear statement of 'I am not afraid of you'. Huang Zhan has never met anyone so formidable. After being in shock for a while, he shouted loudly: "Thats settled then. The one surnamed Wan had better not cower back at that time."

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and had a good laugh, saying: "Master does not have to worry. Having the chance to compete with experts is something that I, Wan Ruiguang, desire earnestly but am rarely able to fulfill."

Hearing the heroic air and confidence in his laughter, Huang Zhan was startled, turning to Dong Luzi he said: "Fragrant Splendor Pavilion's Little Ju'er belongs to me Huang Zhan. Dong Luzi, you had better not go there in the future."

Once he had finished speaking, he let out a deafening whistle and spurred his horse, leading his people away. The street is now lined with carriages and chariots.

Dong Luzi gazed at Huang Zhan's back with a hateful and poisonous look. Only after leading them to another street did he

take a deep breath and say: "I really hope that General Wan can slaughter this chap with one stroke of the sword."

Of all the cities he has been since he arrived in this era, Shouchun has most nightclubs and brothels. The most prosperous neighborhood, which was next to the inner castle, had an intensely fragrant main street aptly named 'Wine God'. Just this street alone contained more than a hundred brothels, entertainment halls and wine shops of all sizes. They were all privately owned, signaling the prosperity of the place.

According to Dong Luzi, the majority of the song courtesans came from vanquished states. Of these, the women from Yue commanded the highest prices. The 'goods' could have been 'purchased' directly from those places that have been exploited by Chu over the long term. They could also have been captive slaves from vanquished states purchased from the government. Merely thinking about these issues, Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed.

The Red Embrace Mansion is one of the largest song and dance establishments in Shouchun. The other two are the 'Vegetarian Goddess' and the Fragrant Splendor Pavilion that Huang Zhan warned Dong Luzi against.

The Red Embrace Mansion is formed from a cluster of courtyards surrounded by high walls. The area inside is divided into seven to eight courtyard houses. The main house was two stories high, with windows facing backwards. This provided a view of the nearby Chu palace with its splendid, densely packed palace halls and rooms, the inner city wall, the moat and Shouchun's famous scenic

spot, the Ying Garden. The Ying Lake, which is on the central axis of the garden, looked like a bright mirror embedded in the dense groves of trees. The scenery was harmonious and pleasing. The Dian King's Mansion that Xiang Shaolong was residing in was located at the Eastern end of the Ying Garden.

With Dong Luzi's guidance, Xiang Shaolong ascended to the second story of the main house. Four beautiful, colorfully attired servant girls knelt respectfully in greeting. They used two basins of clear water to wash their hands and faces. Such a show of ostentation is unmatched in the three Jin states and the strong Qin.

The manager is a big fatty called Shu Qi. This person was a topnotch boot-licker and he rarely had such a perfect occasion. Even Xiang Shaolong felt compelled to give him a reward to ease his own conscience.

Li Yuan was drinking wine in a side room in the direction of the Ying Garden. Accompanying him were the two men who were once defeated by Teng Yi, Lou Wuxin and Yan Fu. Upon seeing Xiang Shaolong, he invited him to join the party, and asked with a serious expression: "Did the Empress Dowager find out that you were sitting behind the screen?"

Xiang Shaolong was electrified, knowing that he now had to choose between buying the favor of Li Yuan and that of Li Yanyan.

He heaved a sigh and said: "Empress Dowager did give me strict orders not to reveal anything, but I, Wan Ruiguang, am not afraid of death. Not to mention that Imperial Uncle has gone all-out

effort for the Zhuang family. Yes, I do not know how, but Empress Dowager knew that I was hiding behind the screen."

He had decided to buy Li Yuan's favor, though his reason was quite laughable. It was simply because Li Yanyan was a kind-hearted person. Even if he offended her, he would still have room for maneuver. Li Yuan on the other hand was an all out villain. If he found out that he himself was lying, things would invariably sour.

Li Yuan was pleased and said: "Brother Wan really thinks highly of me. I, Li Yuan, will naturally spare no effort to defend Brother Wan. Brother Wan can be at ease. Hei! Can you guess how she knew you were hiding behind the screen? I too could only figure out after it had happened."

Xiang Shaolong could not figure out and shaking his head, replied: "Imperial Uncle, please explain!"

Li Yuan said: "There are two factors. First, she had already found out from the sentry that Brother Wan and I were drinking wine and having a chat. Next is the footprint on the ground. When Empress Dowager wanted me to leave, I looked back and saw a footprint leading to the screen, immediately knowing that we had been exposed."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: what a close shave! If he had lied and said that the Empress Dowager had just sat in a daze for a while and then left, he would have been caught lying on the spot.

Li Yuan laughed and said: "Brother Wan! Li Yuan toasts you a cup."

Lou Wuxin, Yan Fu and Dong Luzi all raised their cups.

After the wine had made three rounds, Xiang Shaolong committed himself and said: "Empress Dowager seemed to have a faint suspicion that Imperial Uncle had indeed deliberately raised the matter concerning my country to cause me to confirm the true opponents of my Zhuang family's restoration. She even reprimanded me severely for a while."

Li Yuan said nonchalantly: "Could Brother Wan please relate the whole conversation with Empress Dowager word by word? This is vital. You must not miss or hide anything."

Xiang Shaolong immediately offered half the story, providing a description filled with half-truths. Of course he had to leave out the most critical parts like how she had seen through Li Yuan's ploy to get Xiang Shaolong to assassinate Lord Chunshen.

Li Yuan frowned in contemplation for a while then continued probing for details, compelling him to reveal even the account of how he pulled out his sword to commit suicide. With a queer expression, he said: "I understand my younger sister the Empress Dowager's temperament the best. She rarely has this many words to say to people. The most peculiar is that she did not punish Brother Wan in any way."

Turning to the rest, he said: "What do you guys think?"

Lou Wuxin and the rest all had queer expressions on their faces, but they all did not dare to reveal their thoughts.

Li Yuan became angry and said: "If I ask you guys to say it then say it! Don't you think I do not know myself? I just wanted to verify with you guys!"

Lou Wuxin lowered his head deferentially and said: "In the end Empress Dowager is a woman, maybe..... Hei! Master should understand my meaning!"

Li Yuan flashed Xiang Shaolong a glance and laughed aloud, saying: "Look at these big men being so hesitant when talking about women, isn't it ridiculous?"

Now it is Xiang Shaolong to feel strange. If Li Yuan and this beautiful younger sister have an unnatural relationship, he would have been at least a little jealous when she fells for another man. But looking at how happy he is right now, the reality and this theory don't match.

Li Yuan raised his cup for a toast and said: "Let us drink another cup!"

While still confused, Xiang Shaolong raised his cup and answered everyone's toast.

As Li Yuan put down his cup, his eyes were shining with an

intimidating gleam. With a voice brimming with hope, he said: "In the end the Empress Dowager my younger sister was not able to endure loneliness and was moved by Brother Wan. Such developments between men and women are the hardest to understand. If only this were the case, Brother Wan has hope to reclaim his country."

Xiang Shaolong secretly scolded him in his heart: First he wants me to be an assassin, now he wants me to be a male gigolo. Shaking his head, he said: "Imperial Uncle has misunderstood. Empress Dowager is only concerned about my Zhuang family's matter, that is why she had a long conversation with me and also spared me. There shouldn't be any male-female relationship."

Li Yuan excitedly said: "Of course we could be celebrating over nothing. But I will probe her with words. I know her too well. She can hide matters from anybody, but she cannot hide them from me."

Xiang Shaolong righteously said: "If Imperial Uncle asks me to raise my sword to kill the enemy, I will not crease even half an eyebrow. But....."

Li Yuan interrupted him and said: "Good! Indeed worthy of being called a man! However, has Brother Wan ever considered that people who wish to accomplish great things not only mustn't be a stickler for small matters, but must also be completely unscrupulous. If not Brother Wan should not have come to Shouchun. He should instead have slashed his way to Dian and tried to use the sword in his hands to kill the clique of traitors."

(IMHO, this is Li Yuan's most eloquent speech yet. The logic is

irrefutable. Is honor in the end hypocritical?)

Xiang Shaolong was stumped, and at the same time became curious about one fact. He asked: "There is one thing I do not understand. In the end Li Ling is Imperial Uncle's clansman, why is Lord Chunshen protecting him while Imperial uncle is against him?"

Li Yuan sighed and signaled to Yan Fu, saying: "Yan Fu, why don't you explain!"

Yan Fu respectfully said: "There are a few things that General Wan does not know. Even in the Li Clan, there are different factions. The most powerful is of course our Master's. The other faction is led by Master's uncle the Great Prayer Li Quan who controls all offerings and sacrifices in the country. He has recently been colluding with Minister Lord Chunshen. Li Ling and Li Chuangwen belong to that faction and are naturally against Master."

(As we will see later, the Great Xxxx are a set of official positions in the Chu court)

Only now does Xiang Shaolong understand.

On the surface, Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan are on good terms, but underneath they are secretly engaging in a violent struggle. Lord Chunshen is making use of the powers within the Li Clan who were hostile to Li Yuan to set him back. It was precisely because of this that Lord Chunshen changed his position from supporting the Zhuang family's restoration to opposing and sabotaging them. In

the end, none of them are good guys.

Under these circumstances, Li Yanyan naturally became the pivotal person. Whoever is able to gain her support will emerge victorious.

The most powerful players in the Chu court are the Right Minister Lord Chunshen and the Left Minister Li Yuan, followed by the Great Prayer, the Great Ancestor, the Great Justice and the Great Historian. Of the latter four, the Great Prayer who is in charge of laws and decrees is the most powerful. With the Right Minister and the Great Prayer acting together, it is no wonder that Li Yuan is at a disadvantage.

Looking from this angle, perhaps Li Yuan is not totally against the restoration of the Zhuang family. This is because once the Zhuang family is restored, they will become Li Yuan's trusted agents and a source of power, and could even help him to stabilize the other vassal states. This would cause his power to increase tremendously, giving him enough power to overwhelm his opponents.

Li Yuan said: "The Empress Dowager's invitation to the Dian Princess and Crown Prince (of Dian) was Li Quan's idea. While the idea sounds noble, it is actually to prevent you from contacting the other vassal states and forming secret agreements to the detriment of Li Ling! Does Brother Wan understand now?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be moved to tears and said: "Many thanks to Imperial Uncle's pointers."

Li Yuan then muttered irresolutely for a while, then continued: "In this matter, let me stall the Empress Dowager. Let us temporarily put aside the matter of Lord Chunshen. The most important thing in front of us is to verify if the Empress Dowager has really taken an interest to Brother Wan. Only then can we decide what to do next."

He stretched himself and rose, saying: "I'll head back to the palace first. Let these other three accompany you to drink and make merry. The ladies here are outstandingly good looking. Brother Wan is guaranteed to be satisfied."

How could Xiang Shaolong be in the mood for prostitutes? He stood up, saluted and said: "I appreciate Imperial Uncle's kindness. This stateless official does not have the appetite for enjoyment and merriment."

Li Yuan saw that apart from his family's restoration, he did not have a hint of interest in anything else. He happily said: "In that case, let me send Brother Wan part of the way!"

They then left together.

Book 16 Chapter 03 - Locked In Constant Strife

Back at the Dian King's Mansion, Xiang Shaolong saw ten over palace guards standing guard at the main gate. Only upon entering did he realize that these soldiers have been personally dispatched by Li Yanyan to protect the Mansion.

The minute he entered the Mansion, he was invited by Madam Zhuang for a discussion. After hearing Xiang Shaolong's account, Madam Zhuang indignantly said: "I did not expect Lord Chunshen to be such an ungrateful person. Despite my late father-in-law favourable treatment of him in the past, he actually colluded with the Li Clan to harm us."

Xiang Shaolong is already used to seeing people repaying kindness with evil and comforted: "The world is full of people who will forgo their integrity for wealth. Fortunately, we do not need to rely on anyone else. Once we dispose of Tian Dan, we will immediately leave this wicked place and diligently work towards the restoration of Dian. Let them kill each other."

Madam Zhuang serenely sighed and softly whispered: "Luckily, I can still rely on you."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and changed the subject, saying: "Did anything extraordinary occur today?"

Madam Zhuang's spirit rose: "It can be said that we arrived at the right time. Each vassal lord has either sent an important minister

or has come personally to express their condolences. They all cherish the memory of my late father-in-law's benevolence. Except for the Yelang people who support Li Ling, they have all indicated that if we ever take action, they can provide us with weapons, rations and money. The power of the Yelang people has increased greatly over the last few years. Everyone hopes that we restore our country and suppress the Yelang people's wild ambitions. I heard that even Yelang King Hua Ciwa is also coming to express his condolences."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Will Li Ling come?"

Madam Zhuang shook her head ignorantly and sighed. She smiled bitterly: "If the Chu Court allows him to come to Shouchun, it would mean that Chu has officially recognized his position. I believe Li Yuan will not allow such a thing to happen."

Xiang Shaolong state in a deep voice: "I think there's a high chance that he is already here. Otherwise, Lord Chunshen would not have deliberately invited you back while sending people to assassinate you during your journey. In my opinion, he will be coming together with the Yelang King Hua Ciwa. The very reason Li Chuangwen forcibly occupied the Dian King's Mansion is to help Li Ling showcase his authority. Unfortunately for them, we made it back to Shouchun in one piece. With the death of King Xiaolie, Shouchun became embroiled in a big power struggle. Li Yanyan understood the complexities of this situation which explains why she dispatched soldiers to defend the Dian King's Mansion."

Madam Zhuang's complexion changed: "Shaolong! I am only a defenceless woman who is completely lost when facing such

complicated matters. What can we do to counter them?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "There is still one thing we must clarify: Why did Great Prayer Li Quan suggest that we move into the palace? One of the reasons could be to allow Li Ling to openly and pompously move into the Dian King's Mansion. Lord Chunshen can then use our safety as an excuse to keep us in the palace akin to house arrest. Not only can they prevent us from communicating with the other vassal states, they can also openly declare that Li Ling has officially become the Lord of Dian. This method is certainly despicable."

Madam Zhuang angrily swore: "Don't tell me that they can manipulate Li Yanyan so easily?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "We haven't really ascertained what kind of person Li Yanyan is. But from my observation, she is closer to Lord Chunshen and Li Quan in comparison to Li Yuan. Otherwise, Li Yuan would not be wild with joy when he learnt that Li Yanyan and treated me differently."

Madam Zhuang peered at him for a while and nodded: "You are certainly a man who can move a woman's heart. Li Yanyan has always hated men. Maybe she will change on your account."

Xiang Shaolong almost lost his voice and said: "She hates men? Is she a lesbian?"

Madam Zhuang was startled: "What is a lesbian?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he had a slip of the tongue and explained: "It means she likes other women who are of the same sex as she is. Hei!"

Madam Zhuang pursed her lips and smiled: "I have never heard of anything to this effect. Just that from the time she became mature, she would not touch anything that a man has touched before. She treats men even more harshly. That is the reason why Li Yuan can deduce so much from just an ordinary conversation between you and her."

At this moment, Zhuang Kong entered without even knocking on the door and announced: "The Empress Dowager and the Great Prayer is here!"

Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang stared at each other in shock. This was totally unexpected and they did not know what to do.

With her face covered with a thick veil, Li Yanyan sat on the main seat in the Dian Mansion's main hall which is facing the front door. The Great Prayer Li Quan was standing respectfully on one side holding up the royal tablet. Doughty palace guards lined the two sides of the hall until they reached the hall entrance. The atmosphere was solemn and stately.

After Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong paid their respects to Li Yanyan, the protocol official barked: "Please rise!"

Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong stood up.

Xiang Shaolong carefully stole a glance at that Great Prayer Li Quan. His face was long and narrow and his body was tall and thin, with a beautiful beard reaching his chest. He is around the age of forty and he resembled an immortal or a Taoist priest. It is a pity that his face was pale as a result of overindulgence in wine and women. He has shifty eyes which betrayed his evil character.

The Empress Dowager Li Yanyan calmly enquired: "Has the Imperial Uncle has come to see Princess and the Crown Prince (of Dian) to convey my wishes?"

Of course Madam Zhuang could not lie blatantly and while she was wondering what to reply her, Xiang Shaolong gave a dry cough: "Empress Dowager, Imperial Uncle had....."

The Great Prayer Li Quan let out a cold snort and interrupted: "The Empress Dowager is speaking to the Princess. No one is allowed to reply on her behalf."

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to pull out his sword and slaughter him. This lord is really an insufferable bully.

Madam Zhuang coldly hissed: "My younger brother Wan Ruiguang's words are as good as my own."

Li Quan gave a cold snort and looked towards Li Yanyan's heavily veiled face.

Li Yanyan commanded: "General Wan, please speak!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that if he didn't show a little bit of his might, they would lose their standing in Shouchun. He unhurriedly and calmly questioned: "If I may ask the Empress Dowager, is the crafty villain Li Ling presently approaching Shouchun with the Yelang King in tow?"

Li Yanyan and Li Quan trembled at the same time and were stumped on the spot. The atmosphere was extremely awkward and hard to bear.

Xiang Shaolong's eyes were flashing severely. He continued in a deep voice: "Will the Empress Dowager please answer me."

Li Quan recovered from his shock and hollered: "Wan Ruiguang, how dare you be rude to the Empress Dowager?"

Irritated, Xiang Shaolong rebutted: "Great Prayer Li, please forgive my ignorance. I am merely making enquiries regarding my State of Dian. I do not think I am rude in any way."

Li Quan has always been even more despotic than Li Yuan and has rarely been contradicted by anyone. Nonetheless, he could not be unreasonable under the present circumstances and he was momentarily speechless.

Xiang Shaolong icily gazed at him and his lips curled into a cold sneer that caused Li Quan to shiver in fear. He then turned to Li

Yanyan carried on displaying a fearless attitude while quietly waiting for her reply.

Li Yanyan serenely answered: "Li Ling did request to come here, but was flatly rejected by me. I am not sure if he is traveling with the Yelang King though."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "In this case, I will use my head as a betting stake that Hua Ciwa and Li Ling these two colluding villains have both reached Shouchun. If not, why would there be a need to trouble the Empress Dowager and the Great Prayer to come personally to invite us back to the palace?"

Li Quan's face changed colour immediately and loudly shouted: "What audacity!"

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and laughed wildly: "What's so audacious? Since Chu wants to decimate my Dian Kingdom and we are unwilling to bear this insult, I hereby invite Empress Dowager to return to the palace. We will all offer ourselves as sacrifices to our late king and commit suicide. We do not need Empress Dowager to trouble herself on our account anymore."

Li Quan's complexion changed again. If this happens, it will cause all the vassal states to have the desire to secede and may even switch loyalty to the strong Qin. When that happens, it will be an enormous disaster for Chu.

This is the greatest fear of Chu.

Li Yanyan's delicate body trembled slightly and she does not know how to deal with this situation.

Madam Zhuang knelt down while embracing Zhuang Baoyi. Instead, it is this boy who kept standing straight with his head held high and not revealing the least bit of fear.

Xiang Shaolong's eyes were like an eagle's, staring hard at Li Yanyan.

Of course he would not be so stupid as to kill himself. If necessary, he will run away immediately. Whatever the case, it would be better than being under house arrest in the palace and vulnerable to anyone's attack. His greatest fear is that people will discover the flying needles on his body. By then, even Li Yuan would want to kill him.

At this moment, the noise of clashing weapons could be heard from outside. Li Yuan barrelled in while shouting angrily: "Who dares to hinder me?"

The eight imperial guards outside the door extended their halberds and cut him off.

Li Yanyan ordered delicately: "Let Imperial Uncle come in!"

The halberds withdrew and Li Yuan sheathed his sword. He displayed a heroic spirit as if the whole world is under his feet.

Xiang Shaolong saw Madam Zhuang's beautiful eyes gazing at Li Yuan, betraying an intoxicated expression. While concerned, he could not do anything at the moment.

Li Yuan strode to Xiang Shaolong's side and stood up after paying his respects. Li Quan sneered and said: "Imperial Uncle...."

Li Yanyan coldly cut him off and said: "I will handle this!"

Li Yuan flashed Li Quan a disdainful look and state in a deep voice: "Forgive me for not knowing how to flatter. If Empress Dowager continues to be misled by evil men, our country's demise is at hand."

In defiance of Li Yanyan's order, Li Quan argued: "What is the meaning of the Left Minister's words? Explain yourself or I will hold you accountable." Following that, he knelt down in front of Li Yanyan and kowtowed: "Empress Dowager, please be the arbitrator. Even when the late king was around, he has never said a single word of insult to me."

Xiang Shaolong mused to himself that this Li Quan was not some decent guy; no wonder he has been bribed by Lord Chunshen. Unexpectedly, the power in Qin, Chu and Zhao has all fallen into the hands of the Empress Dowagers, though for different reasons. Zhao's King Xiaocheng lived an excessive life and died under his extravagant lifestyle. Qin's King Zhuangxiang was poisoned by Lu Buwei, while Chu's King Xiaolie probably died under the hands of Li Yanyan.

(Justin: Li Yanyan did not kill Xiaolie but probably manipulated his lifestyle using her beauty and indirectly cause his death. It is also not due to excessive love making.)

Because Li Yanyan's face was hidden by her veil, she appears mysterious and it was hard to guess her intentions. After a long silence, she slowly said: "Imperial Uncle should refrain from using such frightening words to scare people."

In reality, Xiang Shaolong still does not know where Li Yanyan stands. She seems to be protective of the Zhuang family but this could also be her putting up an act. But one thing is for sure: Regarding helping Zhuang Baoyi reclaim the throne; she is definitely siding Li Quan and Lord Chunshen. Otherwise, she would not have appeared in the Dian King's Mansion.

When she had ordered Li Yuan to bring the entire Zhuang family and staff to the palace this morning, she must have already known of Li Ling's arrival in Shouchun.

Li Yuan heaved a big sigh and remarked with disappointment: "I have already said all that I wanted to say. The past sages have a saying, 'going against the popular sentiment, one will surely fail'. Presently, Li Ling has colluded with the Yelang people and they are forcing their will on the other vassal states and harbour wild ambitions. The ridiculous thing is that some people are turning a blind eye and even lending them a helping hand, causing the vassal states to consider defecting to Qin. Judging by the number of people jostling to visit the Dian Crown Prince since he arrived in Shouchun, we know where the popular sentiment lies. It is definitely not empty talk when I say that the Empress Dowager has

been misled by evil men and that the demise of Chu is near. If we lose our South-western territories, the strong army of Qin can invade us directly by marching straight in. Within a month, their soldiers would be outside the walls of Shouchun. At that time, it would be too late to try to appease the vassal states."

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel that Li Yuan is really serious about the Zhuang family's restoration. He may be an unscrupulous man but in the end, he is someone who loves his country and his family.

To a certain extent, if he wants to remain in Shouchun, he would have to cast his lot with Li Yuan.

If Li Yuan is disposed of, he would not be able to survive too.

This matter is really hard to predict. Even if the great prophet of the day Zou Yan were to tell him about this outcome, he would not have believed him.

The kneeling Li Quan cried with a weeping voice: "Empress Dowager, please disregard these erroneous words and slanderous talk. I am only following the instructions the late King left behind. The Empress Dowager should understand."

At this point, Xiang Shaolong finally grasped Li Yanyan's position.

She really isn't in favour of Li Ling nor was she leaning towards

Li Quan or Lord Chunshen. Rather, she was following the last wishes of Chu King Xiaolie by trying to use Li Ling to bring all the vassal states back under the direct control of Chu.

Li Yuan has actually discerned that this was an unworkable plan. This together with the Li Clan's internecine struggle has caused the deadlock today.

Xiang Shaolong put himself in her shoes and couldn't help but feel a headache at the choice she has to make.

Li Yuan is actually much sharper than Li Yanyan. At least he has the courage to go against King Xiaolie's random orders.

Madam Zhuang is still kneeling silently on the floor, her eyes repeatedly scanning Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan. Perhaps she is having trouble choosing between the two.

Li Yanyan heaved a sigh and said: "Let's discuss this issue later! I wish to return to the palace."

Li Quan urgently and fearfully called out: "Empress Dowager!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud: "Great Prayer Li had better tell the traitor Li Ling that regardless of size of his army, I, Wan Ruiguang, vow to cut down the head on his neck."

Li Yanyan's delicate body jolted and she stood up.

Xiang Shaolong, Li Yuan and Zhuang Baoyi hurriedly kneeled down in respect.

Li Yanyan slowly state: "Li Ling's arrival at the capital was without my permission. Li Quan, please instruct him to remain in the Yelang King's Mansion. He is not allowed to step out of the mansion gates at all. If he is still killed by someone despite this, he can only blame his bitter fate."

Turning to Li Yuan, she said: "Imperial Uncle will select a regiment of palace guards to stand guard at the Dian King's Mansion round the clock. If anyone comes to cause trouble, he is to be killed immediately without pardon."

Amidst the sound of the royal entourage returning to the palace, this number one beauty of Chu exited the door with eight palace maids escorting her.

Li Quan's incomparably hateful eyes swept over Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong before he followed the royal party out.

Madam Zhuang personally poured a cup of wine for Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong and flashed Li Yuan an enchanting smile: "Only till today do I know who is sparing no effort to help our Zhuang family. Let us brother and sister toast the Imperial Uncle."

Li Yuan toasted: "One day when I, Li Yuan, am able to defeat the traitors within the Court, I will guarantee that the Dian Crown Prince will be able to sit on the Dian throne peacefully. I will swear

with this cup of wine."

Hot tears of gratitude gushed forth from Madam Zhuang's graceful eyes. After the toast, she lowered her head and promised: "The Imperial Uncle has such a profound love for righteousness, even if I have to work like a bull or horse, I will be most willing."

Li Yuan's two eyes gleamed and he said with mucho grace: "The Dian Princess is giving me too much credit."

Even though Xiang Shaolong does not harbour any intentions on Madam Zhuang, he felt uneasy that she is allowing Li Yuan to gorge himself on her. Fortunately he had a broad mind. After drinking a cup, he threw out his concerns.

Madam Zhuang secretly stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong. Her lips cracked into a smile and she gently said: "Ruiguang, you should stop after drinking another cup."

Turning to Li Yuan, she explained: "This little brother of mine can hold his liquor well, but no matter how much he drinks, his face will not turn red."

Xiang Shaolong had a fright and secretly praised Madam Zhuang's attentiveness. His face was covered with thick makeup so no matter how much he drinks; his face is certainly not going to turn red.

Li Yuan smiled: "Dian Princess, please forgive Li Yuan for being

presumptuous. I would like to exchange a few words with Brother Wan in private."

Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang were both startled.

Madam Zhuang gently nodded her head and departed the hall. She even helped the two men to close the door as she left.

Li Yuan faced Xiang Shaolong in a daze for a long time before giving a long sigh, declaring: "Xiang Shaolong! I, Li Yuan take my hat off you!"

Xiang Shaolong was immediately frightened out of his wits, his hands pressed down on his sword hilt.

Li Yuan raised both his hands to show that he is unarmed and coaxed: "Brother Xiang should not be alarmed. If I really wanted to deal with you, I would not have come here to drink wine with you."

Xiang Shaolong calmed down and laughed, asking: "How did you recognize me?"

Li Yuan replied: "The first time I saw Brother Xiang, I already felt that you looked familiar, but felt that this was an impossible matter. Moreover you have grown a long beard and the shape of your face is different. Your hair colour and skin colour are both greatly different from before, plus your speech carried a Dian accent. I had to believe that some people really do look alike."

He continued to shake his head and smiled: "Actually I was here for some time already and was outside the door looking at Brother Xiang's brilliant move of turning the tables around. At that time not only did you forget to mask your voice, you even exhibited your usual bearing. That is something unique to you and there is no other like that. Unless I am blind or deaf, how could I not know you are Xiang Shaolong?"

Xiang Shaolong asked curiously: "Brother Li and I are enemies, so why are you now treating me as a long lost friend and leisurely having an intimate conversation?"

Li Yuan leaned forward and sighed: "The discord between me and Brother Xiang started over Talented Lady Ji. At that time, I really wished I can tear you into pieces. But now, the rice has already been cooked (It is too late to cry over split milk). Ai!"

Deep pain shot out from Li Yuan's eyes. He lamented: "In life, we have to move on. What do I have to gain by killing Xiang Shaolong other than to cause the Talented Lady Ji to hate me for a lifetime? Worse still, if she committed suicide in the name of love, I will be even more miserable."

For the first time ever, Xiang Shaolong is seeing the emotional side of Li Yuan. He was a little moved and apologised: "I did not expect Brother Li to have such magnitude; I have been disrespectful."

Who would have thought that after only two days in Shouchun,

he has been recognized by both Guo Xiu'er and Li Yuan. It seems like the disguise is not helping very much. Fortunately, besides Tian Dan, Han Chuang, Guo Kai and a limited number of people, there is no one else in Shouchun who recognizes him.

Li Yuan looked like he was full of thoughts and feelings and after many gasps and long sighs, he state with disgust: "Whether you believe it or not, even if Brother Xiang walks out to the street and shouts loudly 'I am Xiang Shaolong', I guarantee that nobody will dare to touch you. Everyone knows that you are a confidante to the Qin Crown Prince and Empress Dowager. Moreover, the Qin military holds you in the highest regard. If you are killed today, the Qin army will march here tomorrow. Only Brother Xiang doesn't realize this himself! Presently, under the skies, only Lu Buwei and Tian Dan dare to take your life."

Xiang Shaolong checked in a deep voice: "This is precisely the issue that bothers me. Didn't Brother Li and Tian Dan form an alliance?"

Li Yuan fiercely said: "Please do not mention this ungrateful old fox again. After reaching Shouchun and finding out that Lord Chunshen is more influential than me, he changed sides very quickly and is now supporting him. He just moved into Lord Chunshen's mansion yesterday and even revealed all my plans to Lord Chunshen. Fortunately I have spies in Lord Chunshen's mansion or else I would not even know how I died."

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization and he laughed: "So this is it!"

Li Yuan's brazen face turned red and he asked: "How did Brother

Xiang know that Tian Dan has come here?"

There was no more point in concealing the truth from him. Xiang Shaolong revealed the entire story and as Li Yuan listened, he couldn't help sighing and exclaiming how lucky he was.

After all the odds and ends had been clarified, Li Yuan seriously state: "I know it is not easy to get Brother Xiang to trust me completely. Brother Xiang should know by now that I am in a disadvantageous situation. I also know that the two tasks that Brother Xiang wants to achieve: the killing of Tian Dan and the restoration of the Dian Kingdom which are the hardest tasks of all. But if we work together, maybe all these impossible tasks will become easier to accomplish."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Who can refuse this kind of win-win partnership? But I need to understand something first. Does Brother Li know about Lu Buwei's plot to make use of Chu people's hands to kill Xu Xian?"

Li Yuan said: "Of course I know and how could I, Li Yuan, be tricked by Lu Buwei? If Xu Xian dies under the hands of our Chu people, coupled with the fact that he is coming here to offer condolences to the late King, the consequences will certainly be unimaginable."

In the past, Xiang Shaolong would never have believed Li Yuan. But now after understanding his position and knowing that the most influential person in Shouchun is Lord Chunshen and not Li Yuan, he has no more reason to suspect him.

Right now, Li Yuan's utmost priority is preserving his life followed by power-grabbing.

Just by looking at Lord Chunshen's seventh son Huang Zhan's attitude this afternoon, he can easily guess what the rest of his men are like.

Li Yuan suddenly jolted and exclaimed: "No good!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and asked: "What's the matter?"

Li Yuan's complexion turned pale and slapping the table in anger, he roared: "Lord Chunshen really doesn't understand the bigger picture. In order to win the trust of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei, he has unexpectedly committed this folly."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. With an ashen face like a corpse, Li Yuan explained: "Fifteen days ago, Lord Chunshen's sixth son Huang Hu led three thousand family warriors heading West on boats. That was the day after we received word of Xu Xian's trip to Shouchun. I was suspicious then, but did not think that Lord Chunshen would be so senile, not recognizing the gravity of matters."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "In reality, Lord Chunshen and Tian Dan have always been conspiring with each other. You may not know that Zhao Mu is really Lord Chunshen's fifth son. That year, Xiao Weimou came to Wei to kill me as requested by Lord Chunshen."

As Li Yuan heard this, he became mute and stared blankly, knowing that he has been used by Tian Dan while he himself had trusted Tian Dan completely in a vain attempt at getting the help of the Qi people to deal with Lord Chunshen.

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand and said: "This alliance is formed!"

Li Yuan exulted and stretching out his own hand with a firm grip, he said: "I have always trusted Brother Xiang."

He turned a little awkward and said: "Nonetheless I also know that Brother Xiang does not dare to fully trust me yet. Right now I swear an oath to heaven that if I violate this agreement, may I be pierced to death by ten thousand arrows."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised him in his heart. This is because if Li Yuan is not able to gain his complete confidence, he needs to safeguard himself in every aspect. It will be a weak partnership.

Thinking about it, he felt hilarious. Not too long ago, the two of them are still trying to kill each other. Now, being compelled by tough circumstances, they have become comrades-in-arms.

Li Yuan's spirits rose dramatically and suggested: "The first step we will take is to kill Li Ling to show them who's boss, what do you think?"

The two of them looked at each other and broke out into laughter, enjoying the feeling of being well-matched partners.

Book 16 Chapter 04 - Escape By A Hair's Breadth

Xiang Shaolong escorted Li Yuan out of the residence. Li Yuan's thirty-plus bodyguards had been waiting forever. Before mounting his horse, Li Yuan softly asked: "Is Yanran here?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded slightly.

Li Yuan mumbled for a while then laughed bitterly and said: "I am deeply envious of Brother Xiang."

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Do you wish to see her?"

At first, Li Yuan appeared pleasantly surprised, then changed his mind and shook his head, saying: "Meeting her is as good as not meeting her. Brother Xiang, please help to convey my regards. Tell her that she, Ji Yanran, is the lady that I love and respect the most."

Laughing at the sky, he mounted his horse and led his bodyguards out the main gate, swift as a tornado.

Xiang Shaolong sighed sadly, shaking his head. He then returned to the residence intending to seek out Ji Yanran to make a report. He was intercepted by Madam Zhuang on the way and led to an empty room. She asked softly: "What did Li Yuan and you talk about?" Xiang Shaolong recalled her earlier confused and intoxicated disposition towards Li Yuan and was peeved. He coldly

said: "It was all about slaughter and bloodshed, nothing special."

Madam Zhuang bent closer and scrutinized his eyes. An unnatural feeling seeped through him from top to bottom. Madam Zhuang laughed with a soft flowery voice, saying: "Shaolong is a little jealous. I am very happy."

Xiang Shaolong thought he might as well vent his anger, saying: "This is not about jealousy. It is about one man having to listen to a woman telling another man that she is willing to become a bull and a horse for him. Its about respect and dignity. Can you please take your hands off me?"

Madam Zhuang drew even closer. She leaned close to his ear, speaking as airily as a silkscreen: "If the person I was saying it to was Xiang Shaolong and not Li Yuan, the words would have been changed to 'becoming a concubine and maid servant'. Does Shaolong understand the difference?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Am I a person who can be deceived or pacified easily? Does Madam dare to say that she is not moved by Li Yuan?" As he said this, he was secretly startled as he realized that he had himself been moved slightly by Madam Zhuang.

He is usually very gracious with women, rarely scolding them or causing them harm. Even towards those like Dan Meimei and Gui Yan who conspired to murder him, he had never had the intention of settling this score with them.

The person who has received the most scolding from him is Zhao Ya, but in the end he has still forgiven her and he now loves her as before.

So why is he losing his temper on Madam Zhuang?

Xiang Shaolong has met his share of setbacks, and he does not want to be like the other men in this era, treating women as goods where 'the more is the merrier', widely collecting concubines. Nonetheless this is but wishful thinking on his part. It is the women instead who constantly throw themselves into his embrace, gladly and willingly joining his brood of wives and concubines.

Men are not like dense wood, who are unfeeling.

Moreover he is naturally softhearted towards women, that is why he has always been careful, trying to avoid getting entangled in more male-female relationships. Till today, the only one who has caused him to lose his restraint is Qin Qing. He has managed to have self-control with everyone else.

Nonetheless, Madam Zhuang's situation was unique.

Regardless of whether she is successfully restored to her country, she will not become his concubine. It is a matter of status. Madam Zhuang and her son have become the legitimate symbol recognized by all the Dian people. If Madam Zhuang marries out, this symbolism will be destroyed.

She can still have affairs with men, this is after all a common thing in that era.

That is why even if an affair develops between Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang, it will have to be brief and momentary. Once Zhuang Baoyi ascends the throne and Xiang Shaolong leaves Dian, this bout of passion between them would have to die a natural death.

It is precisely because of the lack of this mental barrier and also because of the fact that Xiang Shaolong has a lot of pity for this isolated and helpless mother and son, that is why without realizing it, he has gradually accepted Madam Zhuang. Perhaps this is a case of 'familiarity breeds fondness'.

He himself was unaware of the fact. Only after reflecting on his present anger did he awaken to this fact.

Despite being scolded, Madam Zhuang react like one who has been reprimanded, and in fact replied with a straight face: "You are right. Li Yuan is indeed a man who has moved my heart. And even if I ignore his righteous anger, I cannot ignore his righteous support of the Zhuang family. If I had not met you, I would have used my body to repay him. But I won't do that now, because I am afraid that you will despise me. Now that I have bared myself like this, are you satisfied?"

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh and said: "However you have now aroused Li Yuan's heart, are you sure you are able to control the situation?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "Do not worry. I have ample experience dealing with men."

She then laughed a foxy laugh before saying: "I did that on purpose just now just to see if I could get any reaction from you the hard-hearted man. Now I know finally. Ai! Shaolong, let me serve you in the bedroom tonight, alright?"

Xiang Shaolong thought about Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi and hardened his heart, saying: "We had a prior agreement and the larger matter is more important. It is better to put aside our feelings and sexual desires temporarily."

Madam Zhuang was so touched that her eyes reddened. Hanging her head, she said: "You are still the first and only man I have met who helped me for any reason other than my looks." As she said this, she held on to him even more tightly and closely.

Only then did Xiang Shaolong reveal that his identity had been exposed and that he had formed an alliance with Li Yuan. Madam Zhuang was stunned to silence and she listened in a daze. Celebrating the good news, she forced Xiang Shaolong to cuddle with her for a lingering moment before letting him go.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his residence and repeated the story to Ji and Zhao the two ladies. Both ladies also listed in stupefied silence and amazement. It was hard to imagine that the situation would have developed in such an unexpected way.

Ji Yanran happily said: "Li Yuan is self-centered and mercenary, petty and unscrupulous. Nonetheless he is also a knowledgeable minister. Under the present circumstances, forming an alliance with you is the smartest thing to do. Moreover, with you as a friend, perhaps he can deceive Qin into choosing some other country as its first target of conquest."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said: "It is very difficult for me to say anything in this matter. If you do not attack others, others will attack you. Its not just friends who can become enemies, even fathers and sons and elder and younger brothers can fall out and become enemies. The Talented Lady Ji is proficient in history and should appreciate this point."

Zhao Zhi nodded and said: "Hubby is right, let alone the fact that Shaolong now has friends everywhere. Even if he wanted to help, he wouldn't know which country to help first."

Xiang Shaolong confessed: "I am a person who just loves peace and hates war. In the future when the Crown Prince (of Qin) has ascended the throne, let us go far away, look for some plains or valleys with beautiful mountains and rivers and live till we are old. Don't you think that would be so enjoyable?"

The ladies were so moved that they threw themselves into his bosom.

At this moment, Jing Shan came in and reported that the Inner City Official Qu Shiming was seeking an audience.

Xiang Shaolong was greatly astounded. Only after asking Ji Yanran did he find out that the Inner City Official was the Commander of the Inner City Guards. With a belly full of suspicion, he hurriedly rushed to the front hall to receive the visitor.

Qu Shiming was about thirty years old. He had a serious attitude but had a friendly face. He was tall and had handsome features, giving others a very good impression.

However, this was but a facade. This was because Xiang Shaolong detected within his eyes an essence that was completely different from his external appearance, suggesting that Qu Shiming was the kind of person who would conceal a knife behind his smile.

They exchanged pleasantries.

Qu Shiming then said: "The Empress Dowager has ordered me to come to invite General Wan to the palace. Is General Wan able to leave immediately?"

Xiang Shaolong calculated that it was now the full light of day, and that the route to the palace was through the main street. He should not be afraid of any tricks. Moreover, even if something untoward did arise, he would be able to escape amidst the tide of people on the main street. He nodded in agreement and, mounting a horse, followed the official towards the palace.

Along the way, Qu Shiming pointed out the scenery and buildings and talked jovially, actually providing Xiang Shaolong

with a lot of intelligence. At least he now knew that the cluster of imposing buildings beside the palace was actually Lord Chunshen's official residence. Li Yuan's Left Minister's official residence was diagonally opposite that of Lord Chunshen's.

Since Li Yuan had residences inside and outside the palace, it did seem that his relationship with Li Yanyan was closer than that of her with the other members of the Li Clan and Lord Chunshen. It is no wonder that despite having roused the jealousy of Lord Chunshen, Lord Chunshen had yet to be able to deal with him.

However, with Li Ling entering Shouchun, and with Tian Dan and Lord Chunshen's open collusion, this equilibrium is sure to be upset.

After entering the palace, everyone dismounted.

Qu Shiming said in a low voice: "The Empress Dowager wishes to meet you in her Eastern palace's Heart Nourishing Garden. This is where she usually entertains herself with the zither. If she is in a good mood, she may even play a song for Mister."

Xiang Shaolong secretly wondered, could Li Yanyan really have fallen for himself? Thinking about it some more, he felt that it was an impossibility. How could a woman who hated men suddenly transform within two days?

Dwelling on the thought was futile, so all he could do was follow Qu Shiming.

Eight of the guards were ahead opening the way. The other sixteen guards followed behind. This level of protection did appear a little over-the-top, but it could also have signified Li Yanyan's desire to ensure his safety.

These twenty-four guards were clearly special crack troops. They were all valiant with thick necks and broad shoulders, and all were powerful and skilled fellows. If the entire Chu army was of this caliber, even the Qin people would not be able to defeat them.

At this moment, Xiang Shaolong and Qu Shiming were being crowded by the guards from the front and back while crossing a small lane paved with crushed rocks. All around were luxuriant and tightly packed flowers and plants. With little pagodas and bridges, running water and fishponds, the garden was teeming with life.

On the left beyond the grass and trees was a row of residences, but it seemed as if they were unoccupied.

In the four directions, the place was quiet and empty of people.

Qu Shiming pointed to the residences and said: "General Wan, please take a look." Xiang Shaolong looked where he was pointing, and asked curiously: "Look at what?"

Right at this moment, he suddenly felt a sharp and hard object press heavily against his right waist, emitting a ding sound.

Xiang Shaolong instantly realized what was happening.

Qu Shiming had surreptitiously stabbed at him with his dagger but had hit the concealed sack with his flying needles.

Without thinking, he lashed out an elbow at Qu Shiming's side.

Qu Shiming dropped the dagger as his hand was jolted. As the sound of broken bones was heard from his side, he fell to the ground in distress, but he did not forget to shout: "Attack!"

The first person to move was Xiang Shaolong. Blood Wave, which had been put in a new scabbard to fool people, flew out. The closest two people in front were slashed in the neck and fell to the ground with blood splashing.

Xiang Shaolong knew it was not advisable to match the enemy with force and bending his body, jumped into a small thicket and rolled out the other side. By this time, the enemy had already launched an all-out offensive.

There were two men each on the left and right attacking towards him without regard for their lives, intrepid as insane tigers.

Xiang Shaolong knew he could not retreat and gathered his enemy-crushing fighting spirit. He dashed forward, trampling on an untold number of fresh flowers, but was able to escape the danger of being surrounded. He then turned around abruptly and struck out like lightning using Blood Wave.

These guards were really carefully selected experts. The point person shifted his sword to block the swift and sharp attack, but was unable to block the kick that came from underneath. He was hit in the groin and fell to the ground with a wretched howl.

The two rushing in from behind were unable to change their stances in time and almost tripped and fell to the ground.

Xiang Shaolong rose explosively and swept round with his sword. The two guards dropped their swords and fell to the ground, dying violently on the spot.

At this moment, even more people flocked over from three directions in front. They had all appeared from the underbrush and vegetation.

None of them shouted any sort of challenge but attacked silently.

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden inspiration, and while shouting loudly made a dash towards the residences on the left.

As he was rushing across a small bridge, the sound of wind came from the rear. Xiang Shaolong knew that it was not good and tumbled onto the bridge. Above him a long sword swept past the thin air.

Xiang Shaolong jumped up on the bridge and used a stance of 'attacking to defend', creating waves of sword pressure, causing the

two guards dashing up to defend themselves frantically.

With a "Qiang!" sound the person on the left was left with half a sword.

It's a pity that Xiang Shaolong had also lost the opportunity to kill him. While forcing the other person to retreat, he saw seven to eight enemies crossing the stream under the bridge, seemingly with the intention of intercepting him on the other end of the bridge.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the enemy in front of him and jumped on the bridge railing, and with a mid-air somersault, jumped onto a patch of grass on one side.

Two of the enemies immediately threw themselves towards him.

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented. All these people were fierce and skilled in martial arts, and with their sheer numbers, they were fully capable of killing him many times over. If he was surrounded and had to fight a head-on battle, he was sure to suffer an unlucky fate. He ferociously clenched his teeth and rolled on the ground again.

Those two enemies were brave but had never before seen such fighting techniques. As they hesitated in panic, one of them had already been kicked on the lower limbs by Xiang Shaolong's two legs, falling to the ground. The other person was stabbed in the belly by Blood Wave.

In all four directions the garden was filled with human shadows and sword flashes.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the person on the ground and rolled towards a large tree at the side. As he hit the tree, his body leaped up. Three long swords thrust towards him from different angles.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this was a critical juncture. If he could not break out of the encirclement, he would definitely die today. With a wild shout, he used his last resort, the 'attacking and defending at the same time' stance. All three swords were 'stuck' to the sword light that he drew, and they were forced back by his boundless sword power.

In the blink of an eye, all the other people had madly rushed over, encircling him in a death trap.

Xiang Shaolong raised his head and saw that there was a horizontal branch reaching out above him. Above that, the foliage was even thicker. He celebrated in his heart and, while the enemy was still rushing in, sheathed his sword, leaped up off the ground and with both hands grabbed the thick branch which was as thick as a person's arm.

The enemies jumped up waving their swords trying to attack him.

Xiang Shaolong's two legs flew out to the left and right, sweeping at the blades of two swords. The two swords were swept aside.

Both legs then continued to kick out rapidly. Two of the enemies were kicked in the face. Blood spurted out and the two men staggered and stumbled to the ground.

As he used the strength of his waist to climb higher up the branch, the ground below was already filled with enemies.

Three swords flew towards him, having been thrown by some enemies.

Xiang Shaolong pasted himself against the tree trunk, avoiding the swords. He then climbed upwards rapidly.

The enemies had miscalculated, and they stood below looking at him, at a loss for what to do. At this point they could only regret not having brought crossbows.

After he had reached the top of the tree, he was already about eighty to ninety feet off the ground.

Xiang Shaolong was beside himself with joy. He opened his throat and hollered madly to the sentries on the sentry post: "Rebellion! Rebellion!" Four of the enemies had begun to climb upwards.

Xiang Shaolong was not anxious but was instead rejoicing. He drew Blood Wave and attacked downwards. Using the advantage of higher ground, he chopped and sliced, sending the four attackers tumbling down the tree. From observation, it would be hard for

them to live.

At this point, Qu Shiming laboriously arrived at the bottom of the tree, clutching the broken bones at his side. He was nonetheless also unable to devise a plan, and with no other choice, he shouted: "Cut down the tree!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud and said: "Thanks for the hard work!"

Given that the tree was thicker than a man's arms could envelop, they would need at least an hour to cut it down just using their swords.

At this moment, an uncountable number of guards spilled over from all directions.

Qu Shiming's complexion changed completely, shouting: "Go!"

However, he was a moment too late. The guards had surrounded both the attackers and the tree. Upon seeing that its their superior Qu Shiming, they all stopped in a daze.

"The Empress Dowager arrives!"

All the guards knelt on the ground.

The Xiang Shaolong who was at the treetop found it

inconvenient to kneel in greeting while on the tree so naturally he did not.

He has finally escaped this dangerous assassination attempt.

All because he was lucky.

Book 16 Chapter 05 - Exposed Again

The Empress Dowager's palace.

Qu Shiming and the seventeen subordinates who perpetrated the sneak attack on Xiang Shaolong had been bound and were kneeling before Li Yanyan's dais. Five amongst them have suffered various degrees of sword wounds and were covered with blood. They were all looking very sad and pathetic.

Including Qu Shiming, of the twenty-five would-be assassins, seven had been killed by Xiang Shaolong.

Li Quan and all the major officials who were in the palace at that time rushed over on receiving the news. Of these two were precisely Great General Dou Jie and the Minister-of-State Cheng Suning.

This Dou Jie was originally someone who adhered to Li Yuan, but later defected Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's side after recognizing that Lord Chunshen was more powerful. Cheng Suning has always been Li Quan's lackey. It was him who despatched his nephew Cheng Qi and family warriors to impersonate boatmen with the intention of killing Madam Zhuang mother and son on the Huai River.

Dou Jie and Cheng Suning are both about forty years old, with the former having a formidable appearance filled with the air of a Great General. The latter has a pale complexion, and one could determine with one glance that he was someone deep into wine

and women.

Besides these two there was also Outer City Official Wu Zhan and the Royal Guard Captain Lian Anting who was responsible for the security of the Empress Dowager and the Crown Prince of Chu. Xiang Shaolong leisurely and contentedly stood downward of the dais from Li Quan, followed by Wu Zhan and Lian Anting.

Across from them is Dou Jie and Cheng Suning. Qu Shiming's face is ashen as a corpse and his head is lowered in silence.

Li Yanyan is wearing her phoenix coronet but is without her heavy veil. Her jade face that was peerlessly splendid within Chu carried a severe and frosty expression. Her eyes flashing with prestige, she asked: "Whats the matter here? Who incited this?"

Qu Shiming reported with his head still lowered: "After Wan Ruiguang arrived in Shouchun, he went on a rampage, making it seem like our Great Chu did not have any capable people. Today he even offended the Empress Dowager in the Dian King's Mansion. And even more he has obviously killed people. I was indignant and decided to teach him a lesson. Nobody incited me to do this."

Li Yuan's voice sounded from the entrance, and with a long laugh, he said: "How did Wan Ruiguang run amuck? If you Qu Shiming had your home forcibly occupied by someone else, what would you do?" Everyone looked towards the entrance and saw Li Yuan walking in rapidly in high spirits. He first greeted Li Yanyan, then came to Xiang Shaolong's side, showing clearly that they were standing together.

Li Quan sneered and said: "There is some discrepancy in the Left Minister's words. How could the two matters be mentioned together? When Li Ling occupied and administered the Dian King's Mansion, the late King was still around but he never said anything to oppose it, clearly....."

Li Yanyan coldly cut him off, saying: "Great Prayer!"

Li Quan glared at Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong and gave a "Humph!", but did not continue. Everyone could tell, though, that what he wanted to say was that Li Chuangwen's forceful occupation of the Dian King's Mansion was with the tacit consent and approval of the devil Xiaolie.

Dou Jie gave a dry cough and said: "Qu Shiming concealed matters from the Empress Dowager and committed an offense in the palace. This is certainly against military discipline, but he was merely aroused by righteous indignation and is pardonable. I hope that Empress Dowager will deal with this leniently."

He is a major figure in the Chu military and even the Empress Dowager had to consider his words. From this, it can be seen that Lord Chunshen now has an overwhelming advantage in power.

Cheng Suning also pleaded for mercy, saying: "Qu Shiming merely wanted to burst General Wan's bubble a little and did not have the intention to kill. Empress Dowager can see clearly."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "This is strange indeed. None of

you were around just now, how could you be sure that General Qu merely wanted to teach me a lesson? Could it be that you have agreed on this from the beginning?" Cheng Suning was stumped to silence and could only glare at Xiang Shaolong fiercely with a poisonous expression.

The Royal Guard Captain Lian Anting bowed and said: "Empress Dowager can see clearly. When the small official led his men to the East Garden, Official Qu and the others were holding their swords. It is not a case of the usual disturbance or fight. Moreover the corpses of the seven people who died are distributed within the garden, clearly the result of intense battle and violent pursuit."

Li Quan sneered: "Does the Royal Guard Captain have some ulterior motive for saying this?" Lian Anting is obviously a person with extreme restraint. His countenance did not change one bit, even having been openly accused by Li Quan of coveting the Inner City Official position which is one level above his. He said: "Great Prayer Li's words are too serious. This official is but reporting the actual situation to the Empress Dowager. If I deliberately conceal anything, I will lose my job."

Li Yuan laughed and said: "Deliberately distorting the facts not only carries the threat of dismissal, it is also the crime of deceiving the monarch. Great Prayer Li should not overly neglect your form."

Li Quan angrily said: "Left Minister....."

Li Yanyan interrupted him, and turning to the as yet silent Outer City Official Wu Zhan and asked: "Does General Wu have any

opinion on this matter?" Wu Zhan controlled the city's defense so he wielded enormous power. His position was at the same level as Dou Jie, but he has always been even-handed and impartial. That is why his words have exceptional influence.

The lion-like Wu Zhan's large eyes, which looked like copper bells, emitted a cold and severe expression and landed on Qu Shiming. He said in a deep voice: "Indiscriminately using the knife and sword within the palace is a big crime. Worse still is murder, which is unforgivable. Nonetheless since Official Qu claims that it is casual fighting and disturbance, we should clarify matters. Empress Dowager only needs to allow me to bring the offenders away to be interrogated separately, I guarantee that the whole truth will be revealed."

The countenance of Li Quan, Dou Jie and the rest changed immediately. Who would have thought that Wu Zhan did not take into account one bit of their feelings and sensibilities. If all this group of background instigators are reveal, it would be an even worse disaster for them.

At this moment, the gate official sang out: "Lord Chunshen arrives!"

Lord Chunshen was followed by a warrior general on each side. One of them is his fifth son Huang Zhan, who rushed into the hall in a torrent.

As they paid their respects, Li Yuan quietly informed Xiang Shaolong that the other person was Lord Chunshen's third son Huang Ba.

Lord Chunshen arrived and stood upstream of Dou Jie and completely beyond everyone's expectation, pointed his finger and started scolding Qu Shiming severely. He said: "Qu Shiming, you are the Inner Castle Official and are responsible for the security of the palace. Unexpectedly you break the law despite knowing the law, do you admit your crime?"

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan winked at each other, knowing that Lord Chunshen is going to kill them to ensure their silence.

Qu Shiming still thought that Lord Chunshen was going to use another method to exonerate him, and hurriedly replied: "This general accepts his guilt!"

Lord Chunshen faced Li Yanyan and said: "The old official invites Empress Dowager to make an immediate decree, to behead all the offenders."

Qu Shiming started to tremble from head to toe, and raising his head, shouted in shock: "Lord! This matter...."

Huang Zhan hurried out from behind Lord Chunshen and kicked Qu Shiming on the mouth. The latter's teeth were immediately shattered and lips split. With a miserable howl, he tumble down onto the ground.

Lord Chunshen turned his head and glared at the Qu Shiming who was painfully moaning and groaning on the ground and said disdainfully: "You have committed a capital offense and you still

dare to insult the Empress Dowager, even ten thousand deaths is not enough to absolve you."

With a few simple words, he has covered over Huang Zhan's act to silence the prisoner.

Li Yanyan looked at Lord Chunshen coldly, and only after a long while did she let out a sigh and say: "Men! Bring these people out of the palace hall to be hanged immediately. The Royal Guard Captain is responsible for the execution."

Lian Anting knelt to receive the order, and then instructed the guards to take Qu Shiming and the rest out.

Li Quan and the rest were all pale, but knew that this was the best way to solve the problem for them.

Li Yanyan's eyes swept over everyone. When her eyes fell on Xiang Shaolong, she stopped for quite a while, showing a perplexingly complex look, before finally coming to Wu Zhan. She said in a soft voice: "Who does General Wu think should assume the role of Inner City Official?"

Xiang Shaolong had a good feeling about the fierce general Wu Zhan, and was very interested to know his proposal.

Lord Chunshen and gang all displayed a wary look. It would appear that this Inner City Official position has a critical influence on the outcome of the battle between the two factions.

On the contrary, it was Li Yuan who's manner was calm, even revealing a smile.

Wu Zhan solemnly said: "Shouchun is now in troubled times, and even the palace grounds are no exception. This general believes that there should not be any major changes. Let us promote Official Lian up one rank. As for the Royal Guard Captain post, let the Vice Captain Du Gui fill it. Does Empress Dowager think that this is workable?" Before Lord Chunshen and the rest could object, she preempted: "General Wu's suggestion is close to my intention. Let it be done this way. Nobody may object."

Then she continued and said: "General Wan has been startled. Please stay behind. Dismissed!"

Li Yanyan was alone waiting for Xiang Shaolong at the back of the hall. After the guards and servant maids had been driven away by her, this absolutely beautiful Empress Dowager let out a rare smile. She faced the Xiang Shaolong who was sitting downward and said: "Is it reasonable to say that General Wan is actually more famous and talented than he is presently."

Xiang Shaolong felt fear creeping into his heart, but pretended not to understand, saying: "What is the meaning of Empress Dowager's words?" Li Yanyan flashed him a glare and said: "The people who wanted to murder you just now were all the most outstanding of the guards. Each of them can handle ten men under normal circumstances. However despite mounting a sneak attack, General Wan managed to kill seven of them while remaining completely unhurt yourself. This caused me to think of one

person."

Xiang Shaolong felt a chill down his entire spine and asked: "Who did Empress Dowager think of?" Li Yanyan changed the subject and said: "After meeting General this morning, I went to see Madam Xiu'er's embroidery. She was perturbed and made one mistake after another, and even pricked her finger. I questioned my men and found out that General and Xiu'er bumped into each other as you were leaving, and that she even arranged for a carriage to send General off. At that time I did not think of anything. But after seeing General's later performance at the Dian King's Mansion and in the palace, I changed my thinking."

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed in alarm, knowing that she had suspicions of him.

Li Yanyan's eyes gleamed and firmly gazed at him, saying: "There is only one man under heaven who can cause Xiu'er to be so distracted after only one encounter. Can General Wan tell me who that man is?" Xiang Shaolong knew he had been exposed. Guo Xiu'er is Li Yanyan's close friend after all, and must share her personal matters often. So when Li Yanyan discovered her strange manner, and with himself also displaying such extraordinary yet furtive conduct together with his formidable talent, this beautiful but intelligent woman was bound to guess that he was Xiang Shaolong.

This time, this pretense of his seems to have suffered setbacks everywhere and is in shambles. It is fortunate that Tian Dan does not yet know he has arrived.

And Li Yanyan also shooed everyone else away before revealing his identity. There must be some leeway for him to turn the situation around.

After heaving a big sigh, he reverted to his former easy and unrestrained manner and dully said: "Did she tell you any of the 'honey stories'?" Li Yanyan nodded slightly and her face turned dark again, saying: "Xiang Shaolong! How audacious of you. This time are you on orders from Qin to bewitch my Great Chu's vassal states?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "I, Xiang Shaolong am not such a base and despicable person, plus I disdain to do these kind of things. If I want to fight, I will fight on the battlefield to show my real stuff. This time I came to assassinate Tian Dan. Now that my identity has been exposed by Empress Dowager, I have no choice but to return to Qin. The only request is to be able to lead Dian's orphan and widow away peacefully."

Li Yanyan almost losing her voice, said: "Is it so easy to leave?" Xiang Shaolong smiled and looked at her, first flashing around of his handsome sex appeal, then serenely said: "Whether you want to kill or maim, its all at your convenience. But if I am killed, and with Lord Chunshen's plot to send people to kill Xu Xian, even Lu Buwei will find it difficult to prevent the Qin army from crossing the border, leading to a disaster."

Li Yanyan was extremely angry and said: "This is being an intolerable bully. Do you think my Great Chu is really afraid of Qin? Qin is presently facing a revolt in the Eastern regions and is unable to look after itself. Would they really dare to invade my Great Chu?" This speech was hard on the outside but soft on the inside. People with sharp eyes could all tell that she was afraid. It is no wonder. Whose countenance does not change nowadays when

talking about Qin?

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Qin is certainly now busy with internal affairs. But what matter is the Eastern uprising? 'Soldiers arrive, calm restored'. 'Medicine arrives, illness cured'. On the contrary, it is Great Chu's issue with Dian that has caused the vassal states to have a change of mind, inciting popular confusion. Qin may not have the strength to conquer Chu right now, but as long as Qin is able to force Empress Dowager to move her capital once again, the consequences would be indescribable."

As the two of them stared at each other, Li Yanyan coldly said: "Just now you mentioned that Lord Chunshen has sent people to attacked Xu Xian's diplomatic delegation. What is this about?" Xiang Shaolong secretly celebrated, knowing that the tide has turned, and he said with a deep voice: "This is actually a big conspiracy by Tian Dan and Lu Buwei to overturn Chu. Lord Chunshen thinks that killing Xu Xian will put him in Lu Buwei's good books, but in reality he has fallen into a trap."

He then related everything from beginning to end, especially the part about how Lu Buwei and Tian Dan colluded, at first seeming to include Li Yuan, but later showing their true plans, abandoning Li Yuan in favor of Lord Chunshen. He also took the chance to tell her about how he met Madam Zhuang in the Qinling mountains, and even elaborated in detail how Cheng Qi disguised as a boatman to murder them en route.

Li Yanyan's beautiful eyes got bigger and bigger, her countenance flitting between light to dark, appearing extremely shocked.

At last Xiang Shaolong said: "Empress Dowager should know by now that I truly have not the least bit of dishonorable intention towards Great Chu."

Li Yanyan said in annoyance: "Why is Lord Chunshen so muddle-headed, unexpectedly disregarding universal condemnation to murder the Qin diplomatic delegation that has come to offer condolences. I must prevent this from happening."

Xiang Shaolong said: "If it was possible, I would have done it already. Xu Xian is one of the core people in the Qin military. If something untoward happens and Lu Buwei leaks that it has been perpetrated by Lord Chunshen, then the only way to appease the fury of the Qin military is to offer up the head of Lord Chunshen. Then I could possibly make an attempt at exonerating Great Chu."

Li Yanyan was startled and said: "How can I do such a thing? Ai! Although I am the Empress Dowager, I still do not have the ability to behead Lord Chunshen so easily."

Xiang Shaolong knows that she has already been affected emotionally and softly said: "It can be done as long as Empress Dowager does not oppose it. I will think of a way with Imperial Uncle."

Li Yanyan blankly said: "Does Imperial Uncle know you are Xiang Shaolong?" Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

Li Yanyan clearly knew about the former happenings between the two of them and said with a deep voice: "Doesn't he hate you

for stealing his love?" Xiang Shaolong said: "At present, Brother Li can only choose between killing me and Chu's internal disorder plus the threat of the Qin army. In the end Brother Li loves his family and his country, and so he chose to collaborate with me!"

Li Yanyan contemplated this for a while then showed a tired look and said extremely tenderly: "General Wan, please withdraw. I need to have a good think."

Her feeble manner caused Xiang Shaolong to be extremely aroused. As he hurriedly suppressed his crooked thoughts, he left.

The moment he stepped out of the palace hall, he was immediately invited by Li Yuan to his alternate residence in the palace for a discussion.

After revealing his exposure by Li Yanyan, Li Yuan happily said: "This matter is wonderful. If younger sister stands on out side, our odds will increase greatly."

Xiang Shaolong purposely tested his sincerity, saying: "Empress Dowager's manner towards both you and Lord Chunshen appears special. Does she have some situation between the two of you?" Li Yuan stared blankly for a while then gave a profound gasp, exposing a painful look, saying: "Even though Brother Xiang has always been this Li's arch enemy, but no matter whether its me or Tian Dan, we both greatly admire Brother Xiang in our hearts, even finding glory in having a person such as you as our opponent. If this had been asked by someone else, I would have just beater around the bush and been done with it. But now I do not feel like concealing it from you, and even more am convinced that Brother

Xiang will help our Li family preserve this secret."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank, knowing that his expectation was not far off.

Li Yanyan was really involved in an unnatural relationship. Li Yuan was silent for a long time before slowly saying: "When Yanyan was fourteen, she was already very beautiful. Dad, mom and me this elder brother all regarded her as a precious pearl. We never expected that it was not only outsiders that salivated at her charm, but there were even people within the clan who harbored wild and beastly desires."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock. It seems that he had wrongly guessed the relationship between Li Yuan and Li Yanyan. The incestuous person was someone else. But why then was Li Yanyan's attitude towards Li Yuan so odd?

Li Yuan said: "I do not wish to discuss the details. The matter happened when Yanyan was sixteen. This beast with a human face was Li Quan. Li Ling also had a hand in it. At that time Li Quan was the most powerful in the Li clan. We could only watch in silent fury. Dad and mom passed away in hatred because of this. Yanyan also changed completely, totally unwilling to come into contact with men, hiding in the house all day long. She was only willing to see me this one person and she had an unusual unwillingness to part with me."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly puzzled and asked: "If this is the case, she should be dying to kill Li Quan, why does she then trust him so?" Li Yuan grieved and said: "Because she also hates me!"

Xiang Shaolong looked at him in shock.

Li Yuan slapped his palm on the table and his eyes emitted a blaze of hatred, and gnashing his teeth, he said: "From that moment on, I determined to kill Li Quan and Li Ling by hook or by crook. Up till when she was twenty, Li Quan this person who is worse than a beast unexpectedly came repeatedly to demand for her. I was at a loss and was compelled to think of a plot, which is to give Yanyan to Lord Chunshen. If she became pregnant, we would have Lord Chunshen give her to the King. Brother Xiang should understand my meaning! Only this way will Li Quan not dare to touch Yanyan. And I could also obtain Lord Chunshen's favor and trust, and also had a chance to become the Imperial Uncle."

Xiang Shaolong stared at Li Yuan in a daze. Who would have thought that the situation would be so complex. Indeed, every family has its problems. At the same time, it could be seen that amongst the different countries, not only did the Chu clans hold the most power, they were also the most incestuous.

Li Yuan said: "I spent ten days expositing to Yanyan before convincing her, and the main reason she agreed was for the good of Chu. This was because if the King had no sons, there would have been chaos after he died. But she had a condition, and that is that the father of this child had to be me. She was only willing to bear a child for me."

Xiang Shaolong's voice almost failed, saying: "What?" Both Li Yuan's eyes turned red and with a depressed look, he unhurriedly said: "I pretended to agree to her request. When it was time to do

the deed, I switched with a household warrior whose body shape was similar to mine. Its a pity that a hundred secrets are revealed with one carelessness, and she found out after. She was so angry that she killed the man with her protective dagger. The next day, she did not say a thing and followed me to Lord Chunshen's house. Since then she refused to speak to me. Only after she became Empress Dowager did she treat me a little better. She deliberately favored Li Quan to harm me. Only recently did I realize that she had an unbalanced mind. That is why I was so happy when I found out that she had taken an interest to you, hoping that she could return to normal."

Xiang Shaolong finally understood why Li Yuan and Li Quan were from the same clan but were crossing swords, and why Li Quan can act so arrogantly with powerful backing. There was actually such an unnatural and perverse relationship behind this.

Taking in a deep breath, he said: "Li Quan and the Empress Dowager, Hei! Do they still have....."

Li Yuan shook his head and said: "Definitely not. Yanyan deeply and painfully hated men after that incident, only willing to talk to me. Later how she managed to bewilder Lord Chunshen and the King until their bodies and souls were reversed, even I do not understand. I do not know why she is able to endure them."

Xiang Shaolong said: "She did it for you. This is the only way to prevent Li Quan from killing you."

Li Yuan's whole body shook dramatically and with one hand grabbing at Xiang Shaolong, said with a gasp: "Is this really so?"

Xiang Shaolong said: "It truly is so. That she is willing to ignore her pain and serve the two men is indeed because of revenge. But she knows that you are now Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's adversary, that is why she deliberately became close to Li Quan and distanced herself from you. Just looking at how she allowed you to stay within the palace, we can see that she intended to protect you."

Li Yuan said: "Then why doesn't she explain everything clearly to me?" Xiang Shaolong said: "That is because she really still hates you. I discovered this subtle circumstance that day when I was secretly looking at the both of you from behind the screen."

After revealing everything, Li Yuan felt a lot more at peace, and nodded saying: "Brother Xiang's words make sense. Brother Xiang should now understand my sincerity in collaborating with you. As long as we are able to kill Lord Chunshen, Li Quan and Li Ling, I don't care about anything else."

At this point even Xiang Shaolong also feels like killing Li Quan and Li Ling these two people who were worse than beasts. He asked: "At this point, who is holding on to military power in Shouchun?" Li Yuan resumed his calm and replied: "Shouchun's troops are mainly divided into the Outer City Guards, the Inner City Guards and the External Defense Army. Originally, the Outer City Guards and the Inner City Guards operate under Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's control. But with Qu Shiming's death, the Inner City Guards are now under the command of Lian Anting. Du Qui has been promoted to become the Royal Guard Captain. These two are both my men. That is why the Inner City Guards are safely in my hands. Who would have thought that Wu Zhan was so helpful."

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Which side did Wu Zhan originally belong to?" Li Yuan said: "Wu Zhan is only loyal to the Crown Prince (of Chu) and Yanyan. If we did not have him to maintain the present circumstances, younger sister would have fallen into Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's control long ago. Even I would not have been able to protect her. The Inner City soldiers number approximately ten thousand. I will completely dismantle the remnants of Qu Shiming's clique. Only by protecting my sister and the Crown Prince (of Chu) do I have the capital to contend with them."

After a pause, he continued: "The Outer City soldiers number about thirty thousand and are responsible for the defense of the city and the four neighboring towns. The commander of the External Defense Army is precisely the ingrate Dou Jie. In those days, it was I who vigorously pushed for him to assume this key position. How would I know that when I returned from Handan, he had already thrown his lot in with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan. The External Defense Army is responsible for land and naval defense and also for building the Great Wall. Their soldiers number fifty thousand, and they have the greatest strength, if not I would have gotten rid of Li Quan long ago.

Xiang Shaolong asked: "How about Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's private strength?" Li Yuan said: "Li Quan is nothing to fear. But Lord Chunshen's three sons Huang Zhan, Huang Hu and Huang Ba are dauntless and unrivaled military leaders, together with five thousand household warriors, nobody in Shouchun is more powerful than he is. I only have two thousand family warriors under me. We are not even comparable."

Xiang Shaolong said: "Now that Huang Hu has led three thousand men to murder Xu Xian, his strength is greatly reduced, so if we want to make a move it has to be within these few days. Else once Huang Hu is back, Lord Chunshen will immediately deal with us."

Li Yuan heaved a sigh and said: "I have also considered this point, but once the Yelang King and Li Ling arrive, the entire situation would be different. They have close to two thousand men with them, including many experts. It seems that if the Dian King's Mansion wasn't guarded by the Royal Guards, and if Lord Chunshen didn't need to be so discreet with sister, Li Ling would have led men to invade the Dian King's Mansion long ago. Brother Xiang should also be careful."

Xiang Shaolong felt a big headache and asked: "Is it possible to win over Wu Zhan?" Li Yuan replied: "I won't say that is impossible just yet. If Wu Zhan really stands on our side, it will turn the covert struggle into an open fight, it will only bring us harm and no gain. The best method is still to use a heavy and lightning fast strike to sweep away Lord Chunshen, Li Quan, Li Ling, Dou Jie and the rest, and then let sister clean up the pieces. I only regret that we do not have the strength to do this at present."

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and said: "The one who strikes first gains the initiative. The one who strikes after is dominated. Is Brother Li able to create a map of the Yelang King's Mansion for me? If feasible, I will go and kill Li Ling tonight in order to avoid complications from too much delay."

Li Yuan patted his shoulder and said: "This is easy. Brother Xiang should first return to the dian King's Mansion. I will come look for

you in a little while!"

As both men exited the side room door, they coincidentally ran into Guo Xiu'er. All three were startled at the same time.

Li Yuan still does not know that Guo Xiu'er has also seen through Xiang Shaolong's identity, and laughed, saying: "Xiu're, quickly come and pay your respects to General Wan. He is the Dian Princess's younger brother."

Guo Xiu'er did not dare to look at Xiang Shaolong and greeted him with her head bowed.

All sorts of feelings welled up in Xiang Shaolong's heart, and after a few polite sentences, he went back to the Dian King's Mansion under the escort of Li Yuan's men.

On the way, Guo Xiu'er's pretty and refined face flashed repeatedly in Xiang Shaolong's heart. Unexpectedly, after a few meetings in Handan, she kept him constantly in her mind.

The things that have happened after they reached Shouchun have completely exceeded their expectations. All he wanted to do originally was to kill Tian Dan and then leave Shouchun for Dian to fulfill his commitment to help the Madam Zhuang restore her country.

How was he to know that his identity would be exposed individually and at different times by Guo Xiu'er, Li Yuan and Li

Yanyan, and deeply dragged into the Chu capital Shouchun's power struggle.

One of the reasons he is sincere about helping Li Yuan is to help Guo Xiu'er.

This is because if Li Yuan collapses off the stage, Guo Xiu'er will suffer a miserable fate.

The other reason is the debt of righteousness. Li Quan and Li Ling these two men who are lower than beasts are really too vile. As for Lord Chunshen, putting aside the matter of Zhao, just his plot to murder Xu Xian is unforgivable.

The problem is that even with Li Yuan's men, they do not have the strength to deal with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan.

The only way is to compel Li Yanyan to stand on their side. Only by killing Li Ling and demonstrating their power can they sway her opinion.

He just couldn't believe that Li Yanyan wouldn't want to take revenge for the lifetime of disgrace and hatred that changed her entire character.

If not she would not have defended Li Yuan and the Zhuang family constantly in all areas.

By the time he arrived at this thought, he had reached the Dian

King's Mansion.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and determined to assassinate Li Ling at the Yelang King's Mansion that night. If not, he might never get another chance.

Book 16 Chapter 06 - A Tragic Life

The moment he stepped into the Mansion, Jing Shan welcomed him and reported: "Master Teng is here!"

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed at the unexpected good news and burst into the inner hall. Teng Yi was chatting with the two ladies Ji and Zhao.

Teng Yi jumped up with unbridled emotions and hugged him tightly.

After they sat down, Ji Yanran beamed: "It turns out that we just missed Second Brother. Dan Quan and Wu Da took only two days on horseback to reach Second Brother Teng."

Teng Yi related: "We attacked Dan Chu's army seven times in succession, but was repelled each time. This person's strategic and tactical acumen is not to be belittled. Pu Bu and Xu Yiluan are now holding them back. I feared that Third Brother was short of men and therefore brought three hundred with me. They all disguised themselves as traders from the Wei border and entered the city in batches. They are the best of our elite special forces."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and said: "I was just fretting over how I would assassinate Li Ling, but now my worries are over. Second Brother should first select ten men and have them act as the Dian King's former subordinates who have come to look for their new Master. These men will take over the defense of the Dian King's Mansion."

Teng Yi promptly summoned Jing Shan and the recently-arrived Wu Da and Dan Quan and had them take care of the arrangements. Xiang Shaolong then proceeded to brief Teng Yi on all that had happened to that point. As Teng Yi found out that their arch enemy Li Yuan had become their comrade-in-arms, he could not help but bug his eyes in surprise. When Xiang Shaolong revealed that his cover had been blown by Li Yanyan, Zhao Zhi was so startled that she clung onto Ji Yanran's back.

Li Yuan arrived at this moment.

The three men retreated to the study room to strategise.

Li Yuan was energized and his confidence increased when he saw the reinforcements, especially since he knew that a mere two hundred of the Wu family's elite warriors had the power to overcome a thousand regular soldiers.

As they unfolded the map and began discussing their strategy, Lord Chunshen's messenger arrived with an invitation for Madam Zhuang, Zhuang Baoyi and Wan Ruiguang to attend a banquet at his residence.

The three of them furrowed their brows. Li Yuan dispatched a servant back to his house to see if he too been invited. He then said: "What a treacherous banquet. How should we deal with this?"

Xiang Shaolong asserted: "I am sure that Brother Li has also been invited. Lord Chunshen must have lost his patience after failing to

assassinate me today, not to mention that Brother Li's power has surged with the demise of Qu Shiming. He intends to eliminate the both of us in one fell swoop."

Teng Yi grinned: "Then we should beat Lord Chunshen at his own game and eliminate him tonight."

Li Yuan noticed his casual demeanor and smiled saying: "But we cannot possibly bring several hundred men to the feast. It would also be unseemly if we refused to go. We have managed to maintain a veneer of civility up till now."

Xiang Shaolong opined: "We definitely need to attend this banquet. It will cover our sneak attack on the Yelang King's Mansion. How many true experts does Brother Li have under him? They must be near the level of Yan Fu or Dong Luzi."

Li Yuan replied: "I can count on ten to twelve people."

Xiang Shaolong continued: "That is enough. I will add twelve of my men to yours. We will each bring twenty-four men. In addition, Brother Li should station men inside the mansion grounds to keep watch. They are to assault Lord Chunshen's residence the moment they see a signal rocket. We will fight a life and death battle with them."

Teng Yi queried: "Shouldn't we defend against a possible sneak attack by Li Ling's men on the Dian King's Mansion?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "What we actually fear is that he doesn't come! Here..... Hei! We'll have Yanran take charge. They will come but will not be able to leave because they underestimate our strength."

Teng Yi proposed: "I will take care of Li Ling's petty life. In my view, forty-eight people is still a little thin. It would be best to have another ten men look after the horses and carriages outside. If anything happens, everyone will meet outside. This will reduce our risks significantly." Next he patted his sleeve and added: "Our concealed "collapsible crossbows" will decide our victory."

This moment, Lou Wuxin came to report that Li Yuan had indeed received Lord Chunshen's invitation for the night's banquet.

The three men continued to discuss the details of the night's operation. Li Yuan also sought clarity on the "collapsible crossbow"'s function and usage before leaving together with Teng Yi.

Xiang Shaolong then went to look for Madam Zhuang. As he reached Madam Zhuang's Northern courtyard, Zhuang Kong came out to welcome him, saying: "Madam Qingxiu is in the inner hall reminiscing with Madam Zhuang." Before he had finished speaking, the sound of jingling ornaments drifted over. With two servant girls opening the way, Madam Zhuang and another beautiful woman exited side by side. He couldn't make out Madam Qingxiu's appearance under her veil, but just with her slender build and her elegant footsteps, he could tell that she was a rare beauty. Dou Jie was actually very blessed. Why would he forsake her and fall for Cheng Suning's concubine only to regret after?

Xiang Shaolong and Zhuang Kong briskly stepped aside while expressing their greetings.

Madam Zhuang introduced: "Madam! This is my younger brother Wan Ruiguang." Madam Qingxiu flashed Xiang Shaolong a glance through her veil and returning the courtesy, said: "General Wan, pleased to meet you!"

She did not utter another word but continued to walking and left accompanied by Madam Zhuang. Xiang Shaolong remained unperturbed despite her disregard. After all, no man could possibly expect every woman to fall for him. (I'm sure the ladies on this forum will have a field day with this comment)

After Madam Zhuang returned, she dragged Xiang Shaolong into the inner hall and closed the door behind them. With a heavy expression, she said: "Madam Qingxiu came to warn me that Lord Chunshen, Li Quan, Dou Jie, Cheng Suning, Li Ling and the Yelang King have made a pact to kill us and Li Yuan. Let us leave this minute!"

Xiang Shaolong knitted his eyebrows and queried: "Hasn't she separated from Dou Jie? How would she know about this matter?" Madam Zhuang replied: "Her niece is Huang Zhan's wife. Huang Zhan has a loose tongue. He was raining curses on you and Li Yuan at his home and so leaked the secret."

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand, embraced the gloomy Madam Zhuang and chuckled, saying: "Even if they did not make a

move, I would have compelled them to." He then outlined the situation regarding themselves and the enemy.

Madam Zhuang took in a deep breath and said "I see you already knew. In that case, should Baoyi and I go to the banquet tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Of course not. I'll just make up some excuse for Lord Chunshen. I am sure that he has already predicted this."

Madam Zhuang anxiously asked: "Are we at a big disadvantage manpower-wiser?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "We may have a lot less people than they do, but combat power is another matter. My people are all trained in infiltration and guerrilla tactics. Once the Yelang King's Mansion is on fire, I can guarantee that Lord Chunshen and his party will be in chaos and won't know what to do. I am determined to lay down my cards with Lord Chunshen tonight. It would be a dream come true if I could seize this golden opportunity to kill Tian Dan at the same time."

Madam Zhuang snuggled into his embrace and said: "Shaolong! I am very thankful to you. But what does it mean to 'lay down my cards'?"

Xiang Shaolong explained and then continued: "I am only afraid that Lord Chunshen's real objective tonight is the two of you mother and son. It would then be difficult for us to strike because we would not have the excuse to use force. Our only consolation

then is to kill Li Ling and the Yelang King."

Madam Zhuang giggled: "You're awfully relaxed. Li Ling and the Yelang King have many experts at their sides. Don't underestimate them!"

Xiang Shaolong saw that her bright and intelligent eyes were extremely alluring and leaned over to give her a kiss. He then boasted: "What experts haven't I seen before? The most formidable strategy is to catch the enemies unawares. Their attention should be focused on Li Yuan's family warriors. How would they know I have soldiers in ambush? Knowing oneself but not knowing the opponent, this is a military commander's biggest fear. Madam please do not worry."

Madam Zhuang replied: "We mother and son have Xiang Shaolong to rely on, what do we have to fear? We are just concerned about you."

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was lovely and touching, and couldn't help giving her another heartfelt kiss before leaving to continue his preparations. Who could have guessed that they would be confronting the enemy openly so soon.

Seventy-two members of the elite special forces have arrived. They all infiltrated the Dian King's Mansion secretly by climbing walls and traversing trees.

Ji Yanran was excited with her heavy responsibilities, but was calm and collected in command. She first gathered Madam Zhuang

and the women and children and then laid out a defense plan for each strategic position. Even the treetops were covered. Zhao Zhi naturally became her attendant and orderly (OC runner!).

At this moment Lou Wuxin came on Li Yuan's instruction to update Xiang Shaolong on the situation: "Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's informants have spread out across the city. They have established tight surveillance of the Ministers' residences and the Dian King's Mansion with the intent of preventing anyone from escaping. Instead, it is the Yelang King's Mansion that is undisturbed, with the doors shut and nobody going in and out. No unusual movements can be detected."

Xiang Shaolong pointed out: "'Nobody going in and out' is unusual. This is also known as 'covering intentions makes one conspicuous'. They will definitely attack the Dian King's Mansion tonight. Only by borrowing a foreigner's hand can Lord Chunshen deny all responsibility in front of the Empress Dowager."

Lou Wuxin said: "Our informant in Lord Chunshen's residence says that there will not be any special attack tonight. Huang Zhan has nonetheless been boasting that he will compel you to fight him during the banquet and even said that he is aching to kill you. All my brothers and I are waiting for a good show tonight!" He then continued in a deep voice: "Huang Zhan is the best swordsman in Lord Chunshen's household. Killing him would be a big blow to Lord Chunshen."

Xiang Shaolong unenthusiastically said: "It is enough to cripple him or injure him seriously."

Lou Wuxin chortled and said: "Working for Master Xiang is certainly different." As he was going to continue, Jing Shan came to report: "The Empress Dowager has summoned Xiang Shaolong to the palace."

Xiang Shaolong was elated. Li Yanyan has finally been convinced.

The palace maid withdrew after reporting his name. Li Yanyan had her face behind a veil and was silent. Xiang Shaolong, who was seated on her right, could only wallow in his own boredom.

This was a hall in a quiet and secluded courtyard in the Empress Dowager's palace. With the courtyard entrance closed, there was no trace of any other people. It almost seemed like they were the only two people in the whole universe. He could not help but pity Li Yanyan, recalling her humiliation at puberty, and now with a strained relationship with her brother and with Chu's turbulence, and finally having to put up a pretense with the enemy.

Even though she is now the Empress Dowager, there is no happiness in her life. One can feel her misery and pain just thinking about how she had to bend herself to serve Lord Chunshen and King Xiaolie these two decrepit old men. Now even with that in the past, she has to contend with powerful officials who conspire amongst themselves, borrowing the late King's name to force this weak woman to commit acts against her conscience. Thinking about this, he could not help but sigh deeply.

Li Yanyan coldly asked: "Why is Mister sighing?" Xiang Shaolong

could hear the wariness in her voice. He knew that her bitter experiences have made her particularly sensitive and so he could not deal with her like he did others. He softly said: "I don't usually meditate and listen to my surroundings, but I just noticed the sound of wind rustling the leaves in the courtyard. I found that it was constantly changing with infinite variations, pleasant to the ear like the sound of nature, something that I normally miss. I was awakened to the fact that beautiful (good) things are always around us, but because we're engrossed with other things, we will miss them even if they're right in front of us."

Li Yanyan remained silent but her delicate body trembled lightly. Nonetheless her face was hidden by the veil so Xiang Shaolong couldn't see her reaction. A long while later, Li Yanyan whispered: "Imperial Uncle is my half-brother. We have the same father but different mothers. My father only had us two children. From the moment I was born, Imperial Uncle had always been very protective of me. I..... I remember when I was fourteen, we were attending a Li clan banquet. The Li Ling, who was then called the Li clan's Little Hegemon, ganged up with some others and took liberties with me. Elder Brother defended me and fought with them, one against more than ten. He was beaten black and blue, but steadfastly resisted. Only when the adults were alerted did they stop. He did not awaken until I had tended his injuries for seven days and seven nights."

Xiang Shaolong imagined their bitterness and hardship, and couldn't help praising their fortitude. He could also see that their "sibling love and devotion" had its clear origins, and that their later tragedies had been seeded way back then. Li Yanyan continued as if she was in a dream: "Everyone in the Li clan looked down on my dad, leading us brother and sister to be bullied frequently. Thankfully Elder Brother was never discouraged, arising before

dawn everyday to train his sword skills, train his horsemanship and archery, and to read widely and all manner of books. In my heart, there was nobody better than him in the sword, and even less men more erudite and multi-talented than he was. "

Xiang Shaolong knew that she had just made a life-changing decision. She was actually raising all this to convince herself that it was the right decision. Even though it seemed as if she was speaking to Xiang Shaolong, she was actually repeating everything to herself. Li Yanyan gently let out a breath of air, causing her veil to flutter open a little. She continued gently: "Do you know why I am saying all these things to you?" Xiang Shaolong replied as gently: "Because Empress Dowager trusts that I, Xiang Shaolong, am not some despicable and petty cad who will reveal your secrets in gossip."

Li Yanyan said unhurriedly: "This is one reason. When Elder Brother came back from Handan he was dejected and depressed. I found out later from Guo Xiu'er that it was because he had lost to Dong Horse Fanatic. After I had ascertained the facts, I sent people to investigate the real Dong Horse Fanatic, only to find out that Elder Brother had really been duped by you. It was only after Elder Brother returned from Xianyang this time that I confirmed my conjecture, and informed Xiu'er. (and that is how Xiu'er knew in the end. Didn't someone ask this question?) At that time I was very curious what kind of person Xiang Shaolong was. How was it that with only a trivial few hundred people, you were able to toy with world-class formidable people like Elder Brother and Tian Dan, and defeat them with them not even knowing how and why. Even people like Lu Buwei who had power to overturn the Qin court could not cope with you. I finally understand today."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said: "I was just lucky a few times!"

Li Yanyan bowed her head and very lightly said: "Can you sit beside me?" Xiang Shaolong tarried for a while before approaching her and sitting three feet from her on the right. Li Yanyan lowered her head and removed her veil, then looked up again. Only then did Xiang Shaolong realize that her beautiful face was covered in hot tears.

Xiang Shaolong's own emotions surged, and he exclaimed hoarsely: "Empress Dowager!"

Li Yanyan closed her eyes but her tears continued to stream down unbidden. Her voice continued to be calm, however, and she continued one word at a time: "Xiang Shaolong! Kill Li Quan, Li Ling and Lord Chunshen for me. They are all lower than beasts."

Xiang Shaolong replied in grief and determination: "Shaolong solemnly obeys Empress Dowager's decree!"

Li Yanyan opened her graceful eyes gradually. Her lovely yet pitiful expression looked like pear blossoms in the rain, causing Xiang Shaolong to lower his guard. He reached out his sleeve instinctively and gently wiped away the pearly teardrops that clung to her powdered face. Li Yanyan gave him free reign and did not move, seeming as if she did not notice.

As Xiang Shaolong drew back his sleeve, he said solemnly: "Empress Dowager may relax. I will protect Imperial Uncle from

any harm."

He couldn't help laughing at how preposterous the situation was. Those days in Handan, Li Yuan was one of the men he most wanted to kill. How could one imagine that he would now wholeheartedly battle side-by-side with him.

Li Yanyan's gentle eyes focused on his face. She said with her calmly and clearly: "Wu Zhan just reported that Dou Jie has made an unauthorized troop movement. A full division of soldiers have come upstream from the Huai River and are within ten miles of the city. Whats more, a fleet of twenty warships have been parked right beside Shouchun. This is clearly a threat to caution me against dealing with them. I have no choice but to endure this bitterly. If I did not have Wu Zhan maintaining the equilibrium, Elder Brother and I would have been finished long ago. Yet Elder Brother is still unaware of my difficulties."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Besieging troops need to be double the size of the defending troops to present any threat. Attacking one's own royal city, and even more so if there is no legitimate cause, the army will be fragmented and disunited. Dou Jie appears strong, but he is actually weak. Empress Dowager does not have to worry about this."

Li Yanyan flashed him a look of mild annoyance and said: "It is easy for you to say. I fear that the situation in the inner city is unstable, and the Outer City Guards have also been fully deployed for external defense. The Royal Guards have also been pulled back to protect the palace. If Lord Chunshen and his gang strike first and attack you, what should I do?"

Xiang Shaolong guffawed and, displaying an unmatched confidence, leisurely said: "Soldiers are valued for their proficiency, not their numbers. It is Li Quan and Li Ling and that 'distinguished' bunch who should be worried."

Li Yanyan gazed at him with steely eyes and said: "Xiang Shaolong! Have more of your men infiltrated Shouchun?" Xiang Shaolong chuckled and said: "Empress Dowager, please forgive me for revealing the climax prematurely. By daybreak, Li Ling's spirit would have departed his body. Take it as a modicum of justice for the Empress Dowager."

Li Yanyan's body trembled dramatically and with an uptight voice, she said: "Did Elder Brother reveal my story? Why else would you say such a thing?"

Xiang Shaolong was not prepared for her sensitivity. Alarmed, he quickly tried to explain himself, saying: "Didn't Empress Dowager mention that Li Ling bullied the two of you, and even beat your Elder Brother so badly that he was unconscious for seven days and nights?"

Li Yanyan's upright posture was beginning to give way to the increasingly urgent heaves wrecking her body. Tears once again brimmed in her eyes as she stared blankly at Xiang Shaolong. All of a sudden, with a "Hua" sound, she started bawling and threw herself into Xiang Shaolong's bosom.

Xiang Shaolong gently held her violently convulsing body,

feeling the moist patch on his shoulder growing bigger and bigger. He felt her pain, knowing that her long suppressed grief and bitterness had finally burst through her restraint. He did not speak a word of comfort, but cradled her as if she was an infant. Of course there was no hint of eroticism in this.

His noble and sentimental heart was bursting with sympathy and tenderness towards her. At this point, he only wished that he could console this weak suffering woman who has had to display such a strong and unyielding front.

A long while later, Li Yanyan finally choked back her tears. With his help, she sat her lovely body up straight and wiped away her tears. With her head lowered daintily, she lightly said: "I shall await your good news tonight."

Xiang Shaolong stood up without a word and left quietly. His entire shoulder was drenched with her tears.

Book 16 Chapter 07 - The Treacherous Banquet

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan left a little earlier and met on a side street to exchange updates.

The two of them ensconced themselves in a horse carriage. Li Yuan asked: "What did Empress Dowager want of you?"

Xiang Shaolong warily peered out the window, and casually said: "Empress Dowager wanted me to kill Li Quan, Li Ling and Lord Chunshen."

Li Yuan's spirits rose, saying: "Did she really say that?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and said: "Why would I lie to you? Why does she hate Lord Chunshen so?"

Li Yuan sighed forlornly and said: "She hates all men who have sullied her body. This includes King Xiaolie."

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Any updates on your end?"

Li Yuan replied: "It appears that Lord Chunshen merely intends to use a duel to deal damage to us. This is because the guests tonight include all the senior officials, foreign dignitaries and even some vassal lords themselves. No matter how reckless Lord Chunshen and Li Quan are, they will not dare to attack us openly

with their hundreds of people."

Xiang Shaolong asked somberly: "Is the Yelang King in the guest list?"

Li Yuan replied: "I did not see his name. This does not mean he won't be there though. Lord Chunshen must know how easy it is for me get a copy of his guest list."

Xiang Shaolong said in a deadpan: "I intend to determine victory or defeat with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan at this banquet. We will not get another chance. If I am not mistaken, Lord Chunshun will rise in revolt tomorrow morning when Dou Jie's troops are in position. Attacking from within and without, they will use overwhelming force to subdue Shouchun. The Inner City Guards falling into your hands was a bitter blow to them. This banquet is meant to detain us along with the most influential people in Shouchun. Cut off from the outside, we will not be able to make any countervailing moves. This gives them great tactical advantage."

Li Yuan frantically said: "But Lord Chunshen has three thousand family warriors while we have a mere sixty men. Worse, some of our men will be left out in the front lawn. If we start fighting, we would be lucky to escape with our lives. How would we be able to kill the enemy?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "To shoot a person first shoot the horse. To catch the thieves first catch the king (ringleader). Has Brother Li heard of these two sayings?"

Li Yuan repeated the words twice to himself before his eyes gleamed, demonstrating his understanding.

Xiang Shaolong said: "I almost forgot the crucial point. Is Tian Dan on the guest list?"

Li Yuan shook his head and said: "I was just coming to this. Tian Dan has vanished after having breakfast with Lord Chunshen this morning. I think he may have slipped away from Shouchun."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. He said vexedly: "If he did leave, he should have been spotted by the city guards. Why haven't you received any news?"

Li Yuan said in exasperation: "With Dou Jie making the arrangements, even Wu Zhan would have found it hard to investigate. It is a simple matter for them to sneak Tian Dan out of Shouchun under cover."

Xiang Shaolong said with determination: "With this, it is even more important for us to make a move. The only way we can determine Tian Dan's whereabouts is to force it out of Lord Chunshen."

Li Yuan understood his intent. If Tian Dan is already on his way to Qi, Xiang Shaolong would need to settle the matter with Lord Chunshen as quickly as possible and then double up to give chase.

Heaving a sigh, he said: "Brother Xiang has neglected his own matters because of me. I am embarrassed. Ai! That said, our chances tonight are actually not high!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled while shaking his head, saying: "Know yourself and know your enemy, a hundred battles without defeat. I have another proposal. Brother Li might as well substitute all his personal guards for my men. As long as Lord Chunshen does not know that we are carrying crossbows, our chances will increase to seventy percent. This is known as lengthening oneself to shorten the enemy. Using the crossbow to defeat the sword; avoiding their strengths and attacking their weaknesses, using efficiency and speed to defeat the enemy's strength in numbers."

Li Yuan exclaimed: "Even if Sun Wu were to come back to life, he would find it difficult to defeat Brother Xiang's clever stratagems."

Xiang Shaolong chuckled in his heart. This is precisely the creed of the special forces, using the elite to defeat the ordinary. As long as they could grasp the enemy's weakest link, it would be like pinching a viper's throat. No matter how formidable the enemy was, it could only submit and be captured.

After the two of them split up, Li Yuan entered the palace to report everything to Li Yanyan while Xiang Shaolong made his way to Lord Chunshen's banquet.

Entering the main gate, he reached the lawn of the residence which was large enough for a thousand drilling soldiers. It was presently filled with horses and carriages. The whole area was brightly lit.

The main residence was on built on a white stone terrace. It was surrounded by covered walkways which were connected to buildings on the left and right as well as the rear. The environment was elegant and refined, with ancient trees reaching to the skies.

Xiang Shaolong's heart was stirred.

The status of the Chu King with his subjects was clearly lower than that of the Qin King.

That year in the period before King Zhuangxiang's funeral, all forms of celebrations and festivities in Xianyang ceased. The people here were completely different. Just with this one observation, once could tell why Qin was always victorious over Chu.

Xiang Shaolong and his men dismounted. Six of the men were assigned to watch over the horses while the other twenty-four followed him towards the main residence.

It was common for big shots to bring ten family warriors to banquets. Twenty-four is on the high side, but under the present circumstances, Lord Chunshun had no reason to object. Moreover, how could he be concerned with twenty-four men?

The steps leading up to the main residence were filled with Lord Chunshen's family warriors. Lord Chunshen was with his two sons Huang Zhan and Huang Ba welcoming the guests.

Xiang Shaolong walked towards the steps. When he was halfway there, a voice called out from behind him: "Ah! Please hold it!"

Xiang Shaolong halted in alarm and turned his head. Scrutinizing the face of the person who was hurrying up to him, he was surprised again.

It was Han Chuang. He had a puzzled look on his face, and he apologized with a dry cough: "My apologies, I mistook you for someone else."

It was obvious that Han Chuang had recognized him from his back profile, but could not be sure after seeing his face since his entire appearance had been greatly altered.

Xiang Shaolong chuckled and said: "Your servant is now Wan Ruiguang! How is Marquis?"

Han Chuang understood instantly and winked at him. He then turned around to greet the other dignitaries.

Xiang Shaolong felt warmth in his heart. This Han Chuang may be flawed, but he was true to his friends.

As he walked up the stone steps, the two-faced Lord Chunshen hastened over and greeted him, saying: "Welcome General Wan! This lord is extremely honored. Why isn't the Dian Princess and the little Crown Prince (of Dian) here?"

Xiang Shaolong observed the formalities, returned the greeting and said apologetically: "The little majesty is unwell. The Dian Princess has remained behind to look after him. Will the Lord please forgive me."

Lord Chunshen hurriedly said: "I'll dispatch people immediately to diagnose and treat the little Crown Prince (of Dian). Once the precious medicine arrives, the ailment will be cured."

Xiang Shaolong swept his eyes over Huang Zhan, Huang Ba and family warriors who were all glaring fiercely at him. He chuckled in his heart and thought, no matter how sharp your eyes are, you can never imagine that there is such a thing as a "collapsible crossbow" that can be hidden in one's trouser legs. This the advantage of 'High Technology'.

He replied: "I appreciate the Lord's good intentions. The little majesty has just taken his medicine. If he is not better tomorrow, we'll trouble the lord to look into it!"

At that point, a family warrior led Xiang Shaolong into the large hall.

The hall was comparable to the King's palace hall. There were four immense wooden pillars on each side, holding up four majestic beams which in turn supported roof.

The host seat was on the Southern end facing the entrance. Three rows of banquet mats extended to the left and right.

Roughly estimating, there were at least a hundred seats in all. The front row of mats were for the important guests while the row at the back of the room was set up for family warriors and followers.

At this point, more than half the guests had been seated. They were served by more than a hundred colorfully dressed servant girls who looked like butterflies. The atmosphere was lively and celebratory.

Xiang Shaolong glimpsed the Guo Kai whom he had not seen in a long time seated to the left of the host seat. After he had become the Premier in Zhao, this lord seemed to have been reborn, filled with spirit and vigor and being as pleased as punch. He was presently chatting with Lord Longyang who was seated beside him.

This moment, the ushering family warrior said: "Master Wan, please!"

Xiang Shaolong followed him to the fourth mat to the right of the host seat.

Jing Shan and the rest squeezed into the two mats behind him and sat down in orderly rows.

Lord Longyang who was reclined opposite him gave him a wink. Guo Kai looked over and sized him up, but evidently did not recognize him as Xiang Shaolong.

The hall was now noisy with a feel of excitement. The guests

were all taking advantage of the time before the start of the banquet to greet each other and exchange news. Nonetheless nobody seemed to show an interest in Xiang Shaolong. Only the envoys from the vassal states waved at him in greeting.

A servant girl approached to serve wine.

Xiang Shaolong took a look at her and noticed that she was extremely dark. She even had a small mole on her left cheek. Since her appearance was commonplace, he took no further interest. He turned to scrutinize the other guests.

Li Quan was just across from him. After giving him a disdainful glance, he continued talking to the Cheng Suning who was downwards of him. He did not give Xiang Shaolong a further glance, as if he was already a dead man that would no longer have any effect on him.

As Xiang Shaolong was sneering in his heart, a familiar sweet-sounding voice wafted into his ears, saying: "You devil! Once again dressing up to scam people."

Xiang Shaolong's body shook with epic excitement and he almost called out Shan Rou's name. As he was about to take a closer look at the servant girl in front of him, Shan Rou softly scolded him: "Don't look at me. There is a concealed exit to your rear which connects to the outside through a winding corridor. Be careful!"

She left once she finished speaking.

Seeing this dream stealing and soul bewitching female confidante again, Xiang Shaolong's spirits surged. The whole world was now alive to him, filled with colour and warmth that he had thirsted for and waited for expectantly for a long time.

At the same time, he was alarmed.

From appearances, this large hall only had two side doors leading to narrow corridors connected to the side courtyards. Without Shan Rou's information, he wouldn't have known that there was a concealed exit at the rear. This was a formidable arrangement for Lord Chunshen. He almost wanted to go in to take a look.

He hurriedly waved Jing Shan over and told him the matter.

As Jing Shan retreated, Xiang Shaolong's heart filled with the beautiful image of Shan Rou.

This beauty was certainly versatile and capable, actually managing to infiltrate Lord Chunshen's household as a servant girl to for an opportunity to kill Tian Dan.

At this moment, Shan Rou came back serving food. She whispered: "There are lances hidden underneath the corridors outside." She then turned away to serve another guest.

Xiang Shaolong let go of his worries. It appeared that the opponent did not dare to use crossbows for fear of missing the target and hitting the other guests instead.

At this point, the guests had mostly arrived. Xiang Shaolong failed to recognize most of the guests being announced by the entrance official. He just knew that they were either rulers themselves or top ministers, an exceedingly distinguished crowd.

The four military commanders Dou Jie, Wu Zhan, Lian Anting and Du Gui were all absent. This was expected since even though Shouchun looked peaceful on the outside, it was wrecked with tension on the inside. Dou Jie's big army was now confronting both the Inner and Outer City Guards. It was presently a stalemate.

Qu Shiming's failed attack on Xiang Shaolong had given Lord Chunshen and Li Quan their largest setback. With the Inner City Guards falling under Li Yanyan and Li Yuan's control, the enemy was compelled to distract them with the present threat of danger.

This moment, the entrance official chanted: "The Qielan King arrives!"

Xiang Shaolong looked over at the entrance. The first thing he saw was the sheen of jade arms and beautiful legs.

Their owner was a youth filled with feral beauty and sex appeal.

This girl was dressed in clothes made from thin leather. Her beautiful hair hung to her eyebrows, and she had a smooth chest and bare arms. She was extremely alluring.

The most captivating thing was that as she looked around, she flashed her abundantly sweet smile and coquettish eyes, instantly grabbing everyone's attention.

With great difficulty, Xiang Shaolong forced his attention to the Qielan King beside her. His head was crowned with a feathered crest and he wore a long robe. He was short and stout, with his facial features squeezed into the center of his face. He walked with an exaggerated swagger and was talking to the Lord Chunshen at his side.

All the bodyguards behind him were taller by at least half a head, their exposed arms thick and strong, creating a unique ethnic appearance.

As Lord Chunshen pointed him to his seat, Xiang Shaolong suspected that the Qielan King was asking after himself. Indeed the Qielan King's slender eyes looked over in his direction. Extricating himself from Lord Chunshen, he led his delegation over in large strides and sat down.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up to offer his greetings.

The Qielan King then laughed loudly from a distance: "Wan Ruiguang is worthy of being named the number one warrior of Southern Dian. Just arriving at Shouchun, you drove away the scoundrel who had the gall to occupy the Dian King's Mansion, to everyone's great satisfaction."

The other guests all pricked their ears and raised their brows at

this open declaration of support.

Li Quan snorted loudly, expressing his dissatisfaction.

The Qielan King either did not hear or pretended not to. Without waiting for anyone, he came to the front row and raised his right palm.

Xiang Shaolong had been instructed by Madam Zhuang earlier, and hurriedly raised his right palm and hi-fived him three times.

The Qielan King said to that captivating girl: "Caicai, come meet Hero Wan, Ha! This is my daughter Nuo Caicai. I brought her here this time to see the Great Chu's bustling scene."

Nuo Caicai greeted, her soul stealing eyes sending him an unforgettable ripple, and giggled before saying: "General Wan is really big and strong!"

These words instantly caused a murmur to break out. It was rare to see such a brazen and unrestrained girl being so forward with a man she had just met.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen hurried up and was about to lead the him to a mat on the right of the host seat when the Qielan King pointed to the mat ahead of Xiang Shaolong's and said: "I will take my seat here."

A look of displeasure flashed across Lord Chunshen's eyes, but he

could not object.

Just as the bustle was resuming, the entrance official proclaimed: "The Yelang King arrives!"

The Qielan King leaned to one side with complete disregard to his bearing and spat out a glob of spittle with a "Pei" sound, expressing his distaste at hearing the Yelang King's name. He then led the scorchingly hot Qielan Princess Nuo Caicai to the mat upwards of Xiang Shaolong, openly proclaiming that he was standing in unity with the Wan Ruiguang that Xiang Shaolong was playing.

Dispensing with propriety, he gave him several winks.

After the song courtesans had retreated, the Yelang King bellowed a long laugh, looked at Xiang Shaolong with his ferocious eyes, and raised his cup, saying: "I'll first toast General Wan a cup, then inquire on one matter. General Wan, please advise."

Xiang Shaolong exchanged a glance with Li Yuan, both knowing that the show was about to start. Nonetheless, they would let the enemy make the first move.

Book 16 Chapter 08 - Fight Behind Closed Doors

Xiang Shaolong did not make a move, and solemnly shouted: "I, Wan Ruiguang have never drank wine with my enemies. This toast can be dispensed with. Whatever matter the vassal lord has, please raise it!"

(Just a note that the word for vassal lord 侯王 has been translated to Marquis in previous chapters. I am keeping the term vassal lord to distinguish the Kings of vassal states from the usual Marquis like Han Chuang.)

The whole banquets hall quietened down. Everyone could feel the mutual hostility.

The Qiellan King gave a cold snort and glared furiously at the Yelang King.

As host, Lord Chunshen should have raised his voice to diffuse the situation, but he took it easy and looked on as if nothing was his concern.

Li Quan and Cheng Suning looked pleased with themselves, obviously knowing in advance that the Yelang King would cause trouble with Xiang Shaolong during the banquet.

That Yelang Prince Hua Qi glared at Xiang Shaolong with murderous intent.

The Yelang King nodded his head and shouted 'good!' twice before glaring sinisterly at Xiang Shaolong with his fierce eyes and said: "I heard that you Wan Ruiguang boasted in front of the Empress Dowager today that you wanted the Dian King Li Ling's life. This King felt puzzled after hearing that. Wan Ruiguang, you have but fifty men with you and may not even be able to protecting the women and children. I would like to know what ability you have such that you have the guts to spout such lunacy. Wan Ruiguang, can you explain yourself?"

This speech provoked a round of laughter from the Yelang people, Li Quan, Huang Zhan and the rest, demonstrating his ability to humiliate with his words. [help!]

As the laughter died down, the hall became deathly silent and filled with explosive charge.

Li Quan, Cheng Suning, Huang Zhan, Huang Ba and the other core conspirators from the other camp could not help looking pleased with themselves.

Xiang Shaolong has seen enough of major events. He even disregards people like Lu Buwei, Tian Dan and such, so why would he fear a mere vassal lord who thinks too highly of himself. He pretended to be surprised and said: "The vassal lord loves to joke. The Dian King is presently in the Dian King's Mansion, neither did he change his name to some Li Ling, has the vassal lord been muddled by the three cups of watered wine?"

The Yelang King was stumped for a moment. Just as he was about to speak, Li Yuan guffawed out loud and said: "Vassal lord

Hua Ciwa not only made a mistake, he has also overstepped the authority the Great Chu allowed him by privately conferring titles and riches to traitors. What kind of relationship does the Yelang King have with this traitor who betrayed his sovereign?"

These words were even harder to refute.

While Li Lings seizure of the Dian King's seat was with the tacit consent of King Xiaolie, it was never openly acknowledged. At this point, even the scheming and foresighted Lord Chunshen found it difficult to intercede.

The Qielan King was the Yelang King's mortal enemy and took the chance to add fuel to fire, saying: "If one day, Hua Ciwa's position is usurped by someone else, I can also enjoy the pleasure of privately conferring titles on people."

The Yelang King flew into a shameful rage and said: "Whoever is sitting on the Dian throne now is without doubt the ruler of Dian country. This is an incontestable fact. Only ignorant people will quibble over this obvious matter."

Everyone could tell that he was running out of arguments to justify himself.

Lord Longyang giggled delicately and said: "The vassal lord's words are lacking. It is said that if the name is not legitimate, the words will be untenable. Li Ling's name is indeed not legitimate, that is why the vassal lord's words are not tenable. These words are said by the former sages. Are you saying that the former sages

are also ignorant?"

The moment these words were spoken, the whole floor except Xiang Shaolong was startled. This was because Lord Longyang represented the Wei King and his position was venerable. Whatever he said was Wei's position. For him to oppose Li Ling as the King of Dian is therefore a surprise.

Han Chuang also followed with a laugh and said: "What Lord Longyang said is reasonable. How can someone who murders his master in treason be treated as legitimate?"

Lord Chunshen and his party all looked at each other. Who would have thought that the Wei and Han representatives would both ridicule the Yelang King.

The ten bodyguards who came with the Yelang King all placed their hands on their sword hilts, looking like they wanted to bite people's heads off.

Guo Kai was completely baffled, not being able to figure out why Lord Longyang and Han Chuang would want to help 'Wan Ruiguang'.

After Xiang Shaolong saw Shan Rou again, he body was charged with strength and his hand tingled with expectation. He sniggered: "At present this Wan only has the sword on his person and a few steadfast and loyal men, really nothing much to show. If the vassal lord is interested, wouldn't it be a lot simpler to send someone forward to verify my ability?"

Nobody could predict that he would turn the tables and take the initiative, openly inviting a fight. The hall was so silent that one could hear a pin drop. The loudest noise was the Yelang King's panting. He was evidently exploding with rage.

With a violent bark, the Third Prince Hua Qi sprang up from the Yelang King's mat. He carried a battle axe in each hand. He clashed the two axes together with a loud clang, then loudly declared: "The Yelang King's third son Hua Qi invites Wan Ruiguang to the arena for a contest."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly pleased and was just about to step out to deal a heavy blow to this kid. Who would know that the Jing Shan who was behind him was itching for a fight even more than he was. He dashed out and bowed, saying: "Your servant is Wan Shan. Would Master Wan please grant me permission to do battle?"

Xiang Shaolong was extremely pleased in his heart. Firstly, Jing Shan's combat ability was second only to Jing Jun, so he should have no problem with this kid.

Secondly, he wouldn't have to worry about arousing the Qielan Princess Nuo Caicai's interest and having to entertain her tonight after killing the Yelang kid.

Nonetheless, he wasn't going to let Lord Chunshen off so easily. Smiling at him, he said: "The Lord should understand that this contest is not just some ordinary bout. It is easy for blood to be

drawn and lives to be taken, spoiling the festive spirit and could even break into an all-out riot. If the Lord objects, I will not accept this challenge."

The Yelang King still mistook this for cowardice, and sniggered, saying: "Life and death is fated. If you Wan Ruiguang have the ability to touch a strand of my son's hair, I , Hua Ciwa will not quarrel endlessly over this."

How would Lord Chunshen ruin his grand plan for tonight just with two sentences from Xiang Shaolong? He chuckled and said: "Since the Third Prince has this interest, how could Huang Xie be the one to dampen the spirit? General Wan had better decide for himself."

Hua Qi hefted his axes and made a stance, seemingly unburdened by the weight of the axes, clearly an exceptionally strong man. He shouted explosively: "If you Wan Ruiguang kowtow and admit your mistake, we can let this matter drop."

Xiang Shaolong chortled and said: "Good!" After signaling to Jing Shan to take his life, he said: "Swords and sabers are blind! Everybody please be careful!"

Jing Shan exulted and rushed forward with big stride. He stood ten feet from Hua Qi with his sword still sheathed.

Huang Zhan suddenly stood up and shouted: "Wait!"

Everyone was startled and turned to him.

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to scan the floor to look for Shan Rou, only to find that all the servant girls had retreated to the back of the banquets hall and were standing with Lord Chunshen's family warriors. How could he spot this cunning and clever buddy in such a short time?

Huang Zhan's voice carried over: "If General Wan's side loses this bout, will he again send his underlings to die on his behalf?"

These two words were really overbearing and unreasonable. Even those who did now know what was going on could tell that Lord Chunshen and the Yelang King had joined hands to bully Xiang Shaolong.

Nonetheless, nobody dared to say anything. Only the Qiellan King sneered and said: "This contest has yet to be decided, isn't Master Huang's words premature?"

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan looked at each other and laughed, the former lazily said: "What wise opinion does Master Huang have?"

Huang Zhan shouted harshly: "Shouldn't the next bout be between you and me?"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "Master, don't be so impatient. Its not to late to speak of this again after this bout. Begin the fight!"

Hua Qi has lost his patience waiting. He bellowed a battle cry like thunder and raised both battle axes, looking extremely bold and powerful. He brandished his axes in a series of severe chops and hacks, and swept towards Jing Shan like a breaking wave flying into the sky. He was certainly an arrogant general who thought himself above all. Everyone was moved with his display. Even Li Yuan was worried for Jing Shan. Nuo Caicai was even more nervous, her hands clasping her chest.

Jing Shan was calm and fearless, and his sword flashed out like lightning, carrying with it the deadliness of a viper. His steady yet swift movements looked like rolling winds in the clouds. Jumping, leaning, hacking and thrusting, every move was aimed at the enemies openings and vulnerabilities. Together with his flashing speed and his graceful dancelike footwork, he seemed to be using nothing but a defense and counter-attack strategy.

The sound of clashing axes and swords rang without pause. Jing Shan periodically advanced and retreated. Hua Qi could not glean one bit of advantage.

The countenance of the Yelang people and Lord Chunshen changed instantly. They could not imagine that some random person from Xiang Shaolong's entourage could contend with Hua Qi, the number one warrior in Yelang. Moreover, his arm strength was clearly greater than Hua Qi's, how could they not fear and despair?

By this time, Hua Qi had exhausted his strength. Since his axes were heavy, he became momentarily sluggish. As he waned, Jing

Shan waxed and his sword exploded forward, forcing Hua Qi back two steps.

Hua Qi was greatly embarrassed and rashly counter-attacked in a mad fury.

Jing Shan gave a long demonic laugh and moved forward like a flash of lightning. He unexpectedly raised his sword hilt towards the axe coming at his temple, blocking Hua Qi's most powerful right-handed axe attack. He then bent low, letting Hua Qi's left handed axe fly over his head. The sword in his hand moved as if electrified, shooting towards Hua Qi's stomach from an oblique angle.

Hua Qi was scared stiff and both axes flew from his hands while he suddenly retreated.

Jing Shan sheathed his sword and coldly watched Hua Qi retreating.

From the time the two men started fighting, the entire banquet floor was quiet without a whisper. This moment everyone focused on Hua Qi's body. They all knew that he had been injured seriously but just didn't know whether he was in mortal danger.

Hua Qi retreated another two steps before emitting a heart rending shriek and collapsing on the ground with a loud crash.

The Yelang King frantically stood up and yelled madly: "My son!"

The Yelang people had already dashed out as a group to examine the Hua Qi lying on the ground. They couldn't help but see the fountains of blood gushing from his chest and stomach.

Jing Shan nonchalantly return to his mat. As he passed by Nuo Caicai, he reached out, hugged her and kissed her on the mouth before letting her go.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen, Huang Zhan and the rest all left their seats to take a look at Hua Qi.

The Yelang King suddenly let out an earth-shaking cry and stood up from Hua Qi's side. He pointed his finger at Xiang Shaolong and screamed: "Wan Ruiguang! This blood debt for killing my son, I shall demand from you ten million times."

Most of the people on the banquet floor looked disdainful. They all despised the fact that he had so quickly reneged on his earlier claim that life and death were fated and that he would not pursue any grudge.

Lord Chunshen personally pulled the Yelang King back to his banquet mat. Hua Qi's corpse was carried out the back door. The floor was still covered with blood, presenting a ghastly sight.

The festive atmosphere had naturally evaporated, but nobody blamed Xiang Shaolong because the whole matter was evidently the work of the Yelang King and Lord Chunshen. Everyone also knew that the best was yet to come.

The Qielan King broke the tense and silent atmosphere with a loud laugh, saying: "That General Wan has such a divine subordinate is cause to celebrate. The General is sure to be able to accomplish your objective of reclaiming your land soon."

The Yelang King stared at the Qielan King with his blazing eyes, but was angered speechless.

Huang Zhan returned from the back of the hall and walked towards the center of the arena with his hand on his sword hilt. He soberly said: "Wan Ruiguang! It is now our turn."

Li Yuan asked in a puzzled tone: "This matter is truly puzzling. It is clearly a matter between Dian and Yelang. Why is Master Huang acting as if someone has killed your parents? My hand is also very itchy. Why don't I play along with you instead!"

Everyone including Lord Chunshun's countenance changed at these words. This meant that Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen are now openly at war.

Huang Zhan knew that his sword skills were still inferior to Li Yuan's. He could only bitterly endure this and coldly said: "This does not concern Premier Li. Wan Ruiguang! Are you going to send someone else to do your battle again?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled sardonically, saying: "Master Huang is blinded with anger and is not in shape for a duel. Moreover, as I have said before, I will not touch the young master unless the Lord

permits.

All the guests' attention naturally shifted to Lord Chunshen.

Lord Chunshen could only keep his bitterness to himself.

At this point, if he doesn't strike, everything will cease, but if he does strike, the situation will only come to an end when someone dies.

This Wan Ruiguang's underling was already so formidable. The man himself must be unfathomable.

The problem was that the Yelang King had already sacrificed a son. If he did not let Huang Zhan battle, how was he to account to the Yelang King?

He couldn't help regretting not springing his surprise attack earlier. If he used underhanded methods under the present circumstances, he will gain the ridicule of the whole world.

In reality, the ambush he arranged tonight was just a back-up, not necessarily to kill Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan on the spot. He only hoped to delay things till morning so that he can coordinate his assault with Dou Jie. If he killed Li Yuan just like that, it would be difficult for him to prevent Li Yanyan from mobilizing the Royal Guards in a counter-attack.

As he was frantically considering all this, Huang Zhan had

already said: "Will dad please allow your son to go to battle!"

Lord Chunshen silently heaved a deep sigh and nodding his head, said: "Be careful, son!"

The entire banquet floor perked up. The majority of the guests hoped to see Huang Zhan perish under Xiang Shaolong's sword.

This person has always relied on his father's protection, fearlessness rampaging through Shouchun, both hands reeking with blood. It was just that nobody could contain him!

Xiang Shaolong chortled and stood up. He moved outside the arena and patted his sword hilt lightly three times. This was the coded signal for his men to prepare their collapsible crossbows.

At the same time he said indifferently: "It would be the best for the Lord to withdraw his permission. Master Huang's heart is now filled with animosity and a murderous spirit. I would like to be merciful, but it will be difficult."

Everybody felt that his tone was boastful. Nonetheless just seeing his casual posture, they could see his world dominating might. Huang Zhan was a far cry compared to him, hence everybody also got the feeling that his tone was justified.

Huang Zhan did not wait for Lord Chunshen's reply and barked: "Who wants you to be merciful?"

Brandishing his sword, he ploughed forward in a mad dash.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has always relied on his prestige to go on a rampage, regarding no one. That is why he deliberately provoked him to anger. He has now been suckered by Xiang Shaolong's ploy. He focused his mind and Blood Wave left its scabbard.

"Dang!"

The sound jolted the entire field.

Xiang Shaolong stood proudly with his precious sword. Huang Zhan staggered back unsteadily with his sword. He was actually forced into retreat just by Xiang Shaolong's one move.

Xiang Shaolong gave a long laugh: "Master Huang! How about stopping the fight now?"

Lord Chunshen stood up and shouted: "Son!"

The hands of Lord Chunshen's warriors who standing at the back all strayed to their sword hilts, greatly increasing the tension in the hall.

While everyone's eyes were focused on the arena, Jing Shan and his party used this golden opportunity to load their crossbows under the table.

All the banquet guests were stupefied.

Huang Zhan has always used his bravery and strength to gain the reputation of being Chu's number two swordsman after Li Yuan. Who would have known that he would be forced into such difficulty, cutting such a sorry figure after only one clash. Who would not be shocked?

At the side, Li Yuan was perceptive. He knew that Huang Zhan's mind was clouded with violent rage. Xiang Shaolong's sword move was also sophisticated. He struck precisely when the opponent's equilibrium was the weakest. That was how he achieved this seemingly mystical result. It was also demonstrably clear that Xiang Shaolong's arm strength was greater than Huang Zhan's.

Huang Zhan had retreated up to twelve steps before he could stop. Who would have thought that Xiang Shaolong would repeat his words: "Master Huang! Let this matter go!"

How could Huang Zhan withdraw after such great humiliation? He violently screamed: "I will slaughter you!" He pounced forward again.

While the opponent was halfway there, Xiang Shaolong moved forward suddenly and with a rapid attacking move, mercilessly bore over, meeting strength with strength.

The sound of a girl cheering and clapping sounded out suddenly. It turned out to be Nuo Caicai solitarily doing a cheerleader's act.

Because this was not some casual fight, everyone was holding their breath and keeping quiet. Nuo Caicai's clapping and cheering was really jarring, but nobody had the interest to pay her any attention.

The clashing sound of metal on metal rang out continuously.

The two men swept past each other.

Xiang Shaolong stopped abruptly and still with his back to Huang Zhan, he sheathed his sword.

Huang Zhan rushed forward another five steps before emitting a heart rending and miserable shriek. His word fell to the ground and with his left hand clutching his right, he knelt down. At this moment everyone realized that his right hand had been cut off neatly at the wrist, and had fallen along with his sword.

Xiang Shaolong faced heavenwards and laughed: "Anyone who wants to kill me, this person shall serve as a warning."

Lord Chunshen screamed: "Wan Ruiguang!"

Xiang Shaolong said without turning his head: "I warned the Lord many times not to let your son enter battle. Its a pity that the Lord wanted to kill me too badly. You can only reap what you sow. Who can the Lord blame?"

The Yelang King suddenly stood up and barked: "Kill him!"

Lord Chunshen also yelled: "Every debt has its perpetrator. Everyone please remain at your tables." He picked up his cup and hurled it against the floor. "Peng!"

The cup disintegrated.

The ten over men behind Lord Chunshen rushed forth like a tide. Seven of them remained by Lord Chunshen while the other eight rushed towards the center of the hall and helped Huang Zhan up.

The other family warriors rushed forth from all four sides of the banquet hall, forming a human wall to cut Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan off from the other guests while surrounding them at the same time.

Lord Chunshen's family warriors who were originally behind the two men Xiang and Li retreated to the two sides instead. More than twenty of them went towards the Qiellan King's banquet mat to dissuade them from getting involved.

The sound of swords leaving their scabbards sounded unceasingly.

Lord Chunshen laughed from behind the human wall and said: "Didn't expect this right? If you order your men to lay down their arms, maybe I will spare your wretched lives."

Li Yuan remained calmly seated on his mat. He did not seem to notice the gleaming swords surrounding him. Sneering, he said: "The Lord is really audacious. Aren't you afraid of injuring the guests accidentally? Are you thinking of mounting a rebellion?"

Xiang Shaolong stood tall with a peaceful look and laughed out loud, saying: "Huang Xie, you are gravely mistaken."

Lord Chunshen sniggered and said: "We shall see!"

With a "Peng Peng!" sound, all the doors were shut.

Xiang Shaolong saw Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and the rest grasping their sword hilts one after another. He announced: "Everyone, please do not get involved or stand up. I will settle this with Huang Xie. Make your move!"

At this moment, Jing Shan and the forty-eight men were all still seated on the banquet mats. They were all completely expressionless, causing those who looked at them to feel a sense of chill.

Lord Chunshen yelled: "Attack!"

"Peng!"

The hidden door behind Jing Shan and the rest opened. A few tens of men with lances came out and attacked towards Jing Shan and gang.

The guests could not imagine that Lord Chunshen would have this trick up his sleeves. Nuo Caicai was the first to exclaim hoarsely.

Only then did Jing Shan and the rest start moving.

The forty-eight men spread out like a fountain, rolling on the floor and springing up. Forty-eight flashes of light flew from their hands. It turned out to be flying daggers concealed in their hands.

In the midst of miserable cries, the incoming men were hit by the daggers and fell to the ground.

Only then did they use the crossbows. Flights of crossbow bolts flew out accurately and unerringly, causing the defenseless attackers coming in to fall down in rows. The attack melted like ice.

The forty-eight men rapidly loaded their bolts with lightning quick movements, firing ceaselessly. They not only drove those attacking from the hidden door back out, they also forced those family warriors already in the hall to the back, protecting the rest of the banquet guests.

Before long, the ground was littered with enemies groaning in pain and lying their own blood. The situation was extremely wretched.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan rushed towards Lord Chunshen. The ten odd family warriors tried to block them.

Jing Shan, Wu Shu and the rest of the forty-eight men spread out across the banquet hall, commanding all the strategic positions, merely using the crossbows to shoot any enemy soldiers who dared to attack. All the guests remained completely still in their seats, not daring to budge, afraid to endanger themselves in the crossfire.

Li Yuan's sword stabbed into Huang Ba's chest in a lightning move. Just as he was kicking aside the corpse, Shan Rou's shriek carried over the milieu: "Everyone stop! If not I will slaughter Huang Xie."

Both sides looked towards Lord Chunshen only to discover that he had been forced to a corner by a servant girl. A sharp dagger was pressed against his neck. His face was ashen like a corpse.

The entire battle scene froze.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan simultaneously rushed over and shielded her from both sides.

Shan Rou sternly shouted: "Throw down your swords!"

All the family warriors looked at each other at a loss of what to do. Huang Zhan was seriously wounded, Huang Ba had been killed. There was no one left to lead them.

The Yelang King madly yelled: "Kill them for me!"

When his men jumped up, two rows of crossbow bolts had already flown towards them. Including the Yelang King, the ten over people were all struck dead.

Nobody else dared to move an inch.

Shan Rou yelled again: "Still haven't abandoned your swords?!"

It was not clear who started first, but with a sonorous "Keng Qiang" sound, the ground was covered in discarded swords in an instant.

Jing Shan and the rest forced all the family warriors to the area behind Lord Chunshen's host seat. Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan forced Lord Chunshen towards the side of the main entrance.

Li Quan and Cheng Suning were seized and trussed up together with Lord Chunshen.

The special forces soldiers demonstrated a high level of efficiency, some advancing and some retreating, every movement was tidy and orderly, with no confusion at all.

Everyone could only stare mutely at this unimaginable outcome.

Li Yuan leaned over to Xiang Shaolong's ear and intimated: "Only now do I understand what is meant by 'To capture the thieves, first capture the king (ringleader)'. I submit to Brother Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled to himself and turned towards the one and only unique woman Shan Rou who was staring straight back at him. He laughed, saying: "Elder sister is formidable."

The lovely Shan Rou snorted at him, immensely proud of herself.

Lord Chunshen asked in a trembling voice: "What do you intend to do?"

Xiang Shaolong greeted the floor of quests and said: "I, Wan Ruiguang am deeply sorry for causing everyone some false alarm. All the esteemed guests may leave. Nonetheless, please wait for a short while and allow us to open a route for you."

Before he had finished speaking, the sound of slaughter could be heard outside the hall. It was a while before the noise died down again. Everyone's countenance changed.

A knock on the door transmitted a coded signal. Wu Yan who was in charge of the door flung it open. Lou Wuxin rushed in and said: "I have not failed my mission!"

Li Yuan laughed and said: "Everyone may leave now. We will secure the area for you."

He exultantly looked at Xiang Shaolong. Both knew that victory was in their grasp tonight.

Book 16 Chapter 09 - The Villain Is Taught A Lesson

After Xiang Shaolong and his party dragged away Lord Chunshen's gang of three, the remaining family warriors within Lord Chunshen's residence gushed out in full strength. Who would have known that the moment they stepped onto the street, they were ambushed by Li Yuan's family warriors hiding with bows on the rooftops on either side of the street. Men fell and horses collapsed. They were utterly defeated.

Next, under Lou Wuxin, Dong Luzi's and the rest's command, hundreds more of Li Yuan's family warriors rushed out from the buildings at the side. They carried lances, charging at Lord Chunshen's frightened family warriors in waves. Even though the enemy had twice the number of men as they had, they were without a head. Their morale was low, and all dispersed and fled in the face of the assault.

Lou Wuxin and the rest pressed home the advantage and attacked towards Lord Chunshen's residence.

They had been given strict orders not to massacre women and children, and also those who surrendered.

This moment, the Yelang King's Mansion was ablaze with flames reaching to the sky. Billows of thick smoke rose up into the clear night sky.

Of the ten buildings, four were on fire. The ear-splitting cry of

murder sounded unceasingly.

The battle at the Dian King's Mansion had ended a short while ago.

The attacker's were Li Ling's hundred plus followers. They had climbed the high walls on the left and right to get into the mansion. They had thought that they could gain an easy victory. How could they expect that arrows would fly in like rain from all four directions. Half of them were felled in the blink of an eye. The rest who had managed to enter the mansion ran straight into the elite soldiers led by Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi.

They could not even escape with their lives, much less to kill and burn.

Under Li Yanyan's orders, Du Gui secured the palace. The newly promoted Inner City Official Lian Anting had also sealed off the Inner City and set up inspection checkpoints on the streets. At the same time, he also safeguarded the foreign embassies and diplomats. Everything was orderly and tidy. Even though they did not participate directly in the struggle, they prevented other parties from interfering.

The Yelang King's Mansion was surrounded by Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong's allied troops in a watertight encirclement. All who tried to come out were chased back in with powerful arrow shots.

The allied soldiers all had a red sash on their helmets to

distinguish themselves.

Even though the Inner City had been plunged into a wild and noisy battle, the Outer City was completely undisturbed. Wu Zhan had also received orders from Li Yanyan not to get involved in the Inner City affairs.

Dou Jie and his large army outside the city were cut off from all news from within the city. He even thought that the fire was from the Dian King's Mansion that Li Ling's men had besieged.

Lord Chunshen's gang of three were kept prisoner on separate horse carriages under the close watch of the guardians.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan, these two war comrades with a complicated relationship, stood shoulder to shoulder outside the Yelang King's Mansion, observing the situation.

The battle cry sounded.

Close to a thousand of Li Yuan's family warriors carrying shields split into two groups, forcing entrance into the front and rear gates of the Yelang King's Mansion. An even more intense round of battle cries and killing sounds rose up.

This round of battle concluded quickly. Teng Yi's imposing body appeared at the mansion gate. At his back, Wu Guang and the rest led a bound man out. They came straight towards Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan and pushed the bound man to the ground.

Wu Guang rushed forwards in big strides and grabbing his hair, raised his face while forcing him to kneel.

Under the light of the torches, they could see that even though the man's expression was now twisted, his facial features were actually well proportioned, sanctimonious and dignified. Who would have known that in reality, from the time he was young, he had never been a good person.

Li Yuan's two eyes gleamed and he chortled saying: "Li Ling old chap, how have you been!" "Peng!" Li Yuan kicked him in the lower abdomen, causing so much pain that he curled up.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that Li Yuan would beat him to death right there and hollered: "Tie him up and put him into a carriage. We shall return to the Dian King's Mansion."

Teng Yi came to his side and said: "These Yelang people and Li Ling's Dian soldiers are all good-for-nothing. There was hardly any special defensive arrangements in the mansion. They could not even resist our crossbow and fire arrow attacks for a short while. Only ten of our men sustained light injuries."

Xiang Shaolong mused that these elite soldiers of his were as good as twenty-first Century special forces. They had all been trained in his modern methods and were best able to demonstrate their efficiency and power in city warfare. The Yelang King and Li Ling's men underestimated the enemy and did not prepare for defense. Moreover they had come from afar and had yet to have a

proper rest. How could they present any real opposition with their tired men and horses?

This demonstrates the critical factors 'heavenly timing, favorable location and ready people' needed for one to achieve victory in battle.

This moment, Li Yuan walked over and patted both men's shoulders, saying: "This business tonight, I, Li Yuan will engrave deep within my heart. No matter what happens between Qin and Chu in the future, I will still be a friend to the both of you."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "It is unlikely that I and Brother Li will meet in the field of battle. Moreover, I intend to retire in seclusion at the earliest opportunity. Brother Li does not have to worry."

Li Yuan was stupefied and wanted to question further when Lou Wuxin and a group of family warriors approached riding fast. They called out: "We can't find Tian Dan. It is said that he left Shouchun this morning. We need to interrogate Lord Chunshen on this."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a glance. Even though they had known that the outcome was likely to be thus, they nonetheless couldn't help but be disappointed.

Li Yuan opined: "Dan Chu and the rest have yet to arrive. He should not have returned to Qi. Ai, it is nonetheless hard to say." Lou Wuxin suggested: "The Inner City is under control. It is now time to round up the clique of traitors."

As Li Yuan was about to agree, he was dragged aside by Xiang Shaolong who earnestly requested: "Can Brother Li limit his reprisal to Lord Chunshen and his few collaborators? From the beginning, taking revenge to settle a grudge has never been the best solution."

Li Yuan dithered for a while before nodding and said: "If I can't even do such a simple thing, how can I repay Brother Xiang's grace? We'll do it Brother Xiang's way!" He instructed Lou Wuxin: "Help me inform all the high-ranking military officers in the Inner City, this incident was the result of the three men Lord Chunshen, Li Quan and Cheng Suning's rebellion. Besides these three men's direct male relatives, all the women may return to their mother's houses. Servants and maids may be placed under alternative employ."

Lou Wuxin was extremely startled and displayed a puzzled look. He only proceeded to execute the order after a long pause.

The fire at the Yelang King's Mansion had been extinguished. The Inner City had been restored to peacefulness and tranquility. Only the sound of marching troops reminded the people in the city of the issue at hand.

"Pa La!" Madam Zhuang raised her hand and twice slapped the Li Ling who was kneeling on the street, pointing her finger and berating him.

Li Ling knew that his power was gone, and remained silent in his

disappointment. He looked like a defeated rooster.

You Cui and You Ning rushed forward with faces full of hot tears and joined Madam Zhuang in the abuse.

Zhuang Kong and the rest also cried tears of excitement when they saw that the villain had been captured and that their little Prince's restoration was at hand.

The impossible had become reality.

Shan Rou had arrived earlier and was with Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi in an extremely warmhearted embrace.

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's return, they dragged him into the inner hall to chat.

Lord Chunshen's gang of three were imprisoned separately awaiting action.

After sitting down in the inner hall, Shan Rou blissfully said to Xiang Shaolong: "At least you have a bit of conscience. In the end you were willing to come and deal with the big villain Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "How did you end up in Lord Chunshen's residence?" Zhao Zhi delightedly replied on her behalf: "Sister Rou has always been pursuing Tian Dan. She guessed that he would

need to pass through Shouchun on the way back to Qi from Xianyang. She also knew that he and Lord Chunshen were collaborators, so she sold herself as a servant girl and came to Lord Chunshen's residence."

Xiang Shaolong said in puzzlement: "Where has Tian Dan disappeared off to?" Shan Rou replied: "He is going to meet up with Dan Chu. It has been reported that he is on a boat on the Huai River heading East. I was just fretting at how to handle this matter. Thankfully you have arrived."

Teng Yi entered and said: "We have discovered Tian Dan's whereabouts. He left the city secretly this morning. He is on a boat to Chengyang to meet up with Dan Chu's battered army. He will take at least a fortnight to reach Qi. We have enough time to prepare."

At this point, Wu Guang's stuck his big head out from behind Teng Yi's shoulder and announced: "The Empress Dowager is in the outer hall awaiting Master Xiang!" Li Yanyan's face was covered by a heavy veil. She was covered in a maroon cloak and was standing and looking at the bright moon in the night sky outside the window. It was hard to determine her intentions.

The Royal Guard Captain Du Gui and the hundred plus guards had been ordered to remain outside the room.

Xiang Shaolong knew that she was filled with conflicting emotions and did not disturb her. He stood quietly at one side.

At this moment, Jing Shan and the rest dragged the two men Li Ling and Li Quan into the hall and forced them to kneel on the ground.

As Li Quan saw Li Yanyan, he thought she here to save him and wailing, he said: "Empress Dowager please arbitrate on the old official's behalf....." Li Yanyan coldly shouted: "Shut up!"

Li Quan wanted to speak further, but was boxed in the mouth by Wu Shu. Two incisors broke immediately and he was rendered speechless.

Li Yanyan softly said: "Besides General Wan, everyone else please withdraw."

Jing Shan and the rest looked at Xiang Shaolong and saw him make the hand signal for them to obey. They then let go of the two men and went outside the hall.

Li Yanyan's plaintive voice arose like a dream, saying: "Do you two remember the incident five years ago?"

Li Quan and Li Ling exchanged a look, both showing fear and surprise.

Li Yanyan slowly turned her body and uncovered her veil, exposing her magnificent and elegant face. Her eyes were nonetheless cold as ice, shooting forth a piercing hatred.

Li Quan lisped through his blood-filled mouth and softly said: "Yanyan, don't forget that I am your uncle. I have always loved you dearly....."

Li Yanyan shook her head and said: "It is precisely because one is my uncle and one is my cousin that all my life I can't forget your beastly conduct. If it was an outsider, I might have been able to endure it. I leveraged my own body just for this day. Li Quan, get your a** here."

Li Quan was terror stricken and repeatedly kowtowed and said: "Empress Dowager please spare my life!" With a "Pei!" sound, Li Ling spat a glob of spittle, and said in contempt: "What Empress Dowager, you were even ridden by me Li Ling....."

"Peng!" Xiang Shaolong's leg flew out and hit him square in the face. Li Ling fell face up on the ground and could not speak anymore.

Li Yanyan flashed Xiang Shaolong a grateful look and slowly walked over to Li Quan.

Li Quan knew something was wrong and looked up in shock. Li Yanyan raised her sleeve, exposing her powdered and tender arm with a gleaming sharp poisoned dagger. Quick as lightning, she thrust the dagger into Li Quan's stomach.

Li Quan gave a miserable scream and fell to the ground dead along with the dagger.

Li Yanyan turned around and threw herself into Xiang Shaolong's bosom. She panted rapidly but did not let out any tears.

When she had calmed down a little, Li Yanyan left Xiang Shaolong's embrace and requested: "Can you kill Li Ling for me?"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "I am not used to killing people who are defenseless. Allow me to find someone else to do it, ok?...."

Li Yanyan looked at him deeply, hanged her head and said: "You are truly a good man. Alright!" She then returned to the window and turned her beautiful back towards him.

Xiang Shaolong gave the Li Ling who was groaning on the ground a look and thought: this person had committed all sorts of evil deeds, certainly death was too good for him. He opened the door and was about to call for people when Li Yuan and Madam Zhuang arrived together.

Xiang Shaolong did not wish to let them know hat Li Yanyan killed Li Quan herself, and so whispered: "Empress Dowager is in a bad mood. Let us not disturb her. Li Quan is gone. I'll leave Li Ling to you guys!" Li Yanyan appeared behind Xiang Shaolong with her phoenix coronet and veil replaced and firmly said: "No, I want to see him executed with my own eyes!"

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner residence, it was just past the fourth night watch. Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou

were all in high spirits relating all the happenings to each other. Shan Rou had removed her disguise and returned to her regular appearance.

Xiang Shaolong felt like he had moved from one universe to another, leaving behind the vengeful struggle that he had loathed but could not avoid, and arriving in this gentle and sweet little world of his.

What he sought after here was not carnal satisfaction, but spiritual peace and quiet. His needs were especially pronounced after the night of blood and gore. His mind and body were both exhausted. This was the price of survival and protecting his loved ones after all.

The three ladies' eyes flitted over to him in unison.

Shan Rou still looks like she is dissatisfied with something. She squinted at him with her intelligent eyes and leaned on him, her appearance as mesmerizing as ever.

Xiang Shaolong sat beside Shan Rou. Before he could say a word, Shan Rou raised a finger and pressed it on his lips, solemnly saying: "Don't ask me about what has happened. If you wish to know, please ask the two of them. I will not repeat what I have just said again."

The feeling of familiar warmth and comradeship welled up in Xiang Shaolong. He laughed without speaking.

Shan Rou removed her finger and suddenly kissed him on the lips before smiling enchantingly, saying: "I have really missed you. I think of you at least once a month."

After teasing Xiang Shaolong, she giggled together with Zhao Zhi.

Ji Yanran gently asked: "How is the situation outside?" Xiang Shaolong replied: "We are just waiting for Dou Jie to report to the royal court tomorrow. Li Yuan has sent a man that Dou Jie trusts to tell him that Li Yuan and I have been killed by Lord Chunshen. We hope to swindle him into entering the city without precautions."

Ji Yanran elucidated: "It is difficult for Dou Jie to clap with only one hand, what can he accomplish? How could the King's city be so easily breached? His subordinates would not have been willing to follow him in staking their lives and families in this one risky gamble. All of them have clansmen or relatives living in the Inner City."

Xiang Shaolong lay down on her mat and sighed, saying: "So comfortable!" Zhao Zhi said: "Night has fallen. Hubby should take a bath and rest. Let Sister Rou accompany you tonight."

Shan Rou was greatly embarrassed and jumped up saying: "Who does he think he is? Who said anything about accompanying him?" Xiang Shaolong's childish spirit was provoked and exerted himself to get up, saying: "Do you think you are calling the shots?" Shan Rou gave a shriek and ran into the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong had just shut his eyes for a while before he had to leave the Shan Rou whose body had bewitched him upside down the last night. He hurried along with Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi to attend the morning court session.

Li Yuan was wearing his court dress and was waiting for them outside the palace gate under the protection of a large group of bodyguards.

After the customary greetings, Li Yuan allowed Madam Zhuang and her son to proceed first before riding in with Xiang Shaolong. He said excitedly: "Dou Jie fell into our trap. The moment he entered the city, he was seized by Wu Zhan. Wu Zhan has now assumed command of the External Defense Army and has left the city to receive the troops."

They did not have many words before they reached the entrance of the main palace hall.

The four of them entered together. The three conspirators Lord Chunshen, Dou Jie and Cheng Suning were trussed up together and kneeling at the feet of Li Yanyan who was sitting high on the imperial dais.

Most of the officials present had attended the last night's banquet and therefore knew of Lord Chunshen's intent to kill Li Yuan and Wan Ruiguang. They also knew that Shouchun was now under the control of Li Yuan. Who would dare to plead on behalf of the three of them?

Li Yanyan had the three men's charges read to them. Lord Chunshen was not only guilty of attempting to murder the Imperial Uncle and remaining members of the Zhuang family, he was also guilty of inciting his son Huang Hu to lead men in an attack on Xu Xian. When this matter was reveal, it caused an uproar.

Dou Jie was guilty of moving army troops without approval and with the intent of revolt. Cheng Suning was guilty of being an accomplice.

Immediately after the charges had been read, all three men were led out of the hall and beheaded.

Following that, Li Yanyan proclaimed Li Yuan as the Right Premier and also announced a few more appointment changes.

Finally, she re-affirmed Zhuang Baoyi as the Dian Crown Prince and ordered troops to be sent to assist the mother and son to restore their country.

After the court was dismissed, Li Yanyan summoned Madam Zhuang and her son. Li Yuan was extremely busy himself. Xiang Shaolong was completely idle from head to toe and took the opportunity to take an incognito tour with the three ladies Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou, feasting their eyes on Shouchun's famously beautiful scenery. Teng Yi left to prepare their offensive against Tian Dan.

At dusk, the four of them finally returned to the mansion after having had their fun. The moment they stepped into the mansion, they knew something was wrong.

Li Yuan, Lord Longyang and Han Chuang had all arrived. The all had serious expressions, looking as if they were facing imminent calamity.

An intensely ominous feeling well up in Xiang Shaolong and he asked somberly: "Has Xu Xian met with a mishap?" Li Yuan nodded and replied: "Not only has Xu Xian met with a mishap, it turns out that Tian Dan has fooled even Lord Chunshen. He is secretly returning to Qi via a land route."

Lord Longyang said: "He was afraid of getting embroiled in this latest massacre and therefore slipped away before anyone else."

Shan Rou bellowed out: "Pursue quickly. I know how to intercept him."

Xiang Shaolong collapsed down on his mat in extreme disappointment. Thinking about Xu Xian's indomitable character and his cheerful appearance, he could not help but shed tears.

Unexpectedly they had been dealt another blow by Lu Buwei. The hard-fought balance of power in Xianyang had been destroyed all at once.

Book 16 Chapter 10 - Numerous Difficulties And Dangers

Under the You sisters' miraculous hands, Xiang Shaolong saw his restored appearance reflected in the bronze mirror.

The two ladies were filled with the sorrow at the thought of parting, and could no longer banter with him as usual.

Xiang Shaolong was also a mass of worry due to the matter about Xu Xian.

Huang Hu had related the account himself. He had been captured by Li Yuan at the city gate just as he was returning from the mission. Three thousand men had departed but only seven hundred returned. The battle must have been intense.

Under torture, Huang Hu revealed that one of Lu Buwei's spies had been concealed amongst Xu Xian's five hundred attendants. That was how they were able to mount a precise ambush in a valley near the Wei border. Huang Hu personally shot the fatal arrow. Under the Qin soldiers' death-defying counter-attack, Huang Hu suffered many casualties and beat a hasty retreat. Some of his men were even captured. That was why Li Yuan was so vexed. Lord Longyang also feared that Lu Buwei would use the fact that the incident had happened in Wei as an excuse to mobilize an attack against them.

Tracing to the bottom of the matter, the ringleaders had always been Tian Dan and Lu Buwei.

The most hateful was Tian Dan's deliberate stirring of conflict, hoping to profit from the turbulence.

After Xiang Shaolong had heard the whole account though, his spirits rose as it was actually unknown whether Xu Xian was really dead.

Nonetheless he had determined to set out at dawn to hunt down and kill Tian Dan.

Tian Dan had left Shouchun only with slightly more than a hundred close followers. To avoid Chu's customs checkpoints, he had to take a roundabout route. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong had the assistance of the Chu people and could take shortcuts. That is why even though they lagged by two days, they had a very good chance of intercepting Tian Dan before he crossed the Qi border.

As he rose to leave, the You sisters couldn't help throwing themselves into his embrace. They only sent him out tearfully after repeatedly imploring him to visit Dian whenever he had the chance.

Madam Zhuang intercepted him outside the door and pulled him into a room. Only after a lingering kiss did she say plaintively: "After tonight's separation, we may never have the chance to meet again. Shaolong ah, why is your feeling for me so ephemeral? I wish to serve you on the mat, but never got the chance!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "The way things developed was beyond all our expectations. Madam need not be so broken-hearted, however. Perchance I will be able to steal some time off in the future to come and visit you folks."

Madam Zhuang rejoiced and said: "The gentlemen has spoken!" Xiang Shaolong replied: "The fast horse is whipped!" He reached out his hand and teased her chin. As he gave her a sorrowful kiss, gentle feelings welled up from the bottom of his heart and he softly said: "Don't cry. You should be laughing instead. Take care of Baoyi. I believe that we will meet again someday."

(Put together, the two phrases that Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong said means something like '[A gentleman's words are as good as gold](#)'.)

Madam Zhuang replied: "I will be returning to Dian the day after tomorrow. If you visit us on your way back to Qin, I will laugh for your pleasure."

After sharing hardship for such a long period, he would be lying to himself if he said he hadn't developed feelings. Although he was in a hurry to kill Tian Dan and return to Qin, under the present circumstances, he could not refuse.

Only after another round of intimacy did Xiang Shaolong extricate himself and leave the room. Everyone in his party was packed and ready to go. Li Yuan was talking to Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Teng Yi. Seeing him arrive, he pulled him aside and said: "I just saw Yanran. My heart is actually comforted. Indeed it is only you who are a match for her. I am too eager to pursue fame and fortune, power and influence."

Xiang Shaolong silently faced him and patted his shoulder, saying: "I was just a little bit luckier. If Brother Li had met her earlier... in reality she has always admired you."

Li Yuan sighed and said: "Just based on vision and aspirations, I am already unable to match you. Hei, Xiu'er wants me to wish you a pleasant journey."

Xiang Shaolong thought about Guo Xiu'er and his heart became sorrowful.

At this moment, Teng Yi came to hurry them, saying: "We need to set off!" Everyone left together and mounted their war-horses. Ji Yanran and the ladies had their faces veiled, shielding their exceptional looks from the eyes of passersby.

Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Li Yuan sent them off personally. Under the lead of the Chu soldiers, they galloped towards the Inner City gates.

It was still before dawn. The pitch-black sky caused everyone to taste the bitter sadness of parting.

Will they ever meet again? Worse, Qin and the six South-Eastern countries were constantly at war. The possibility of having to face each other in battle caused everyone to be all the more melancholic."

Xiang Shaolong thoroughly abhors war, but it is one of the most inevitable realities in this era.

As they approached the palace, a horse carriage protected by a company of horses and men raced out and cut them off. Looks like Li Yanyan has arrived.

The Royal Guard Captain Du Gui galloped over and said: "The Empress Dowager would like to see Master Wan and invites Master Wan up the carriage."

Xiang Shaolong whose face was covered with a bamboo hat nodded and mounted Li Yanyan's horse carriage. Horses and men proceeded towards the Inner City gate.

Li Yanyan removed Xiang Shaolong's bamboo hat and dreamily sized him before saying in approval: "Xiang Shaolong is much better looking than Wan Ruiguang. No wonder Xiu'er is unable to forget you. Oh! I am not saying that she lusts after your charm and intelligence. Rather your present manner and temperament is a better match for your words and your lofty and heroic ideals."

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Hadn't Empress Dowager decided not to send us off? Why did she change her mind unexpectedly? Li Yanyan threw herself into his bosom impulsively and hugged him with all her strength. She panted: "This is the reason. Thinking about how we might not meet again, Yanyan could not help being depressed and dispirited. If there is a day when Shaolong feels that he cannot prevail over Lu Buwei, the doors of my Great Chu is always open to you."

With the beauty's great favor, and thinking about her desolate and humiliating past, Xiang Shaolong's heart was kindled. He lowered his head, found her scorching lips and gave her deep kiss before baring his heart and saying: "I seldom regret missed romantic relationships. However, reflecting on the coming days, thinking about how I missed the opportunity to share your quilt and pillow, to enjoy the kind of 'silence speaks a thousand words' and 'one spring night beats a thousand pounds of gold' kind of 'good times and beautiful scenery' with you, I can't help but feel the greatest regret."

Li Yanyan's heart and mind were both intoxicated. She said: "Nobody's words of endearment are as beautiful as yours. Still, what is the use of regret? Going by our speed now, it will take at least half a day before we reach the docks outside the city. There is much we can do!" Xiang Shaolong said in shock: "Are you saying.... Hei!" Li Yanyan pasted herself on his cheeks and said plaintively: "Who would know? Xiang Shaolong, didn't you just say that one Spring night is better than a thousand pounds of gold?" As Xiang Shaolong embraced this woman who was praised as the most youthful and beautiful Empress Dowager in the Warring States Era, all sorts of feelings welled up in his heart.

(You have to give it to XSL. This is about as flowery as it gets. I can't believe that lousy honey parable that he ripped off so long ago is still having such a great ripple effect all over the central plains!)

He had known her but for a few days, but felt as if it had been for half a lifetime. Perhaps, Li Yuan aside, he was the one who understood most her bitter experiences and inner world.

He did not know if he loved her more or pitied her more. But undoubtedly her beauty was sufficient to elicit uncontrollable feelings of adoration in him.

The most tragically romantic thing is that this relationship can last but a moment. That is why Li Yanyan cast off her majesty as Empress Dowager, forsaking everything to send him off and to seize this last opportunity, ensuring that she would never be sad at having missed this short but ever valuable and memorable encounter.

All of a sudden, he melted.

What happened within the carriage was unreal.

Just like a deep and intoxicating dream.

They lost all bearing of where they were.

The setting sun descended West.

Three large ships had set sail, following the River Huai towards Chu's second largest city.

Xiang Shaolong found Shan Rou standing alone aft of the ship. Curious, he asked: "What is Sister Rou doing here?" Shan Rou irritably replied: "Can't I have some peace and quiet?" Xiang

Shaolong went over and tentatively embraced her shoulders. Seeing that she only flashed him a glance without making another move, he was relieved and kissed her cheeks, gently saying: "If we can kill Tian Dan this time, would Sister Rou be willing to return to Xianyang with us?" Shan Rou softly and warmly leaned into his bosom and lightly said: "I am used to a wandering lifestyle, treating the world as my home. I am afraid that it would be difficult for me to remain in one place. If I have to see the same people everyday, how tedious it will be. I am not suited for family life."

Xiang Shaolong nodded and said: "This I understand. Hanging around the ends of the earth is certainly a fascinating way of life."

Shan Rou asked curiously: "Aren't you upset that I am so unfeeling?" Xiang Shaolong laughed nonchalantly and said: "Why should I be angry? What you said was an incontrovertible truth. When one eats the same thing over and over again, even the most exotic delicacies will taste like wax. However, you should at least come to Xianyang to see Shan Lan and her son. Your sister misses you so!"

Shan Rou replied: "I will go to Xianyang some day. However, I have promised someone that I would spend some time with him once this matter is over. We'll see what happens then!" Xiang Shaolong forced a laugh and said: "Is that your new lover?" Shan Rou whispered: "I really shouldn't be telling you this, but I don't want to lie to you. I don't know if it was because you had aroused my passions. After we parted, I had a few men, but none could replace you. This man that I intend to spend time with once rescued me from certain death and nursed me back from serious injuries. My feelings towards him started more as gratitude."

Xiang Shaolong was actually filled with jealousy, but on reflection realized that he had had relationships with many women. It was only right for Shan Rou to enjoy relationships with many men. Laughing with relief, he said: "Elder Sister should do whatever she wants. Even if you are married with children, please do not forget to visit us in Xianyang. Moreover, you have to do it before the Qin Crown Prince ascends the throne, else you may never find us again."

Shan Rou turned her head and gazed at him for a long while before saying in astonishment: "You are truly exceptional. All other men have become crazy with envy when they learned that I have another man in my heart. You are the only one who is completely unaffected. Don't you care about me one bit?"

Xiang Shaolong stopped smiling and said: "This is wrong, that is also wrong. What do you want from me?" Shan Rou's face displayed an eccentric expression, and with a sigh she said: "It is precisely because you are a true-blue weirdo that I Shan Rou am unable to forget you. That is a very painful feeling. Still, I just cannot give up my dream to wander the world. When I am tired of it one day, I will come look for you guys. Will you turn your back on me then?" Xiang Shaolong released her from his embrace and lazily stretched himself before saying dully: "Don't be oversensitive. As long as you deign to come to Xianyang within seven years, you will definitely find us."

Shan Rou stamped her foot in frustration and said: "I'm won't yield!" Xiang Shaolong has never seen her act like a spoilt little girl. He was astonished, saying: "What won't you yield to?" With a face full of irritation, she said: "What aren't you reacting like other

men? Its as if you couldn't care less whether I come or not."

Xiang Shaolong bellowed in laughter and said: "Don't you want your independence? I am refraining from interfering with your way of life yet you are blaming me. What kind of logic is this?" Shan Rou pondered this for a while before giggling and pouncing on him with a hug. She raised her face which was pretty as a flower, and smiling enchantingly she said: "You are different from everybody else, its no wonder that I want to be intimate with you."

Xiang Shaolong gently said: "Sister Rou should enjoy your life fully. That is everyone's fundamental right. If I say that I was not jealous, I would be lying to you. Its just that I felt that it is not my right to control you. I can only suppress my selfish desires and respect your freedom."

Shan Rou was moved and said: "This is the first time I've heard anything sensible from a man. But will you love me any less because of this?" Xiang Shaolong calmly replied: "I will never change my love for you, but will force myself not to think about you so much. This is because I will naturally remember that you might be in the arms of another man. That will cause me to be very uncomfortable. Everyone is self centered after all."

Shan Rou gave him a kiss and then tenderly and softly said: "You are very honest. In reality I am also wary of thinking about you for the same reason. I actually regret telling you this. It was only after parting with you that I realized that I could not forget you."

Xiang Shaolong softly kissed her lips and gently said: "Since this is the reality, both of us should accept it. It is time for dinner. Shall

we return to the cabin?" Shan Rou stubbornly shook her head and said: "No, I am afraid that I will lose your love one of these days."

Xiang Shaolong mirthlessly said: "Elder Sister should stop pulling my leg. How could you be this kind of person? You are merely dissatisfied that I did not react to your affairs with other men as expected. You just want me to surrender, that's all!" Shan Rou stamped her foot again and said: "I hate you to death. Quickly say that you are jealous to death."

Xiang Shaolong laughed and bent down saying: "Alright, I am jealous to death."

Shan Rou happily said: "This is more like it. Oh! I was just bluffing you just now. No other man has impressed me yet. But don't be too happy. That includes you. Come!" She then grabbed Xiang Shaolong's hand and led him back to the cabin.

Under the light of the wind lamps (lamps that can resist the wind), Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou sat in a circle on the banquet mat studying the map of the Chu-Qi border that was spread on the coffee table.

Teng Yi said: "After my careful study and analysis, I believe Tian Dan has at most three possible routes back to Qi. The first is to make landfall and discard his boat, ride furiously towards the Fuli pass and then buy a ship at Zhongli and return to Qi by water. The second is to select a few good horses at Fuli pass and follow the official roads through Peng City, Miao Hill and Kaiyang all the way to the Qi border. The last route is the most circuitous, that is to go East past Mingshan before returning to his country. I have traced

the routes on the map in different colours, you should be able to understand at a glance.

As Xiang Shaolong and the rest were pondering the three lines, Shan Rou asserted: "There is no need to consider this further. This person Tian Dan loves comfort. He is sure to have selected the water route. Also, the governor of Zhongli, Xia Ruzhang has always been close with Tian Dan. Whats more, Tian Dan does not know that we are hot on his tail, how could he trade the easy for the difficult?" Ji Yanran said: "If this is so, we might even be able to reach Zhongli before he embarks." Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

As Tian Dan had pretended to go to Chengyang by boat the day he left, he had to go against the current Westwards for more than ten miles from Shouchun before abandoning his boat and proceeding by land. After that he had to go into the countryside to buy horses for his hundred over people before heading for Fuli pass and Zhongli. With so many delays, he had naturally taken more time.

This person was certainly cunning and despicable. After he had instigated Lord Chunshen to assassinate Xu Xian, he slipped away immediately, leaving the Chu people to deal with the consequences themselves while he safely remained away from the furore.

Zhao Zhi said: "I am a little puzzled as to why Tian Dan is in such a hurry to return." Ji Yanran suddenly blanched and said: "Not good. I think Tian Dan wants to deal with Yan!" Teng Yi was also jolted and said: "Prince Dan is in danger!" Xiang Shaolong also realized what was happening.

Lu Buwei and Tian Dan's collaboration was based on mutual benefit. What Lu Buwei fears most is an alliance of the six countries, that is why he has always courted Tian Dan, not only hoping to keep Qi out of the alliance, but also hoping that he can damage any alliance between the other five countries.

That Qin armies were powerless to resist the recent incursion by the five countries' allied army further reinforced his thinking.

At the same time, he knew that Chu's past bitter experience would prevent them from allowing Qin to nibble away at the three Jin state's territory, hence he abandoned Chu as an ally in favor of Qi.

Of course Tian Dan knows that Lu Buwei is wildly ambitious, but he knew it was always better to rely on oneself than others. Being strong was the only way out for Qi.

In this era of war, the only way to become strong was to swallow other countries, expanding one's territory. At the present, Yan was like a juicy pork chop as it had been greatly weakened by its fight with Zhao.

Tian Dan wasn't doing any favors for Lu Buwei either. For instance, the assassination of Xu Xian will actually intensify Qin's internal power struggle. This can only benefit Qi.

Also Lu Buwei should have had to offer something in return. One possibility was to have Prince Dan killed within Qin's borders. If

Yan loses this tower of strength, its loss in morale and strength will be incalculable. Tian Dan would then find it even easier to invade and occupy Yan.

With the abrupt question, they were all suddenly clearer about Tian Dan and Lu Buwei's conspiracy.

Ji Yanran somberly said: "If we cannot kill Tian Dan this time, Yan will be finished."

Shan Rou ground her teeth and said: "This time he will not escape!" Ji Yanran replied: "Zhongli's Xia Ruzhang is intimately related with Tian Dan and may notify him after hearing news of us. If he switches to an overland route, it would be difficult for us to pursue him."

Xiang Shaolong heart was stirred and he said: "Since this is the case, we should beat him at his own game. We should deliberately frighten Xia Ruzhang to determine where Tian Dan is. Then he can forget about returning to Qi alive."

Two days later in the morning, the three big ships sailed into Zhongli's large harbor.

Xia Ruzhang came to find out their purpose.

The commander in charge of the Chu soldiers was Li Yuan's trusted aide called Li Guang. He was extremely astute. He went down to meet Xia Ruzhang on receiving Xiang Shaolong's

instructions.

After he had let Xia Ruzhang inspect the military order that Li Yanyan had personally signed and sealed, Li Guang lowered his voice and said: "We have come to the East this time on a secret mission."

Xia Ruzhang started and asked: "What is the matter?" Li Guang pulled him aside and replied: "The general must have heard news of the matters in Shouchun."

Xia Ruzhang forced a smile and said: "Not only have I heard rumors, I received the official communique yesterday. It is hard to imagine that Lord Chunshen would end up like this. He must have been senile."

Li Guang said: "He was not senile, but mistakenly trusted a villain's words. Not only did he send men to kill the Qin envoy who was en route to the late King's funeral, he also mounted a rebellion. Empress Dowager and Minister Li were furious, ordering us to lead an army to hunt the person down. General Xia should know who I am speaking of!" Xia Ru Zhang's expression changed repeatedly. He gravely asked: "Could General Li be a little more explicit?"

Li Guang replied: "Who could it be other than the treacherous bandit Tian Dan? Does General Xia have news of him?" Xia Ruzhang's limbs shivered and he said with difficulty: "No." Li Guang knew exactly what was happening, but did not expose him. He whispered: "Tian Dan has to be escaping by water. Can General Xia order people to resupply our three ships immediately? I wish to

set sail before dusk."

Of course Xia Ruzhang could not refuse. Li Guang then left him alone and returned to the ship.

After Xia Ruzhang instructed his subordinates, he hurriedly returned to the city.

At that point, Xiang Shaolong had already infiltrated the city. With him were the three ladies Ji Yanran, Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi dressed in men's clothing, as well as Teng Yi, Jing Shan, Wu Guang, Wu Yan and Wu Shu and the rest of the eighteen guardians, and finally Li Guang's deputy Cai Yong. Since they all had official passes, entering and exiting the city was no problem.

As Xia Ruzhang reached the city, he rushed back to his residence without pause.

It was broad daylight. The general's residence was also heavily guarded. Xiang Shaolong and the rest could only sigh at the high wall and split up to monitor each entrance, waiting for nightfall.

Fortunately for them, it was not long before the Xia Ruzhang in civilian garb and two household warriors slipped out the back door and rode quickly towards the South gate.

They were all delighted and followed from a distance.

Xia Ru Zhang went straight out of the South gate and proceeded across the countryside. At dusk, he arrived at a manor concealed in the woods.

Outside the forest grove, a river flowed from the Northwest, joining with the Huai River five miles downstream and flowing East.

There seemed to be a small wharf there, with four large fishing boats moored.

They all rejoiced.

Teng Yi said: "I will go and clean up the boats and the men in them. Third Brother should enter the manor and deal with Tian Dan. Be careful, Tian Dan has many followers and they are mean." Leading half the guardians, he headed for the wharf.

Xiang Shaolong exhorted Ji Yanran, saying: "Yanran should lead Zhi Zhi and remain outside the manor, using the crossbows to stop anyone from escaping or to kill them. I will infiltrate the manor with Sister Rou to see if Tian Dan is inside."

Ji Yanran gave a terse affirmation and spread out with the rest.

Xiang Shaolong gave Shan Rou a signal and they both infiltrated the manor quick as the devil. In a short while and without incident, they arrived at the underbrush along the manor's Eastern wall.

As this manor was surrounded by high walls, it was not possible to see what was happening inside from close up.

At this point, the night had descended, the stars were in the sky and the moonlight was bewildering.

Dim light escaped from the manor. The two of them used a rope to straddle the high wall and noiselessly dropped into the open courtyard behind the wall.

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou climbed up the roof ridge of the nearest residence. They saw rows upon rows of rooms and for a moment did not know where to begin.

Shan Rou whispered into his ear: "Tian Dan likes South facing houses. Let us look into that block."

Xiang Shaolong looked towards where she was pointing, but only saw landscaped gardens in the South. These gardens were filled with flowers and trees, ponds and miniature rock mountains and pavilions. A brook flowed through the garden, forded by white bridges. It was peaceful and tranquil. The other half was filled with high buildings.

With one look, one could tell that this manor was a summer retreat for high ranking officials. It was probably also Xia Ruzhang's private estate which Tian Dan was borrowing for his use.

Without speaking, the two of them vaulted over numerous roofs in one breath. They came to the center of the manor and discovered human voices and images on the other side of the little bridge. The two of them did not dare to be careless. They kept their distance and using their grappling hooks, they traversed the treetops towards another tall tree on the other bank of the brook before dropping back to ground. Thus they bypassed the sentries. Next they climbed up to the roof of a tall brightly-lit building.

Human voices carried up from below.

They heard Tian Dan's voice saying: "Is this is for real? Logically, Li Yuan should not have been able to overcome Lord Chunshen."

The next voice was Xia Ruzhang's, saying: "Its definitely true. I received Empress Dowager's official command yesterday to monitor the mountain pass closely. The communiqué also announced that Li Quan, Li Ling, Dou Jie and Cheng Suning had all been publicly beheaded."

The two of them rejoiced and couldn't help giving each other a kiss. (that's Shaolong and Shan Rou, not Tian Dan and the Xia guy... I'm sure you figured that (=)

After untold hardships, they had caught up to the old thief Tian Dan.

Tian Dan was speechless for a while before coldly snorting: "Li Yuan is really foolhardy, sending people to hunt me down.

Ruzhang, why don't you follow me back to Qi?"

Xia Ruzhang sighed: "My family and property are all here. How can I go at will? We can discuss this matter later. The most important question now is how to plan for Minister Tian's safe return."

After a pause, he continued: "They managed to guess that you would return to Qi by the waterways. If Minister Tian leaves by the land route, they will chase empty air. I think Minister Tian should not wait for General Dan Chu anymore. As long as Minister Tian returns to Qi safely, no matter how much guts Li Yuan has, he would not dare to touch Dan Chu and the rest."

Xiang Shaolong did not have any more interest in their conversation. He kissed Shan Rou again and said: "Second Brother should have cleaned up the people at the docks. Let us create a little confusion, are you ready?" Shan Rou's eyes betrayed deep emotion and she whispered: "I have waited for more than ten years!" Xiang Shaolong raised the signal rocket in his hand.

The fireworks flew skywards and exploded into a blood red flower of light.

Book 16 Chapter 11 - Avenging The Great Enmity

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou started their ferocious attack. From their vantage point up in the roof, they rapidly shot down more than ten men before Teng Yi and the rest forced open the gates and rushed into the manor.

The two were puzzled when they did not see Tian Dan escape from inside the building. They rapidly climbed up the roof and entered the room through the skylight. There, they quickly found a secret tunnel that Tian Dan and his men used to escape. They plunged in immediately, giving chase.

The tunnel was wide and straight, reinforced with wooden pillars and rammed earth panels. It even had ventilation ducts, demonstrating its meticulous construction.

The two of them did not dare to light a torch and could only grope forward using the wall as a guide. They soon reached the other end of the tunnel, realizing that it actually emptied out into the fringe of the forest grove. Right outside the grove stood the little wharf. The fishing boats had long been scuttled. Ten over human shadows were escaping upriver along the bank.

Xiang Shaolong fired a signal rocket before the two of them gave chase.

After a mad sprint, six of the opponents fell back, drew their swords and attacked towards them.

How would Xiang Shaolong have the patience to dicker with them? He drew out his flying needles, waved his hands and shot out the needles under the cover of night. The six men fell to the ground en masse.

The remaining seven enemies did not anticipate that their six comrades could not even delay them by one second. With a shout of command, they left the river bank and scattered towards a small hill and the jungle by the river.

Xiang Shaolong fired another two needles, instantly felling two more enemies.

Shan Rou's bloodlust was kindled and she threw her flying dagger. An enemy who had just started climbing the hill was hit in the back and tumbled down. At this moment, Shan Rou recognized one of the men racing up the hill as Tian Dan. Strength surged into her legs from God knows where as she overtook Xiang Shaolong, flying up the hill like an arrow, catching up with the enemy.

Xiang Shaolong feared for her safety and gathering his energy, chased up the hill.

The sound of clashing blades rang out. Shan Rou's delicate shouts interspersed with the enemy's blood-curdling shrieks. However, peace and tranquility was quickly restored.

By the time Xiang Shaolong reached the hilltop, the two fighters had already separated. They were both covered with blood. Fresh

blood flowed from Shan Rou's left arm and right shoulder.

Tian Dan was holding a long sword facing Shan Rou. His diaphragm was heaving up and down. His face was pale as a corpse under the moonlight.

Tian Dan took a glimpse at Xiang Shaolong and laughed bitterly, saying: "Bravo, you have finally caught me!" Shan Rou said vehemently: "Tian Dan, do you know who I am?" Hoofbeats sounded. Teng Yi and the rest arrived with torches, surrounding the three people in a circle.

Zhao Zhi shrieked and flew down her horse, viciously shouting: "When you put the three generations of my family to death, did you ever think there would be this day?" Shan Rou said icily: "He is mine. I want to kill him with my own hands!" Xiang Shaolong went to Zhao Zhi's side and whispered: "Let your Sister Rou do it!" With a "Hua" sound, Zhao Zhi leaned into Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and started crying agitatedly.

Tian Dan remained calm and laughed loudly, saying: "I Tian Dan have killed countless people in my lifetime. How can I remember whom I have killed before? Xiang Shaolong, you are good. I Tian Dan submit to you!" Reversing his blade, he slashed his neck and fell backwards, dying instantly.

Shan Rou's entire body began to shiver and she knelt down.

Zhao Zhi rushed over and held her tightly.

The two women cried bitterly on each other's shoulders. Their cries resonated through the whole forest.

This category defining, ruthless and ambitious person had finally perished.

Teng Yi jumped off his horse, cut off Tian Dan's head and shouted mightily: "Let us go!" Xiang Shaolong was numb in his heart.

It was a feeling that was hard to describe.

On the one hand he was pleased that Shan Rou, her sisters and Teng Yi had avenged the extermination of their family.

He had also accomplished an impossible goal himself.

But seeing this historically celebrated character committing suicide in front of him gave him a sense of loss.

Still, this had all become an unchangeable piece of history.

When Xiao Pan ascends the throne and the evil Lu Buwei had been killed, he would leave this warring central plains and live the peaceful secluded life he had always dreamed of. He would never again return to the central plains.

(Can't help but think of RWX in the Dongfang Bubai movie.... where there is man, there is strife.... where can you retreat to?)

They returned to their ships and set sail back to Shouchun.

That evening the whole party drank themselves silly and slept all day the next day before waking at different times.

Xiang Shaolong came to the cabin with a hangover. The three ladies were chatting in a low voice. They looked happy and at ease.

Zhao Zhi gleefully called out: "Shaolong, Sister Rou is willing to return with us to Xianyang!" Xiang Shaolong was extremely pleased and replied: "That day you really were lying to me!" Shan Rou displayed an unreasonable yet lovely look and said: "Told you I was bluffing long ago. I'm still angry when I think about it. You were totally unaffected."

Ji Yanran laughed and said: "Sister Rou should not be angry. Our husband keeps everything in his heart. His words are hard but his heart is soft. You must not blame him!" Shan Rou replied disdainfully: "He is your husband, what does that have to do with Shan Rou?" She then giggled lovably and gave him a sweet smile.

Everyone knew her disposition and naturally nobody took her words for real.

They sailed upriver. The ship moved slowly. They took a day more returning than they did setting out, eventually reaching Shouchun.

Xiang Shaolong did not stop but continued sailing towards Chengyang as he had promised Madam Zhuang that he would visit her for few days as he passed by Dian on his way home.

After disembarking, they rendezvoused with their special forces troops and headed South towards Dian.

Madam Zhuang and her son was accompanied by the freshly minted General Dong Luzi. He commanded eight thousand Chu soldiers and had recovered most of the territory occupied by the rebel army. As the people of Dian found out that Zhuang Baoyi had returned, they revolted in large numbers and joined the new Dian army. This army grew to about twenty thousand people and they joined hands with the Chu army. They were presently besieging the Dian capital Gaoze.

Gaoze sits on a plateau with its back against a mountain, truly an impregnable stronghold. Since the city had adequate water and food, the allied army had not been able to defeat the defenders and had even lost close to a thousand men.

Witnessing the demise of the Yelang King, all the vassal states dispatched armies in the restorative effort. The Qielan King even led the soldiers himself, forcing entry into the Yelang capital and setting up a new ruler before returning in triumph. From then, Yelang people were never again strong enough to bully the neighboring vassal states.

As Xiang Shaolong and his men reached the allied army camp at Gaoze, the besieging soldiers had just suffered a defeat. Casualties littered the field, piled on one another.

When Lou Wuxin and Madam Zhuang knew that Xiang Shaolong had come as promised, they were overjoyed at the unexpected news and ushered everyone into the camp.

Lou Wuxin wanted to organize a feast to welcome the party from their journey but was refused tactfully by Xiang Shaolong. They held a meeting immediately at the commander's tent, looking for ways to defeat the city.

After listening to Lou Wuxin detail Gaoze's terrain and environment, Xiang Shaolong calmly said: "The most formidable characteristic of the city is that it is set against the mountain. We will use this to our advantage. I can guarantee that we will be in the city within three days."

Madam Zhuang, Lou Wuxin and the rest of the high-ranking officers all bugged their eyes in disbelief.

That night, Xiang Shaolong and his party marched through the night and arrived at the rocky mountain behind Gaoze before setting camp and organizing his soldiers.

The next morning after Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi had thoroughly reconnoitered the mountain, they identified five routes of approach and sent men up to install metal hoops at regular intervals and to deploy climbing equipment.

These were all basic techniques taught to all the elite special forces. With the installations complete, at nightfall, Xiang

Shaolong and his party used the climbing equipment and specially installed rock steps to quickly ascend to the undulating and overgrown mountaintop.

The seven to eight mile long Gaoze city wall stretched in both directions from beneath their feet.

Lou Wuxin was marshaling his army, besieging the city night and day, drawing the attention of the rebel army.

War cries and the sound of stone piercing projectiles rang out unceasingly.

Ji Yanran and the two ladies also reached the summit at this moment. They crouched beside Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi while delicately catching their breath.

Where they were, it was only about seven hundred feet from the bottom. The average person would be shocked when looking down, but it was child's play for the elite special forces who regularly trained on the moon reaching mountain near the Wu family ranch. That mountain was three times the height of this mountain.

Teng Yi issued a single command and the four especially skilled men Jing Shan, Wu Shu, Wu Ji and Dan Quan immediately abseiled down using the climbing equipment. After finding a foothold, they hammered in an iron loop and installed a new climbing apparatus.

Their equipment was built according to the designs of twenty-first century climbing experts. Resting on the overlapping loops at their waists, they glided down as fast as lightning and as easily as if they were playing a game.

The four men quickly reached the undergrowth at the foot of the mountain. They were only separated from the South-facing rear wall of the city by a moat.

The sentries on top of the wall had all gone to the other three wall segments to help in defense. Only the few sentry towers were manned. Moreover, it was difficult for the sentries to see into the pitch black area beneath the walls.

Teng Yi issued another order and the Wu family special forces followed their usual drill, sliding down under the cover of the hillside trees as well as the darkness. At this moment, Jing Shan and the rest of the four men had installed the device to traverse the moat.

Ji Yanran gazed at the ant-like civilian conscripts in the city and said: "From a cursory glance we can tell that this regime is maintained only through military force. The residents are all being forced into labour with whips."

Everyone looked closely and realized it was just as Ji Yanran had observed. The city residents were merely carrying materials under close watch and the threat of whips. They all had an expression of bitter resignation.

This moment, a mounted patrol came from one end of the wall. The patrolmen were carrying wind lamps scanning the bottom of the wall and the mountain.

Everyone had a fright and hurriedly hid themselves. Jing Shan and other others crouched at the foot of the wall. What was most worrisome were the four moat crossing contraptions. As long as the other party was alert, they would surely spot them.

Even though the contraptions had been camouflaged with a dark non-reflective grease, but they were not invisible after all.

Xiang Shaolong was born quick-witted. As the patrolmen's lamplight was almost on the contraptions, he puckered his lips and emitted a shrill sound like a night owl.

The patrolmen naturally raised their lamps towards the mountain, but were unable to see anything unusual. When they turned back, they had passed the contraptions and rapidly rode away.

Everyone was covered in a sheet of cold sweat.

Shan Rou came over and said: "At least this chap has some creative methods!" Jing Shan and the rest shot out their grappling hooks, clasped onto the wall and climbed up rapidly, agile as monkeys. They split up to take care of the sentries in the towers.

The Wu family warriors crossed the moat and started climbing

the wall in groups. Their movements were nimble and quick, demonstrating astonishing efficiency.

Seeing them, Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of pride. Even the twenty-first century special forces may not be at this level.

By this time, close to a thousand men have descended to the foot of the mountain. Those who had crested the wall took out their crossbows and guarded the parapets.

(I am guessing that when they rendezvoused with the soldiers near Shouchun earlier, it was with the main body of their army, not just the three hundred men that Teng Yi brought to Shouchun.)

Teng Yi chuckled softly: "Second Brother is itching for a fight. I will go first."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Lets go together!" When Xiang Shaolong and his party had reached the top of the wall, the thousand plus Wu family elite warriors had split into four groups, preparing to attack the wall in both directions and also towards the city center.

Teng Yi fired a signal rocket to notify Lou Wuxin that they had penetrated the city successfully.

After Xiang Shaolong had assigned people to defend all the entry points on the wall, he led the three women and five hundred soldiers towards the city center.

Teng Yi was responsible for capturing the wall.

Bugles sounded.

All of a sudden, the warriors shouted as one: "The city is breached! the city is breached!" The conscripted defenders in the city were startled. The sound of killing rose to the heavens. Looking to the back wall they saw a large flag atop a tall post inscribed with the word: "Zhuang". Several hundred soldiers flew down from the walls in attack.

Those residents who were forced into labour cried out at the same time and threw down the firewood, stone and other materials that they were carrying. They dispersed and escaped, even echoing: "The city is breached! The city is breached!" The breakdown in order and discipline spread like an epidemic.

Xiang Shaolong and his contingent swarmed down the stairs on the city walls like locusts. Crossbow bolts flew like rain. The enemy soldiers fell to the ground in droves. In the blink of an eye, they had obtained control of the rear city gate and the nearby square and buildings.

Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to open the city gate and let down the drawbridge. At the same time, he commanded men to lay out a defense grid on the rooftops of buildings.

The enemies who rushed forward were all driven back in a hail of bolts.

Their own men flowed in endlessly through the city gate. They even brought with them lances, tall shields and other heavy weaponry.

Teng Yi took advantage of the enemy's chaos and swept through each section of the Northwestern wall.

Lou Wuxin's besieging troops attacked the East gate with all their might, concentrating the enemy's attention there.

The soldiers who had occupied the Northwestern wall used their superior ground to shoot down the enemy soldiers who were rushing about trying to hinder the attackers.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the timing was opportune and waved his arm in a signal.

Row after row of Wu family warriors raised their lances and advanced towards the three gates in the East, West and North under the cover of archery fire. The battle was pitched and desperate.

The Wu family warriors on the wall shouted loudly once again: "Those who abandon their weapons and squat on the ground are not to be killed, those who abandon their weapons and squat on the ground are not to be killed!" Repeating endlessly. This was of course a scheme that Xiang Shaolong came up with based on modern psychological warfare techniques he had learned.

Many of the residences were on fire. Raging flames rose from the rooftops, spreading to the surrounding buildings. The whole city was bathed in the orange glow of the fire. Thick smoke covered the sky. The moon and stars were obscured and dim.

The defending soldiers discarded their weapons in large numbers. They joined the city residents in squatting at the corners of the city walls, squares and thoroughfares. Their morale had dissipated.

The insides of the city had turned into a chaotic battleground. The Wu family warriors organized themselves in tight units and continuously expanded the ground under their control.

The warriors up on the city walls progressed even more swiftly. The resisting enemies were slaughtered until their blood ran like rivers. Corpses littered the parapets.

The wounded were rapidly moved to the South wall to be treated by medical specialists. The entire operation was clear and orderly.

This is the first time the special forces have demonstrated their prowess in a large scale campaign. It was truly out of the ordinary.

Under the cover of a company of archers and shield men, Xiang Shaolong led the three ladies and the eighteen guardians towards the inner castle. At this point, the West and North gates had fallen into their control. The gates had been opened and the horses and men of the allied army were rushing into the city.

The enemy soldiers defending the inner castle resisted bitterly. Xiang Shaolong and his party threw themselves into attack, rushing left and slashing right. They broke through the inner castle gate shortly, and attacked towards the palace.

The enemy soldiers knew they had lost and discarded their weapons, surrendering by the lot.

Xiang Shaolong instructed his men to concentrate the surrendered enemy soldiers in one location under guard. Lou Wuxin and Zhuang Kong were leading a thousand elite troops and they rushed in. Once the two armies met up, they swept through the city even more quickly. In less than the time it took for a cup of tea to cool, they had attacked into the palace.

The interior of the palace was a mess, and cries of grief shook the heavens. The palace women and children were huddled in a group, trembling and asking for forgiveness. The garrison soldiers were all kneeling in surrender.

Xiang Shaolong took pity on them and found men to console them and look after them.

"Peng!" The door of the main palace hall was forced open. They saw about thirty enemy officers and soldiers in a circle with their swords raised, protecting a youth wearing royal robes and a crown. The situation was bleak.

The sounds of crying and killing outside gradually subsided. It was clear that Gaoze City had fallen into the hands of the besieging

soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong and his men gathered in front of the enemy soldiers in large numbers. More than ten crossbows were aimed at the enemies at the center of the hall.

Zhuang Kong bellowed: "Surrender immediately or be killed without mercy!" Lou Wuxin moved close to Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "This kid has done much evil, raping countless women. Death is too good for him."

That youth in royal robes raised his head and yelled back: "I am Li Ling's son Li Qi. I will die before surrendering!" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "You know my preference. I'll let you take charge of this!"

Heaving a big sigh, he ushered the three ladies back out of the hall. Behind them, the sound of concentrated crossbow fire rang out along with the sound of wretched cries before gradually becoming silent again.

It had taken three days to recover Gaoze. Xiang Shaolong took his leave of Madam Zhuang, her son, the You sisters and others, all unwilling to be parted. They then hurried back to Xiangyang.

It could be said that this trip to Chu had yielded them good results. Not only did they manage to kill Tian Dan, they had also helped Chu and Dian in big way. Nonetheless because Xu Xian's status was unknown and also because Prince Dan had been

captured in Xianyang, everyone's feeling of triumph was greatly diminished.

As they went through customs, their old friend An Gu personally invited them into the official building.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the Qin soldiers were all wearing a white sash on their arms and knew that things had turned for the worse.

Sure enough, An Gu said in grief: "Premier Xu was seriously injured in an ambush and died en route back to Xianyang."

A torrent of hate welled up in Xiang Shaolong and gushed towards heaven. Lu Buwei was certainly more malicious than a ravenous wolf. Just for a little personal gain, he had forgotten about Qin's overall situation. He would unscrupulously get rid of anything or anyone who got in his way.

The two of them originally had no cause for enmity, only favor. Yet he wanted to kill him just because King Zhuangxiang, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan were close to him.

Now he had used such a despicable method to kill Xu Xian, it made him gnash his teeth in pain and hatred.

An Gu sighed and said: "It has been confirmed that this was perpetrated by Lord Chunshen. The Chu people have sent over

Lord Chunshen's head and even offered to cede five cantons to parley for peace. But how could we let this go like this?" Xiang Shaolong rode along with him, saying in pain: "If we proceed like this, we would have succumbed to Lu Buwei's evil designs. Precisely he is now using this critical situation to expand his powers. The true culprit for Premier Xu's murder is Lu Buwei. Lord Chunshen was but a puppet under his strings!" An Gu's countenance changed and he exclaimed: "What?" The next day, Xiang Shaolong set off immediately for Xianyang.

It was now three days into Winter and the weather was bitter cold. Without realizing it, they had been away from Xianyang for five months.

Eighteen days later, Xianyang finally appeared before their eyes.

The elite special forces automatically returned to the Wu family ranch while Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, the women and the eighteen guardians braced their weary bodies and returned to Xianyang.

As they entered the city, they heard another piece of bad news: Lu Gong had fallen ill.

The illness was caused by anger.

The moment Xu Xian's body returned to Xianyang, Lu Gong had cried violently over the corpse, collapsing on the spot. Since then he has been ill and has not risen.

As one wave subsides another rises.

Xiang Shaolong and his party rushed towards the commander-in-chief's residence.

The moment he stepped in, he knew that something was wrong.

The residence was filled with Wang Ling and other high ranking officers, ministers and Lu Gong's family. The sound of weeping permeated the place.

While Xiang Shaolong thought that Lu Gong had already passed away, Wang Ling pulled Xiang Shaolong into the inner hall and said in deep grief: "Quick, go see the commander-in-chief one last time. He's been waiting for you, unwilling to take his last breath until you arrive."

Hot tears flowed from Xiang Shaolong's eye sockets.

He suddenly realized that in reality, he not only looked upon Lu Gong as a venerable friend and superior, deep within his heart he had also started to treat Lu Gong as a close relative. He had developed the intimacy and reluctance to part as if a son to a father.

Lu Gong was lying on a couch, his complexion as white as paper. His two eyes were tightly closed, and he breathed with difficulty.

Xiao Pan stood at his side holding his hand. His expression was

shockingly calm.

Lu Dan'er knelt on his other side weeping bitterly. Two noblewomen who must be her seniors were looking after her.

Jing Jun, Lord Changwen, Lord Changping, Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, Li Si, Lao Ai and the rest were all there, standing outside the door.

Everyone let out a happy expression when they saw Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Buwei also displayed an appearance of happiness and embraced Xiang Shaolong's shoulder, softly saying: "It's good that Shaolong is back. Quickly go in and see the commander-in-chief one last time."

Xiang Shaolong really felt like slaughtering him then and there. As he was about to wrest himself out of the embrace, Lu Buwei released him.

Jing Jun rushed forward holding his brows and called out "Third Brother" and couldn't help turning hoarse and crying bitterly. Those who heard could not help but feel sad too.

Xiao Pan's imposing body started and looking over, he saw Xiang Shaolong. His eyes emitted a look of profound emotion but his expression was extraordinarily serene. He unhurriedly said: "Grand Tutor, please hurry in!" The Lu Gong who was leaning on

the couch let out an "Ah" sound and awakened.

Xiao Pan gravely ordered: "Please help Miss Dan'er outside!" Lu Dan'er stood up and was about to protest when her legs gave way and she fainted into the bosom of the two noblewomen. Jing Jun rushed over and carried her out.

Xiang Shaolong came to the side of the couch. At this point only Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were in the room with Lu Gong. As Xiao Pan had not given permission, the others did not dare to enter. The only one who would dare to rush in was Lu Buwei, but he had his own motives and chose to remain outside.

Lu Gong ferociously opened his eyes and swept over the men. His face blushed red and he unexpectedly struggled to sit up.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan glanced at each other, both fearing the worst. They knew that he had seen Xiang Shaolong and was using his last gasp of life. It would be hard to hold on after this.

The two people helped him sit up.

Hot tears flowed from the corners of of Lu Gong's eyes and he rasped: "Was Xu Xian killed by that treacherous thief?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded distressedly, his own tears falling uncontrollably.

Lu Gong grasped their hands, one in each hand. With a trembling

voice, he said into their ears: "Protect the Crown Prince. Kill the traitor. Avenge me and Xu Xian. Remember this, remember!" He then breathed his last, let go of their hands and passed away.

end of Book 16

Book 17 Chapter 01 – Hatred Caused By Love

In their half a year apart, Xiao Pan has matured further, becoming even more adept at hiding his feelings.

Leaving the commander-in-chief's residence, Xiang Shaolong followed Xiao Pan back to the palace. Teng Yi, Ji Yanran and the rest returned to the Wu residence. Lu Gong's funeral arrangements would be arranged by the ceremonial official appointed by Xiao Pan.

They entered the study. When Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong had been left alone, Xiao Pan slapped the table and said in fury: "Ten thousand deaths is not enough to atone for this traitor's guilt."

Xiang Shaolong sat down forlornly beneath him and said somberly: "Why was Xu Xian sent to Shouchun?"

Xiao Pan appeared fearful of being blamed and explained: "Lu Buwei had exhorted me to ally with Chu and Qi to attack the three Jin states. He persisted in asking for Xu Xian to travel to Chu to repair relations and even wanted me to take a Chu princess as my wife. Empress Dowager could have been confused by Lao Ai as she strongly supported Lu Buwei together with Wang Wan, Cai Ze and the others. I was not able to resist them and had no choice but to agree. At that time I thought that Lu Buwei only wanted to keep Xu Xian away from Xianyang for a period of time to deter Lu Gong from harassing him. Who would know that the Chu people would be so reckless, actually daring to assassinate the envoy who was representing me.

For the first time, Xiang Shaolong felt hatred for Zhu Ji. He was pained to silence.

Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang Chi had always been the three pillars of the military. Now only Wang Chi remained. Worse, this person was close to Lu Buwei. The status quo he had painstakingly created had been destroyed overnight.

Presently, amongst the military and the government heavyweights, he could barely count on one person Wang Ling to be on their side. The rest like Meng Ao were part of Lu Buwei's inner circle. Du Bi too had ulterior motives. This was the most precarious situation he had encountered since coming to Qin.

Xiao Pan sighed and said: "The biggest headache now is the vacant Left Premier's post left behind by Xu Xian. Lu Buwei has recommended Wang Wan, and Empress Dowager is leaning towards this proposition. It is very difficult for me to object. In terms of experience and seniority, no one besides Cai Ze is more qualified than he is to become the Left Premier."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "This matter is critical. No matter what we do, we must not let the Left Premier position fall into the hands of Lu Buwei's men, else the Qin court will be safely in Lu Buwei's pocket within three years."

He turned towards Xiao Pan and queried: "Does Crown Prince have a candidate in mind?"

Xiao Pan replied: "If it was up to be, I would go against

convention and promote Li Si. He is ten times as talented as Wang Wan."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said: "Going by ability, there is no problem with Li Si, but he is not a native of Qin. Even if no one objects, you should not promote an outsider thus before you have stabilized your own position. This will only put you at odds with the Qin community."

Xiao Pan was silent for a while before nodding his head, saying: "Master is right. We should not do so at present. Ai! Its good that you are back! Finally there is someone to help me think through plans."

Xiang Shaolong gazed at Xiao Pan for a while before saying: "You have already done very well to drag things up to this point."

He stood up and started pacing, but his mind remained a blank. He mumbled: "The candidate must first be a Qin native, and then must be someone we trust absolutely. The next criterion must be that he is young and have high ideals, so as not to be easily bribed by Lu Buwei. At the same time, he must clearly understand our relationship with Lu Buwei and must also have the support of the military. Where can we find this person?"

Xiao Pan sighed and said: "This person is you my Master. But I already know that you will refuse."

Xiang Shaolong jumped once and said: "I know! This person is Lord Changping!"

Xiao Pan was startled for a while before cupping his head and saying: "Isn't he a little soft?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Of course he's a little soft. But this tactic is called 'feigning one thing and doing another'*. The feint is Lord Changping. The real person in the shadows is Li Si. Lord Changping is a noble kinsman of the King. Even Wang Wan will find it difficult not to give in to him!"

* The actual phrase used here is 'Openly repairing the plank road while secretly crossing the river Wei at Chencang'. Its a reference to a stratagem used by Liu Bang in 206BC against Xiangyu of Chu (reference from MDBG.net). Its meaning is close to what is written above 'feigning one thing and doing another'.

Xiao Pan asked in bafflement: "I understand what 'repairing the plank road' means, but what the heck is Chencang?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly berated himself for slipping once again. This is because this incident would only happen during Chu and Han's conflict many years later. Xiao Pan had naturally never heard of it. He could only invent some nonsense, saying: "That refers to an obsolete and unused warehouse that nobody notices**. In short, Li Si is the true Premier while Lord Changping is the figurehead."

** Chéncāng 陈仓 is the ancient name of Bǎojī city 宝鸡市 (reference from MDBG.net). XSL is associating the word chén 陈 with 陈旧 chénjiù meaning 'obsolete', and the word cāng 仓 with 仓

库 cāngkù meaning 'warehouse'. Hence XSL's rubbish explanation above. This is also how I try to decipher more obscure Chinese idioms and phrases. Please do not ever try to learn Chinese from my translations. And never ever use what you see here when doing business in China. You have been warned =)

Xiao Pan was still hesitant and pointed out in doubt: "Lord Changping's treasured sister is very close to Guan Zhongxie. If Yingying is married to Guan Zhongxie, won't that present some problems?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "This might have been a problem previously, but now as long as the Changping brothers know that Xu Xian was murdered by Lu Buwei, it would be useless for him even if Guan Zhongxie marries their mother."

Xiao Pan laughed bitterly from his belly and said: "Master should not provoke me, this is not the time to be laughing."

As Xiang Shaolong thought about Xu Xian and Lu Gong, his enthusiasm diminished and he said solemnly: "This is but the first step. The second step is to recall Wang Jian and use him to counter Wang Chi, Meng Ao and Du Bi. I am sure that he will become the cornerstone of our Great Qin's military someday. Throwing in Huan Qi and Wang Ling, they will be even more formidable than Xu Xian and Lu Gong."

Xiao Pan stood up abruptly and replied: "How do we get past the Empress Dowager? She is sure to reject this because of Lord Changping's lack of experience."

Xiang Shaolong thought for an instant before saying confidently: "Allow me to persuade her personally."

Xiao Pan shook his head and cautioned: "Empress Dowager is no longer the Queen mother of last time. After Lao Ai obtained her favor, Empress Dowager has become even more infatuated with him. She also feels that I am becoming less obedient to her. I believe that Master's influence over her is no longer what it used to be. Also, Lu Buwei has been courting Lao Ai, else mother would not be supporting him."

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Then I should speak to Lao Ai! I cannot believe that he would be willing to allow Lu Buwei to become more powerful. Now that I am back, he is no longer alone. He should now have the guts to betray Lu Buwei."

Xiao Pan nodded and said: "Lets do as Master says. If all our methods fail, we can just summon Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie into the palace and have Master kill them with the sword once and for all. After that we can trump up some charge and pick up the pieces."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and replied: "What kind of plan is this? The bulk of the military strength is now with Meng Ao. If we do this, the outcome would be unpredictable. Moreover the palace is steeped with Lu Buwei's spies. If anything goes wrong, we will be the ones to lose out."

Xiao Pan sighed and was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Prince Dan and asked about his situation.

Xiao Pan nonchalantly replied: "Lu Buwei has invited him to his new official residence and detained him there. It is unknown whether he is alive or dead. His subordinates have been placed under house arrest in the guesthouse. They are not allowed to step out of the gates. Guan Zhongxue's men are guarding the place. I did not feel that this was a big deal and I had too many things to worry about, hence I did not get involved."

Xiang Shaolong beheld him in astonishment, trepidation rising from the bottom of his heart.

Qin Shihuang is Qin Shihuang after all, promoting expedience while discounting benevolence and righteousness. Just based on Xiao Pan's manner, one could tell that he had no qualms about having Lu Buwei kill Prince Dan. This would after all remove one of the obstacles in the way of his future unification of China.

As he reflected on this, he realized that to move Xiao Pan in this matter, he would have to appeal to benefit.

After he thought for a while, he heaved a long sigh and said: "Doing this, Crown Prince is actually elevating the other party and putting himself down."

Xiao Pan stared blankly for a while and said: "So even this a problem?"

Xiang Shaolong forthrightly said: "If Crown Prince remains aloof on this matter, the prestige that Crown Prince painstakingly created by quelling the rebellion at the royal hunt will dissipate, causing people to think that the only one in charge in Xianyang is that stinking Premier Mentor Lu Buwei. It is said that when two countries battle, envoys are not to be harmed. Prince Dan has come from afar to attend the funeral of your late father. He has been seized by Lu Buwei, but the charge will be leveled at you. Will the Eastern six kingdoms trust you in the future if you do not observe righteousness and justice? "

Xiao Pan was startled and said: "Why does Master sing the same tune as Li Si? Looks like there is some reason there. But what if Prince Dan has already been killed by Lu Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and replied: "How could Lu Buwei be so willing to kill Prince Dan? This matter is clearly directed at me. On the other hand, it is also to help that devil Tian Dan defeat Yan."

He paused for a while before giving a cold snort, saying: "Mo Ao was killed publicly by me, removing the old scoundrel's chief tactician. Worse, his prestige was damaged. As someone who is paranoid about winning, how could he swallow this? Still he did not have a way to deal with us directly. His only method was to use Prince Dan. At the most I would barge into the residence demanding the person. He would then be able to kill me or stick some charge on me."

Xiao Pan coolly said: "Still, this matter had the tacit approval of

mother. Lu Gong and Xu Xian voiced opposition many times but were always suppressed by mother and the scoundrel Lu. Hei! It is also difficult for me!"

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming. Xiao Pan was right. Zhu Ji has definitely changed a lot this half a year.

Xiao Pan said: "From tomorrow, Master must attend the morning court. Ai! The number of people who dare to oppose Lu Buwei are diminishing by the day."

He paused and then continued: "Is there anyway to recall An Gu?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said: "The bulk of our Great Qin's military strength is now concentrated at the border. The seven cities are in the hands of Meng Ao, Wang Chi and Du Bi. The rest belong to Wang Jian and An Gu. If we recall both Wang Jian and An Gu, we will lose all out external support. This is something we must never do."

Using this as a segway, he asked: "What has come of Huan Qi's effort to build a contingency force?"

Xiao Pan was reenergized and replied: "The two of them Huan Qi and Little Ben have been traveling all over the country, personally selecting talent. They now have an army of close to ten thousand. Li Si has given this division the name 'Rapid Response Division'. It sounds appropriate."

He snorted again and said: "Nonetheless Lu Buwei has hindered Huan Qi in many ways. On the surface he agrees to everything, but in secret he opposes everything. I wanted to promote Li Si by one grade to become a minister-of-state in the government and military, but was stiffly blocked by Empress Dowager and Lu Buwei. I am unable to move a single step. Master needs to think of a plan for me."

Xiang Shaolong was vexed. He was without Xu Xian and Lu Gong while the enemy had Meng Ao and Wang Chi. He was himself unschooled in top level military and civil administration. How was he to overcome Lu Buwei?

Thinking to this point, his heart jolted, calculating that if he could swing Meng Ao over, everything would be solved. While it would be difficult to instigate Meng Ao to rebel, he had a chance because Lu Buwei had once tried to murder Meng Ao's two sons. Nonetheless he must first win over Meng Wu and Meng Tian. His heart was stirred and he had already formulated a plan.

Xiang Shaolong summed up: "The matter of utmost importance right now is to capture the position of Left Premier for our man, and then to increase Wang Jian's profile to counter the two men Meng Ao and Wang Chi. I will take care of Prince Dan personally."

They continued discussing the details especially on Prince Dan's situation before Xiang Shaolong left Xiao Pan's study.

As he stepped across the study door, he did not know where to go for a moment.

He desired most to return to the Wu residence to see Zhao Ya. Nonetheless, in the name of righteousness and justice, he needed to console Prince Dan's subordinates Xu Yize and the rest. However, the most critical person he had to talk to was actually Lao Ai, to instigate an alliance against Lu Buwei.

After a while of indecision, Li Si's voice sounded in his ear saying: "Official Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong recovered his spirit and joyfully cried: "Brother Li!"

Li Si grabbed him in one hand and led him to the imperial garden through a side door.

It was now afternoon and the sky was covered in heavy clouds, suggesting a blizzard.

As they arrived at a small pavilion, Li Si released him, sighed and said: "The scoundrel Lu is truly formidable. After a few moves, we are now at a great disadvantage again. Hei! Has Tian Dan been killed?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

Li Si's eyes brightened and he said excitedly: "This is greatly beneficial to Great Qin's future plans to unify the world. And Lu Buwei can no longer count on his mutual support to control the six Eastern states."

Xiang Shalong seized the opportunity to ask: "Besides the military's Meng Ao and Wang Chi, what kind of strength does Lu Buwei have?"

Li Si replied forlornly: "Lu Buwei has comparatively weak troops-wise. At least within Xianyang, our strength is superior to his."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his eyebrows and said: "I am unfamiliar with the court process, can Brother Li explain its ins and outs to me?"

Li Si looked at him in shock for a while before nodding his head and saying: "If you need a detailed explanation, I am afraid that Official Xiang will not be able to return home tonight. At a high level however, there are three levels in the hierarchy. At the top is naturally the Crown Prince together with supporting minor officials like me. We form the inner court. Hei! Just the inner court is extremely complex."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "I am actually familiar with the inner court. Brother Li does not need to explain. Under the Crown Prince is the Right Premier and Left Premier. What is the difference in authority between the two?"

Li Si patiently explained: "To answer this, we need to start with Shang Yang's political reforms during the time of Duke Xiao. Then, the two highest officials under the monarch were the Commons Chief and the Grand Vizier***. Until King Huiwen came, Shang Yang held both positions, effectively unifying the control of the

military and civil government in one person. His achievements were spectacular, arousing even the jealousy of his master King Huiwen who finally executed him through dismemberment by horses. From then on, power was concentrated in the King. The civil government and military was separated, with a Premier installed to manage the former and a Great General to command the latter. The Premier headed hundreds of officials. The administrative load on him became too heavy and the post was divided into the Left and Right Premiers, with the Right Premier managing the civil government and the Left Premier managing military affairs. The former was akin to the previous Commons Chief and the latter akin to the Grand Vizier."

*** I've decided to translate these two terms broadly. They are actually just official titles under Shang Yang's reforms. Don't know what the real English equivalents are. The Grand Vizier or 大良造 is supposed to be the highest official position in the Qin state.

The more Xiang Shaolong listened, the more confused he got. He asked: "If that is so, why is Lu Buwei so insistent on controlling the military?"

Li Si laughed bitterly and replied: "It has always been difficult to separate the civil government and the military. Since both the Left and Right Premiers report directly to the King, whenever there is a decision to be made by the King, both Premiers must be consulted. Now with the Crown Prince still young and the Empress Dowager personally holding court. The situation is even more complex."

Xiang Shaolong felt even more confused and frowned, asking: "In that case, how do these two Premiers operate?"

Li Si languidly replied: "The Left and Right Premiers govern the country through the four institutions. The four institutions are the Army and Government, the Judiciary, the Tax Authority and Public Works. They are controlled by the four cabinet ministers, the Minister of War, Minister of Justice, Minister of Education and Minister of the Sky. Presently the Left Premier manages the Military and Public Works while the Right Premier manages the Judiciary and Tax Authority. Lu Gong was originally the Minister of War. This position is now glaringly vacant."

Xiang Shaolong was about to query some more when an inner palace attendant arrived outside the hall, greeted and announced: "The Empress Dowager requests the pleasure of seeing Official Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si glanced at each other, both realizing something was wrong.

Thick snow started floating down at this moment.

Inside the Empress Dowager's inner palace, Zhu Ji was sitting high atop the phoenix dais. Four palace maids and four servants stood at her left and right. Palace guards lined up on both sides up to the entrance of the palace hall.

The moment Xiang Shaolong saw this troop arrangement, he knew that he was at a disadvantage. This is because Zhu Ji is clearly indicating that she did not want to engage in private conversation. She is also indicating that her heart is with Lao Ai,

since she is demonstrating that she does not want to meet him alone, avoiding Lao Ai's jealousy.

Indeed, after Xiang Shaolong had paid his respects and recovered, Zhu Ji looked at him with chilly eyes and coldly said: "Official Xiang, are you disregarding me the Empress Dowager? Returning after half a year, you do not even meet me for a greeting."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the only effective move was to use the soft to overcome the hard. He sighed and said: "Empress Dowager, please calm down. The reason....."

Zhu Ji interrupted him, saying: "No matter what you say, I am not going to calm down. Xiang Shaolong, tell me what you and Crown Prince are stirring. You are so secretive and sneaky in everything, keeping me in the dark. When Lord Gaoling rebelled during the hunt, you clearly had prior information. Why didn't you inform me?"

At this point Xiang Shaolong knew she was merely sore about an old issue, so he laughed bitterly and said: "This minor official has a thousand things to say, but finds it difficult to say a word with so many ears listening. Is it right for me to speak so freely of the Late King or the Crown Prince or Premier Lu or Premier Xu?"

Zhu Ji's beautiful eyes gazed at him deeply for a time. She then softened and heaved a sigh, saying: "Alright! Everyone please get out. Anyone who dares to eavesdrop is to be killed without mercy."

In the blink of an eye, all the servants and guards had cleared out of the hall, even closing the palace hall door and all the side doors.

The Zhu Ji who was sitting on the phoenix seat heaved another sigh and with a softened voice said: "I already knew it was impossible to corner you. Speak!"

Xiang Shaolong took two steps forward and bracing himself, sat on the steps of the dais. He blandly said: "Lu Buwei killed Xu Xian and harmed Lu Gong. If he is able to kill me, the next will be Official Lao."

Zhu Ji saw that he was actually so rude as to sit on the steps of the dais on his own accord. She had wanted to reprimand him, but was overwhelmed by his startling words. She shook dramatically, saying: "What did you say?"

Xiang Shaolong buried his head in his palms and said solemnly: "Any obstacle in Lu Buwei's path to power will be kicked away by him sooner or later. He can sacrifice anyone and anything other than himself. Empress Dowager should understand this even better than I do."

Zhu Ji's breathing became heavy and only said after a long while: "The Chu people have sent the severed head of Lord Chunshen over, begging for forgiveness over Xu Xian's death. What does this have to do with Lu Buwei? If you do not make yourself clear, I will not spare you."

Xiang Shaolong became furious and whipped his body around

sharply, staring at Zhu Ji. He said: "What did Lord Chunshen stand to gain by killing Xu Xian? If not for Tian Dan's instigation and Lu Buwei's background support, even if there was much to benefit from it, would the Chu people be so audacious? Heng! You will not spare me? Just get someone to come and behead me then. See if I Xiang Shaolong will crease half a hair on my eyebrow."

Zhu Ji's eyes emitted an intensely cold killing aura, but after contending a time with his gaze, she was defeated. She lowered her gaze and lightly said: "Just take it as if my words were too extreme. Whats the use of getting so angry?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that it was a good chance to back down, but decided to vent his anger anyway. He said forcefully: "The position of Left Premier is now being coveted by everyone. If it falls onto Lu Buwei's hands, not only will I Xiang Shaolong die without a proper burial, the person beside Empress Dowager will not live to his old age."

Zhu Ji gently said: "If Shaolong is willing to be the Left Premier, I will support him with all my power."

Xiang Shaolong regained his calm and smiled while shaking his head, saying: "It is not for me, but for Lord Changping."

Zhu Ji was startled and objected: "How would the people accept Lord Changping? Why don't you consider Wang Ling?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "This is because we need Wang Ling to replace Lu Gong in managing the Army, to better master Wang

Chi, Meng Ao, Du Bi and their men. Even though Lord Changping is a little lacking in virtue and seniority, he is still a scion of the royal family. Appointing him as Premier is the best way to pacify the hearts of Great Qin's military. Empress Dowager should remember that two of the three tiger generals of Western Qin have gone. The remaining one Wang Chi is not only leaning towards Lu Buwei, his standing is still below that of Meng Ao. Now everyone is currying favor with Lu Buwei. When everyone has fallen in with him, will Empress Dowager and Crown Prince have a place to stand?"

Zhu Ji stared at him for a while before saying forlornly: "Why can't I ever prevail over you? But this is no small matter. I need to mull on this. Please retire first!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that she was going to discuss this with Lao Ai and cringed in his heart. Still, he could not do a thing and left in frustration.

Book 17 Chapter 02 – Block And Counter

Lao Ai's residence is beside the palace. Just across and looking as magnificent as a mini-palace is Lu Buwei's new den of thieves. The outer wall is tall and thick and the entrance is framed by thirty-foot high stone archway. The three large words 'Premier Mentor's Residence' were inscribed in stone. This brazen act of strife with the King's prestige is enough to arouse the kind of jealousy that King Huiwen had for Shang Yang. Provoking the jealousy of Xiao Pan the future Qin Shihuang will undoubtedly be his downfall, it is just a pity that that will only happen in six years.

To endure and survive this six bitter and treacherous years, he would have to feign humility and friendship with the crafty Lao Ai.

In that movie about Qin Shihuang, Zhu Ji finally stands completely on Lao Ai's side, not only opposing Lu Buwei but also secretly plotting the overthrow of her son Yin Zheng.

The movie's explanation was grossly simplified, attributing it all to Zhu Ji's infatuation with Lao Ai.

But Xiang Shaolong knew that there were at least two other reasons. The first reason was her unrequited love for Xiao Pan and himself turning into hate.

The other reason is even more complicated.

Xiang Shaolong was actually abiding by the irresistible will of fate. That is why he deliberately allowed Zhu Ji to succumb

increasingly and more inextricably into Lao Ai's lustful manipulation.

Because he felt guilty, and also knew that Zhu Ji was no longer able to leave Lao Ai, he subconsciously alienated himself from her, increasing her hatred for him. That is how things have ended up this way today.

Xiao Pan had always looked up to Zhu Ji as his mother, taking her as a natural replacement for Madam Ni. Thus he had also wished that she would remain chaste like Madam Ni. In the depths of his heart, other than King Zhuangxiang, he could only accept Xiang Shaolong as his father. Zhu Ji's standing in his eyes has taken a tumble since she became attached to the disreputable Lao Ai, seeming to have lost her self respect. This disappointment caused more than a minor change in his attitude, it has in fact has turned into an intense loathing and hatred. This is in turn causing their relationship to become increasingly vile.

Under these circumstances, Zhu Ji naturally leaned closer to Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

It seemed to her as if Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were colluding against her.

This is a situation and a fact that nobody can change.

Xiang Shaolong's only resort was to incite conflict between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei, causing Zhu Ji to support only Lao Ai and not Lu Buwei.

He arrived at Lao Ai's inner residence and reported his name. Lao Ai received the news and happily came out to welcome him.

This scoundrel with the heart of a beast was decked in court dress, looking rejuvenated and in high spirits. While he was still at a distance, he smiled and greeted: "The news is that Official Xiang has returned from his long journey. I was just thinking of visiting to pay my respects. Who would have guessed that the Official would honor us with a visit. How could the lesser official bear this?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed his mother because she gave birth to such a heartless thief. But of course he managed his expression carefully and went up to meet up. He pulled his arm and laughed, saying: "I just met Empress Dowager and the Crown Prince and found out that so much has happened in Xianyang. Come! Let us find a place to have a heart to heart chat."

Lao Ai clearly knew about his meeting with the Empress Dowager and indifferently led him into the East room. Along the way, he saw numerous maids and household warriors. His grandeur seemed to be rising.

After they had sat down and had a cup of fragrant tea, with the maids had withdrawn, Lao Ai said: "What confidential matter did Empress Dowager and Official Xiang discuss?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was most jealous of the unrequited feelings that Zhu Ji had for him. If he could not allay his suspicion,

he could forget about corporation. He whispered: "I told Empress Dowager that Xu Xian was killed by Lord Chunshen under orders from Lu Buwei."

Lao Ai looked at him in shock.

Xiang Shaolong explained concisely and exclaimed again: "If the post of Left Premier falls into the hands of Lu Buwei's men, even the Crown Prince and Empress Dowager will have no choice but to be led by the nose."

Lao Ai was stumped for words and started contemplating.

This was Xiang Shaolong's brilliance. Truth be told, Lao Ai had large ambitions. And his only means was to rely on Zhu Ji.

If Zhu Ji loses power, not only would his own per wane, he would have to return to living on Lu Buwei's grace.

Human beings were thus. Before tasting the sweetness, all is good. But after tasting the sweetness, it would be hard to give it up. If Lao Ai had to return to being Lu Buwei's slave, it would be more unbearable than killing him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "If I guessed correctly, Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie must have exhausted all means to win Official Lao over, just like how he won me over previously."

Lao Ai glanced at him and asked: "Please forgive the Lao's query,

but why did Official Xiang favour me from the beginning?"

Xiang Shaolong squeezed out his most earnest expression and replied: "I can reveal this matter only to Brother Lao alone. The reason is the Empress Dowager. Crown Prince and I did not want her to feel lonely, plus I have always been fond of Brother Lao. Brother Lao should understand my intentions now!"

Lao Ai couldn't help asking: "Is Brother Xiang wishing that I will support your appointment as Left Premier?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed him for projecting his petty thinking onto the noble intentions of others. He forced an expression as if he did not want to be misunderstood and angrily replied: "If I had wanted to be Left Premier, I would have been while the Late King was still around. Brother Lao should know about this matter right?"

Of course Lao Ai knew about this and he hurriedly apologized: "Brother Xiang, please do not misunderstand. I was just thinking that apart from you, who else would be qualified to contend with Wang Wan?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he had been moved, and heaving a sigh, he said: "Please allow me to change the topic for a while. It is said that 'men are not grass and trees, how can they be emotionless?'. I Xiang Shaolong personally brought the Empress Dowager and Crown Prince to Qin. I had originally intended to return to obscurity then to enjoy a peaceful rural life with my lovely wives and beautiful maids. This is truly my dream. How was I to know that this old scoundrel Lu Buwei repeatedly tried to kill me, even

causing my wife and maids to die tragically. This is why I want to fight Lu Buwei to the end. The day the Lu scoundrel is killed will also be the day I Xiang Shaolong leave Qin. If this is not the case, may heaven exterminate me. Does Brother Lao understand my intent now?"

Lao Ai stared at him for a moment before stretching his hand and saying: "I understand!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he had been thoroughly moved and stretched out his own hand for the handshake. He then solemnly said: "Lord Changping to be the Left Premier, Wang Ling to replace Lu Gong. Does Brother Lao agree?"

Lao Ai exclaimed hoarsely: "What?!"

After Xiang Shaolong left Lao Ai's residence, he led the eighteen guardians to the heavily guarded guest house of Prince Dan. More than ten of the city guards immediately blocked the route to the entrance. The leading city guard captain saluted and said: "Official Guan has ordered that nobody is to enter the house."

Xiang Shaolong glanced at him sideways and barked: "You've seen me Xiang Shaolong yet you dare to obstruct me so rudely. What is your name?"

That guard captain knew then and there that he was in big trouble. He knelt down in fright and pleaded: "Your humble servant knows his guilt! Your humble servant knows his guilt! For

a moment I did not see clearly that it was Commander Xiang."

It could be said that, there was no one in Xianyang at present who did not know that Xiang Shaolong was the anointed man closest to the Crown Prince. If he wanted to act against some small fry, even Lu Buwei would not be able to prevent it. The guards were so frightened that they all knelt down.

How would Xiang Shaolong trifle with them? He shouted coldly: "Open the door for me!"

How would the guards dare to object? They obediently opened the gate. It turned out that there was another group of guards encamped in the square within the residence.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse and instructed his guardians to keep watch at the gate. He then swaggered into the residence with high and mighty steps. The city guards were intimidated by his mighty aura and dared not utter a word.

There were more than ten of Prince Dan's experts inside, including the Great General Xu Yize, Minister-of-State Leng Ting, Division Commander You Zhi, and the Yan Du who was defeated by Guan Zhongxie. When they heard his voice, they went to the residence gate to welcome him.

When they saw Xiang Shaolong, they all had an expression of grief and indignation.

After they had reached the main hall and sat down, Xu Yize indignantly said: "Official Xiang must arbitrate for us."

You Zi was the cool-headed one. He asked: "Did you manage to dispose of Tian Dan?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in affirmation.

Xu Yize and the rest all breathed a little easier.

Truth be told, if Tian Dan was still alive, Yan would be in mortal danger.

Leng Ting heaved a sigh and said: "How could anyone predict that Lu Buwei would dare to defy public opinion and detain the Crown Prince (Dan). We do not know if Crown Prince (Dan) is alive or dead so we dare not act. Else even if we are all killed in battle, we will want to vent our anger."

Xiang Shaolong said: "Gentlemen, please be at ease. Even if one day Lu Buwei grew some balls, he would not dare to injure the Crown Prince (Dan). Else he would have broken faith with the world. I think he has just promised to detain Crown Prince (Dan) for a time to allow the devil Tian Dan to satisfy his wicked desires! Leave this matter to me. If I cannot openly compel him to release Crown Prince (Dan), I will rescue him in secret. Alright! Please pack your belongings and come to my residence. The Lu thief will have to release Crown Prince (Dan), but may turn to murdering all of you instead. That would be a disaster."

Xu Yize saw that Xiang Shaolong was loyal and righteous without regard for Lu Buwei. He couldn't help but be moved and ordered his men to pack their items immediately.

In a short while, more than a hundred people had assembled in the parade square. The city guards in charge looked on helplessly. Nobody dared to interfere.

At this moment, the sound of hoofbeats arrived. A company of men and horses galloped in from the main gate. They were led by Guan Zhongxie.

His expression was chilly. He quickly dismounted and came up to Xiang Shaolong. In a bold and self-righteous tone, he said: "Official Xiang please wait. Your subordinate has been ordered by the Premier Mentor to forbid the occupants of the residence from stepping past the gate."

Xu Yize and the rest all drew their swords. Under the reflection of the blades, the tension mounted.

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud and said: "Could I ask if Official Guan has any official document signed by the Premier Mentor or any such thing?"

Guan Zhongxie was stumped on the spot.

As soon as he had received the news from his subordinates that Xiang Shaolong had run the barricade, he had rushed over from

the command building immediately. He could not have had the opportunity to meet with Lu Buwei. He said forcefully: "Subordinate has received Premier Mentor's verbal orders. If Official Xiang does not believe me, he may inquire of Premier Mentor personally."

Xiang Shaolong drew his sword with a "Qiang" sound. He laughed and said: "Then I also have Crown Prince's verbal orders to come here to retrieve the people. If Official Guan does not believe me, he can inquire of the Crown Prince personally. If anyone dares to hinder me, he is disobeying the King's order. I will kill without mercy."

All the guardians drew their swords as one, tightly encircling Guan Zhongxie and his ten plus bodyguards.

Guan Zhongxie's expression changed slightly, knowing that if he said anything more in contradiction, blood would be drawn then and there.

He looked at his underlings on the outside. Their faces were pale as clay and they were keeping quiet out of fear. For sure if a fight broke out, none of them would dare to get involved.

He then looked at Xiang Shaolong and saw the murderous spirit in his eyes. It was clear that Xiang Shaolong intended to use this opportunity to eliminate him. 'A gentleman does not mind backing down for a while to achieve a larger purpose'. He smiled and retreated to one side, flatly saying: "Official Xiang has misunderstood. Subordinate was just afraid that the Official has just returned from afar and does not know the present situation."

Since this is the case, we'll let Premier Mentor take this up with the Crown Prince then. Official, please!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented that was a pity and sheathed his sword. He smiled and said: "That would be the best. I had thought that Official Guan was disobedient even to the Crown Prince, being loyal only to the Premier Mentor."

Guan Zhongxie felt a stab of fear, recalling that Lu Buwei's greatest weakness was that ultimately he was not the Qin King. That is why as long as the Qin Crown Prince had Xiang Shaolong's backing, he had to obey the King's orders unless he chose to rebel openly.

Xu Yize and all the guardians sheathed their swords and mounted their horses.

Xiang Shaolong did not even spare Guan Zhongxie a glance, leading everyone out through the gates. He suddenly thought of a contingency, and after instructing Wu Shu to bring Xu Yize and the rest back to the Wu residence, headed for the palace immediately with his men. When he entered the inner courtyard, he found Xiao Pan discussing court business with Li Si. He greeted and said: "If Crown Prince wishes to demolish the Lu thief's prestige and increase your monarchical power, a golden opportunity is before you."

Xiao Pan and Li Si were astonished, both looking at each other.

As the Crown Prince commanded for the inspection tour to proceed, more than a hundred mounted guards set forth, clearing the way for him. Lord Changwen, Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong and Li Si formed up at the Crown Prince's front, back, left and right. More than three hundred men and horses galloped out of the palace in splendor and might, heading towards the Premier Mentor's residence.

At this moment, Lu Buwei was furiously rushing out of the Premier Mentor's residence as he had just been informed by Guan Zhongxie of Xiang Shaolong's rescue of Prince Dan's men. He was going to the palace to get Zhu Ji to call Xiang Shaolong to account. How was he to know that he would meet the sovereign en route.

Guan Zhongxie and the rest hurriedly moved to the side and knelt down. Only Lu Buwei urged his horse forward to Xiao Pan's front. After greeting Xiao Pan, he first gave Xiang Shaolong a glance before gravely asking: "Where is Crown Prince going for his inspection tour and why?"

Xiao Pan secretly cursed him: Since when is it your turn to mind my business? Nonetheless he maintained an unhurried expression on the surface and replied: "I was just going to the Premier Mentor's residence."

Lu Buwei replied in shock: "Why is Crown Prince looking for the old official?"

Xiao Pan blandly replied: "It is said that Prince Dan has gone to Premier Mentor's residence and is lingering there. I have a sudden urge to meet him. Will Premier Mentor please arrange a meeting

between us immediately."

Lu Buwei stared foolishly for a while before his eyes betrayed a cold murderous look. He coldly said: "Prince Dan had expressed a desire to leave over the past few days. I do not know if he is still within the old official's residence." He turned his head towards the kneeling Guan Zhongxie and shouted loudly: "Commander Guan, why haven't you quickly gone and checked it out for the Crown Prince?"

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong exchanged a glance before the former sneered: "Premier Mentor's words are strange. Don't you even know if someone is at your residence? To be sure, Prince Dan has arrived from afar to offer sacrifices to the Late King. He is our Great Qin's honored guest. If our hospitality is not satisfactory, even I have to bear some responsibility."

He then shouted: "Changping, Changwen! The two of you will accompany Official Guan to verify the outcome!"

Lu Buwei did not imagine that after Xiang Shaolong returned, Xiao Pan would turn into a completely different person. Not only did he not abide by his wishes, he seemed to be putting him down at every point. While he was still dumbstruck, Lord Changping and Lord Changwen had clasped Guan Zhongxie between them and left.

Xiao Pan nudged his horse's belly and rode towards the Premier Mentor's residence. The large contingent of men and horses continued forward. Lu Buwei could only follow at Xiao Pan's side.

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan and Li Si were all laughing in their hearts. Lu Buwei's greatest disadvantage this time was that he had no logic to stand on. That was why it was best for him to remain mute and swallow the bitter medicine, keeping his pain to himself.

All the citizens stopped and bowed on the streetside at the sight of the Crown Prince on his inspection tour. All paid obeisance to this youthful heir-apparent whose martial prowess was rising with each day.

Before they had reached the Premier Mentor's residence, both Lords Changping and Changwen had come out with a pale Prince Dan in between.

Xiao Pan urged his horse forward and laughed loudly, saying: "Prince Dan, how are you doing? Will the Prince please generously excuse our poor hospitality and forgive us our multitude of mistakes!"

When Prince Dan saw Xiang Shaolong, how could he not know what was happening? After he said a few polite words, he turned to the ashen-faced Lu Buwei and said: "One of these days, I will definitely repay the Premier Mentor for this half a year of hospitality."

Lu Buwei knew that he was speaking in irony and coldly snorted without replying. He could not even be bothered to put up an act at this point.

Xiao Pan turned to Lu Buwei and said: "Wasn't Premier Mentor going to the palace? Was it to meet the Empress Dowager or myself?"

Lu Buwei was almost shocked to silence. Who would have thought that Xiao Pan would be so formidable. If he had said that he wanted to meet with Zhu Ji, it would clearly show that he wanted to mess with the Crown Prince in front of her. If he said he wanted to meet him instead, what else was there to say? He awkwardly said: "The old official merely wanted to discuss the candidates for the posts of Left Premier and Minister of War with Crown Prince and Empress Dowager!"

Xiao Pan coldly said: "I have made my decision. It will be announced during morning court tomorrow. This matter need not be discussed further. Premier Mentor, please!"

Lu Buwei looked at Xiang Shaolong in shock.

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and without saying anything, displayed a look of profound mystery. He secretly laughed that Lu Buwei has finally experienced the domineering and oppressive air of this future Qin Shihuang.

As Lu Buwei was fuming over this, Xiao Pan ordered: "I just remembered something. I am not able to stay for long. Official Xiang will entertain Prince Dan properly on my behalf. I wish to return to the palace."

He nudged his horse and left.

Lord Changping, Lord Changwen, Li Si and the rest hurriedly followed.

Xiang Shaolong saw Lu Buwei staring at Xiao Pan's back in a daze and he said indifferently: "Premier Mentor, please! This General will now retire!"

Ignoring Lu Buwei, he led Prince Dan and all the guardians away. He knew that this incident marked the start of his open war with Lu Buwei. There would be no other option.

They passed by Qin Qing's residence on the way back to the Wu residence. He almost wanted to slip in for a tryst with this beautiful widow. Nonetheless he had Prince Dan at his side, and Madam Ya, Wu Tingfang and the rest were also hanging on for his return. It was best for him to suppress this urge.

Book 17 Chapter 03 – A Final Farewell

Xiang Shaolong returned to the Wu residence with Prince Dan. Even in their wildest dreams, Xu Yize and his party could not imagine that their master would be rescued in such a short time. They were all celebrating madly and grateful to tears. Xiang Shaolong was worried about Zhao Ya, Wu Tingfang, Bao'er and the rest, and so handed the task of entertaining Prince Dan to Tao Fang and Teng Yi with an apology. He hurriedly walked towards the inner residence. The servants and maids he met were all excited at his return and greeted him respectfully.

As he walked through the winding covered walkways around the garden, he heard a male and female voice in conversation from the little pavilion behind a bamboo grove. Nonetheless he could not make out who they were.

He did not have the mood to investigate and kept walking. As his footsteps sounded, a woman's voice called out delicately from the bamboo grove: "Master is back!"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and looked over. Turns out it was Zhou Wei. Her face was fuller, perhaps because of the comfortable life here. This caused her to be even more enchanting than before. She prostrated herself on the ground, her face blushing awkwardly with a flustered expression.

As Xiang Shaolong was wondering who she was talking to, a shadow flashed by and the Wu Guo who had brought Zhao Ya back from Daliang came out after her from the bamboo grove. He even called out: "Little Wei you! Oh! Master Xiang! Your servant! Hei!"

He knelt down beside Zhou Wei, his expression also awkward and embarrassed.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized, figuring that Wu Guo this rascal had fallen for Zhou Wei and was currently putting in effort to woo her.

While he had once encouraged Jing Jun to pursue her, it seems that Jing Jun had turned his sights to Lu Dan'er. That is why he has allowed Wu Guo this lovable little rascal to plot his amorous pursuit. He was most happy.

Zhou Wei saw that Wu Guo was almost touching her shoulder to shoulder as he knelt down. She glared at Wu Guo before fretfully saying: "Master, Little Wei." Xiang Shaolong hurried forward and helped the two of them up, happily saying: "Little Wei need not explain. Seeing the two of you together, I have only happiness. How could I blame you for anything?"

Zhou Wei's pretty face blushed a deep red and she hung her head, saying: "Master, its not like that!"

Xiang Shaolong noticed that she did not dare to look at him as she spoke, how could he not understand that she did indeed have some affection for Wu Guo. As he was about to speak, Wu Guo jumped up and in the midst of joyous shouting flipped a somersault before grabbing Zhou Wei's jade arms and shaking it, saying: "Little Wei, what I said was correct, wasn't it! Master Xiang will not blame us for sure."

Zhou Wei shook free of his grasp and angrily scolded him: "Get lost for me. I need to attend to Master."

Xiang Shaolong chortled a laugh and said: "Little Wei does not have to wait on me any longer. From today onwards, let Wu Guo serve you!"

The moment he finished speaking, he raised his steps and walked away, leaving Wu Guo to bandy with Zhou Wei.

As he was about to reach the rear residence, the two maids Tian Zhen and Tian Feng rushed out in in a gust of fragrant wind. They threw themselves into his embrace and cried tears of joy, looking like two beautifully trembling little birds.

Xiang Shaolong embraced the two of them tightly and entered the hall.

Wu Tingfang was having a heart-to-heart chat with Ji Yanran. The soon to be three year old Xiang Bao'er nestled in the latter's bosom.

When Wu Tingfang saw Xiang Shaolong, she forgot everything else, jumped up and pounced onto him.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the Tian Sisters and hugged her in a full embrace.

Wu Tingfang cried and complained to him at the same time:

"This person you! Only now are you willing to return home." As Xiang Shaolong laughed and teased her, Ji Yanran carried Xiang Bao'er over and placed him in the crook of his arm.

Xiang Bao'er held on to his neck, his clear boyish voice calling out: "Daddy!" Xiang Shaolong was so happy that he rained kisses on his small face, his heart filled to the brim with the warmth of family affection.

Ji Yanran laughed and said: "Enough! Quickly go into the room to see Sister Ya! She should be awake by now."

Xiang Shaolong knew that Zhao Ya did not have the habit of taking afternoon naps and he jolted, asking: "How is Ya'er?"

Ji Yanran's expression turned dark and she said: "Her body is very weak. Quickly go see her! She has been waiting for you bitterly."

Xiang Shaolong returned Xiang Bao'er to Ji Yanran and smoothly asked: "Where is Zhi Zhi and Sister Rou?"

Wu Tingfang happily replied: "The three sisters are together and have no attention for anything else at the moment."

After Xiang Shaolong kissed Wu Tingfang's cheeks again, the Tian Sisters clasped him in between themselves and dragged him excitedly towards the East wing.

They entered a particularly quiet and secluded room. Zhao Ya had not awakened yet. A pretty maid was at her side nursing her.

The Tian Sisters judiciously dragged away that pretty maid. He was left alone with Zhao Ya. He sat on the edge of the couch, a heated love igniting in his heart. He carefully examined this tragic beauty.

Zhao Ya has obviously wasted away and her appearance was wan and unhealthy. She was missing the brightness and color of her former days, and had taken on a thin and delicate look instead. As he saw this, his heart was pained.

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hands to caress her cheeks and painfully called out: "Ya'er! Ya'er!"

Zhao Ya slowly woke up. Opening her eyes, she saw that it was Xiang Shaolong and with a delicate moan, she struggled to sit up.

Xiang Shaolong embraced her into his bosom and kissed her fragrant lips deeply.

Zhao Ya used a hidden burst of energy and wrapped him up tightly like a parcel, giving him a warm and full response. She then raised her pretty face and laughed saying: "My man is finally back. Oh! Why are you crying? Even I am not crying!"

Xiang Shaolong fell on the bed and they fell asleep in mutual embrace, face to face and with one hand caressing her arousing

body. He sighed: "Ya'er, you've lost weight!"

Zhao Ya kissed the tip of his nose and happily said: "I have already given consideration to your pair of naughty hands and have been forcing myself to eat something everyday. Are you still blaming me? Wu! Remember, you are not to bring up our old grudges, not even one word."

Xiang Shaolong saw her beautiful eyes ripple with splendor and was secretly delighted, saying: "Ya'er, you must recover and accompany me for for a scenic tour, enjoy the pleasures of life without holding back."

Zhao Ya smiled and said: "My illness is incurable. But as long as I am able to spend my last days with my most beloved, Heaven does not owe me Zhao Ya anything anymore."

An intensely ominous feeling welled up in him and he reproached her saying: "I forbid you from saying such things. You are sure to recover completely. My love to you is the world's best miracle cure, stronger than any grand doctor."

Zhao Ya giggled and her pretty face twinkled. She gave him another kiss before saying: "Please help me up. I've sleep till I'm tired to death."

Xiang Shaolong actually could not bear to leave this comfortable slumber inducing couch, but did not have a choice but to cradle her up by the waist and sitting up on the couch.

Zhao Ya strove to hold on to his neck, and said weakly: "How about going out for a walk? Look! Its snowing!"

Xiang Shaolong looked out the window. Snowflakes were indeed floating down. He couldn't bear to deny her and finding a cloak and a thick cape, wrapped her up tightly before supporting her towards the small pavilion in the courtyard. He helped her onto a stone bench and said in sympathetic love: "Is Ya'er uncomfortable anywhere?"

Zhao Ya pasted herself onto his cheeks and looked at the snow covered landscape outside the pavilion. She smiled and said: "Are you talking about the past? I feel completely devoid of energy. I will feel dizzy whether sitting or standing. Sometimes when I think of you, my heart will ache. But everything is alright now. I even feel like eating something!"

Xiang Shaolong leaned away and asked: "Should I get someone to prepare some food for you? What would you like to eat?"

Zhao Ya's eyes emitted a passion deep as the sea, and with a smile on her face, she shook her head saying: "No! That was just a feeling. Right now I just want you to hold on to Ya'er. Let Ya'er know that Xiang Shaolong still loves her so. Ya'er is already very contented."

Xiang Shaolong carefully examined her countenance and saw that he face had turned red. Her elegant eyes twinkled with a fantastic and stunning expression. The color and brightness she had lost had reappeared on her silken face. He was delighted and momentarily speechless.

Zhao Ya gently said: "Zhao Da and the rest have been loyal and devoted to me. Can you find something appropriate for them? They will now serve you! Because of me, they have all abstained from marrying and setting up a family. It is now up to you to help Ya'er fulfill this wish."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong realize that something is very wrong. He shook severely and said: "You are now allowed to say such things. You will recover very quickly."

Zhao Ya laughed dully: "Look! This great snow is so beautiful, purifying all the ugly and hateful things in this world of men. Even though Ya'er has had many men, but the only one she has truly loved is Shaolong. All the others have been forgotten. I should have died in Daliang long ago. But knowing that I still have a chance to meet you, I held on until now. If you had not called to me just now, I might not have woken up again. Shaolong Ah! Don't cry, ok?" Reaching out her sleeves, she wiped his tears.

Xiang Shaolong's whole body turned cold, his heart feeling as if it had been sliced by a knife and his guts feeling as if they had been cut short. He said in a trembling voice: "Ya'er, don't scare me. You must press on. This world still holds many wonderful things, awaiting your enjoyment."

Zhao Ya smiled and with a voice as soft as water, she said: "Beautiful things are always short-lived. I still remember meeting you for the first time on the street in Handan. Then your clothes were ragged and you had a down and out appearance. But you had that bright, valiant and brave disposition that made you prouder

than any aristocrat, causing Ya'er to be unable to suppress the passion in her heart."

Pausing, her eyes emitted an unsurpassed red-hot expression. She lightly moaned: "'[When the golden wind meets the jade outdoors, it is better than countless moments in man's world](#)'. Do you remember saying these two beautiful sentences of poetry in my little house? Those were the most beautiful words of endearment Ya'er has ever heard in her life. It was because of these two sentences that I forced myself to stay in Daliang. But in the end I could not help but come to see you."

The saying is '金风玉露一相逢, 便胜却人间无数'. It is attributed to a Qin dynasty official and means something like: If two people who love each other run into each other, even though their time is short, it is to be treasured and is better than countless beautiful moments in the world. [Reference](#).

She then held on to him desperately saying: "Shaolong ah, you are Zhao Ya's drop of honey! Please kiss me ok?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart was shattered, and in the midst of his broken and dejected spirit, sealed her scorching lips.

Zhao Ya responded with passion, gasping with hurried breaths.

She then collapsed into Xiang Shaolong's bosom, her lips turning cold.

Only after Xiang Shaolong parted from her lips in shock did he realize that she had stopped breathing.

However, the corners of her mouth betrayed an expression of happiness and satisfaction. Her eyes were lightly closed, looking as if she had just fallen into a deep sleep.

But he knew that she would never awaken again. The reason she was able to survive till today was because she was vigorously striving to see him one last time! With Zhao Ya's death, Xiang Shaolong also felt his past in Handan buried in the current of time.

The three Zhao beauties with whom he had relations had all passed away one after the other. Every incident was a great blow to him. By this time, he had become numb.

He was truly exhausted emotionally.

He had seen the death of Lu Gong and Zhao Ya in a single day. And both had happened so suddenly that he could no longer bear the mental and physical torment. After he handed Zhao Ya's body to Tao Fang to manage, he followed Zhao Ya's last wishes to comfort Zhao Da and the rest. After that, he could endure no more and hid in his room crying bitterly before falling into a deep sleep.

When he awakened, he found Wu Tingfang curled up and asleep in his embrace. He hurriedly woke her and cleaned himself up before rushing towards the palace.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the eighteen guardians guarded his

procession.

His conflict with Lu Buwei was getting more intense and there was danger of assassination at any time. That is why they were extremely careful where ever they went.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is attending court.

Under normal circumstances, a city defense official like him would never have had the opportunity to attend morning court. Fortunately, Xiang Shaolong's other position was Grand Tutor. According to tradition, before the Crown Prince had come of age and with the special permission of the emperor himself, the Grand Tutor could attend court meetings. The moment he stepped through the palace gates, the two brothers Lord Changping and Lord Changwen cut Xiang Shaolong off and pulled him aside to talk.

The two of them were both alarmed and glad, apparently having heard of Lord Changping's candidacy for the position of Left Premier under his instigation.

As everyone dismounted, Lord Changping laughed bitterly and said: "I do not know whether to thank you or to punch you. Crown Prince sought me out late last night to tell me that you had recommended me to replace Premier Xu. Ai, why are you unwilling to take it on yourself? If you are willing to be Left Premier, all of us will support you heart and soul."

Lord Changwen was even a little suspicious and said: "When

elder brother has made a mess of things, it would be obtaining disaster from a blessing."

Teng Yi laughed and said: "These two chaps are usually unafraid of heaven and hell. Unexpectedly they are now afraid of promotion and wealth. Anyone who sees this will be laughing away."

Jing Jun laughed till his belly ached, saying: "The Crown Prince and us will be in the background holding you up. Even if you meet something impossible just act as normal. Whats the worst that could happen?"

Lord Changping angrily said: "Its easy for all of you to speak. Lu Buwei's power spans the court and commoners, everyone is currying his favor, falling over each other to flatter him and speaking his words. Shaolong, you hide away on the side while asking me to oppose him openly. Will I have anymore peace and happiness in the future?"

Xiang Shaolong embraced his shoulders and blandly said: "[Before heaven bestows a heavy responsibility on a person, he must first... Hei! Something about bitterness of the heart](#). Don't worry! Li Si is at the back to help you plan and decide. Lu Buwei has also lost Mo Ao. What are you afraid of? Come! Let us go in."

Thought I'd better explain this one. XSL was starting to quote a saying from Mencius but gave up halfway because he could not remember the rest of it. Maybe Huang Yi himself couldn't be bothered to look it up in its entirety too. For those interested, the saying is '天降大任于斯人也, 必先苦其心志, 劳其筋骨, 饿其体肤, 空乏其身, 行指乱其所为, 所以动心忍性, 曾益其所不能'. It roughly translates to: Before heaven bestows a heavy responsibility on a person, the

person must first suffer bitterness of the heart, toil of the muscles and bones, hunger of the stomach, till the emaciation of his body and upheaval of his life, thereby building his endurance, broadening his knowledge and developing his capabilities.
[Reference.](#)

Lord Changping was unconvinced and said: "Li Si is so busy with official business, where will he find time to help me?"

Xiang Shaolong signaled a goodbye to Teng Yi and dragged Lord Changping and his brother away.

In the midst of the multitude of prostrating officials, Xiao Pan sat on the King's throne with Zhu Ji to the right on the Empress's seat.

The King's dais was split into two levels. Xiao Pan's personal guards were led by Lord Changping and Lord Changwen and formed a line on the lower level reaching the entrance of the palace hall.

Besides the guards, nobody was allowed to carry arms into the hall.

More than seventy civilian court officials and military generals formed up on the two sides in their tidy court regalia. The right row was headed by Lu Buwei followed by Wang Wan, Cai Zhe, Jia Gongcheng, Lord Yunyang Ying Ao, Lord Yiqu Ying Qi and other civilian court officials. Li Si and Lao Ai were in the seventeenth and eighteenth positions respectively. They could already be

counted as fairly high ranking officials.

The other row is headed by Wang Ling, followed by Wang Chi, Meng Ao and Du Bi.

As the Crown Prince's Grand Tutor, Xiang Shaolong was fairly senior and stood just after Du Bi.

Xiao Pan first expressed grief over Lu Gong's death and declared that the funeral would be in seven days and that he would preside over it personally.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that Xiao Pan was calm and unhurried, carrying within him the lofty mettle of the future Qin Shihuang. He was pleased.

Everyone paid obeisance in acknowledgement. Lu Buwei was the first to speak: "Empress Dowager and Crown Prince are wise. Our Great Qin is in troubled times. First was the Eastern region uprising. Next Premier Xu was attacked and murdered within the Wei border. Finally Lu Gong fell ill in worry and anger, and passed away because of this. The sovereign should quickly restore the government and fill the vacancies in order to build a strong state and spread his benevolent rule."

He paused for effect, then continued with a sneer: "Blood debts must be repaid with blood. Else the little kids in the East will think that our Great Qin is incapable!"

Wang Chi shouted in fury: "The Chu people are too much. If they think that they can appease us with Lord Chunshen's severed head and five cantons, they are certainly naive."

All the officials echoed in agreement. The motion had gained vast momentum.

Xiao Pan coldly observed the officials' reactions and said indifferently: "We will put aside the blood debt with Chu for now. There is more to this matter than meets the eye. As for the vacancies left behind by Premier Xu and the Commander-in-Chief, Empress Dowager and I have discussed this and we have made our decision."

Lu Buwei was shocked and looked towards Zhu Ji. Seeing that she remained indifferent, he knew something was wrong. He gravely said: "Even the Chu people have openly acknowledged their culpability in the murder of Premier Xu. What secret is there? Could Crown Prince please explain."

Xiao Pan replied in displeasure: "Your sovereign has just said to put this matter aside for now, did Premier Mentor not hear it?"

These few words were extremely blunt. Lu Buwei's expression changed a little. Exchanging a look with Wang Chi and Meng Ao, he closed his mouth and kept quiet.

Having lost Zhu Ji's support, how would he dare to contradict Xiao Pan?

Wang Chi and the rest couldn't imagine that Xiao Pan would be so unyielding. For a moment they did not dare to say anything.

Since Shang Yang's reform of Qin politics, power had been concentrated in the sovereign. If Zhu Ji does not object, Xiao Pan could do whatever he pleased. Short of fomenting outright rebellion, all subjects had to obey his words as absolute commands.

Xiao Pan was secretly gratified. Ever since Xiang Shaolong left Qin, he had silently endured the pressure from Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei. Now that Xiang Shaolong was back, he felt a sea change in power, both psychologically and in substance. How could he not seize the opportunity to emphasize his sovereignty, cracking down on Lu Buwei to intimidate the pack of court officials.

If he was not such a person, he would not have become the Qin Shihuang in the later years.

The great hall became so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

Zhu Ji spoke for the first time, saying: "The position of Minister of War will be assumed by Great General Wang Ling. Do the subjects have any opinion?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself on hearing this. He mused that Xiao Pan the future Qin Shihuang would never have asked for anyone's opinion.

Wang Chi was from the same clan as Wang Ling and was happy

with what he heard, saying: "Great General Wang Ling is certainly the best candidate." Lu Buwei had originally intended for it to be Meng Ao, but since Zhu Ji had stated her weighty opinion, he had no choice but to abide by it. He couldn't help glaring at Xiang Shaolong ferociously, knowing that it was him behind all this mischief.

Cai Ze acted the senior and bowed, saying: "The post of Left Premier is of great importance. Unless the candidate is virtuous and prestigious, he cannot command the respect of the people. Who is Empress Dowager and Crown Prince's preferred candidate?"

It was Zhu Ji's turn to be struck speechless. This was because if virtue and prestige were the criteria, Lord Changping would be far back in the queue. Xiang Shaolong took a look at Lord Changping who was standing guard on the dais. His head was bowed and he was silent. His face was blushing, betraying his fear and doubt. He knew that if he did not turn the tide now, all the officials would soon echo Cai Ze. Maybe even Zhu Ji would begin to waver too.

With a loud laugh, he said: "Duke Cai is right. Nonetheless this small official thinks that this is still insufficient. In my humble opinion, the candidates eligible for the post of Premier should fulfill three criteria."

Next, he turned towards Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji and bowed, saying: "Empress Dowager and Crown Prince are wise. Will you allow this small official to explain his viewpoint?"

Xiao Pan rejoiced and after asking Zhu Ji for instructions, he

happily ordered: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please speak forthrightly. Do not have any reservations."

Lu Buwei and his faction were all wary in their hearts, but could not prevent him from speaking.

Du Bi's face displayed a sneer. In his standpoint, he would actually rather that the Left Premier post not fall into Lu Buwei's hands.

Even though Wang Chi was leaning towards Lu Buwei, he was finally still a central pillar of the Qin military. He also had a favorable opinion of Xiang Shaolong. That is why as long as what Xiang Shaolong said was reasonable, he would support it.

The situation was exceptionally delicate.

Everyone's attention fell on Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed with a little pride and said: "I am unworthy. Firstly, this person must have sufficient learning to assume this office. Virtue and vision can be cultivated and are not so important at this moment. Take Premier Lu as an example. Everyone knows the circumstances under which he assumed the post of Premier, but is there anyone now who is not convinced in heart and speech? From this you can understand the reasoning behind this small official's first criterion.

Everyone was dumbstruck, the reason being that Xiang Shaolong

has forcibly laid this matter on Lu Buwei's credibility. If anyone objects, it would be akin to challenging Lu Buwei.

Lu Buwei almost burst with rage. He hated most having his past mentioned. Nonetheless this time he found it difficult to speak.

Meng Ao's expression became grave and he laughed coldly, asking: "Could we know what Official Xiang's next two criteria are?"

Xiang Shaolong coolly replied: "The position of Left Premier oversees the largest part of the military chain of command, hence the person must be a high-ranking military officer. Furthermore, to satisfy the hearts of the soldiers, this person must be like Premier Xu, a native-born Qin general. Only thus can he inspire our Great Qin's soldiers to serve willingly and loyally. This criterion is critical and must not be neglected."

These words had as well as eliminated any chance for Wang Wan or Meng Ao to be the Left Premier.

And the only people who could fulfill these two criteria were Du Bi and Wang Chi. Lord Changping fell short by a little bit.

Lu Buwei was green with anger, but could not say anything once again. This was because Xiang Shaolong's logic was irrefutable.

Apart from Wang Chi himself, all the high ranking military officers from native Qin nodded in agreement.

Xiao Pan slapped the table and said: "Well said! Now even I am interested in hearing the third criterion."

Xiang Shaolong first thanked Xiao Pan for his permission before smiling and saying: "The third criterion is that this person must be youthful and promising so as to be able to grow together with the Crown Prince. This will ensure continuity of policies. This argument may be audacious, but there is reason behind it. As long as one thinks carefully, one can see the beauty of it."

In truth this had always been the weakest of Xiang Shaolong's three criteria. The officials erupted immediately, frantically discussing the issue with one another.

Lu Buwei chuckled and said: "Grand Tutor Xiang's last criterion leaves much room for discussion. Who does Grand Tutor have in mind?"

Xiao Pan laughed and said: "Grand Tutor Xiang's words agree with my thinking. Lord Changping, receive the decree!"

The great hall swiftly become silent.

Lord Changping ran out and prostrated himself below the dragon steps.

Xiao Pan solemnly pronounced: "From this day forward, Lord Changping will be my Great Qin's Left Premier. My decision is

final. The officials shall not quibble over this nor shall they have another opinion!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed in his heart and without even sparing the livid Lu Buwei a look, he led the court in kneeling in acknowledgement of the Crown Prince's order.

What had been an impossibility had become reality just like that.

The pivotal move was obtaining Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's support. With this, Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's faction had also openly and irrevocably severed relations with Lu Buwei.

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Book 17 Chapter 04 – Gold Upon The City Gates

On the same day that Lord Changping assumed the position of Left Premier, Prince Dan led his men back to Yan. Xiang Shaolong asked Liu Chao and Pu Bu to lead City Cavalry troops in escort, preventing any conspiracy from Lu Buwei.

As they parted reluctantly, Xiang Shaolong left the city and returned to the ranch to bury Zhao Ya properly. Due to their own mourning, they were obliged by custom to miss Lu Gong's funeral.

By the time everything was settled, ten days had passed. Xiao Pan dispatched messengers three times to urge him back to the city. By now, Xiang Shaolong had gradually nursed himself back from his grief and determined to return to the city the next morning.

Heavy snow had started falling since dusk. After they had said a prayer for Zhao Ya, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran returned to their home shoulder to shoulder.

Ji Yanran grabbed his hand and gently said: "When you return to the city this time, you should first pay Sister Qing a visit, else she is sure to be very unhappy!"

Xiang Shaolong as startled: "Have you seen her?"

Ji Yanran nodded, saying: "I did see her! She also knows about Madam Ya's passing, if not she would not have forgiven you."

Xiang Shaolong replied in distress: "Didn't you forbid me from touching your Sister Qing? Why are you encouraging me to look for her now?"

Ji Yanran sighed serenely saying: "Maybe its because of my love and respect for her! I think she is losing her self control with you. Else she would not have lowered her noble self to come here looking for you the day after we returned. Of course she pretended it was just to see me, but on learning that you had gone to the court meeting, her entire being became listless. Ai! I do not know what to say."

The moment they stepped into the rear garden, there was a flash and Shan Rou had cut off the two people.

The two of them received a fright and let go of their hands.

Shan Rou reached out her hand and pinched Ji Yanran's cheek and displayed an enchanting smile, saying: "Beautiful girl! This girl wants to borrow your husband for a while!"

Ji Yanran did not expect to be teased by Shan Rou and did not know whether to laugh or be angry. She said in annoyance: "If you want to borrow then borrow! Am I Ji Yanran that possessive?" With a lovely laugh, she left.

Shan Rou took the initiative and pulled Xiang Shaolong's hand and coming to a little pavilion in the inner garden, she turned and hugged him tightly. She heaved a sigh and said: "Xiang Shaolong! I

am leaving!"

Xiang Shaolong hoarsely cried: "What?"

Shan Rou pushed him away and turning her lovely body around, said with some irritation: "I've said it so clearly, didn't you hear? I am leaving!"

Xiang Shaolong moved forward and hugged her little petulant waist, somberly saying: "Where is Sister Rou going?"

Shan Rou heaved another sigh. Shaking her head, she said: "Please don't ask, ok? In short I will be returning to Qi tomorrow. I can't be sure that I will be back to see you in the future."

Xiang Shaolong recalled the words she had said when they were in Chu. Then she had denied it as a lie, but going by the present circumstance, it could be true after all. Thinking about the reasons she would throw herself into another man's embrace, he could not help but be dejected. Still, he could not do anything and could only remain speechless for a while.

Shan Rou quietly said: "Why are you not talking? Are you angry with me?!"

Xiang Shaolong released the hand he had looped around her and laughed bitterly saying: "What right do I have to be angry with you? Sister Rou should do whatever she wants to do! I could I Xiang Shaolong interfere?"

Shan Rou turned around like a tornado and looped her arms round his neck, both her eyes displaying deep emotion. With a gentleness that she has never shown before, she said: "Let Zhi Zhi represent me in service of you, but tonight I Shan Rou will belong to you Xiang Shaolong. I will listen to commands and run your errands. At the same time I want you to remember that Shan Rou will never forget Xiang Shaolong. Its just regretful that Shan Rou has made a promise to someone else. The details have been made known to you earlier."

Xiang Shaolong looked at the flurrying snow outside the pavilion and remembered the tragic Zhao Ya. The pain in his heart covered over his indignation over Shan Rou's leaving. He nodded his head and said: "I understand. Sister should wholeheartedly do what she wants to do! We cannot have everything we want. I Xiang Shaolong am resigned to this fate."

Shan Rou silently leaned into his embrace and for the first time, Xiang Shaolong saw the glistening teardrop rolling in her beautiful eyes.

When he woke the next day, Shan Rou had already left quietly.

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to set aside his longing for her and got up to practice his sword skills.

Ji Yanran excitedly came over with her spear to spar with him. Wu Tingfang, the Tian Sisters and Xiang Bao'er stood at the side cheering. The atmosphere was glad and cheerful.

The Talented Lady Ji's spear technique was certainly accomplished. As the fight developed, even though Xiang Shaolong gave his all in an acrobatic display, he

could not break the power of her spear. Withdrawing his sword, he laughed:

"This kid admits defeat. Fortunately I still have the Flying Dragon Spear that is owed to me. I will go to the Intoxicated Wind Mansion these couple of days to demand it from Wu Fu. I will ask the Talented Lady's advice again."

Ji Yanran held her spear horizontally and laughed, saying: "This house has house rules. If you wish your wife to accompany you for the night, you must dispossess the spear in her hand. Tingfang and the rest will be witnesses."

Wu Tingfang and the rest applauded in glee, as if they would not be happy till they had seen some chaos.

Xiang Shaolong mischievously laughed: "If Talented Lady Ji considers that her opponent was not her husband whose emotions restrained his hand, do you think she will be able to boast on to the world!"

Ji Yanran's jade cheeks burned deep red and she angrily said: "If Xiang Shaolong is this kind of petty despicable person, even if I surrender my body, I will not be happy in my heart."

Xiang Shaolong knew that her intentions were good, to use this to encourage him to improve his skills diligently. He sobered up

and said: "Relax! I was but cracking a joke! As long as Talented Lady gives me three years, I will be able to succeed"

Ji Yanran's pupils opened wide and she hoarsely said: "Three years?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly and stepped forward, pulling her into his embrace and said soothingly: "Even three days is too long for me. How could I let the Talented Lady restrain herself in isolation like a widow for three years, ha....."

At this moment, Jing Shan arrived with a report that Wu Yingyuan had returned.

As Xiang Shaolong celebrated, Wu Tingfang had barrelled out to greet him.

As he arrived at the main hall of the master residence, the spirited Wu Yingyuan had been enveloped by Wu Tingfang in a large embrace. Tao Fang was reporting the recent developments to him.

After a round of noise and excitement, Wu Yingyuan carried Xiang Bao'er and sat down beside Xiang Shaolong and Tao Fang to talk. Wu Tingfang automatically massaged her father's tired shoulders. The hall was brimming with familial warmth and affection.

After Wu Yingyuan said a few sentences of praise to Xiang

Shaolong, he laughed and said: "This trip I visited the distant northern lands and saw that the land that Wu Zhuo has been working on is truly a blessed paradise. The terrain is superior, with abundant water and lush greenery. Wu Zhuo has constructed a large ranch and has also received a few minority tribes who have been oppressed by the barbarians as resident workers. The whole effort is progressing steadily, but more manpower is needed else we cannot deal with the barbarians."

Xiang Shaolong said: "I too have this intention. This is because Wang Jian will be posted back to Xianyang soon. Without his assistance, we will have to rely on ourselves for everything."

Wu Yingyuan said: "I have discussed this with Little Zhuo. He needs at least two thousand more men. Is that a problem?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "No problem at all."

Wu Yingyuan relaxed and informed Tao Fang: "Master Tao, please take charge of this. Eventually, I wished to move our Wu Household gradually away from Qin towards the Northern Lands. After all, it is the best place to live and prosper. In the future, we need not worry about politics or power struggles."

After discussing the details further, Xiang Shaolong led his wives and the Guardians back to Xianyang City.

Back at the city, he headed to the palace first to visit Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was delighted to see him again and received him as usual in the Imperial Study. After seating themselves, he started: “Lian Po has been sacked.”

Although it was within expectations, Xiang Shaolong felt some hints of despair. From now onwards, Zhao will be controlled by Guo Kai and Pang Nuan. At the same time, he wondered about Li Mu’s fate.

Xiao Pan appears to have a great dislike for Lian Po. With this burden off his chest, he added: “Without Lian Po, Zhao is akin to having lost half of their fighting ability. If Li Mu is gone too, it will be the end of Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he harbours deep hatred for the people of Zhao which is something beyond his control. In a deep voice, he inquired: “Did they kill Lian Po?”

Xiao Pan plainly state: “Lian Po is a wise strategist. The minute he sensed something was wrong, he immediately led his kinsmen and escaped to Daliang City together. I heard that he had fallen ill due to his anger at the Zhao politicians. Ai! Age is catching up on him and he is just a shade of his former glory.”

Xiang Shaolong’s spirits sank.

Xiao Pan sighed: “Unfortunately, Li Mu is still fighting a successful battle against the Xiong Nu at the northern border. It seems like he will still enjoy a prolonged period of prosperity. As long as he is around, we cannot afford to attack Zhao and can only

focus our armies on Han and Wei.”

Remembering his old friends Han Chuang, Han Feizi and Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong felt even worse.

He was most concerned about Lord Longyang and expressed: “If Lian Po is helping Wei, it will not be so easy to attack them.”

Misunderstanding his intention, Xiao Pan sniggered: “Master need not fret. This is called retribution. Earlier this year, Lian Po had attacked Wei and conquered their Rongyang Province. King Anli of Wei hates him to the core. Now that he has defected to Daliang, it will be a blessing if they did not kill him at sight. Why would they even use him as their defending general?”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Changing the topic, Xiao Pan commented: “Using the water engineer Zheng Guo from Han, Lu Buwei has started building the irrigation canal for more than a year. They planned to divert water from River Jing towards the east and merge with River Luo in the north. This project has exhausted our resources and manpower, making it hard for us to attack the eastern states. At most, we can only attack Han. Currently, Meng Ao is working hard at recruiting and training new soldiers to increase our military strength. I have a suggestion: Why don’t Master lead an expedition personally and accumulate military contributions? This will help to suppress Meng Ao and Wang Ci’s influence.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked. He hurriedly advised: “This is not the best time. If I am gone, Lu Buwei may try something funny in my absence. We had better wait for Lord

Changping to consolidate his influence first.”

Xiao Pan sighed, agreeing that Xiang Shaolong’s words do make sense and did not insist any further. His mood turning better, he laughed: “Thinking about the other day when we coordinated our words during the morning court and suppressed Lu Buwei, I was filled with joy.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Lu Buwei will surely find some other ways to hit back at us. Did he do anything unusual these days?”

Xiao Pan bitterly smiled: “His methods caught me by surprise. On the second day after you left for the farm, that traitor dangled a reward of one thousand taels of gold upon the city gates. He bragged that if anyone can improve on his <<Spring & Autumn Annals of Lu>> by even one word, he will reward the gold to him. This has caused everyone to analyze his works. As Master knows, this book from hell is only his own theories to establish power and compete with my royal authority. This is so infuriating!”

Xiang Shaolong was speechless. This traitor surely knows how to advertise himself to the common population. In this manner, he will indirectly influence the thinking of the Qin population and create doubts about Shang Yang’s reforms which emphasizes on royal authority.

He is from the 21st Century and he understood the powerful effects of mass media influence better than Xiao Pan.

This cannot be easily resolved by force or strength. Reminded

about his beloved Talented Lady Ji, he stood up and promised: “Crown Prince need not panic. Give me some time to think this over. The next time I see you, I will present you with a viable solution.”

Xiao Pan was elated: “I knew that Master will give me a brilliant counter strategy. Please hurry up. I will wait for your good news.”

In actual fact, Xiang Shaolong is making an empty promise and did not have the slightest confidence that Talented Lady Ji will have a good solution too. But in front of this future Qin Shihuang who holds him in such high regard, he could only force himself to accept this task.

Stepping out of the Imperial Study, he thought of Li Si and guessed that he should be able to provide some assistance to counter Lu Buwei’s propaganda too. After all, he is more talented than himself in political theories. With this in mind, he went to look for him.

Li Si was buried in his work. When Xiang Shaolong showed up at his workplace, he happily welcomed him into the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Why are you so busy? Is it related to Lord Changping?”

Li Si settled down in his seat and his face reddened: “I have just finished his work and am now working on my own.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Why does Brother Li appear to be embarrassed about his own work?”

Li Si replied in a soft voice: “Shaolong must not laugh at me. For the past six months, I have been vigorously analyzing Shang Yang’s reforms and spotted several loopholes and weakness in the operations and executions. Thus, I focused my attention and came up with a more suitable management model. If it is utilised, it will improve administration drastically and is extremely favourable to uniting the world in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “Tell me more about it.”

Li Si’s eyes shone brightly and his spirits lifted: “Firstly, there is a weakness regarding the Left and Right Premiers. Both are positions with high authorities and it is hard to define their roles. Whoever that is holding more power can interfere with the other Premier’s work. For example, Lu Buwei is constantly interfering with the Qin military. If we can limit his jurisdiction, we can curb his excessive power and solve the problem of Qin officials holding more authority than the Qin King at the same time.”

Xiang Shaolong slapped his armrest, exclaiming: “I understand. Brother Li can use this to counter the <<Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu>>!”

Li Si nodded: “Exactly. Unfortunately, my powers are limited and can only use this as a discussion topic but cannot implement this into full force to counter Lu Buwei’s theories. Honestly speaking, Lu Buwei’s theories are an amalgamation of the best theories in the world. Despite being on opposing ends, I must admit that he is a

true administrative talent.”

Xiang Shaolong insisted: “Brother Li, tell me more about your theories first.”

Li Si joyfully gushed: “My methods are simple and effective. It is known as Three Premiers Nine Ministers administration. There will be a Chief Premier who will manage the majority of the officials and is in charge of politics. The Left Premier shall be renamed the Military Premier who will be in charge of all military affairs. The Right Premier shall be renamed the Administrative Premier who will manage all administrative affairs and inspections. These three Premiers roles do not overlap and they report directly to the Crown Prince.”

Xiang Shaolong was moved. This Three Premier Nine Ministers method is much more appealing and to think that it was Li Si who created it. No wonder his legacy will last for centuries. At the same time, he can sense that Li Si harboured some selfish motives. The Administrative Premier is a role he created for himself in the future. He calmed down after accepting the fact that all men are selfish and seek personal gain at the end of the day.

Li Si continued: “The majority of the nine ministers refers the existing official positions that are already present in the Qin court but with their roles more clearly defined. The three Premiers are in charge of helping the King rule the country and the day to day running of the country is still left to these ministers. They include the Rewards Minister, Ceremonial Minister, Health Minister, Defence Minister, Religious Minister, Entertainment Minister, Transportation Minister, Culture Minister and Construction

Minister. The Palace Guards, Imperial Infantry and Imperial Cavalry shall be combined into one army under the control of the Defence Minister. This will avoid the internal conflicts between these three armies.”

Xiang Shaolong can tell that Li Si is putting so much effort into explaining these to him so that he can in turn present them to Xiao Pan.

He was willing to do this favour for Li Si as it is beneficial to Qin too. He nodded: “Brother Li please prepare your work well. When I enter the palace later, I will present these theories to Crown Prince.”

Li Si jumped up for joy: “You are truly my best friend and confidante. If Crown Prince is willing to adopt my theories, all my years of hard work will not be in vain.”

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and left merrily. He is more confident than anyone that this theory will be adopted. Otherwise, he would not have heard about this method when he was still in the 21st century.

Book 17 Chapter 05 – The Beginning Of The Five Elements Theory

Passing by the Qin Residence, Xiang Shaolong can feel his entire body itching to see its owner. Finally, he succumbed to his desire.

Every family warrior guarding the gate knew about his special relationship with Qin Qing and invited him to enter the residence without announcing his arrival.

The housekeeper Uncle Fang escorted him into the main hall and was about to inform Qin Qing when Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I am just passing by. Let me just say Hi to her.” After enquiring about her whereabouts, he entered the corridor and walked towards the rear chambers.

A few pretty maids were playing with the snow in the garden. Chancing upon Xiang Shaolong, they whispered and giggled among themselves before pointing him towards Qin Qing.

Crossing over the door ledge into the eastern chamber, he saw Qin Qing leaning towards the table at an angle. Dressed in a pale green dress and a purple shawl embroidered with phoenixes, her hair was tied up neatly in a bun with a few strands of hair hanging loosely. The loose strands of hair made her even more mesmerizing coupled with her flawless beauty. Even with Xiang Shaolong’s strong willpower, he was stunned at this display before him.

With one hand holding a piece of cloth and the other sewing with

a needle and thread, Qin Qing was fixated in her work.

Never in her wildest dreams did she expect Xiang Shaolong to appear suddenly before her. Shocked, she frantically tidied her hair and sat upright, chirping: “Ai, it is you!”

Witnessing her enchanting movements, Xiang Shaolong was aroused and stepped forward, sitting down beside her. Almost touching her lap, he leaned forward and greeted: “Hello Grand Tutor Qin! Please forgive me for visiting you after such a long delay.”

Qin Qing leaned backwards and put more distance between their two faces but did not find fault with him. She almost wanted to whine out but held back, making her even sexier.

Xiang Shaolong noticed the embroidery in her hands and she somehow tried to hide it from his prying eyes. Curious, Xiang Shaolong asked: “What picture is Grand Tutor embroidering?”

Qin Qing’s neck became burning hot instantly and she lowered her head, whining: “Will Official Xiang please watch your own behaviour? How can you sit right beside me at the same table without asking for permission? ” Xiang Shaolong guessed that her embarrassment came about because the embroidery is possibly linked to him. His heart filled with sweetness, he gently coaxed: “I am only here to pay my respects and have to take my leave now. If I have offended you, it is just for a short period anyway. Please forgive me for this temporary rudeness.”

Qin Qing seriously state: “You! You had to barge in like this and caught me in a dishevelled state.”

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward slightly to enjoy her body fragrance and smiled: “I beg to differ. Had I not barged in, I would not be able to see the intoxicating side of you.”

Qin Qing regained her usual icy composure but her face is still slightly red. Standing up and away from the other side of the table, she placed her embroidery into a painted box near her. She carefully and delicately arranged everything in the box neatly before shutting it. Xiang Shaolong came up to her side and imitated her posture, softly asking: “I have returned safely. Are you happy?”

From his angle, he can enjoy the features of this ancient beauty and was swept off his feet. Naturally, his words carry a hint of teasing.

Qin Qing kept quiet for some time before turning around to shoot him a look. She slowly sighed: “I thought Official Xiang has something else to do? Don’t waste your precious time here.”

These two sentences are as good as pouring a bucket of ice water over Xiang Shaolong’s head. Xiang Shaolong immediately snapped out of his stupor and his passion fizzled out. After a short daze, he can no longer stand the awkward silence between the two of them and with some anger; he nodded and paid his respects. He furiously strode towards the door and swore to never step into the Qin Residence again.

Before he can cross the door ledge, Qin Qing softly whistled: “Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong stood still and coldly snorted: “What else does Grand Tutor Qin want now?!”

Footsteps sounded softly as Qin Qing came up to his back. Her gentle voice filled his ears: “Are you angry?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “If it was you, would you be happy?”

Qin Qing went around him to his front and plainly state: “Of course not but do you realise that your behaviour is simply disrespectful!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big revelation. All along, Qin Qing had misunderstood him. As she has many spies in the palace, she must have thought that he and Zhu Ji share a special relationship which makes Zhu Ji support him wholeheartedly. She was mistaken that he had used his charm to seduce Zhu Ji and despised him for that. Therefore, she becomes cold and unfeeling towards him.

He shook his head and smiled bitterly: “Grand Tutor Qin thinks too lowly of me. Forget it! You are free to believe whatever you wish. I am used to being misunderstood by you anyway.” Ignoring her wailing, he left the Qin residence in a huff.

Just as he left the Qin Residence with the Eighteen Guardians, he ran headlong into Ying Ying and several of her female warriors.

Both their entourage stopped beside the main road. With a guilty conscience, Ying Ying awkwardly greeted: “Hello Official Xiang! Why didn’t you visit me despite having returned such a long time ago?”

Xiang Shaolong is in a bad mood and he knew that Ying Ying is still fooling around with Guan Zhongxie. Unwilling to humour her, he coldly replied: “Will you be free if I visited you?” Paying no further attention to her, he slapped his horse and left.

Back at the Wu Residence, he quickly searched for Ji Yanran.

Talented Lady Ji had just completed her two favourite tasks: Taking a short nap and having a hot water shower after the nap. Smelling sweetly, she was seated on a small armchair and leaning on a soft cushion. She was slightly covered by a light blanket and was reading quietly. A jade flute was resting on her bosom and it was a sight to behold.

Seeing her, Xiang Shaolong forgot all the unhappiness he encountered today and slipped into her blanket and her bosom without her consent. Ji Yanran smilingly put down her book and allowed Xiang Shaolong to soak in her fragrance. She slowly asked: “What problems did you have today? You have such a long face.”

Xiang Shaolong let out a comfortable sigh and explained to her about Lu Buwei hanging a thousand taels of gold at the City gates.

Ji Yanran furrowed her brows slightly and crossed her legs. Pushing some loose strands of hair behind her ears, she simply replied: “This is a powerful method by Lu Buwei to create the impression that he is the new saint. It is not impossible to counter him. Ai! Can you please stop kissing me there? How can I think straight with this distraction?”

Xiang Shaolong moved his greedy lips away from her neck and sat upright unwillingly. Scrutinizing her well-defined eyes, he cheered: “I knew you would have a good plan.”

Ji Yanran shot him a look and her eyes twinkled with joy. She added: “I have read the Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu and it is truly a masterpiece. Its only loophole is that it is heavily plagiarised from the works of others. Compared to godfather, he is way below. Its weakness is its impracticability. If I recite his Five Elements theory, Lu Buwei’s work will seem like child’s play.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “I thought godfather’s work is just something used to predict the future? How can it be used to counter the Annals?”

Leaning into his bosom, Ji Yanran cutely giggled: “Hubby is so muddle-headed and adorable at the same time. Lu Buwei is promoting his Annals to portray himself as a new saint and suppress the influence of the Qin King over the population. All we need to do is to explain the theories of the Five Elements. For example, Zhou is Fire Element and Qin is Water Element. Water extinguishes Fire so Qin will unite the world for sure. We will immortalize Crown Prince into the Leader of the era and Lu Buwei

can only pale in comparison.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic and carried the fragrant and helpless Ji Yanran in his arms, laughing: “Talented Lady Ji shall now accompany me into the palace.”

Ji Yanran protested: “I am so relaxed now; can we enter the palace tomorrow instead?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “No! The wife should follow her husband. Talented Lady Ji must leave with me immediately.”

While they are still bickering, Tian Zhen came to report that Qin Qing is here.

Ji Yanran struggled out of his bosom and kissed him: “You go ahead and welcome Sister Qin. I need to get changed in order to enter the palace with you! After all, it is just my luck to marry a husband like you!” Laughingly, she slipped away.

When Xiang Shaolong stepped into the main hall, Qin Qing is seated with her back to the scenic garden that was covered with a blanket of white snow. It was an elegant portrayal that highlights her aristocracy and purity.

Coming up to her back, Xiang Shaolong was feeling apologetic, knowing that he had been too narrow minded, causing her to come all the way here to find him. He lightly apologised: “I’m sorry!”

Qin Qing's delicate frame trembled slightly and she took two deep breaths to suppress her emotions. In a peaceful manner, she declared: "Xiang Shaolong! The reason I come all the way here today is to clarify something with you."

All Xiang Shaolong wanted to do was to grab her tender shoulders and pull her into his bosom but Qin Qing has this aura of innocence and purity that creates an intangible gap between them, forcing him to resist this temptation.

He sighed: "If you are here to appease me with some insincere words, you can save it. I will not deceive myself any longer. I hope you will do the same. Ha!"

Qin Qing turned her body around. With her eyes shining, she wailed loudly: "When did I say anything insincere to you?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that they are now even closer to each other after the last misunderstanding. Qin Qing is easily offended by his gestures because she has been chaste for a very long time. He suitably offered: "That's good. Yanran and I are entering the palace to visit the Crown Prince. Does Grand Tutor Qin want to come along?"

Forgetting about her own affair, Qin Qing was taken by surprise: "What is it that requires you to get Sister Yanran involved?"

Ji Yanran happened to come up to them in her outdoor clothes. Speaking as they walked, they boarded the horse carriage and entered the palace.

Everyone of importance in Xiao Pan's circle of trust was assembled in the Imperial Study. They include Xiang Shaolong, Li Si, Lord Changping, Wang He, Qin Qing and of course Ji Yanran. Together, they are here to listen to Talented Lady Ji's explanation of the Five Elements Theory.

Seated at the head of the seats on Xiao Pan's right, Ji Yanran spoke out in her usual charming manner: "The Five Elements are in continuous motion and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. They submit to the Chosen One. The person who unites the world will possess one of the elements. The Five Elements are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. Each element will shine for some time before it diminishes and be replaced by the rise of another element. The Yellow Emperor is Earth Element. Wood counters Earth. Xia Yu is the Wood Element. Metal counters Wood. Shang Tang is the Metal Element. Fire counters Metal. King Zhou Wen is the Fire Element. Now, the Zhou Dynasty is in decline. The next element to come into power is the Water Element which counters the Fire Element."

His eyes shining with curiosity, Xiao Pan repeated: "Water counters Fire! Water counters Fire!"

Playing on the safe side, Wang He questioned: "I acknowledged the brilliance of Zou Yan's philosophies but it is still a theory that is only professed by him alone. Is there any other evidence?"

Ji Yanran's eyes rotated with charm. Every man in the room including Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were intoxicated.

As if she is stating a fact, Ji Yanran explained: “The Five Elements have already been mentioned in the Book of Shang; Water nourishes, Fire burns, Wood crafts, Metal tools, Earth constructs. Since the ancient times, there have been six gases and five solids. The five tastes are spicy, sour, salty, bitter and sweet. There are five musical notes Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So. The five main basic colours are white, black, red, yellow and green. The other colours are a mixture of the basic five and they affect one another.”

Seated beside her, Qin Qing mused: “Mencius did mention that a new King will rise every five hundred odd years. The period between Xia Yu and Shang Tang is around five hundred years; the period between Shang Tang and King Zhou Wen is also five hundred years. Now, the rise of Confucius is about five hundred years after Zhou. This must be the rise and fall of the Five Elements.”

Li Si guessed: “Confucius is only a scholar and is not worthy of being referred to as an outstanding King. I believe Crown Prince is the new Ruler of this era.”

Xiao Pan was overjoyed but was concerned that he may not be the New Saint. He frowned: “It is difficult to pinpoint who is the new King every five hundred years. How can we turn this into an argument against Lu Buwei’s propaganda?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Of course we will employed our own propaganda and stake it on the widespread influence of Talented Lady’s Godfather Zou Yan. Who is a better person other than him to pinpoint the New Saint? I am certain everyone will be convinced by his prediction.” Pausing, he seriously added: “We

must use the Five Elements and Official Li's Three Premier Nine Ministers recommendation to overhaul the power of the Qin court. This will stabilise the Crown Prince's authority and prevent Lu Buwei from abusing his power."

Ji Yanran smiled: "This is called 'using one's weapons against oneself'. The Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu is a compilation of works from different philosophers and also contain certain chapters that support Godfather's Five Elements Theory. During the reign of the Yellow Emperor, giant earthworms were sighted and the Earth Element is strong. Earth is yellow which became his nickname. The Water Element will replace the Fire Element. The matching colour of Water is black. We can make use of Lu Buwei's propaganda to turn the tables around and put him down. When that happens, he can only wallow in self pity."

Xiao Pan slapped his armrest and praised: "This is great news indeed."

Still having reservations, Wang He questioned with suspicions: "Talented Lady Ji mentioned that during the reign of the Chosen One, there will be some auspicious sightings. During the Yellow Emperor reign, giant earthworms are sighted and the fire phoenix is sighted during King Zhou Wen's reign. If there is no auspicious sighting for Crown Prince, it is hard to convince the Qin people."

Xiang Shaolong is from the 21st century and knew better than anyone else the powerful effects of marketing and brainwashing the population. Everything can be manipulated to create a sensation. Inspired, he suggested: "This is easy. When the Crown Prince is crossing a river, we will create a Black Dragon that will

appear in the water. It will be exactly like the Loch Ness Monster... Hei! It's nothing. The Dragon only needs to reveal its head and back to be regarded as an auspicious sign for the Crown Prince. After that, everything impossible will become possible."

Lord Changping frowned: "Talk is cheap. If we are discovered, we will be the laughing stock of the world."

Xiang Shaolong recalled that Zhou Wei's elder brother Zhou Liang is a boat expert and the mechanical experts of Ji Yanran's State of Yue. He laughed: "Leave this to me. The Black Dragon only needs to move a bit and sink back into the water to accomplish our mission. I guarantee that no one will see through this ruse."

Xiao Pan burst out laughing: "I shall have to bother Grand Tutor then." Facing Ji Yanran, he continued: "If I am the chosen one, there must be other accompanying evidence. Please help me see to this and act according to plan." His expression turning serious, he declared: "This information is limited to everyone present today. If this is leaked, the offender will be executed with his household."

Everyone accepted his order.

Xiang Shaolong is feeling crazy. He did not expect his conflict with Lu Buwei to involve propaganda and marketing. This is going to be a public relations battle.

Book 17 Chapter 06 – Creating Trouble At The Brothel

After the historical meeting, Lord Changping forcefully dragged Xiang Shaolong away from the reluctant Ji Yanran and Qin Qing. At the Left Premier Residence of Lord Changping, Lord Changwen is already waiting for them patiently.

Once the doors have been secured, Lord Changwen slammed the table and cursed: “Damn that bastard Guan Zhongxie! His charm has caused our sister to be completely bewitched by him. The Crown Prince has informed us through Official Li to take our sister in hand. What shall we do?”

Lord Changping rested his hand on Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and laughed: “I can tell that even Grand Tutor Qin is interested in you; wooing our sister should be an easy task for you. Shaolong must help us win her back from Guan Zhongxie’s influences.”

With Shan Rou’s recent departure, Zhao Ya’s death and the passing of Xu Xian and Lu Gong, Xiang Shaolong has been dealt with one heavy blow after another. Except for Qin Qing, he is no longer bothered with any other woman. Ying Ying is obnoxious and fickle-minded. If he had met her when he first came to this era, they will have a good time together. But after experiencing Lady Ni’s suicide and Zhao Ya’s betrayal, all he seeks is true love.

Lord Changping continued: “I heard rumours that Lu Niang Rong is personally pushing for a rematch between you and Guan Zhongxie. She will only marry him if he defeats you.”

Lord Changwen pleaded: “No matter what, Shaolong must help the two of us this time. If Guan Zhongxie rebels in the future, our sister will be implicated and the consequences are unbearable.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Love cannot be forced. What do you want me to do?”

Lord Changping suggested: “We are now openly opposing Lu Buwei so we might as well go all the way. You must fight and defeat Guan Zhongxie. Our sister will never hang around with a loser and this problem will be resolved automatically.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: “If I defeated Guan Zhongxie to marry Lu Niang Rong, I’d rather concede the fight.”

Lord Changwen laughed: “Relax! Lu Buwei will never marry his favourite daughter to you. You need not fight him openly but just prove yourself to be better than him in one way or another. This will increase your prestige and lower Guan Zhongxie’s. Our sister will then recognise who is the real hero.”

In a begging tone, Lord Changping implored: “The most arrogant people in Xianyang City now are the men from the Premier Mentor Residence. Everyone hates them to the core. If Shaolong can stand up to them, it will be helping the Crown Prince too. In fact, every one of us is waiting for you to come back and lead us against them.”

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to brighten up and bitterly smiled

after some thought: “All right. Reserve a table tonight at the Drunken Wind Brothel and insist on Dan Meimei and Guiyan to be our companions. We shall create a scene there tonight and demand my rightful Flying Dragon Spear at the same time.”

Both men were delighted and hurriedly left to see to the arrangements.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to slip back to the Wu Residence. Whilst inquiring about Zhou Liang, he discovered that he has left to look for the King Eagle and has yet to return despite having left six months ago. Slightly worried, he looked for Zhou Wei instead.

Probably due to the nourishment of Wu Guo’s love, Zhou Wei is looking great and her beauty became even more outstanding. When she met Xiang Shaolong, she retains some sense of awkwardness.

After getting her seated, Xiang Shaolong enquired; “Why is your brother away for so long?”

Zhou Wei explained: “To find the best hunting eagles, elder brother needs to go far to the northern regions. The journey to and back requires at least four months and time is also needed to search for eaglets. Luck plays a part too.”

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed: “I needed his help now, what should I do?”

Zhou Wei brightened up: “I may lack his true expertise but my knowledge is not too shabby too. May I know what kind of assistance do you require?”

Xiang Shaolong suspiciously scanned her confident expression: “You know how to build ships too? It is more than just basic shipbuilding, it is actually... I don’t know what to say.”

Zhou Wei gleefully assured: “Master can speak his mind. Shipbuilding is a strong tradition in our family and the skill is passed on to both males and females. My shipbuilding skills are not inferior compared to my brother.”

It is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to brighten up and he revealed his plans about the Black Dragon.

Zhou Wei frowned heavily upon hearing his plans. After some consideration, she pointed: “It is not difficult to build a submerged vessel but it is hard to provide continuous air supply. If they surfaced to breathe, we will be exposed.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “I thought about this too but it is not something impossible. The human head can be concealed below the skin of the dragon and some breathing holes can be made. Moreover, we will base the dragon far away from shore so it is hard for anyone to expose us. However, this dragon needs to have good buoyancy and must be easy to fix and dismantle underwater. That should be all we need.”

Zhou Wei cheered: “Leave this to me. Ah, this is wonderful; I can

finally contribute something for Master.”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased: “Is Wu Guo treating you well?”

Her cheeks glowing red, Zhou Wei knelt down: “Master, please decide my future for me.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “It is settled then. It is time for Wu Guo to settle down too.”

Returning back to the inner hall, he told Wu Tingfang about Wu Guo and Zhou Wei’s marriage. Wu Tingfang is more than happy and took up the heavy responsibility of arranging their marriage.

Xiang Shaolong played with Xiang Bao’er for a while and heaped praises on Ji Yanran before taking a shower with the Tian sisters. He then head back to the Cavalry Command Centre.

Regardless of rank and experience, every Cavalry soldier is full of respect for Xiang Shaolong for his heroics. Everyone greeted him most sincerely.

Back at his office, Jing Jun was nowhere to be found.

Teng Yi explained: “Little Jun has gone to look for Lu Dan’er. Ai, I nearly forgot. He wanted me to beg you to propose marriage on his behalf. I think he is taking this relationship very seriously!”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “As long as Lu Dan’er does not object, it shouldn’t be an issue. But Wang He should propose marriage instead of me given the prestige of the Lu Family is Xianyang City.”

Teng Yi agreed: “Lu Dan’er is now madly in love with Little Jun so she will never object. It is best that you propose marriage with Wang He. This will prove our sincerity in uniting these two lovebirds.”

Sitting down, Xiang Shaolong nodded in consent.

Teng Yi updated: “I have assigned favourable positions to Zhao Da and his brothers which Lord Changping has gladly approved. We are fortunate to have him as our Left Premier; otherwise, it will be difficult for us to get anything done.”

Xiang Shaolong twinkled: “We have a more powerful method to undermine Lu Buwei’s authority.” He went on to detail his plan about the fake dragon.

Teng Yi praised: “This method is better than beating him up. Since he hanged the gold reward upon the city gates, I have been taking precautions against a rebellion. This plan should be carried out as soon as possible. When do you plan to execute this?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Immediately after the dragon event, we can proceed to change the court administration. It is best to wait for the Spring Festival. So we have to produce our dragon within these two months.”

Teng Yi commented: “It is not advisable to let Guan Zhongxie be the Imperial Infantry Commander. We should remove him from this post as soon as possible. Little Jun has told me that the people of the Premier Mentor Residence are running amok and oppressing the common folks all because of Guan Zhongxie shielding them. This is so infuriating.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled the good old days in the 21st century when he was creating trouble and getting into fights too. He laughed: “They think they are tough? We’ll show them who calls the shots. Is Second Brother free tonight to join me in creating a scene at the Drunken Wind Brothel?”

Teng Yi burst out laughing and happily nodded: “My hands are itching already and I have been training hard over the past six months. I would have challenged Guan Zhongxie to a duel myself if not for you.”

Checking the sky, Xiang Shaolong decided: “We shall meet at the brothel two hours later. Now, I am going to speak to Meng Ao privately. If I can turn him against Lu Buwei, it will be an additional bonus.”

After dismissing his attendants, Meng Ao stared at Xiang Shaolong for a moment and sighed: “If Official Xiang is here to say anything negative about Premier Mentor, you can save the trouble.”

Pausing for a while, his eyes shone with a tinge of apology before he plainly added: “I am a Qi native and am heavily discriminated in Qin. Wherever I go, I was ridiculed and suffered numerous

humiliations. It is only when I work for Premier Mentor did I have the chance to hold my head up high again. My gratitude for him is tremendous. He may be unscrupulous but given all that he has done for me, even if he wants me and my two sons to die for him, I will not have the slightest resistance. If not for Shaolong doing your best to protect my two sons, I will not let you take a single step into my General Residence. But this is the last time too.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “So General knows about that incident.”

With pain shooting out of his eyes, Meng Ao slowly nodded: “I did interrogate Meng Wu and Meng Tian about the ambush along the river. Naturally, I knew that something is amiss. It is a past event now and I do not wish to bring the past up. Grand Tutor Xiang, I won’t see you out!”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to be so fiercely loyal to Lu Buwei. Angered, he stood up and simply warned: “To each his own. I do not want to force you but I should tell you that you need to draw a line between your loyalty to Qin and your loyalty to Lu Buwei. Otherwise, all your descendants will not be spared. Goodbye!” Finishing, he strode in large steps towards the main door.

Meng Ao roared: “Hold it!”

Xiang Shaolong held his step and coldly challenged: “You want me to leave my head behind?”

Meng Ao stood up and remarked in a deep voice: “I differentiate between gratitude and grudges and I detest lowly behaviour too. Premier Mentor may be greedy for power but it is to safeguard his life too. According to history, every foreigner who becomes the Premier of Qin suffers a fate worse than death. Premier Mentor was forced to do what he had to do. If Shaolong can let go of the past, I can persuade Premier Mentor to...”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and bitterly laughed: “It is too late. Ever since he murdered Princess Qian and the rest, our debt can only be settled with blood. Moreover, he poisoned King Zhuangxiang, assassinated Xu Xian and caused Lu Gong to die of anger. Now, he has incurred the wrath of the Crown Prince and the Qin Military. General Meng better pray that he succeeds in his rebellion. Otherwise, your entire household will be executed. I have said my piece and any more words are unnecessary.”

Apparently, Meng Ao has no idea that Lu Buwei is behind King Zhuangxiang and Xu Xian’s death. His face changing colour, he stammered: “What did you say?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loudly and his laughter carried utmost grief. Ignoring Meng Ao, he stepped out of the house.

Human silhouettes suddenly appeared. The two brothers Meng Wu and Meng Tian leapt out from his left and right respectively. Kneeling down in front of him, they cried out in unison: “Grand Tutor!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Are you eavesdropping on us?”

Their eyes red, they nodded their heads furiously.

Xiang Shaolong went forward and helped them up, whispering: “You must never let your father know about this. Come and look for me after a few days!” He then left.

Entering the Drunken Wind Brothel, a middle-aged woman who still maintain her complexion fairly well came up to him. Accompanied by four maids, she joyfully welcomed: “Welcome Official Xiang! I am Chunhua (Spring Flower).”

The four maids stepped forward and helped to take off his coat as part of their premium customer service.

Xiang Shaolong plainly questioned: “Has Brothel Owner Wu passed away due to sickness? Why didn’t he welcome me personally?”

Chunhua replied awkwardly: “He is indeed unwell and is resting at home. He should be fine after a couple of days of rest.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed to himself, knowing that Wu Fu has intentionally avoided him and went to beg Lu Buwei to protect his life and business. Turning to the Guardians, he bellowed: “Brothel Owner Wu is treating today. Please go ahead and have as much fun as possible but do remember not to consume any poisonous food or wine.”

Jing Shan and the rest understood his intentions and cheered loudly in unison, squeezing into the inner chambers of the brothel. Chunhua hurriedly ordered more staff to attend to them and at the same time protested in fear: “Official Xiang must be joking. How can there be any poison in our food and wine?”

Keeping his cool, Xiang Shaolong shot back: “You have to ask Miss Guiyan that question. Is she sick too?”

Chunhua lowered her head and softly answered: “She has been reserved by Official Guan and will only accompany him tonight. I have already told Lord Changping.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “So Dan Meimei has been reserved by Premier Mentor?”

Chunhua panicked: “She was reserved by Official Lao.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and coldly snorted: “I will ask them about this personally. Meanwhile, you better tell Brothel Owner Wu that if I do not see him within one hour, I will close down this brothel and this day next year will be his death anniversary. Hng!”

Sniggering to himself, he strode forward in large steps.

Her face totally devoid of colour, a trembling Chunhua walked in front to guide him.

The banquet destination today is on the second floor of the main brothel building which is also the most luxurious area of the brothel. Unlike the isolated dining building, the second floor holds twenty over tables and is similar to the modern wedding ballroom except that it is much more spacious.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived, more than ten tables are already occupied with numerous people in flamboyant clothes and it was a boisterous scene.

There is a fireplace in every corner of the hall, making the place warm and cosy.

Upon seeing Xiang Shaolong, nearly half of those present rose and paid their respects.

Xiang Shaolong scanned the room quickly and discovered that Guan Zhongxie and Lao Ai are also seated at the VIP area. It may be a simple coincidence or some prearrangement that their two tables are located on the left and right of Lord Changping's table.

What really pissed him off is that Ying Ying is actually seated at Guan Zhongxie's table. With Guiyan, she was seated right beside Guan Zhongxie.

Ying Ying apparently did not expect to see Xiang Shaolong in such a place. Flustered, she lost her bearings and did not dare to face him.

Xiang Shaolong bore a new hatred, knowing that Guan Zhongxie purposely brought her here to make the Changping brothers and him look bad.

He laughed loudly and waved his hand to show his appreciation at the show of respect. As he walked towards his own table, he noticed Jing Jun was present too and was busy winking at him.

Leaving his companion Dan Meimei, Lao Ai welcomed Xiang Shaolong with a smile: "A rare visitor indeed! I never imagine that I will ever meet Official Xiang in a place like this."

Xiang Shaolong intimately held his arm and pulled him to a nearby fireplace, smiling: "Let me make a wild guess first, Official Lao must have suddenly received Dan Meimei's invitation so you made the trip here tonight. Am I right?"

Lao Ai was blown away: "How in the world did you know that?"

Xiang Shaolong casually replied: "It's easy. I am here tonight to settle some scores with Wu Fu. Dan Meimei and Guiyan are implicated too so they must quickly find someone else to accompany them. If I come into conflict with Official Lao, then we will both fall into Dan Meimei and Lu Buwei's trap. Official Lao should understand what I mean!"

Lao Ai was slightly dazed for a while before gritting his teeth: "How dare that bitch make use of me! I will make her pay for this!"

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and comforted: “Do not get agitated. I just want you to understand. Tonight, based on our friendship, I will not make things difficult for Dan Meimei. Friend, just enjoy your wine!”

Passing by Lao Ai’s table, Dan Meimei lowered her head and did not even dare to steal a peep at him.

Seated at the same table are some men who appear to be newly recruited by Lao Ai. They are quite respectful of Xiang Shaolong and their female companions are all eyeing him seductively.

Xiang Shaolong stopped at the table and greeted everyone. He held back his laughter: “After being away for six months, it seems that Meimei has forgotten all about me.”

His expression turning ugly, Lao Ai sat down beside Dan Meimei again and hissed: “This is her biggest flaw which is bad memory. No matter what she does, she will forget about it in an instant.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Lao Ai is unhappy with Dan Meimei mainly because Dan Meimei did not tell him that she is quite close to Lu Buwei.

Dan Meimei’s tender frame shook slightly and she raised her delicate face, staring at Xiang Shaolong in fear. She begged: “Official Xiang is a powerful figure. I am sure you will not begrudge a weak girl like me. I will be grateful for your kindness towards me.”

Xiang Shaolong obviously knew that she is putting on an act but find it hard to bully her any further. Smirking, he left for his own table.

Guan Zhongxie stood up immediately and laughed: “How can Official Xiang practise favouritism and not come over to our table for an idle chat too?”

Xiang Shaolong swept his gaze over his table. Except for Ying Ying, Guiyan and the serving maids, there is Zhou Zihen, Lu Chan and three new swordsmen. They must be newly recruited by Lu Buwei.

Judging by their strong concentration and muscular body, all three are top swordsmen.

Ying Ying lowered her head even further. On the other hand, Guiyan smiled charmingly as if she had never poisoned him before.

Xiang Shaolong winked at Teng Yi and the rest before he went over to Guan Zhongxie’s table.

All the men stood up and greeted him.

Guan Zhongxie smiled: “Let me introduce these three new top swordsmen to you. This is Xu Shang from Shangcai in Chu. He is the number one swordsman there.”

Shangcai is a military stronghold northwest of Chu. To be the

number one swordsman there is not easy. Xiang Shaolong could not help but assess this twenty-odd year old tall and handsome swordsman.

Clasping his hands, Xu Shang greeted: “I have long heard of Commander Xiang’s famous name. In the future, I must seek your guidance.”

Besides him, a stout and beefy man filled with a strong killing aura greeted: “I am Lian Jiao from Wei.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “That makes you and Official Guan fellow countrymen.”

His eyes shining with cold killing energy, Lian Jiao icily revealed: “Lian Jin is my younger brother.”

Guan Zhongxie interrupted: “Official Xiang must not be mistaken. Lian Jiao may be Lian Jin’s brother but he only has respect for you for defeating Lian Jin.”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes flashed over Lian Jiao and he did not reply.

The final man is tall and thin with a face like a monkey. Among the three men, he is the most collected. He coolly state: “I am Zhao Pu, a Qi native. I was originally serving Prince Xinling in Wei but that was after Official Xiang went to Daliang.”

Guiyan encouraged: “Why don’t Official Xiang sit down and join us? I can have the honour of toasting you again!”

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loudly: “Miss Guiyan truly loves to joke. We all know that a wise man will not repeat his mistakes. How can I repeat my mistake then?”

Turning to Guan Zhongxie, he commented: “Official Guan’s timing is perfect. The minute you know that I am coming here tonight, you immediately reserved Miss Guiyan. I think you should bring her home and add her to your private collection. That way, there is no way I can win you.”

Based on Guan Zhongxie’s intelligence and Guiyan’s acting, they were still shocked by Xiang Shaolong’s ‘threatening’ words and their faces lost colour instantly.

Ying Ying could sense the strong animosity between Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie and Guiyan. Shaking uncontrollably, she looked up at Xiang Shaolong’s face.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “How are you Miss Ying!”

Ying Ying’s eyes glowed with fear and her shoulder trembled slightly. She remained silent.

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in her answer at all. He smiled at Guan Zhongxie: “Why isn’t Miss Niang Rong besides Brother Guan as well? I have yet to visit her since my return. I have to

bother Brother Guan to send my regards to her.”

Bursting out in laughter, he ignored the hideous expressions of Ying Ying, Guan Zhongxie and Guiyan and returned back to Lord Changping’s table.

Book 17 Chapter 07 – Fixing A Duel Date

After Xiang Shaolong got seated, he noticed that Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are seething with anger. First, they are annoyed at Ying Ying's lack of self-respect and secondly, they were displeased at being passed over by Dan Meimei and Guiyan.

At the end of the day, they are members of Qin Royalty. Even if discounting Lord Changping's position as Premier, their posts as the Commanders of the Palace Guards are already one of the most prestigious positions in Xianyang City.

From this, it shows that Lu Buwei is wielding enormous power in Xianyang City.

Supported by Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can still counter him in the Qin Court but in terms of influence and regarding matters outside the palace, Lu Buwei is the undisputable champion.

Among all the ten odd tables that were occupied, only their table does not have any serving maids.

A shaking Chunhua came up to Xiang Shaolong and gingerly offered: "Shall I get Bailei and Yang Yu to accompany your table?"

Among the top courtesans in the Drunken Wind Brothel, Dan Meimei is the best while the next best three are Guiyan, Bailei and Yang Yu. Lord Changping coldly barked: "Get lost! If Dan Meimei or Guiyan is not coming tonight, the rest of the girls can forget

about coming too.”

Her face turning deathly pale, Chunhua frantically retreated.

Teng Yi icily shot a look at Guan Zhongxie’s table and state in a deep voice: “Guan Zhongxie is here with an ulterior motive. He is out to make us look bad.”

Jing Jun leisurely added: “They have another twenty odd men downstairs who all belong to the arrogant group of men terrorizing the Xianyang commoners. If we can teach them a lesson, everyone will only cheer for us.”

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: “That’s easy. Jing Shan and the rest are drinking downstairs too. You can tell them to stir up trouble and it is a piece of cake.”

Jing Jun was delighted and left to inform them.

Suddenly, a high-pitch protest can be heard from Guan Zhongxie’s table and attracted everyone’s attention. It was Guan Zhongxie hugging Ying Ying and trying to feed her wine. Ying Ying knew that Xiang Shaolong and the others are watching and refused to yield.

Lord Changping knew that Guan Zhongxie is intentionally provoking them and held back his anger.

Lord Changwen was the one who could not hold it any longer.

Standing up, he roared: “Sister! You come over here right now!”

Guan Zhongxie released Ying Ying and folded his arms with a big grin on his face.

Ying Ying stole a look at Xiang Shaolong before lowering her head: “What is it? Let’s talk when we get back home!”

Lord Changping is afraid that matters would escalate. Pulling Lord Changwen down to his seat, he sighed: “This is bullshit.”

Xiang Shaolong enjoyed a sip of wine and lazily comforted: “The more we get agitated, the cockier Guan Zhongxie becomes. Anyway, I already instructed Wu Fu to come and see me within an hour or I will trash him place. That is Guan Zhongxie’s Achilles’ Heel”

Hearing this, the two Lords’ expression became better looking.

Returning back to his seat, Jing Jun shot Ying Ying an eye and whispered: “Dan’er told me before that this precious sister of our two brothers here is actually in a dilemma. She really loves Third Brother but was afraid of loneliness. Moreover she loves to play and ran into this Casanova. Coupled with Third Brother’s absence, she became more and more intertwined with Guan Zhongxie. Look at her eyes if you disbelieve me, there are more pain than joy in them!”

Lord Changping angrily swore: “I just had a big fight with her

yesterday. Hei! I am going to be a good Left Premier and do whatever I can to counter Lu Buwei. Let's see how he dies in the end."

Xiang Shaolong checked: "Have you transferred Wang Jian back to the Capital?"

Lord Changwen reported: "It is still being rejected by Lu Buwei. Wang He is also supporting this but was suppressed by Lu Buwei's Meng Ao and Wang Ci. They said that the Xiong Nu are still active and it is better to be safe than sorry. Empress was frightened at hearing this and dare not support Crown Prince so this issue has been dragging on."

Jing Jun groaned: "Huan Yi is worse off! Military spending is controlled by Lu Buwei and his budget has been compromised here and there, restricting his work performance. We must quickly solve this problem for him."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Have more patience! When the Black Dragon appears, it will be the start of his decline. By then, he will be too busy countering Lao Ai."

Lord Changwen and Jing Jun do not know anything about the Black Dragon and enquired further.

Teng Yi affirmed: "Let's talk about this later!" Pointing to his back, he laughed: "Third Brother's old friend is here."

Everyone looked to where he is pointing.

True enough, Wu Fu is here.

As he walked over, he greeted and mingled with the other guests as usual without any fear. He seems to be confident with the backing of Guan Zhongxie.

Passing by Lao Ai's table, this fellow displayed even more intimacy but at Xiang Shaolong's table, he stood a distance away and reported: "After knowing that Official Xiang is looking for me, I underwent a miracle recovery. Ai! I have let you down as the Spear was being stolen at night and that is the reason for my sickness."

Everyone glanced at one another after hearing his words, thinking that this man is outrageously irresponsible. But this must be Lu Buwei's and Guan Zhongxie's idea to not let Xiang Shaolong have the spear no matter what. Without their support, Wu Fu will never display such insolence.

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: "Since the treasure is lost, I have the responsibility to investigate this crime. Brother Owner Wu must now come back with me to the Command Centre and provide all the evidence. I will get my Cavalry Army to get the Spear back at all costs."

Wu Fu's face lost some colour and could foresee his own death at the Command Centre. He hurriedly countered: "I appreciate Commander Xiang's efforts but I have decided not to pursue this

matter. Moreover, it was stolen on the night I presented it to you and it is more than six months ago.”

Jing Jun barked: “How dare you! The Spear belongs to Commander Xiang and who are you to decide if this matter should be pursued or not? You are obviously trying to make things difficult for us. You must have had a hand in this matter and is now trying to cover your tracks.”

Lord Changping coldly interjects: “According to the Great Laws of Qin, failure to report a crime is punishable by execution. Brothel Owner Wu is showing disrespect to our laws and is hiding this crime. This is unforgivable and death is too light for you.”

All the colour gone from his face, Wu Fu’s legs turned to jelly and he kneeled down on the ground but his eyes were looking at Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie did not expect Xiang Shaolong and company to turn Wu Fu’s words against himself. Standing up, he offered: “As the Imperial Infantry Commander, I am in charge of all matters within the City. Will Official Xiang please hand this matter to me and I will give you a satisfactory reply.”

Everyone in the hall can feel the animosity in the air. All the activities have stopped and everyone is paying attention to the proceedings.

The hall is completely silent and the atmosphere is filled with Guan Zhongxie’s domineering voice.

Lord Changping smiled: “Just by looking at the time of the theft, we can deduce that the criminal has something against Official Xiang and there must be a spy involved. Moreover, the spear may have been transported out of the City by now. As Premier, I think Official Xiang must handle this matter personally. Official Guan need not trouble yourself.”

Based on Guan Zhongxie’s calm demeanour, his face did not change colour at all. He knew that Lord Changping is the Left Premier of Qin and is many ranks higher than him. Moreover, he is in charge of the Qin military administration. If Guan Zhongxie continues to speak out, it is equivalent to insubordination.

Because of these factors, Guan Zhongxie was momentarily speechless.

Thinking about his imminent execution, Wu Fu’s teeth begin to chatter and his entire body was shaking.

Ying Ying’s position has always been undefined. Now, she finally realised that Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie are on extreme opposing ends against Xiang Shaolong, her two brothers and the Crown Prince. Stuck in the centre, she was in an awkward situation and could not help but felt regretful.

In this moment, Dan Meimei rose from her seat and came to Wu Fu’s side. Kneeling down too, she declared in a shrill voice: “If the charge is not reporting a known crime, then everyone in this brothel is guilty. Premier and Commander Xiang can punish all of

us.”

Guiyan hurriedly came over and kneeled on the other side of Wu Fu.

Now, it is Lord Changping and the rest who are in a tight situation. It is hard for them to persecute the entire brothel occupants over a petty theft.

Lao Ai is feeling uncomfortable too. After all, Dan Meimei is his woman. If Xiang Shaolong executed her, he would lose face too.

Guan Zhongxie returned back to his seat and there was a cold smirk hanging at the edge of his mouth. He wanted to see how Xiang Shaolong is able to clean up the present mess.

Still maintaining his leisurely and aloof expression, Xiang Shaolong simply state: “There is a debtor behind every debt. Wu Fu is the main instigator behind the entire episode. He was the one who gave me the spear and since the spear is lost, he should be the one who informed me. Now, he did not report the loss to me and is being uncooperative now so we are charging him with being a possible accomplice. I wonder why are the two ladies insisting on shouldering the same blame; is there something more than meets the eye?”

Dan Meimei and Guiyan did not expect Xiang Shaolong to have such a sharp tongue and were dumbfounded.

Wu Fu knew that things have gone terribly wrong and he was in an extreme state of anxiety. He stammered: “Please give me some time. I am sure I can retrieve the Flying Dragon Spear.”

Teng Yi laughed loudly: “In this case, the spear and shield must have been hidden by Brothel Owner Wu himself. Otherwise, you would not dare to make such a commitment!”

Wu Fu knew that he has slipped. Knocking his head on the floor repeatedly, he begged: “It is all my fault! It is all my fault!”

Guan Zhongxie and his men were filled with hatred, wishing they could tear Wu Fu into pieces.

Lao Ai interrupted: “Will Official Xiang be forgiving and forget this episode if Brothel Owner Wu manages to hand over the spear and shield?”

Taking this chance to stand down, Xiang Shaolong agreed: “Since Official Lao has spoken, I shall accept this suggestion.”

Lao Ai gestured and two of his men stood up and lifted Wu Fu away.

Dan Meimei and Guiyan finally got a taste of Xiang Shaolong’s prowess. Slowly flashing their eyes at him, they returned back to their seats.

Before they managed to sit down, sounds of fighting and cutlery

smashing can be heard from the ground floor.

Xiang Shaolong and his friends smiled, knowing that Jing Shan and his men has begun causing trouble.

The main hall at the ground floor was in a complete mess as if a hurricane has just passed by. The ground was littered with broken furniture, cutlery, spilled wine and dishes.

Half of the Eighteen Guardians were slightly injured but their enemies are in a pathetic state. All the twenty three warriors of Guan Zhongxie were heavily injured and more than half of them are unconscious. Although there were no fatal injuries among them, everyone suffered from broken bones and fractured joints. This shows that Wu Yan Zhu and his fellow Guardians have been lenient.

Witnessing the armageddon before his eyes, Guan Zhongxie bellowed: “What in the world happened?”

One of the men who is supposedly the leader of the men stood out. With one hand nursing his bleeding nose, he pointed at Jing Shan and reported: “This kid exchanged a flirtatious look with one of our ladies. So we...”

Guan Zhongxie roared: “Shut up!”

Wu Guang shrugged his shoulders at Xiang Shaolong, declaring: “They are the ones who attacked first. We are only defending

ourselves!”

Guan Zhongxie knew that Jing Shan and the rest are intentionally out to cause trouble but was powerless to do anything as it was his men who attacked first.

Ying Ying slipped away and stood in between her two elder brothers. The two Lords treated her as if she was invisible and did not even acknowledge her presence.

Guan Zhongxie commanded his men to carry the injured away and apologised solemnly to Xiang Shaolong. He coldly invited: “During the hunting festival, we had a duel that ended in a draw. May I know when are you free to exchange pointers again and also decide Third Mistress’s future?”

The noisy crowd of onlookers and brothel guests immediately became quiet.

Everyone knew that Guan Zhongxie is really incensed and took this chance to challenge Xiang Shaolong.

Duelling is forbidden among military officers but this matter concerns Lu Niang Rong’s hand in marriage and there was a precedent so even Xiao Pan cannot interfere with this duel.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Official Guan can fix the time and place. Even if you want to duel now, I will be happy to comply.”

Everyone's attention turned to Guan Zhongxie.

Before Guan Zhongxie can say a single word, Ying Ying screamed and tore to the front. Standing in between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie, she protested: "Please do not fight!"

Everyone was puzzled.

In Xianyang City, Ying Ying is known for her fighting skills. Moreover, she loves challenging people to fights and enjoys watching others fight too. Now, her violent objection makes it hard for everyone to comprehend her motives.

Xiang Shaolong simply shrugged his shoulders: "I am not the one pushing for this duel. If Miss Ying wishes to stop this fight, you can speak to Official Guan privately. Please forgive me for being unable to help you."

Ying Ying looked at him intimately and replied in a grieved voice: "When two tigers fight, severe injuries will be inflicted. You can choose not to accept the challenge and no one can force you. You must purposely say these provoking words to anger me. After all the trouble tonight, aren't you very imposing already?"

Annoyed, Xiang Shaolong coldly laughed: "Is Miss trying to stop the fight because we are not fighting over you?"

Stomping her foot fiercely once on the floor, with a loud Wah! Ying Ying broke out into tears and ran non-stop towards the door.

Teng Yi winked at Jing Jun and Jing Jun hurriedly chased after her.

Still maintaining his composure, Guan Zhongxie casually state: “The twentieth of next month is Premier Mentor Lu’s birthday. We shall have out duel then and add to the festivities too.”

Footsteps are sounded and Lao Ai’s men returned with Wu Fu carrying the Flying Dragon Spear and shield.

Receiving the spear and shield, Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: “It is settled then. On that day, I shall use this spear to test your formidable skills.”

The onlookers burst out in wild cheering.

Guan Zhongxie’s face lost some colour. Since the last fight, he has already figured out Xiang Shaolong’s sword skills and has been working hard over the past six months to counter it. Now, Xiang Shaolong is using a spear instead of a sword so all his hard work has just gone down the drain.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing secretly inside.

He has more than one month to train until the duel date. He is confident of learning Yanran’s invincible spear skills.

Only with this kind of heavy attacking weapon can he successfully counter Guan Zhongxie's amazing arm strength.

This is called flexibility in warfare.

He has depended on strategy to win the last fight and it will also be strategy that he needs to win this fight.

There is no other way out.

Book 17 Chapter 08 – Expressing Love

The next day, Xiang Shaolong went to pay his respects to Lu Gong and Xu Xian before entering the palace to see Xiao Pan to report his duel with Guan Zhongxie. Finally, he went to see Qin Qing at the Qin Residence.

Qin Qing is in her garden admiring the snow and was delighted to receive him but shy at the same time. Hesitating to look straight into his eyes, she simply swept him off his feet.

Strolling in the snow shoulder to shoulder, there were no intimate actions but they can both feel the intimacy in each others' heart.

Xiang Shaolong gently revealed: "At Lu Buwei's birthday dinner next month is the day I will fight Guan Zhongxie to death."

Shocked, Qin Qing wailed: "You! Why did you have to fight him?"

Xiang Shaolong answered: "This man is talented, intelligent and is holding the post of the Imperial Infantry Commander. If I do not eliminate him, we will have many days of trouble in the future."

Lowering her hood, Qin Qing halted and whined: "If you lose... Ai! I am so worried."

Xiang Shaolong turned around and leaned his head towards her,

scrutinizing her flawless beauty and smiled: “If I happened to forfeit my life during the duel, what will you do?”

Her face becoming pale, Qin Qing shook: “Please do not speak like this. Do you think I am not frightened already?”

Xiang Shaolong insisted: “Grand Tutor Qin has yet to reply me.”

Qin Qing shot him a look and lowered her head, replying softly: “I will join you in death! Happy?”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: “Grand Tutor Qin!”

Qin Qing shook her head and sighed: “To think I will actually say such things to a man. But I know you will not lose, right? Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Of course I will not lose! If I am not confident, I will just admit my loss. What can he do about it?”

Pausing, he added: “I am here today to sincerely invite Grand Tutor Qin to stay at the farm for a month. Because I need to disregard everything and focus on training to prepare for the duel next month. But I know I cannot forget about you and to avoid the pain of pining for you, I have to request that you be by my side.”

In an instant, even the root of Qin Qing’s ears is completely red. Lowering her head embarrassedly, she clarified: “Xiang Shaolong, do you know that by making this request, it is as good as asking me

to marry you?”

Xiang Shaolong reached out and held her white and tender shoulders before gently replying: “Of course I know. Please forgive my callousness but I want to win both your heart and your body. If either one is lacking, I will not accept it.”

Qin Qing struggled slightly and wailed: “Are you treating me like a piece of merchandise?”

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward and kissed her cheek, slowly saying: “Whatever. I just want you. We need not deceive ourselves any longer in the future and live life with so many restrictions. Some opportunities are lost forever if they are missed. I have thought very carefully and thoroughly before I come looking for you.”

Qin Qing’s head is so low that it is almost touching her chest. Whispering as soft as a mosquito, she asked: “When are you leaving for the farm?”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “Early tomorrow morning.”

Qin Qing softly pleaded: “Can you release me first?”

Stunned, Xiang Shaolong released his grip on her.

Qin Qing floated away like the breeze and finally stopped at a distance ten feet away from him. She officially state: “I will wait

for you here tomorrow! See you then.”

Giving him a romantic and emotional look, she turned around and sashayed away.

An intoxicated Xiang Shaolong stared at her until she disappeared among the flower beds before composing himself and headed towards the Command Centre.

At the Command Centre main door, someone dashed out and detained him. It turned out to be Ying Ying and from her haggard expression, she must have had a bad night's sleep. She started: “Official Xiang, I must speak to you privately.”

Xiang Shaolong has just expressed his love for Qin Qing and gotten the most wonderful answer. In a great mood, he nodded: “Let's talk more inside!”

Ying Ying stubbornly shook her head: “No! Let's take a walk outside the city!”

Alarm bells begin to ring in Xiang Shaolong's head. With Xu Xian and Lu Gong dead, he is the man Lu Buwei wanted to kill next. Will this be a trap laid by Guan Zhongxie but executed through Ying Ying?

He decided otherwise because no matter how muddle-headed Ying Ying becomes, she will never harm him. He agreed: “All right!”

Turning around, he was about to instruct the Guardians to wait for him at the Command Centre when Wu Yan Zhu stated upfront: “Master Xiang, please forgive us for being unable to comply. The Madams have strictly instructed us to never leave your side.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and relented: “Fine! You can follow behind me.”

He proceeded to ride with Ying Ying out of the city.

Riding out of the city gates, his spirits lifted considerably.

The rolling meadows have become a blanket of white snow and they spread out as far as the eye can see. Mother Nature is completely silent and only the snow is shimmering.

The Eighteen Guardians were riding two hundred steps behind them and were taking precautions against any ambushes.

Xiang Shaolong assessed Ying Ying.

Her charming body is even more mesmerizing which is probably due to Guan Zhongxie’s nourishment.

Xiang Shaolong wondered how will the already peerless beautiful Qin Qing turn out after his own nourishment?

With this thought running through his head, Xiang Shaolong is more certain than ever than he is only interested in Ying Ying as a friend and not as a lover.

Ying Ying softly asked: “Xiang Shaolong! Please do not fight Zhongxie. As long as you publicly announce that you do not wish to marry Lu Niang Rong and thus rejected the duel, no one will say that you are afraid of him.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed that this is an excellent solution. Moreover, he did appear superior during the hunting fair and with marriage as an excuse; no one will think that he is trying to avoid this fight. The problem is that he and Guan Zhongxie has already reached the point of no return, where neither can tolerate the presence of each other.

Just like him and Lu Buwei, only one man can continue living.

Not receiving a reply from him, Ying Ying raised her voice angrily: “You do not love Lu Niang Rong, what is the use of fighting over her?”

Xiang Shaolong was admiring the snow accumulated on the branches of the trees along the official roads. He lightly sighed: “Miss is really protective of Guan Zhongxie. Whatever you do is in his best interests.”

Ying Ying noticed the sarcasm in his voice and was incensed: “Do you think I am not looking after your interests too? While you are away for the past six months, Zhongxie has been practising his

sword every day and was waiting for the day he could kill you. Do you think you can still defeat him?”

Xiang Shaolong did not take her words to heart and smiled: “So who do you think will win?”

Ying Ying was so angry her entire face is completely white. She cursed: “I wish both of you are dead.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: “Let’s return back to the City. You need not say any more.”

Stopping her horse, Ying Ying’s face is completely green by now. Staring at him furiously for some time, she softened and intimately coaxed: “It is all my fault for being indecisive. No wonder you are treating me like this. Please listen to me this time, ok?”

Xiang Shaolong seriously state: “Ying Ying, you better come back to your senses and look clearly at the harsh realities in front of you. This is not a personal feud but a fight that concerns the power struggle of the Qin Court and a competition between Qin natives and foreigners. The losing party will stand to have their families annihilated. To Guan Zhongxie, you are just one of his pawns but you are only good at disobeying your brothers’ orders to restrict you for your own good. Did you ever spare a thought for them? You are only stubborn, willful and want others to pander to your selfish needs.”

Pausing for a while, he proudly remarked: “Death and defeat is

common during fights and this is not the first time Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie are trying to kill me. But you only choose to live in your fantasy world and ignore genuine concerns. If you ever marry Guan Zhongxie, you better pray that Lu Buwei can successfully rebel but that would mean a tragic death for both your brothers. If Lu Buwei fails, you may be spared but all your kids with Guan Zhongxie will be executed. This is the truth and Crown Prince Zheng will not waver. All these circumstances are born out of Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao's schemes. Mo Ao is dead so now Guan Zhongxie is trying to kill me. Do you understand?"

Not paying any more attention to her, he left and re-entered the city.

Before he reached the Command Centre, Xiang Shaolong's mind is already filled with Qin Qing. Imagining that he can get close to her physically tomorrow, his heart is burning with passion and he wished that time could pass faster.

At the Command Centre, Teng Yi whispered: "Tu Xian will meet you at the usual place later."

Xiang Shaolong was elated: "I was about to look for him!"

Sitting down, Teng Yi reported: "After winter, Meng Ao will attack Han. Your old friend Han Chuang is in trouble."

Xiang Shaolong helplessly replied: "This is something beyond our control. If we are weak, Han will be attacking us instead. But as long as we are building the Zhengguo Canal, we will lack the

resources for a grand campaign. For the next few years, we can only gain one or two provinces from the Three Allied States. By the time they really mount a campaign against the East, we would be long gone.”

Teng Yi sighed: “I know that Third Brother has no interest in war but sooner or later, you will have to field an army too. This is something inevitable.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I have to depend on Second Brother then. I am sure that you are so familiar with the Mozi warfare that you can even memorise it from the back to the front.”

Teng Yi laughed: “You really love to exaggerate.”

Xiang Shaolong inquired: “Is Little Jun out on patrol?”

Teng Yi chided: “He is not so diligent and is out with Lu Dan’er. I told him that you are willing to propose marriage on his behalf and he was so happy that he forgot all about work.”

Xiang Shaolong decided: “The Lu Family is still in bereavement. Let’s talk about this after I killed Guan Zhongxie! I am going back to the farm tomorrow. Second Brother must spar with me if you are free.”

Teng Yi suddenly recalled something: “Shaolong, do you remember the Weinan Martial Arts School?”

Xiang Shaolong searched his mental database and remembered this Martial Arts School was run by this man called Qiu Risheng. In the past, he was conspiring with Lord Yangquan and once sent one of his top fighters 'Scarface' Guoxin to ambush Jing Jun and injured him badly. He himself was almost assassinated by them on the streets.

He nodded: "What about them?"

Teng Yi explained: "After Lord Yangquan was eliminated by Lu Buwei, Qiu Risheng sensed that times are unfavourable so he slipped away. Recently, he resurfaced and is conspiring with Lao Ai. He has been quite prominent lately and is heavily recruiting warriors. Little Jun is itching to lay his hands on them. I am sure there will be some conflict sooner or later."

Xiang Shaolong knew better than anyone that Lao Ai is a despicable cad and expected him to conspire with other ruthless men. He plainly stressed: "Second Brother must watch Little Jun carefully and we must not act rashly. We will only counter them when the Black Dragon shows itself and we have consolidated our power."

Teng Yi smiled: "Leave this to me. Little Jun has never disobeyed my orders. Third Brother is sharp indeed to predict that Lao Ai will be dissatisfied with his lowly position and possess wild ambitions. For him to accommodate Qiu Risheng, it is as good as clashing with Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "When the Crown Prince has consolidated his power, he will have Lord Changping and Li Si to

advise him, Wang Jian and Huan Yi to lead his army. With the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry in their hands, we can retreat back to the farm and watch Lu Buwei and Lao Ai fight to death.”

Teng Yi frowned: “But if this goes on, the Empress and Crown Prince will be enemies one day.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “This is fate which nobody can change. We are helpless too.”

Teng Yi was about to say something when an attendant reported that Wang Ci sent someone to summon Xiang Shaolong to see him at the General Residence.

Both men were stunned as Wang Ci did not have any dealings with Xiang Shaolong.

Arriving at the General Residence, Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians noticed that the courtyard in front of the main building was loud and lively. There were nearly a hundred strong men watching Wang Ci practise his archery.

Despite the cold and frosty weather, Wang Ci braved the chill and mounted his strong bow. His three continuous arrows hit the bull’s eyes and earned loud cheers from the crowd. This Great General truly lives up to his reputation as one of Qin’s famed general. Noticing Xiang Shaolong, he smiled broadly and waved to him. Putting on a fur coat and his shining eyes assessing Jing Shan and the Guardians, he casually remarked: “I heard that these

Guardians are very highly skilled. Since they are free, why don't they exchange a few friendly pointers with my men?"

Xiang Shaolong is in no position to reject him and agreed reluctantly.

Wang Ci smiled and led him into the main hall.

The hall is wide and spacious while the walls are decorated with animal skins and weapons. There is a killing aura in the air.

The strangest thing is a seven facade screen south of the hall. The screen has completely blocked the incoming path from within the building. It looks out of place and Xiang Shaolong is reminded of the time when he was peeping at Chu Empress Dowager Li Yanyan. He was discovered by her because of a footprint on the floor so he naturally looked towards the floor. Immediately, sweat poured down his back and his limbs became icy cold.

There were many water marks on the floor. Needless to say, there are many men who have entered the hall from outside and are now hidden behind the screen. As their shoes are tainted with snow, the water marks are left on the floor. They were there because he has arrived and this is a setup meant for him.

They naturally do not have any good intentions.

All they need to do is to push the screen over and shoot out with their crossbows and he will be a dead man.

Wang Ci took up the host seat right in front of the screen and gestured him to sit down on his right. There is no way that he can make the first move and attack Wang Ci first.

His mind thinking furiously, he gritted his teeth and sat down. In the process, he secretly retrieved five flying needles and hid them in his giant hand.

He has never been so close to death.

Wang Ci is truly intelligent to get his men to occupy the Guardians so that he is alone and defenceless.

Why does Wang Ci want to kill him?

Wang Ci is unlike Meng Ao and is a Qin native. He may be an admirer of Lu Buwei but will eventually be loyal to Xiao Pan.

Thinking about this, he had an inspiration.

Two maids came up to serve tea and excused themselves. When only the two of them are left, Wang Ci suspiciously assessed him for a while before sighing: “This year has been pretty eventful. First, Lord Gaoling rebelled and Xu Xian and Lu Gong died one after another. I find it hard to accept these facts myself.”

Xiang Shaolong does not understand the meaning behind his

words so he kept his silence.

Pain shooting out of his eyes, Wang Ci lamented: “It is Lu Gong’s dream to see Qin conquer the six eastern states and unite the world. Just when things are taking a positive turn, his life ended. This is truly tragic.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but added: “As long as we are having internal conflict, it is impossible for us to unite the world.”

His eyes flashing, Wang Ci mentioned in a deep voice: “This is the reason why I looked for Shaolong. Since Premier Mentor came to Qin, he conquered Eastern Zhou with General Meng Ao and built the three new provinces. Those are strategic locations and now, we are able to threaten Daliang and show off our might to the eastern states. If not for this campaign, it is difficult for Meng Ao and me to attack the three Allied States and conquer Taiyuan from Zhao. When the Five Allied Army came to attack us, it was thanks to Shaolong’s trickery that Prince Xinling was forced to step down and our danger passed. After that, Lu Gong, Meng Ao and I attacked the Allied States and established the Eastern Provinces. Now, Qin is even more prestigious than before. But right at this point in time, our country is rocked by internal strife and our hands are tied. Shaolong, what do you think we should do?”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood that Wang Ci is trying to mend fences between him and Lu Buwei. He is away fighting most of the time and is not clear about the power struggles in the Qin Court. Ultimately, he has declared his loyalty to Lu Buwei and it is hard to convince him to switch sides. If Xiang Shaolong insisted on his way, the attackers behind the screen may just kill him without

the least hesitation. At the same time, he can tell that Wang Ci is not blindly following Lu Buwei's orders.

After some contemplation, he calmly replied: "In the present times, everyone remembers Tian Dan when we speak of Qi, Empress Han Jing when we speak of Zhao and Lu Buwei when we speak of Qin. The Kings of these states seemed to be non-existent. This is called: Thick trees carry thick branches, remove the branches and the tree is powerless. With officials carrying too much power, the King of the State is powerless like the branchless tree..." He just learned the last four lines from Li Si and managed to put them to good use in this desperate situation.

An impatient Wang Ci interrupted: "This is due to circumstances and not the will of men. The King is young and the country is powerful. Without officials managing the state, the country will be ruined. We have adopted the policy of utilising talented men, paying them handsomely and given them critical posts. Since Xiaogong begun our dynasty, we have capable men like Shang Yang, Zhang Yi, Fan Qiao and now we have Premier Mentor. If not for them, Qin will not enjoy our present success today."

Xiang Shaolong comprehended Wang Ci's train of thought and was wondering if he should tell him about Lu Buwei murdering King Zhuangxiang and Xu Xian when Wang Ci continued: "Lu Gong and Xu Xian has always suspected Premier Mentor of poisoning the two late kings and even suspected that Crown Prince Zheng is Lu Buwei and Empress Ji's illegitimate son. It is now proven that Crown Prince Zheng is not related to Lu Buwei so all these are just blatant rumours."

Xiang Shaolong was blown away, realising that behind every gain, there is a loss too. The blood test has indirectly caused Wang Ci to not suspect Lu Buwei the traitor at all. In turn, he has become the main culprit in Wang Ci's eyes and a stumbling block in the way of Qin's unification of the world.

Wang Ci sighed again: "Premier Mentor is a most talented individual. Just by reading his Spring-Autumn Annals and his reward hanging on the city gates, I believe he has surpassed Shang Yang."

Xiang Shaolong decided to show hand: "How can there be any piece of work that is so good that it cannot be improved on? I think people fear his authority and dared not correct his work. There is something I will say but I am afraid that you will not believe me. Xu Xian may be killed by Chu but it was instigated by Tian Dan. Now why would Tian Dan do such a thing? We only need to do some self-reflection and ask ourselves: Who will gain the most from his death in Qin? I believe General can easily guess who the mastermind is."

Wang Ci was shaken: "Do you have any proof?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "How am I going to produce any proof? But Lu Gong was so incensed over this murder he died of anger. On his deathbed, he begged Crown Prince and me to avenge him. Given the present circumstances, General must choose to be loyal to Crown Prince or Lu Buwei. There is no other choice. Lu Buwei has been propagating his Spring-Autumn Annals because he wanted to spread the influence of Officials holding power. If I possess any selfish motives against Lu Buwei, I would not have

rejected the position of Premier twice and allowed others to be promoted.” He is on the brink of death and did not bother to conceal any details.

Wang Ci’s face changed colour and his eyes shone sharply, scanning him with suspicion.

Xiang Shaolong coldly exchanged stares with him with neither hostility nor fear. In his mind, he was thinking of how to flip the table to block the arrows and escape with his life.

Wang Ci’s gaze shifted up and he stared at the main pillar supporting the hall. His eyes are filled with contemplation and he unsteadily commented: “Xu Xian, Lu Gong and I have always admired you Xiang Shaolong. Otherwise, I would not have asked you over for a discussion. For the time being, I am unable to agree with your theories. Nonetheless, my loyalties lie with the Crown Prince. I will try to talk to Premier Mentor personally and hope that he will not end up like Shang Yang who is executed by five horses running in five separate directions and tearing his body apart.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “You must never do this. If Lu Buwei senses that General is having doubts about him, he will try to get rid of you. All I desire is for General to follow your righteous principles and support all the policies that will benefit our country. That is a blessing to us already.”

Wang Ci was moved: “Shaolong, you are definitely not an unscrupulous man. If you are trying to convince me to turn against Lu Buwei, you will not leave here alive. Meng Ao has told Lu Buwei

everything you told him today. Based on that, you have displayed insubordination and Lu Buwei can actually annihilate your household.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief at this close shave. He has been too reckless and did not expect Meng Ao to be dead loyal to Lu Buwei. It is also clear that Wang Ci has been ordered by Lu Buwei to kill him.

If Wang Ci is his killer, even Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji are powerless to hold it against him.

Wang Ci bitterly laughed: “So I can either choose to kill you or fight beside you. There is no third option. If I join hands with Meng Ao, you are just a measly Cavalry Commander who cannot resist us. But relax! You did not try to get me to counter Lu Buwei but Lu Buwei is dead set on killing you. But as long as I disagreed, he dare not act on his own. Hng! If I choose to take precautions against him, what can he do about it?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief but could not resist clarifying: “I thought General mentioned that it is hard to accept my theories. Why did you still change your mind?”

His eyes shining with humour, he warmly answered: “Because I suddenly remembered that Shaolong came to see me without any reservations and speak with reason in a guilt-free manner. In addition, the late King, Crown Prince, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Wang He, Lord Changping and Wang Jian have all treated you with trust, love and respect. It is all because of your selfless attitude. So I was suddenly enlightened and did not commit a serious error. I still

have my doubts about your words but I will not trust Lu Buwei as whole-heartedly as before.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling emotional.

In this moment, he knows that the power vacuum left behind with the deaths of Xu Xian and Lu Gong is now being filled by Wang Ci who has miraculously switched sides to support them. Otherwise, it is hard for him to stay alive, not to mention deal with Lu Buwei.

Wang Ci has abandoned his plan to kill him as he finally realises that Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei has come to a stage of non-reconciliation. At the end of the day, he has chosen to support his own King. After all, he is a Qin native and would never conspire with outsiders to harm his own country.

Book 17 Chapter 09 – A Startling Discovery

After listening to his near-death account at Wang Ci's residence, Xiao Pan sighed with relief: "That was too close!"

For the longest time, Xiang Shaolong hasn't seen him expressing genuine concern and was touched. He gladly added: "There is a reason behind everything. If not for you, Xu Xian and Lu Gong supporting me, Wang Ci would have killed me without giving me a chance to speak out. Moreover, the Qin military has always been loyal to the Crown Prince and thus, Wang Ci is able to abandon the dark side and join us. Otherwise, it is hard to overcome Lu Buwei indeed! Ai! Maybe this is what we call fate."

Xiao Pan nodded: "Master must quickly work on the Black Dragon before Lu Buwei has the chance to transfer Wang Ci away. Meng Ao alone is more than enough to deal with you. Ai! Does Master really need to retreat to the farms? I am concerned that Lu Buwei may send his warriors to attack the farm. If he gets his men to be disguised as horse thieves, it is hard for me to pin the blame on him"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly astounded. At the same time, he resolved to increase his defences and put more emphasis on spying and intelligence gathering. Otherwise, his household may be annihilated. Moreover, he has to send half his Wu Family Elite Army to the northern border to support Wu Zhuo.

Xiao Pan remarked with frustration: "Using the excuse that the Zhengguo Canal is lacking funds, he has been delaying money shipments to Huan Yi's new army. Up till today, they are only able

to recruit one thousand men and did not have proper armour or weapons. Otherwise, I would get them to relocate near the farms and support you if necessary.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Crown Prince can put your mind at ease. I have sufficient strength to protect myself. With Wang Ci countering Lu Buwei and Meng Ao, there is only so much they can do. No matter what, we must try our best to keep Wang Ci in Xianyang City before the Black Dragon sighting to check Lu Buwei’s influence.”

Xiao Pan sighed helplessly and changed the topic: “This morning, Empress summoned me and gave me a tongue-lashing, chiding me for keeping secrets from her. I am so pi55ed. She is not behaving herself and she doesn’t deserve my respect. A mother like her is as good as none.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that the gap between him and Zhu Ji is widening, forcing Zhu Ji to be increasingly reliant on Lao Ai. The real reason is that Xiao Pan is influenced by Lady Ni’s image of a self-respecting mother and cannot tolerate Zhu Ji and Lao Ai’s scandalous relationship.

Only he would really understand this circumstance.

Xiao Pan inquired: “Is Master ready to marry Grand Tutor Qin? She came to inform Empress and me earlier that she is going to stay at the farm with you for a month or so. Hei! I am really happy for you. If Lao Ai or Lu Buwei ends up with her, I will vomit blood.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that Xiao Pan has shifted his affections and respect to Qin Qing.

Lady Ni's death is the biggest lack in Xiao Pan's life. First, Zhu Ji took her place, followed by Qin Qing, providing him with a motherly figure in his life.

Xiao Pan cheerfully revealed: "For the past six months, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei have been creating opportunities to be close to her. Fortunately, Grand Tutor Qin ignored all their advances. Hee! Grand Tutor Qin loves talking to me and she always tells me how heroic you are! Hng! Lu Buwei has been offering me many beauties but they have all been rejected by me. I will not be tricked by him!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "If I marry Grand Tutor Qin, not only Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will be jealous to death but I will also incur the wrath of many people."

Xiao Pan shook his head: "Times have changed. Now, Master has become the heroic icon of Qin. When Master fields an army and win a few god damn bloody battles, I can confer Master to be a Lord or a Marquis. At that point in time, no one can voice any dissatisfaction if you marry Grand Tutor Qin."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Those vulgarities must have been suppressed in your heart for a long time! We shall speak of this later. When the Black Dragon is sighted, we will use this chance to change the palace administration. Is Crown Prince going to promote Li Si to be the Administrative Premier?"

Xiao Pan thought for a while and frowned: “I am afraid that Empress will not support my decision! If possible, I would want Master to take up this post.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big fright and is certain that he could not live up to the expectations of this post. He hurriedly suggested: “I think I am more suited to hold a military post. Relax! The power of the Black Dragon is without question. I have already sent my men to invite Zou Yan back to Xianyang City. When he personally announces that Crown Prince is the new Chosen One, it will be an earth-shattering event and even Empress cannot object. By then, Crown Prince can assume full authority and we can watch Empress and Lao Ai fight Lu Buwei. On your coronation day, we will eliminate all of them in one blow.”

Xiao Pan bitterly smiled: “But that is the day Master will leave me.”

Xiang Shaolong seriously advised: “We are earthshaking figures and do not focus on such petty matters. As long as you utilise Li Si and Wang Jian well, you can unite the world. Crown Prince must forget everything about me and the shadow of your past will be gone forever.”

Xiao Pan’s red reddened and he gasped: “Why is Master so good to me? You are absolutely selfless.”

Xiang Shaolong muttered: “You know the reason better than anyone.”

Xiao Pan was very touched: “I understand. Actually, I have regarded Master as my Father a long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden strong urge to burst out crying. From a nameless Zhao boy to become the awe-inspiring Qin Shi Huang who will unite the whole of China is already something unimaginable.

Moreover, he shared such an intimate relationship with him.

In this instant, an attendant came to report that the Empress has summoned Xiang Shaolong.

Both men exchanged a glance, guessing that the matter is probably related to Qin Qing.

Zhu Ji received him in the tranquil inner hall of the Empress Palace. After dismissing her attendants, she stood up and walked to Xiang Shaolong's front and assessed him for some time. Finally, she gently asked: “Xiang Shaolong, please be honest with me. In what ways am I inferior to Qin Qing?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel trouble brewing. Whenever women become jealous, they are simply irrational. The more peaceful Zhu Ji's appearance is, the angrier she is. In a subservient tone, he meekly replied: “Empress must not be mistaken. Grand Tutor Qin is going to the farms to keep Yanran company. It is not what Empress is thinking.”

Zhu Ji stared at him ferociously for some time before turning around. She sighed: “Does Shaolong still wishes to deceive me? As a woman, I know what other women are thinking. Just by her joyful expression, anyone with brains can guess what is going on. Now, Crown Prince and you are both treating me like strangers, right?”

Xiang Shaolong had a strong desire to hug Zhu Ji’s voluptuous body into his arms but tried his very best to control himself. He gently comforted: “Empress is thinking too much. The Crown Prince and I are still full of respect for you just like before.”

Zhu Ji intimately shook her head: “It is no longer the same! Ai! What wrong did I commit that Heaven must punish me this way? All my men wanted to desert me and now, even my son is disregarding me.”

Xiang Shaolong had to agree with her words. First, Lu Buwei gave her to King Zhuangxiang. With his death, she was ‘given’ to Lao Ai and because of this, Xiao Pan is disregarding her. She may enjoy plenty of power as the Empress but she is certainly not happy.

What else can he say?

Zhu Ji viciously turned around and her expression was frosty. She swore: “Xiang Shaolong. I am utterly disappointed with you. In the future, do not expect me to support you like before.”

Xiang Shaolong realised that all her love for him has been transformed into hatred instead. If not for Lao Ai, Zhu Ji would not be so heartless. Lao Ai may appear friendly to him but must be trying to sow discord between him and Zhu Ji. After all, Lao Ai is just a despicable cad.

Unable to hold his anger, he coldly retorted: “Empress is overreacting. Since we met in Handan City, everything I did was for the sake of Empress and Crown Prince. I don’t think I deserve your berating.”

Zhu Ji blew her top: “How dare you! How dare you use your past achievements to threaten me!”

Blowing his top too, Xiang Shaolong furiously exclaimed: “When did I ever use my past achievements to threaten you? Do I ask you for any special assistance before? Feel free to quote one example!”

Zhu Ji was tongue tied and her face changed colour. She challenged: “Who do you think you are to talk to me in such a manner?”

Xiang Shaolong angrily shot back: “You are the Empress and I am just a lowly official. I am not fit to talk to you. But Empress knows in your heart how I truly feel about you. I am restricted by circumstances and could not betray the late King’s gratitude. Thus, I did not dare to get close to you but you have described me to be an ingrate today. What did I do to deserve this?”

Zhu Ji stared at him with annoyance and her pert breasts are

heaving considerably, showing her considerable agitation.

Unwilling to give way, Xiang Shaolong stared back at her and his mind is filled with anger.

After some time, Zhu Ji finally calmed down and lowered her head. She slowly apologised: “I am sorry to throw my temper at you but I am really angry just now.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling guilty too and embarrassedly apologised: “It is my fault for being rude too! Ai! I also do not understand why I lost control of myself.”

Zhu Ji took three steps forward until they can smell each other's breaths. Lifting her pretty face, her eyes shone brightly at Xiang Shaolong and she offered: “Shaolong! Can we start all over again? You should know how I feel about you. No matter how you rebut me, I just cannot harden my heart against you.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “What about Official Lao?”

Zhu Ji trembled strongly and her complexion lost colour. Her beautiful dream fantasy has just been shattered and replaced by cold, harsh reality.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that she is deeply involved with Lao Ai and their infatuation is even more intense than Ying Ying's relationship with Guan Zhongxie. He may feel a sense of relief but he felt a sense of helplessness at the same time.

Zhu Ji's face lost more colour before regaining her cold and proud demeanour. She nodded: "It is my fault. I heard that you are duelling Guan Zhongxie. If you happen to win, are you going to marry Lu Niang Rong?"

Xiang Shaolong simply replied: "Is Lu Buwei willing to marry her favourite daughter to me?"

Zhu Ji slowly sighed again: "I am tired. Shaolong can take your leave."

Xiang Shaolong left the palace and quickly galloped back to the Wu Residence. He and the Guardians hurriedly disguised themselves as commoners and using a secret route, they mysteriously made their way to the meeting point with Tu Xian. In a short while, the two men met again in the empty house.

A pleased Tu Xian started: "Shaolong is brilliant and you managed to kill Mo Ao. Now, Lu Buwei has to depend on me for everything and I am able to have a clearer picture of his schemes."

His expression turning serious, he continued: "But Shaolong's biggest mistake is to speak to Meng Ao. This morning, Lu Buwei summoned Wang Ci, Wang Wan and Cai Ze for a discussion. I am sure they will take some action against you soon and I am worried for you."

Xiang Shaolong apologised first and revealed everything about Wang Ci's meeting.

Tu Xian was blown away and took some time to finally splutter: “Lady Luck must be smiling on you. It is a gain and a loss for us. You must take safety precautions as Lu Buwei is quite determined to get rid of you. After one plan fails, he will come up with another plan shortly.”

Xiang Shaolong icily smiled: “As long as he does not send the Qin army after me, there is nothing I am afraid of. Housekeeper Tu can rest easy.”

In actual fact, Tu Xian is also confident about Xiang Shaolong’s abilities. He changed the topic: “After you put Guan Zhongxie down during the hunting fair, Lu Niang Rong has been less affectionate towards him. Now, that traitor and Guan Zhongxie are afraid that she will really fall in love with you. This lass is very spoilt like Ying Ying and her female warriors. Shaolong can consider making use of her and you may even profit from this relationship.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Guan Zhongxie can stoop to such a despicable method but how I can do the same to him?”

His expression turning solemn, Tu Xian apologised: “I am sorry! I forgot that Shaolong is a true gentleman.”

Pausing, he added: “It is a pity that Shaolong has failed to kill Tian Dan this time round. Better luck next time.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Who said so? I caught up to him

in Chu and even killed him. It was quite a successful operation.”

Tu Xian was astounded: “How can this be? Yesterday, traitor Lu received a letter from Tian Dan saying that he has safely returned to Qi. They had agreed that when Tian Dan attacked Yan, traitor Lu will attack Han so that Zhao and Wei will be hard-pressed to defend Yan.”

Xiang Shaolong’s body immediately became ice-cold. Once again, he was tricked by Tian Dan.

Tian Dan is indeed a crafty old fox. When he left Shouchun, he must have switched identities with his substitute. Together with Dan Chu, they must have headed back to Qi by traveling on the road. Even Chu was tricked by him and this is the real reason why Tian Dan chose to leave Shouchun unexpectedly.

The substitute not only resembled Tian Dan and even sounded like him. He is willing to sacrifice himself for Tian Dan and now, Xiang Shaolong has become an idiot who must reverse his name to be Long Shao Xiang.

Tu Xian noticed the change in his complexion and pressed for the details. After Xiang Shaolong has finished explaining, Tu Xian comforted: “There are bound to be some failures in life. Shaolong, you have destroyed the alliance between Qi and Chu and that alone is already a heavy blow to Tian Dan and Lu Buwei. If Li Yuan is smart, he will do his best to obstruct Tian Dan and prevent him from attacking Yan.”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to get worried about Shan Rou. There is a chance that she may try to assassinate Tian Dan again and may really end up being killed by him.

Thinking about this, his calm mind became disorderly. Now, he needs to inform Xiao Pan and the others that their mission to kill Tian Dan had failed miserably.

Tu Xian reassured him further and added: “For the past six months, Guan Zhongxie spent two hours every morning and every evening to practise his swordplay. He is ready to conclude his last battle with you. This man’s willpower and determination is something that I rarely see in people nowadays. Shaolong, if you lack confidence, you can use the excuse that you do not want to marry Lu Niang Rong to call off the duel. I am sure that no one will dare to speak ill of you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed to himself. Tu Xian and Ying Ying had proposed the same idea so it is evident that Guan Zhongxie’s swordsmanship must have improved tremendously. Thus, both of them are concerned that he may lose the fight and even sacrifice his life.

Although Xiang Shaolong agrees that their concerns are not unfounded, at the same time, he knows that if he shies away from this fight, in the future, he will never be able to raise his head high up again in front of Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie.

Motivated by this thought, he was filled with a strong fighting spirit. Xiang Shaolong smiled: “No! I will win for sure!”

Book 17 Chapter 10 – Stargazing

Back at the Command Centre, he had just finished telling Teng Yi about Tian Dan's survival. Just as Teng Yi's face changed colour, Jing Jun barged in and reported: "Lu Buwei is getting ready to attack the farms and is now deploying his men."

The two men could not be bothered about Tian Dan anymore. They asked in chorus: "How did you know?"

Jing Jun sat down and explained: "Earlier, Meng Tian came secretly to look for me and told me he overheard his father instructing a trusted family warrior to select two thousand men from his family warriors. Together with traitor Lu's family warriors, they will form an army and attack the farms while disguised as horse thieves. None of us is to be spared. Hng! Meng Ao is such a fool. We must not spare him too."

Teng Yi's expression grew serious: "This is not called foolish, this is called cruel. If they succeeded and with Lu Buwei sheltering them, who can lay a finger on them? If the Imperial Cavalry Commander falls under their control, Xianyang City will be their playground. Luckily, we have always been fortifying our defences at the farm and have added a perimeter wall recently. They are still ignorant of our true strength so we still have a fighting chance."

Xiang Shaolong reminded: "Meng Ao is well-versed in warfare and he must have capable men under his command. Coupled with the thousands of warriors in Lu Residence, they will have double our strength if they attacked with just seven thousand men. If not for Meng Tian's information, we will suffer a huge loss when they

attack. Of course it is a different matter now.”

Teng Yi’s face lost colour: “Not good. This morning, Pu Bu and Liu Chao have led two thousand men towards the Northern Border. We have lesser manpower and it does not bode well for us.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: “What? They left already?”

Teng Yi sighed: “This is Grandmaster Wu’s idea as Eldest Brother needs these men urgently. Thus, they made quick preparations and left as early as possible.”

Jing Jun suggested: “Why don’t we get a few men from the Cavalry Army to help us?”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “We must never do that. If we have any deployments, that traitor Lu will soon get wind of it. Moreover, our Wu Family Elite Army must not be mixed with outsiders as this will affect our efficiency. We may also put Meng Tian in danger.”

Jing Jun nodded: “I nearly forgot to say something. Meng Tian suggested that we run for our lives as he did not expect us to have the ability to face his Dad’s army.”

Filled with a heroic air, Teng Yi state in a deep voice: “I will return to the farm immediately to prepare for battle and disperse all our young and womenfolk. Third Brother and Little Jun can

return tomorrow and do not cause any unnecessary alarm. You should not fetch Widow Qin to the farm if possible. The crux of this battle is the element of surprise. We must trick the enemy to continue thinking that we are unprepared for them.”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and nodded: “I understand. This time round, we will make Lu Buwei, Meng Ao and Guan Zhongxie take a big tumble.”

Arriving home, Xiang Shaolong told his wives about Tian Dan being alive, Lu Buwei using Wang Ci to ambush him and the imminent attack on the farms. Everyone including Ji Yanran was shaken at this news.

Zhao Zhi’s revenge dream has been shattered. In addition, worrying about Shan Rou’s safety has caused her to lose her appetite and she hid in her room crying.

Xiang Shaolong did his best to comfort her and returned back to discuss further with Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang.

Ji Yanran sighed: “Tian Dan’s substitute is really remarkable and he imitated his body language and gestures exceedingly well. Even we were tricked!”

Wu Tingfang bitterly smiled: “If the impersonation is lousy, the fake Tian Dan would not be able to deceive so many of us at the hunting fair.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel the hatred swelling up in him. He was thoroughly deceived by this sly old fox. But Tian Dan's substitution trick is meant for the people of Chu and not him but he was deceived as well. It seems like fate cannot be changed.

Ji Yanran forced herself to brighten up: "Luckily, Uncle Qing has built many new weapons that Xiang Shaolong has invented. We can use this opportunity to test their effectiveness."

Xiang Shaolong recalled his improved weapons and armour and can feel his spirits rising. He was about to speak out when Zhou Wei came in hugging a roll of drawings. Despite her tired look, her eyes are shining with excitement.

Ji Yanran gladly mentioned: "After Little Wei received your instructions, she has been working day and night designing the fake Black Dragon. It seems like she finally has a breakthrough!"

Zhou Wei humbly greeted: "It is all thanks to Madam's guidance."

Xiang Shaolong received the drawings and spread them open. It was a construction plan with many creative designs.

Zhou Wei sat down and began explaining: "This Black Dragon is divided into eighteen sections and one man will operate each section. Just by using their hands, they can form a black dragon which can float and sink as needed. When the dragon is built, the men needed some practice to make sure that everything runs smoothly."

She added: “There is an air bag along the spine of the dragon. When it is filled with air, the dragon can float or sink as needed. To escape underwater undetected, all you need to do is to burst the air bag after the performance.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and he went through the plans with Ji Yanran and Zhou Wei for another two hours. They thought hard at all the possibilities and made all the improvements before retiring back to bed.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Shan led the Wu Family Elite Warriors who are in the Cavalry Army as well as Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Xiang Bao'er and the Tian sisters back to the farms.

The Imperial Cavalry Army was left in Wu Guo's charge.

Xiang Shaolong set off earlier and went to fetch Qin Qing with the Eighteen Guardians.

Qin Qing is waiting for him in her residence. When he arrived, she set off immediately and joined his entourage.

This ancient beauty is delicately dressed with a snow white cloak and a thin veil that blocks out the strong wind. Her overpowering charm has Jing Shan and the Guardians totally spellbound.

Riding beside her, Xiang Shaolong forgot all about Lu Buwei's

threat and laughed: “Grand Tutor Qin is especially pretty today!”

Qin Qing nonchalantly replied: “Go ahead and tease me all you like.”

Xiang Shaolong loosened up: “Grand Tutor Qin has a veil on. Are you afraid that we will see your red and embarrassed face?”

Qin Qing has led a chaste life and has never been teased like this. She loudly wailed: “You better behave yourself or I will not speak to you during the journey.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and hurriedly swallowed the rest of his words.

Qin Qing charmingly giggled: “So Xiang Shaolong is not as brave as I thought. What did the Empress want with you yesterday?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “It seems like nothing escapes your detection within the palace.”

Qin Qing plainly replied: “The Empress is considered to have spent little time within the palace. Her attendants are mainly made up of Lady Hua Yang’s ex attendants so if you dare to do anything deceitful, you cannot escape my knowledge. So far, you have been quite honourable.”

Xiang Shaolong was amused: “Grand Tutor Qin, please forgive me for being rude but I believe it is you who is being deceitful. You

have already fallen in love with me but still refused to admit it. Ha!”

Appearing unmoved, Qin Qing mused: “All men loved to brag and Grand Tutor Xiang is of no exception. On this trip, I am just accompanying Yanran, Tingfang and Zhi Zhi. Official Xiang must be mistaken to sprout such nonsense. Based on this fact, I will not hold it against you but you better watch yourself.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “It seems like I have to resort to force instead.”

Qin Qing shrieked: “You dare!”

The city gates appearing in their view, Xiang Shaolong squeezed Jifeng with his legs and he sped forward, laughing loudly: “I now understand that dating Grand Tutor Qin is so exciting. Thanks for your sharing.”

Out of the city, they met up with Ji Yanran and the rest and continued riding. At night, they finally stopped at a high slope and began building tents and cooking meals, enjoying the wonders of Mother Nature.

The weather is great and the sky is filled with countless stars. The land is covered with shimmering snow and it was a mysterious and breathtaking sight.

Qin Qing appears to be in a great mood and is having a private

conservation with Ji Yanran. Once in a while, they will give Xiang Shaolong a mesmerizing look and fill his heart with warmth against the bitter cold.

After dinner, the two mothers Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi went to coax Xiang Bao'er to sleep while Tian Zhen and Tian Feng helped to wash up.

With Ji Yanran and Qin Qing in tow, Xiang Shaolong went to a slope and laid some blankets on the ground. Sitting down, they looked up to the sky and were lost in the mystifying exquisiteness of the universe.

Xiang Shaolong laid down with Ji Yanran on his left and Qin Qing on his right. Enjoying their fragrances, he was completely inebriated and wished that time can stand still in this moment forever.

After a while, Ji Yanran bypassed Xiang Shaolong and started chatting with Qin Qing. Like the most melodious music, their voices entered his ears.

Funnily, he did not pick up their dialogue and is unwilling to. He is at ease and takes pleasure in hearing their voices just like he is listening to the best musical orchestra.

The bright moon slowly rose above the tree branches and gently shone down on them.

Sounds of the warhorses or humans can be heard occasionally from the top of the slope.

It is absolutely tranquil and peaceful.

Xiang Shaolong let out a comfortable sigh.

Ji Yanran lovingly looked down at him and softly asked: “A penny for your thoughts?”

Xiang Shaolong stretched out his four limbs and accidentally brushed past Qin Qing’s jade legs. He hurriedly shrunk back but Qin Qing had already trembled slightly and whined sensitively in protest.

Pretending not to hear anything, Ji Yanran wailed: “I am talking to you!”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart nearly melted. He stretched out his hand and gently held onto Ji Yanran’s hand and yearned: “I was thinking that the three of us can sleep here tonight and enjoy this limitless view. We can count the stars and fall asleep counting them. We may even dream of stars in our sleep.”

Qin Qing was thrilled: “How can the sky be unlimited?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “If there is a limit, then there must be a border. But there must be something beyond the border right?”

Her eyes shining with joy, Ji Yanran stared up to the sky and softly remarked: “Hubby’s words are too deep and even I cannot fathom them. Godfather mentioned before, every human is a star that dropped down from heaven. When we die, we will return back to the sky. Isn’t that sweet?”

Xiang Shaolong stared at Qin Qing.

The beauty is staring at the sky and her flawless looks seemed to be part of the attractive sky. Under the moonlight, her face is glowing like a piece of top quality silk. His heart aroused, Xiang Shaolong could not help but stretched his other hand over and held her hand tightly too.

Qin Qing’s body trembled again and she shot him a look. Trying to wrest her hand back, she gave up after two tries and her face began to burn with passion.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong felt like he owns the entire beautiful star studded sky.

Everything is materializing like a dream.

He remembered the times when he first came to this ancient era and was subjected to numerous sufferings and was bullied by Zhao Mu and other villains. It is all thanks to his strong will and fighting spirit that he managed to cultivate Qin Shi Huang and even won the hearts of these beautiful women. What more can he ask for?

To the people who knew him in the 21st century, he had died a long time ago. Who can guess that he is living a different life two thousand years ago during the warring states period?

Is this a kind of reincarnation? When he really dies, will he be reborn again two thousand years later to travel back again in time to this ancient era? It is all due to the time machine which somehow manages to preserve his age and memory!

Ji Yanran chirped: “Why are the two of you so quiet?”

Qin Qing struggled again and realised that she cannot overcome Xiang Shaolong’s iron grip. She whispered: “I don’t know why but I feel so lazy I do not want to say anything.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but utter: “This is called: Speaking to your loved one at night, silence can be better than words!”

Both women shook at the same time and lowered their heads to look at him.

Ji Yanran sighed: “These two lines are so poetic and appropriate for this present circumstance. There is no line that is more befitting.”

Qin Qing seems to be moved and held his hand harder instead. She softly pleaded: “Can you say a few more lines for me?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that his literacy is limited and most of his lines are the limited knowledge he gained from his high school Mandarin lessons. He bitterly smiled: “I must have an Inspired Moment and I cannot intentionally create lines whenever I wanted.”

Qin Qing was touched: “Inspired Moment. These four words are already so poetic. Ai! Xiang Shaolong, why is your brain so different from others?”

Ji Yanran laughed: “If Xiang Shaolong is a normal man, Sister Qin will not sit beside him and allowed him to accompany you to sleep while admiring the stars. And you will not blame him for being rude to you.”

Her face turning red immediately, Qin Qing protested: “Sister Yanran, you... When did I agree to accompany him...? I am going to keep quiet.”

Ji Yanran coaxed: “Hubby, do say a few more beautiful lines for Sister Qin. I also wanted to see her moving expression.”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say ‘When the golden wind meets the jade outdoors, it is better than countless moments in man's world’ which is what Zhao Ya repeated non-stop before her death. He felt like his heart was being sliced apart by a knife and could not say anything momentarily.

Qin Qing was looking intimately at him and was surprised: “Is

Grand Tutor Xiang feeling unwell?”

Xiang Shaolong sat up and took a few deep breaths, suppressing the grief he had over Zhao Ya's death. He shook his head: “It's nothing.”

Ji Yanran leaned onto him and gently comforted: “Except for Sister Qin and me, you are not allowed to think of anything else.”

Xiang Shaolong emptied his brain of all thoughts and stared at the faraway mountains that were enveloped in moonshine. Like a lost child, he kept nodding his head.

Qin Qing mused: “It would be great if Yanran has her jade flute now.”

Ji Yanran smiled: “Now, I only wanted to hear hubby say a few touching sentences. Doesn't Sister Qin?”

Qin Qing loudly complained: “Xiang Shaolong bullying me is bad enough. Now I have to deal with this terrible Talented Lady Ji too.”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and had an inspiration. He chanted: “Is there a pub that cannot make you drunk? Is there a lady who does not pine for her loved one? What great ability do I have to gain the affections of the two best women on earth and make this bold statement?”

Both women were moved and like two opposing poles of a magnet, their gazes were fixated on his face.

Abruptly, Jing Jun's voice rang out behind them: "I found them!" Following him were Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi who are looking for their hubby, scaring Qin Qing who frantically yank her hand back.

That night, Xiang Shaolong, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng shared a tent, only hugging each other to sleep. Times are precarious and it is inadvisable to indulge in pleasures of the flesh.

Before the sky has yet to brighten, Xiang Shaolong is already fully awake while the Tian sisters are still sound asleep like two cute kittens.

Xiang Shaolong carefully slipped out of the warm blankets and put his cloak on. Feeling his way out of the dark tent, he approached Qin Qing's tent.

Within the pitch black tent, Qin Qing's light breathing can be heard.

But Xiang Shaolong suddenly sensed that something is not right; there are a dagger pointing at his own waist and Ji Yanran's threatening voice can be heard in the darkness: "Who is it?"

Qin Qing's light breathing stopped and she was jolted awake.

Xiang Shaolong was totally humiliated. He whispered: “It is me!”

Ji Yanran chortled and kept her dagger. Leaning into his bosom, she giggled: “I am so sorry and my mistake is unpardonable. I actually spoiled hubby’s grand plan to raid our tent and make love to us.”

Qin Qing may be keeping quiet but Xiang Shaolong wished he could dig a hole and bury his head inside forever.

The sky has just brightened and everyone is occupied with packing their tents.

Qin Qing stayed as far apart from Xiang Shaolong as possible during the journey. Xiang Shaolong is feeling guilty too and he rode ahead with Jing Jun and the rest in the front.

Shortly after noon, they finally arrived at the farms.

There are sentries based on every piece of high ground cum strategic locations and security is extremely tight.

Teng Yi is busy instructing the Wu Family Elite Army to plan obstacles and lay traps near the entrances and exits. Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun went to assist him while Ji Yanran and the other girls returned back to the farm residences.

Teng Yi led the two men on an inspection tour of the farm layout and defences. As he rode his horse alongside them, he explained:

“Our farms is enormous and it is impossible to guard against every battle line. Therefore, I have focused our strength at the courtyard. Because there is nothing specific to guard, I have increase the height and thickness of the perimeter wall and erected more signal towers. I have also laid many traps around the walls and herded most of the animals away. I have left about a hundred animals behind as a decoy.”

By now, they have ridden up a small hill that is overlooking the wide farmlands.

The Hidden Dragon Abode is one of the buildings in the main courtyard. Initially, there were only eighteen buildings but now, there are over sixty buildings. With high walls surrounding each building, it is like a mini city. If the two thousand men were used to defend the two mile perimeter, it will be largely insufficient. Moreover, the enemy would have come prepared; if they focused on one or two main areas to attack, they can overcome the defenders easily.

Xiang Shaolong shared all his observations and finally suggested: “This time, we must use some of the battle strategies from the Mohist Scroll and ‘attack the attackers’. If we can lay an ambush outside the perimeter wall and coordinate our attacks, we will give them the fight of their life.”

Teng Yi frowned: “I thought about this possibility too. The problem is that Meng Ao is attacking us personally and this man is well-versed in warfare. He would not use up all his men in a full attack but will probably base his forces on higher ground and attack us in different waves. Our ambush army will become an

isolated army instead and this is disadvantageous for us.”

Xiang Shaolong confidently decided: “In that case, it is the higher ground that we must establish control first.” Pointing to a dense snow forest near a mountain base, he recommended: “If we can build an underground tunnel that goes to that forest from here, we can distract the enemies’ attacking force.”

Jing Jun interrupted: “Without a month or two, it is impossible to build a tunnel like that.”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for his mistake and changed the topic: “In that case, we can build a hidden shelter instead.”

Teng Yi bitterly laughed: “If the shelter can only hide a dozen men or so, it would be fruitless. Moreover, Meng Ao should see through this trick given his battle experience.”

Xiang Shaolong thought even harder and happened to see some smoke rising from the farm chimneys. He had a brainwave and exclaimed: “I got it!”

Both men stared at him in shock.

Looking at the smoke, Xiang Shaolong proudly explained: “We can dig a few holes along the valleys and fill them with oil, firewood and other burning materials. It would be better if there is a bad smell created from the burning. When it is lighted, large amounts of smoke can be produced and some of the smoke will be

blown uphill towards the higher ground. When the enemy is thrown into confusion, we shall attack them at the perfect time and I guarantee that their forces will be in total disarray and easily destroyed as a result.”

Jing Jun and Teng Yi were inspired by his strategy.

Laughing to himself that this is probably the first form of chemical warfare in history, Xiang Shaolong continued: “The enemies will naturally attack at night. As long as we are careful, we can escape after lighting up the smoke pits. We will also have a wet cloth to cover our faces and avoid breathing in any of the smoke.”

Jing Jun excitedly cried: “I know of some trees nearby called Poison Oak. When the wood is being burnt, it produces an extremely foul smell. Let me go and cut some now!” Finishing his words, he rode away at once.

Teng Yi was astonished: “Third Brother is truly creative and wise. In fact, we can set up several of these smoke pits and light up those which are having a favourable wind direction. I shall get some men to prepare these pits now. You should go back and have some rest!”

At dinner time, Teng Yi is still busy with work.

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang went to the main hall to dine with Wu Yingyuan and his wife while Qin Qing accompanied Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi for dinner in the Hidden Dragon Abode.

When Xiang Shaolong came back, Ji Yanran and Qin Qing are performing a duet with their flute and qin. His musical knowledge is quite shallow but he still enjoyed their playing.

Out of the blue, Ji Yanran suggested that Xiang Shaolong go for a stroll with Qin Qing. Unexpectedly, Qin Qing agreed to her idea too.

Xiang Shaolong is beyond delight and realised that Qin Qing did not really hold it against him for his earlier intrusion and hurriedly accompanied his love out of the Abode.

Book 17 Chapter 11 – The Great Farm Battle

The farms were lighted in many areas and it was as bright as day. The two thousand Elite Wu Family Warriors and several thousand farmhands are busy constructing defence structures, giving top priority to the smoke pits.

It was strangely calm and peaceful within the residences as if no one expects an imminent battle.

Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing are strolling along a gravel path that is linking the several farm buildings. Coming to a well, Xiang Shaolong fetched a pail of water and took two sips. His arteries nearly froze on the spot.

Qin Qing sighed: “Rural living is pleasant indeed. People living in the city are more hypocritical and ruthless.”

Xiang Shaolong sat down on the edge of the well and patted the empty space beside him, smiling: “Shall we take a rest?”

Qin Qing smoothly sat down beside him. Lowering her head, she softly asked: “Does Grand Tutor Xiang know why I am willing to accompany you for a private stroll?”

Feeling uncomfortable at a possible confrontation, Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath: “Speak your mind. I can accept anything.”

Qin Qing sighed and shook her head: “It is not as bad as you think. I did not hold it against you at all. In actual fact, I could not conceal my feelings too and had to come to the farms with you. As you had mentioned, I have been deceiving myself all these while and suffered the pain of pining for you. But from tonight onwards, I will not be so foolish anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong was unexpectedly surprised and intimately scrutinized her matchless beauty. Intoxicated, he trailed: “Grand Tutor Qin is saying that...”

Qin Qing shyly whined: “I am not saying anything. Why are these people working non-stop? Is someone going to attack the farms?”

Xiang Shaolong understands that if he tries to hasten things with Qin Qing, she would despise him. It is totally unforeseen that she would actually lost her inhibitions and offered herself willingly, adding to the excitement of the relationship. Telling himself to be patient, he divulged Lu Buwei’s scheme and concluded: “Will Grand Tutor Qin blame me for putting you in danger?”

Qin Qing decisively shook her head: “Of course not! I am delighted because you have finally regarded me as... Ah, it is nothing.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but face the sky and laughed: “Is Grand Tutor Qin trying to say that I have finally regarded you as my woman?”

Qin Qing loudly wailed: “No such thing. Hai! It is your brain and

you can think whatever you want.”

Xiang Shaolong reached his hand over and held tightly onto her hand. Standing up, he invited: “Let me introduce you to our battle formation. Otherwise, you may blame me for hiding things from you again.”

Qin Qing struggled shortly and finally accepted the fate of her hand being held by him. She shyly nodded at him first before shooting him a look at his last line, faulting him for bearing old grudges.

Xiang Shaolong’s heart has completely melted and resisted the strong urge to kiss and caress her. He proceeded to lead her on a night tour of the farm.

Back at the Hidden Dragon Abode, Xiang Bao’er has been coaxed to sleep by the nanny while Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi are engaged in a game of chess. The Tian sisters are watching the intense game at the side.

Ji Yanran is analyzing with Uncle Qing on how to build Zhou Wei’s fake black dragon.

Witnessing Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing’s return, Uncle Qing hurriedly got up and paid his respects.

Ji Yanran scanned Qin Qing’s expression and smiled knowingly at Xiang Shaolong. Qin Qing maintained an innocent look

throughout as if nothing has happened.

Qin Qing noticed that although they were staring at each other, she was the centre of attention and quickly left for her room.

Xiang Shaolong joined in their discussion and by the time Uncle Qing has fully grasped the essence of their needs, Xiang Shaolong took the chance to ask: “Does Uncle Qing knows how to produce firecrackers and pyrotechnics?”

Ji Yanran proudly proclaimed: “Uncle Qing’s forte is in blacksmith works. If you wanted to talk about fire crackers and pyrotechnics, you can start asking me for advice!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “You know about gunpowder and related stuff?”

Ji Yanran smugly replied: “Of course. I know about many other things too. Feel free to test my wisdom!”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that her Talented reputation is not without merit. He was thinking of getting Uncle Qing to manufacture a hand gun for his personal protection but decided against it in the end as a hand gun does not have the range of arrows and it is difficult to load gunpowder. He smiled: “Who am I to test you?”

Uncle Qing excused himself and Ji Yanran’s expression turned serious: “Then it is my turn to test you. Go to sleep now and from

tomorrow onwards, I shall take up the heavy responsibility of drilling you in spear skills. Before your duel with Guan Zhongxie, hubby must sleep alone and not indulge in pleasures of the flesh.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. Wouldn't this shatter his beautiful dream of making love to the exquisite and alluring Qin Qing? He protested: “According to studies, love making does not affect the athletes' performance.”

Ji Yanran was shocked and furrowed her brows: “What are you talking about?”

Xiang Shaolong raised both his hands in mock surrender: “I will obey all your instructions.”

He left with a bitter smile.

For the next five days, Xiang Shaolong got up at cock's crow and received Ji Yanran's strict tutoring and even took the initiative to swim in the winter waters in a nearby river. In his free time, he went riding with Qin Qing and his wives and Qin Qing's favourable impression of him grew by leaps and bounds. She no longer views him as a creature of lust and they became much closer.

Teng Yi busied himself with the farm defences and morale was high among their men. Everyone is gearing up for the big showdown with their enemies.

At the sixth day, there was a heavy snowfall.

Spies reported signs of the invading army vanguard in a dense forest about five miles away.

The atmosphere became very tense immediately.

Leading his three wives and Qin Qing who are all dressed in armour, Xiang Shaolong is inspecting the surroundings from a high wall. Below him, Uncle Qing is commanding his subordinates to install heavy duty crossbow mechanisms on the city walls.

This new crossbow machines are Xiang Shaolong's latest creations. Using the same principles as machine guns, they can fire twelve arrows in succession and reach a range of over a thousand feet. This range is twice of a normal crossbow and its weakness is that it is not portable. However, as a defensive weapon, there is nothing else more ideal.

Xiang Shaolong projected his vision further away and saw that the surroundings were hazy. It is favourable for the attackers and disadvantageous for the defenders.

Ji Yanran predicted: "The enemies will definitely attack after the snowstorm and this hasty attack will be less efficient as they are lacking rest. Moreover, Meng Ao is an arrogant man and does not view us as worthy opponents. His belittling of us will create opportunities for us to win."

Sure enough, at dawn, spies reported sightings of the enemies from the south eastern direction. There were roughly a thousand

attackers with ten odd battling rams used to ram the city walls and gates.

Everyone calmed down and prepared themselves mentally for the incoming attack.

All the warriors and workers retreated back into the city while Jing Jun led five hundred of the Wu Family Elite Warriors to a secret bunker that was built behind the high grounds.

The remaining one thousand and five hundred Wu Family Elite Warriors are camping at the trenches along the city wall. Another twenty odd farm workers made up of males, females, the old and young are situated around the residences, ready to put out any fires or repel any invaders who have successfully climbed the city wall. The fighting spirit is abundant and the atmosphere is full of battle tension.

To Qin Qing standing beside him, Xiang Shaolong asked: “Are you cold?”

Qin Qing shook her head to indicate that she is not cold and blew out a wisp of white air: “This is the first time I am participating in a battle and maybe it is due to your presence by my side; somehow, I do not have the least fear.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that her late husband died on the battlefield and took the chance to inquire: “Does Grand Tutor Qin abhor wars?”

Qin Qing took some time to consider her answer and replied with astonishment: “This is the first time somebody asked me such a strange question. In Qin, fighting is a way for the men to showcase their ability and gain the highest honours. But after careful thinking, fighting has caused countless people to lose their countries, their homes, their parents, the spouses and their kids. War causes more hatred. What does Grand Tutor Xiang thinks?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Although I hate to admit this but fighting seems to be part of human nature. Whether it is fighting between two countries or two persons, fighting arises from competition as it is human nature to compare and compete. It becomes a case of survival of the fittest but it is actually human greed for more territory or more possessions. Every person is striving to gain more fame, power and wealth by putting down other people. Thinking about this, I could not help but shudder.”

Wu Tingfang moved closer to him and leaned into his arms in daze. She admiringly praised: “Hubby’s words are so true.”

Ji Yanran nodded: “This is the reason why Godfather and I have been praying for the New Saint. Only when the world is united can we enjoy genuine peace and harmony.”

Xiang Shaolong silently stared at the glowing snowflakes that were illuminated by the light of the fire. He recalled something and smiled: “My dear wives, do you all know that I loved Grand Tutor Qin addressing me as Grand Tutor Xiang. If she addresses me as Commander Xiang or Official Xiang, then I know that I am in trouble.”

Qin Qing loudly wailed: “You, why are you always bringing up the past.”

Zhao Zhi poked Qin Qing’s shoulder and teased: “When is Sister Qin going to address him as hubby just like us... hee... you know what I mean!”

Qin Qing was greatly embarrassed but could not bear to blame her. Her face is as red as an apple and she was speechless. Before she could react, the enemies have been sighted.

As Teng Yi had anticipated, the enemies assembled themselves on the high slopes before moving their battling rams and cloud ladders twenty feet away from the perimeter wall, getting ready to attack the farms.

Xiang Shaolong and his wives put on an act of unpreparedness and their men pretended to be flustered and were running around in panic.

Their act of confusion is to draw the enemies nearer.

Ji Yanran smiled: “In defending a city, first, everyone must be united and face death without fear. Next, men must be properly allocated according to their capabilities and teams. Thirdly, you must have sufficient defensive structures and fourth, there must be no lack of food and resources. Our perimeter wall may not withstand the attacks but we have laid many traps around the area which will cover up this weakness. We have also fulfilled the four conditions so I am certain of victory.”

Teng Yi came up to them and added: “Yanran is well versed in city defences; we will also need to look at attacks!”

Ji Yanran smiled: “We will have to depend on Little Jun then.”

The rumbling sounds of the battle drums filled the air as the attackers started to move the rams nearer. Disguised as horse thieves, they attacked from four routes.

Teng Yi laughed: “Meng Ao is trying to trick us by making a frontal attack and taking away our attention. The real attacking force should be coming from the back. Let’s play along with him.”

Before he finished speaking, a loud crash was heard. One of the battling rams has fallen into a trap along with several men and horses and it was a sorry sight.

The traps were all within range of the crossbow machines. Teng Yi shouted an order and the arrows fell like rain. The enemy vanguard of one thousand men were shot down mercilessly as another battling ram fell into another trap that was filled with sharp knives.

The battle drums sounded again and it was followed by war cries from the left and the back. The war has finally begun.

Stones from catapults and flying balls of fire were crisscrossing in the air.

Due to the long range of the crossbow machines and their higher position, every single enemy soldier was killed before they can even come near to the perimeter wall.

For two whole hours, only two battling rams managed to reach the base of the perimeter wall but were smashed to smithereens by the catapulted rocks.

Occasionally, some fire arrows were shot into the city but were swiftly extinguished.

Everyone knew that if the wall is breached, it will be a serious disadvantage so everyone is doing their utmost best to fight. The blood of the enemy soldiers is flowing like a river and the plains were scattered with corpses.

By now, the enemies have laid wooden planks over the traps and are using giant shields to protect their bodies. Advancing with the remaining five battling rams, they advanced rapidly.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the time is ripe and gave his order. The trumpets sounded his order over the entire compound.

About ten of the smoke pits started to emit thick smoke. With the wind carrying them, they were blown in the direction of the attackers outside the city and also those who are based on the high slopes. The enemies begin to break down and cough incessantly.

Teng Yi roused the Elite Army and motivated them to fight even harder.

Xiang Shaolong separately kissed the cheeks of Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi, instructing them to stay within the city. He then came to Qin Qing.

Qin Qing's face is totally red and she turned her face to one side, awaiting a kiss from him.

Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong used his hand to prop her chin and lifted her face, kissing her heavily on the lips. With a broad smile, he left with Teng Yi and Ji Yanran.

As the thick smoke is subsiding, loud shouts of killing and arrows firing can be heard from the high slope. Apparently, Jing Jun and his men are now attacking the enemies with arrows.

At the main door, one thousand Elite Wu Family Warriors are already mounted on their horses and waiting patiently for Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Ji Yanran. When the three of them mounted their horses, thunderous drumming filled the air and their army marched out neatly before erupting into ruthless slaughtering of their foe. Using the safe paths that were not booby-trapped, they cut into the enemies' formation like a sharp cleaver.

With the Flying Dragon spear and shield, Xiang Shaolong led the pack and killed everyone he saw. The enemy soldiers who have lost their fighting will due to the smoke are barely able to resist his overpowering attacks.

The Elite Warriors displayed their fearsome attacking power. Everyone was fighting their best and like a tiger among a herd of sheep, the enemy formation was broken and they continued their killing spree up the high slope.

By this time, the enemies on the slope are in complete disarray thanks to the choking smoke and Jing Jun's attacks. Coupled with this new attacking force upon them, the attackers could not take it anymore. Demoralised, everyone is only trying their best to escape in all directions.

The city gates opened again and it was another army of three hundred Elite Warriors led by Wu Yan Zhu. Timing their attacks, they killed numerous enemies on the lower ground. In a pathetic state, all the invaders are now only concerned about escaping and staying alive.

Xiang Shaolong met up with Jing Jun's forces and they continued chasing and killing more enemies for another twenty miles before returning back to the farm.

It was a complete rout. Over two thousand enemies were killed and more than two hundred were imprisoned. On their side, there were only thirty one dead and less than two hundred injured. It was a significant win but Xiang Shaolong could not find any joy. For a peace loving man like him, wars, death and injuries are not something he can derive any joy from.

When the sky has brightened, the Wu Family Warriors came out

to survey the damage and clean up the area. Jing Jun is put in charge of sending the prisoners of war back to Xianyang City and create some trouble for Lu Buwei.

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong surveyed the aftermath and lamented: “Too bad we did not capture Meng Ao or Guan Zhongxie. Otherwise, Lu Buwei will surely be implicated.”

Xiang Shaolong knew better than anyone that before Xiao Pan’s coronation, Lu Buwei cannot be toppled. He let out a long sigh and did not reply.

Teng Yi added: “Those captured are either Meng Ao or Lu Buwei’s family warriors. Let’s see how he explains himself.”

Xiang Shaolong replied in a deep voice: “Don’t underestimate him. I am sure he has a ready solution. This matter will only come to a rest.”

Two days later, they received their answer.

Jing Jun sent someone to report that when they arrived at Xianyang City, they were detained by Guan Zhongxie at the City gates. Lu Buwei came personally and took over the prisoners, promising to punish them severely and find out the true mastermind. Based on Lu Buwei’s strong influence, it is hard for Xiao Pan to interfere and the end result is meaningless.

Earlier, Jing Jun has been reminded by Xiang Shaolong and

submitted Talented Lady Ji's report to Wang He who in turn, submitted it to Left Premier Lord Changping. Lord Changping then reported the whole incident to Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan during the morning court.

The report was powerful in the sense that it did not pinpoint Lu Buwei as the main perpetrator but hinted at his involvement every now and then.

No matter how daring Lu Buwei is, he will not dare to invade the farms in near future.

Xiang Shaolong is working especially hard today at his spear techniques because Qin Qing woke up early specially to see him practice.

Pi! Pi! Pak! Pak! For the first time, he forced Ji Yanran to fight with all her might to match his attacks.

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has caused his beloved Talented Lady Ji to fight her best and broke out into laughter. Retrieving his spear, he stood upright in an imposing manner just like a heavenly general.

Wu Tingfang, Qin Qing and the other girls are clapping so hard their palms hurt. Ji Yanran was pleased: "Hubby is really formidable. In a few days, you have understood the essence of spear techniques. I submit to you."

Teng Yi came up to them and was holding a long sabre that Uncle Qing has just forged. He laughed loudly: “Second Brother is here to test your spear skills using this new sabre Uncle Qing has forged for you. Shaolong must be careful. The sabre has chromium alloy which is invented by you. I have tried using it to sever several spears in succession and the wear and tear is insignificant.”

Ji Yanran is naturally curious and attracted to new things; moreover, it is something her own hubby created. She quickly received the long sabre from Teng Yi and scrutinized it carefully. After some time, she sighed: “This is the best weapon during a cavalry battle (fighting on horseback). I cannot understand how hubby managed to think of such a creative weapon. On the battlefield and charging at the enemy with a sword, one has to utilise the arm strength to hit the enemy as the horse speed is too fast. You cannot just pierce your sword forward. In this case, a sword is not very effective although both sides of the sword are sharp. Additionally, the sword is a narrow weapon and only the sword centre is thick enough to be effective. With this sabre, it is easy to cut down at the enemy as it is sharp on one side and thick on the back. It is a durable weapon which is good for hacking enemies and uses less strength for the same blow. Oh. I must also get Uncle Qing to forge another sabre for me to play.”

Xiang Shaolong was speechless at her observations.

He wanted a sabre from Uncle Qing as he had always admired the samurai katana of the Japanese. He did not expect the weapon to be so formidable.

Wu Tingfang received the sword from Ji Yanran and admired it.

After taking a closer look, she exclaimed: “This sabre has very nice engravings on it. Ah, it even has a name inscribed here: Hundred Battles. Hundred Battles, Hundred Victories. It is a lucky name. Ah! This sabre is so heavy!”

Teng Yi explained: “Uncle Qing’s forging method is Yue’s secret ‘Hundred Forges’ method. The weapon is forged over many rounds and subjected to intense fire. It is definitely much superior to a common sabre.”

To Ji Yanran, he smiled: “If Yanran wants another sabre like this, you have to wait for a year but the sabre may not be as good as this Hundred Battle Sabre. This is Uncle Qing’s masterpiece. He has failed countless times before he was finally enlightened to forge this heavenly weapon. All right, Shaolong come!”

Everyone was excited and hurriedly retreated.

Among the falling snowflakes, Teng Yi raised the sabre and stood in an impressive pose.

Xiang Shaolong let out a roar and the Flying Dragon spear sprang into life into mid air and agilely advanced towards Teng Yi’s chest area.

Teng Yi understands that Xiang Shaolong is afraid to injure him because of his longer weapon and chided: “Are you lacking confidence in me? Show me your best moves!”

Wu Tingfang was affected by Teng Yi's air of righteousness and loudly cheered for Xiang Shaolong. Even Qin Qing is cheering loudly for him, showing that she has adapted to Xiang Shaolong's household and lifestyle.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and adopted the horse stance, his long spear striking towards Teng Yi's belly like lightning.

Only with such a long weapon can he attack from such an angle as it is hard for the sabre to deflect the long spear.

Teng Yi coldly snorted and slashed down with the Hundred Battle Sabre.

Xiang Shaolong changed from a piercing attack to a hooking attack. Dang! He failed to hook the Hundred Battle Sabre. He quickly retrieved the spear to protect himself. In the midst of his movement, Teng Yi dashed forward to attack him and Xiang Shaolong blocked with his spear. In a short span of time, they have exchanged many blows.

The first time the sabre and spear come into contact, the spear was heavily deflected. If the Flying Dragon Spear is not made of the best steel but ordinary wood, it would be broken into many pieces by now.

By now, the Eighteen Guardians and Shan Lan have heard the commotion and are busy cheering for them and it was a lively scene.

After another heavy blow, both men retreated and showed signs of tiredness.

Ji Yanran clapped loudly: “This is a match with no clear winner. As long as Second Brother practices more with the sabre and gain more experience, the loser will be our undefeated Xiang Shaolong for sure.”

Xiang Shaolong looked up to the sky and had a long laugh. Throwing his spear away, he cheered: “I think I am not using the spear anymore. Next month, I will use the Hundred Battle Sabre to take Guan Zhongxie’s life.”

Teng Yi joyfully passed him the sabre and wished: “I wish Shaolong will fight and win a hundred battles and be invincible under the skies.”

Xiang Shaolong received the treasure sabre and tested its weight, praising: “This sabre is nearly as heavy as my Mozi Sword but it looks much lighter from its appearance. This will catch Guan Zhongxie by surprise and make him regret for duelling with me.”

Teng Yi laughed: “From today onwards, your Mozi Sword is mine. After using the Hundred Battle Sabre, all other weapons other than the Mozi Sword is uninteresting.”

Both men exchanged a look and laughed loudly. On the side, Ji Yanran just received a report from Wu Guang and happily chirped: “Wu Guang just reported that a giant hot spring has been discovered at Moon Prayer Cliff. Let’s go there immediately.”

Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng cheered in unison.

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Are we skipping practice today?”

Smiling sweetly and charmingly, Ji Yanran gently coaxed: “With this indomitable Hundred Battle Sabre, what’s wrong with taking a day off?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his confidence rising. At the end of the day, he managed to survive until today is because of his knowledge that spans across two thousand years. This sabre he is holding in his hand is the best proof.

Book 17 Chapter 12 – Love Wish Granted

Among the rising heat, the entire rock pool is bathing in warmth. Coupled with the snowflakes falling from the sky, it is heaven on earth.

The boiling spring water sprang out from three cervices in the rock wall and flowed straight into the pool. Any excess water continued to flow to another rock pool five feet below, forming another soaking area. Jing Shan and the other Guardians are congregating in that pool.

On Moon Prayer Cliff, at this inaccessible location, all earthly rules no longer matter. Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen, Tian Feng all revealed the glory of the beautiful bodies and were soaking contentedly in the hot spring. None of them are willing to leave, for in this ancient era where hot water showers are unavailable; there is no better treat for their bodies in the middle of winter.

Qin Qing removed her shoes and soaked her delicate feet into the spring water. To her, that is as far as she would go.

Xiang Shaolong and the girls stared at her with embarrassment. Sitting down beside her and soaking his feet too, he offered: “Does Grand Tutor Qin wants to soak the spring water too? I can join the boys down there.”

Qin Qing resisted the temptation of the spring water and shyly shook her head: “Grand Tutor Xiang can go ahead and enjoy

himself. I am very happy where I am.”

Xiang Shaolong noticed that her face is slightly reddish, making her even more mesmerizing. He teased: “Are you not afraid to see me naked?”

Qin Qing knows that this man is intentionally teasing her and she wailed: “Get into the pool quickly. I will not be bothered with you anymore today. I have yet to settle the last score with you!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that she is referring to the incident where he kissed her on the lips. Without any concern for her feelings, he leaned over to kiss her face and embraced her in a bear hug. Just as Qin Qing is about to struggle, both of them slipped and fell right into the hot spring.

Ji Yanran and the other girls swam over, cheering, giggling and teasing them. Among the falling snowflakes, there are no more barriers between them.

After dinner, while Qin Qing and the other girls are playing with Xiang Bao'er, Ji Yanran dragged Xiang Shaolong to a small pavilion in the garden to do snow-watching. She cooed: “I have never seen Sister Qin so happy before. Are you ready to marry her officially?”

Xiang Shaolong thought for a minute and replied: “I think we should discuss this after my duel with Guan Zhongxie!”

Ji Yanran suggested: “I have thought about it already. The best time is after the appearance of the Black Dragon. That is the best time for changes, including a change in Sister Qin’s status. It will not arouse the displeasure of the royal family.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “Yanran is thoughtful indeed. With Sister Qin, I have no other wants.”

Ji Yanran seriously state: “To get Sister Qin to marry you is not easy. You better treat her like a respectable lady. Ai. I am talking about making love. Sister Qin hates the custom of Qin girls having pre martial sex. Hubby should understand what I mean!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Now, I dare not even touch you; why would I even dare to think about doing anything to her?”

Ji Yanran giggled: “It is fine to make love once or twice before the duel as long as you curb your desires.”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted and held Ji Yanran’s hands, sighing: “You must have understood my agony to grant me this special pardon.”

Ji Yanran gently replied: “It must be the hot spring’s effects. But the one sharing your bed tonight should not be me. Since I am the one who set this rule, I should be the last one to make love with you.”

Among the giant snowflakes, Xiang Shaolong held tightly to the

Hundred Battle Sabre and is standing alone in the middle of the snowy plains. Behind him are the Wu Family farms.

It may be due to the wonderful feeling of this new weapon that the sabre has never left his side for the past ten days. He is trying to inculcate the three Ultimate Stances of Mozi into the sabre play. After a round of meditation, his heart is still as choppy as the sea. He seems to be on the verge of having a breakthrough on the sabre skill but something seems to be lacking.

During his meditation, he had memory flashes of his past. When he recalled the scenes of the tragic deaths of Zhao Qian and the maids, hot blood surged up in his body and he could not suppress it anymore.

Brandishing his sabre, he sliced ferociously through the air at an invisible opponent.

The sabre rang out loudly as it cuts through empty air.

He suddenly felt at ease and naturally exhibited the Mozi Swordplay but this time, he focused on slashing and chopping moves. Somehow, there is still something missing.

Out of a sudden, he had a brainwave and finally understood the crux of the problem.

He remembered that the Mozi Swordplay focuses on defence rather than attack but the nature of the Hundred Battle Sabre is to

attack and not to defend. Therefore, when he tried to inculcate the Mozi Swordplay into the sabre play, it doesn't feel right.

Thinking about this, he quickly forgot about the Mozi Swordplay and focused on attacks. Among the flashing of the sabre energy, he can feel his forceful attacks striking forward just like bolts of lightning, giving him a strong dose of endorphin.

The tremendous impact of the sabre flashes can be felt all around him.

Like a solid mountain, Xiang Shaolong stood erect but his mind is filled with countless giant waves.

He thought about karate and Chinese wushu which are all based on science and logic, such as attacking using the shortest distance between you and the opponent or using momentum, flow and gravity to your advantage. He even thought about ranged attacks. From all these knowledge, he tried to incorporate the essence into sabre play.

He also thought hard about samurai katana moves. Although it only has a few basic essential moves, every one of them is strong and powerful.

Thinking till here, his sword skills and sabre skills seems to merge into one.

Since Mozi can created his own swordplay and he himself has

learnt the essence of his skills, why can't he create his own set of skills by taking the essence of all the martial arts he knew? Xiang Shaolong can feel the boundless of his heart and he was so touched hot tears begin to pour down his face. Facing the sky, he let out a long roar and the Hundred Battle Sabre is now flashing in a maelstrom that has seemed to envelope him.

Following the shadow of the sabre strikes, Xiang Shaolong executed a few intricate strokes and can feel the might of a million strong soldiers and war horses in his heart. He felt a sense of invincibility and fearlessness regardless of the future.

He kneeled down in an instant, knowing that he has fully grasped the intricacies of sabre play. All he lacks now is experience.

Back home, he promptly looked for Teng Yi and Ji Yanran to test out his new skills.

Holding the Flying Dragon Spear, Ji Yanran saw Xiang Shaolong posing with his sabre and was stunned: "Hubby, what happened to you? The moment you stood there exhibiting your sabre pose, I can already sense that there is no way I can even attack you successfully."

Laughingly, Xiang Shaolong bellowed: "This is called confidence and might. Come my dear, my hands are itching already."

Glancing at his natural heroic aura, Qin Qing and all the girls are fully intoxicated.

Letting out a shrill cry, the Flying Dragon Spear came alive in Ji Yanran's hands. Like endless waves of strong currents, the spear dashed forward towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong brightened up. His strength, hands, eyes and footsteps are in perfect synchronicity. Using the Hundred Battle Sabre, every move is used with the appropriate strength, not too much and not too little. Instead of defending as before, he is now mainly focused on attacks. He met the attack head on, appearing to disregard the weight or length of the Flying Dragon Spear.

Under the strong pressure of the formidable sabre attacks, the Flying Dragon Spear was forced back several times. Talented Lady Ji could not retaliate at all.

Ji Yanran sensed that there is no way she can overcome him. Throwing the spear aside, she retreated and wailed: "I quit!" Turning happy in an instant, she pledged: "Xiang Shaolong, today, I, Ji Yanran, fully submit to you."

Without any warning, Teng Yi leapt over and the Mozi Sword swung towards Xiang Shaolong with tremendous impact.

Xiang Shaolong enthusiastically let out a roar and met the attack head on.

On the surface, his counter attack looked ordinary but underneath, its angle and direction is the best possible position available, giving everyone present a sense of grandmastery.

Even with Teng Yi's amazing arm strength and the weight of the heavy Mozi Sword, he was forced to take half a step back.

Teng Yi can feel his exhilaration rising too. When he was about to retaliate, Xiang Shaolong followed up with another two strikes. Trailing the cold sabre energy, Teng Yi felt helpless and overpowered, taking five continuous steps back in order to counter his two strikes.

Taking advantage of this window, Xiang Shaolong carried on delivering one mighty slash after another. The aura of his indomitable sabre attacks caused everyone including the girls and the Guardians to feel their hearts turning cold.

Teng Yi is a worthy opponent after all. Only after meeting another ten blows did he take another two steps back.

Xiang Shaolong retrieved his sabre and retreated but he still retained his aura of dominance.

Teng Yi laughed loudly: "If Third Brother has the intention to take my life, I am afraid I will be dead or severely maimed."

Jing Shan was flabbergasted: "What kind of sword play is that?"

Xiang Shaolong solemnly state: "It is not sword play, it is sabre play!"

Talented Lady Ji agreed: "This is Shaolong's creation: Hundred

Battle Sabre Play. It is more powerful than Mozi Swordplay. Guan Zhongxie is in trouble!”

Amidst their cheering, everyone went back to the houses.

Knock! Knock! Knock! Qin Qing’s melodious voice sang out from within the room: “Who is it?”

Xiang Shaolong dryly coughed: “It is me. Can I come in?”

Qin Qing answered: “Yes, oh, no!”

Xiang Shaolong has already barged in. He was curious: “Why did Grand Tutor Qin first said Yes and then said no? Hey, what are you doing?”

Qin Qing stood up from her seat on the floor rug. Her bedroom has a stove on so it is as warm as Spring. She is dressed in an ordinary white dress with a lake green singlet. Coupled with her exquisite face, she resembled a heavenly angel.

On the floor are several pieces of protective plates. Most of them are square but there are also some rectangular and triangular pieces. There are small holes along the edges and Qin Qing is busy sewing them together. She appears to be sewing an armoured vest and the front part is already completed. There are another thirty odd pieces on the floor that has yet to be sewn.

Her petite face turning red, Qin Qing was furious: “Aren’t you

out for archery? Why did you come back so soon?”

Noticing the plates on the floor, Xiang Shaolong came to her side and smiled: “Aren’t these Uncle Qing’s protective plates? Hey, Grand Tutor Qin must be weaving an armoured vest for me, isn’t it?”

Even the root of her ears has become red. Nodding, Qin Qing tried to wriggle her way out: “I am pretty free compared to the rest. Tingfang and Zhi Zhi have to manage Bao’er and Yanran is occupied with the Black Dragon construction, so I tried to find something to do to pass the time. Ai, can you stop staring at me in such a manner?” Lowering her head, she added: “Do you realise that this is my bedroom?”

Xiang Shaolong relished: “It is fortunate that I did not treat this place like a forbidden ground, otherwise, I will not have seen Grand Tutor Qin’s dedication to me. In the future, when I put on the vest, it is like... Hey! It is like Grand Tutor Qin...”

Qin Qing stomped her foot: “Can you please stop saying anymore?”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart is as sweet as honey. He gently asked: “When I barged into the Qin Residence the other day, you hid the embroidery that you were sewing, I wonder...”

Qin Qing embarrassedly walked away and stopped at the window with her back to him. She lowered her head in silence, and silence means that she is indeed sewing something for him.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his pulse racing. Going to her back, he hardened his heart and grabbed her chiselled shoulders.

Qin Qing trembled for a while before calming down. Amazingly, she did not put up any struggle.

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward and pressed onto her smooth cheek and inhaled her fragrance deeply, gently reminiscing: “I can still remember the first time I saw you. It was right outside the Crown Prince’s study. We were both reprimanded by you and we are like complete idiots. From then on, my respect and love for you is like an immortal.”

Under his warm teasing, Qin Qing’s body softened and leaned backwards into his arms. She moaned: “Your words are really unique. Complete Idiots. Like an immortal. I am only doing what is right but the two of you are clowning around, causing me to lose my temper. I nearly died of anger then.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel her tender back against his own body and he was enveloped in her fragrance. His two eyes feasted on her peerless face, he thought about her virginity and was in ecstasy. His courage grew by leaps and bounds and he proposed: “Grand Tutor Qin, will you be my wife?”

Qin Qing’s body shook strongly. First, her eyes shone with delight before they darkened again. She shook her head.

His hands and feet turning cold at once, Xiang Shaolong was

shocked: “You do not want to marry me?”

Qin Qing had a fright too: “No, Ai, don’t jump to conclusions. If I am unwilling to marry you, I will not have come to the farms with you. I am only concerned about you. For the past few years, there have been countless marriage proposals from many members of the royal family as well as high ranking officials. They have all been rejected with the same excuse: I have no more intention to remarry. If I change my mind and marry you, it will incur much jealousy among them. Even though they are unable to prevent us from marrying, they will act unfavorably against you. You must not forget Empress Ji. She seems to have guessed our relationship!”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief and proudly proclaimed: “Let them say or do whatever they want. When have I been afraid of anyone?” Turning her around, he hugged her tightly. The sensation of feeling her soft bouncy breasts and their legs entangled together is something that cannot be described in words.

Qin Qing opened her mouth and began panting slightly. Her eyes are half-closed, adding to her unparalleled charm.

The number one beauty of Qin forced her eyes open and declared: “Shaolong, if you really head to the borders one day, by hook or by crook, I must go with you. But please do not incur the public’s wrath because of me. Ai, since I have come all the way here, I have already regarded you as my hubby, Ah!”

Xiang Shaolong greedily kissed her and allowed her to enjoy the unreserved pleasure of intimacy of a love relationship. By the time

they stopped kissing, the usually strong-willed woman has completely melted in his arms. Her arms proactively embraced his well-built neck and her body is soft but burning with passion.

The flames of love are burning stronger than ever.

Qin Qing whispered into his ear: “Let’s act normally on the surface but behind closed doors, you can do whatever you want, all right? Ah!”

How can Xiang Shaolong hold it any longer? Carrying Qin Qing up in both arms, he walked towards her bed.

By the time Xiang Shaolong woke up, it is already dark outside.

Qin Qing’s voluptuous figure is still intertwined with his body.

Xiang Shaolong fondled her again and Qin Qing is awakened by his touches. Discovering Xiang Shaolong’s caress, she remained submissive. Just when things are getting interesting, she suddenly sat upright and revealed the top half of her flawless body, wailing: “Oh no, it is all your fault. We have missed dinner. How am I going to face Yanran and the rest in the future?”

Xiang Shaolong cheerfully sat up and hugged her, coaxing: “It is normal for people to fall in love. Who dares to make fun of our Grand Tutor Qin? Come, let me help Grand Tutor get dressed. I am the one who undressed you so I should also be the one who dressed you”

Qin Qing may have made love to him but still cannot stand his teasing. She demanded: “Get out of my room and check out what is happening outside. Come back and report to me as soon as possible.”

Xiang Shaolong accepted her order and jumped out of bed. He hurriedly got dressed and came back shortly. Qin Qing is sitting in front of the bronze mirror tidying up her hair. Xiang Shaolong seized her hand: “There is no need to comb any further. I love to see you with your hair and clothes in a mess. Moreover, everyone has gone to sleep. Only the Tian sisters are waiting to serve us. I have instructed them to bring dinner to us so you need not expose yourself outside.”

Right this moment, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng came in with a knowing smile. After setting up dinner, they left. Qin Qing let out a cry and fell into Xiang Shaolong’s arms, complaining: “Shaolong, you have really gotten me into trouble!”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: “What did I do?”

Her eyes filled with numerous emotions, Qin Qing shyly replied: “Without you by my side in the future, my days will be full of sorrow!”

Xiang Shaolong helped her up and supported her up. He shook his head: “A short parting is sweeter than marriage. This is how deep our love is.”

Qin Qing was in a daze and repeated ‘a short parting is sweeter than marriage’ a few times before sighing: “No wonder even with Yanran’s talent, she still has to submit to you. Hubby’s words are the most pleasing to the ear.”

Feeling guilty, Xiang Shaolong gently asked: “Shall I feed you?”

Qin Qing nodded her head. What followed was a night of love and passion.

For the next ten odd days, Xiang Shaolong controlled his desires and spent all his time practising his sabre play, making huge progress.

On this day, he dragged the Guardians out to be his sparring partners. After he has defeated all of them soundly, Ji Yanran secretly got everyone to a location outside the farm.

At the riverside, everyone stopped their horses. She started: “Recently, a black dragon has been sighted along this river. Is hubby brave enough to kill this beast and save the people?”

Besides her, Teng Yi chortled: “If the dragon is really destroyed, Uncle Qing will strangle every one of you here.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “The Black Dragon has been completed?”

Qin Qing shouted: “Look!”

Everyone followed her line of sight and saw a strange head surfacing from below the water. With lights shining from its eyes, it was followed by several metres of the dragon body surfacing. It is a chilling scene.

However, within a minute, before the dragon can swim closer, it has already broken into two.

Ji Yanran cursed: “Those fools!”

The black dragon has now broken up into several pieces. As the river is filled with air bubbles, the men operating the dragon frantically surfaced and swam towards shore.

Wu Tingfang and the others are laughing so hard they nearly fell down from their horses.

Holding back his own laughter, Teng Yi assured: “There is no need to fret. It is just some minor engineering issue. The weather is too cold too. They should be fine after a few more practices.”

Xiang Shaolong is already very satisfied with the demonstration. After praising Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong turned his horse towards the direction of home and sighed: “These time spent back at the farms are so carefree and joyful. Thinking that I have to go back and face that smelly Premier Mentor, I don’t have any appetite anymore.”

Teng Yi mused: “Little Jun is the exact opposite. He is so unwilling to stay here at the farms.”

Wu Tingfang laughed: “Of course. Without Lu Dan’er, what joy is there for him!”

Ji Yanran enquired: “There is another ten days till Lu Buwei’s birthday. When is hubby returning?”

Xiang Shaolong thought for while and decided: “The day after tomorrow!”

Qin Qing reminded: “We must take precautions in case Lu Buwei sets an ambush for us along the way.”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “The possibilities may not be high but you are right. It is better to be safe than sorry.”

Teng Yi proudly state: “I have already made arrangements. This trip back to Xianyang City will be without hassle. I have sent men to monitor the roads so safety is not an issue.”

Zhao Zhi smiled: “This time, I must also go and watch hubby fight and kill Guan Zhongxie that bastard.”

Wu Tingfang clapped her hands in agreement.

Ji Yanran frowned: “What if Lu Buwei really decided to marry

her daughter to you? What shall we do?”

Qin Qing smiled: “This is why Lu Buwei sent his men to attack the farms. He has his own fears too. Lu Buwei is also afraid that Guan Zhongxie will lose too. Thus, even if Shaolong wins, Lu Buwei will never marry his daughter to him.”

Slapping his horse forward, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Who cares what will happen? Most importantly, we must kill Guan Zhongxie first. We will solve whatever problem that comes along the way.”

With their fighting spirit at their peak, everyone slapped their horses and gave chase, leaving a long trail of horse tracks on the snow grounds. After gaining the Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong has no more fear of anyone anymore.

end of Book 17

Book 18 Chapter 01 – The Empress Moves Out Of The Palace

Xiang Shaolong has just passed the city gates when he received Xiao Pan's imperial edict to enter the palace at once.

Xiao Pan is in the inner court discussing matters with Lu Buwei, Lord Changping and other high ranking officials. After waiting in the Imperial Study for an hour, Xiang Shaolong managed to see Xiao Pan.

After they got seated, Xiao Pan smiled: "Does Master know this man named Feng Qie? He is our law minister."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile: "What is it regarding that Crown Prince specially mentioned this person?"

Xiao Pan plainly replied: "This man has some backbone and is not fearful of authority. He even dared to rebut me in court. He may be influenced by the Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu. He has been criticising our Qin laws, saying that they are too harsh and we paid too little heed to the teachings of the sages."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "In this case, Crown Prince should be upset instead. Why did you sound pleased when talking about this person?"

Xiao Pan laughed heartily: "Master knows me best. Some of his arguments do make sense. For example, he pointed out that the

Kings of every state will issue new laws according to changes in society. The changes are often abrupt and take place instantly, causing confusion among the officials and the people, creating unnecessary legal issues. This is very true. We need a uniform legislative process to make our country stronger.”

Gazing at this soon-to-be-eighteen future Qin Shi Huang, Xiang Shaolong is filled with respect. It is not because he has grasped the importance of uniform law making, but that he is open to alternative views and criticism.

Xiao Pan whispered: “Initially, I thought he is Lu Buwei’s man but he speaks with the same fearless aura as Master. After that, using the farm invasion report, he censured Lu Buwei strongly. As a result, I am confident that he is unafraid of death like Master. Ha! This man may not be good with administration but I am sure he will make a good Administrative Premier.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Isn’t Li Si’s dream going to end up in smoke? He frantically interrupted: “The Crown Prince must reconsider. I think Official Li is a better choice.”

Xiao Pan shook his head: “Talking about choices, I think Master is the best choice. Have you ever heard Li Si rebutting anyone? In terms of knowledge, Li Si is ten times better than Feng Qie. He is wise and may have even surpassed Shang Yang. From his Three Premiers Nine Ministers organization, he is most suited to be the Law minister and handle our great laws of Qin. I can also use his talent to build a lawful country in preparation of uniting the world one day.”

Xiang Shaolong is dumbfounded. In terms of ruling a country, he would not dare to debate with the man who will unite China.

At the end of the day, the Law Minister is still considered a high ranking post and Li Si should be contented.

At the same time, he can see his own influence over Xiao Pan. Because Feng Qie speaks like himself, Xiao Pan immediately has a high opinion of him.

Success is no coincidence. It is because Xiao Pan is capable of putting talent to good use which gives him the opportunity to conquer the world.

Turning happy, Xiao Pan continued in a low voice: “Little Jun has told me everything about the farm battle. I cannot believe it is so exciting. Master could be even better than Bai Qi. If Master fields an army in the future, I am sure you will be undefeated.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled to himself; this is his worst fear. Since Xiao Pan has this idea already, he will have to act accordingly sooner or later. Luckily, it is not an immediate concern. Changing the topic, he asked: “How did Lu Buwei shift the blame off himself?”

A cold murderous look flashed past Xiao Pan’s eyes. He detailed: “He released them unconditionally and find a few scapegoats to be executed, saying they are the masterminds. Thus, there is no way we can verify anything. If not for the Black Dragon scheme, I would have summoned him privately and kill him personally. Hng!

Meng Ao deserves to be killed too. Fortunately, he has two capable sons.”

He faced Xiang Shaolong and implored: “Has the Black Dragon been completed?”

Xiang Shaolong explained the details.

Xiao Pan sighed: “Thank Heavens that Master has come up with this miraculous solution or I would not know how to counter Lu Buwei. Hei! My success today is all owed...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted: “Don’t say such things. Crown Prince has been chosen by Heaven to unite the world. As your subordinate, I am just doing my best!”

Deeply moved, Xiao Pan could not say anything for a while. Finally, he sighed: “Yesterday, Empress moved to Oasis Palace!”

Oasis Palace is situated north of the city among other royal buildings. It is considered to be a position that opposes the main palace. Since Zhu Ji has moved there without her son, their relationship must be in dire straits.

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Did you have a big fight with her?”

With a wronged expression, Xiao Pan shook his head: “On the contrary. I have listened to Master’s instructions and did my best to repair my relationship with her. When she brought up the topic

of moving to Oasis Palace, I did my best to make her stay but she was completely oblivious to my pleas. I smell a rat too. Hei! Actually, it is better that she moved out. I need not witness her scandalous acts.”

Xiang Shaolong understands that he is referring to Zhu Ji and Lao Ai’s illicit affair. He felt funny too. By right, Zhu Ji should stay in the palace to maintain her influence over politics and power. Why did she choose to leave Xianyang Palace? He had a brainwave and recalled Qin Qing. Based on her information network, she is the best person to investigate this strange behaviour.

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Does she partake in the morning court sessions and official meetings?”

Xiao Pan smiled: “Of course she will not give up her power. She may not always be present but insists that every edict must be approved by her regardless of importance. Now, dealing with her is even more difficult than before. The most annoying issue is the rise of Lao Ai. Acting like her spokesman, he has been quite vocal and is always sowing discord between Empress and others. I wish I can kill him with one stroke.”

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Since this is the case, we should support him and make him the official representative of Empress. With his insatiable ambition, he will clash with Lu Buwei sooner or later. When that happens, we can sit by the side and enjoy a good show.”

Xiao Pan is incensed: “But every time I see him, I am so irritated...”

Xiang Shaolong smilingly cut him off: “To achieve big things, we must have tolerance and real skills, doing what others cannot do. Ultimately, Lao Ai is only a clown who is only good at ganging up with other crooks. The damage he can cause can never match up to Lu Buwei. He is only good with the Empress backing him. In other’s opinion, he is still Lu Buwei’s man but if we can make him more powerful, it is as good as creating more trouble for Lu Buwei. Crown Prince, I think we should tolerate him for a few more years!”

Xiao Pan realised: “Master is right. As long as I am not coroneted, I have to give face to Empress. Hei! Before she moved, she insisted that I make Lao Ao a marquis. I declined immediately. From that day onwards, she refused to co sign my edicts, making it hard for the officials to begin their work. Ai! I guess I have to comply with her.”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “A wise man act according to circumstances. Crown Prince can let Empress know that after the Spring Festival, when it is time to make new changes, you will promote Lao Ai to be a marquis.”

Xiao Pan was perplexed: “It is not so easy. Empress even wanted me to promote a few of his cronies. For example, Lao Ai wants his own clansman Lao Si to be the Interior Minister. There is also Ling Qi and Han Jie who are his new recruits. Empress wants them to be promoted too and I can feel a headache coming.”

Xiang Shaolong already saw this coming. Without these implementations, Lao Ai will not dare to rebel in the future.

He comforted: “No matter how powerful they grow, they cannot accomplish much. To gain Empress’s support, Crown Prince has to bear with this. Don’t fret. Lu Buwei’s headache is worse than yours!”

Xiao Pan thought about it and laughed: “Somehow, everything is easily solved when they come to you. I will follow Master’s advice.”

After further discussion, Xiang Shaolong left the palace and went to find Qin Qing.

They had only parted shortly but Xiang Shaolong is already here to see her. Qin Qing is especially delighted and received him in the inner hall.

Since they mated, Xiang Shaolong has to focus on his training so they did not have any more close contact. Meeting her in the inner hall, they both felt intimacy and some awkwardness at the same time. It was simply refreshing and yet they felt lost too.

In the end, Xiang Shaolong held her hand and asked: “Have you heard that Empress is moving to Oasis Palace?”

Qin Qing’s eye brows tightened and she whispered: “I knew it the moment I came back. The attendants she brought to the Oasis Palace are all her own people so I am afraid I cannot conduct any investigation for you.”

Pulling her to the rear garden, Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing came to a bridge and sat down on the railings. With one hand hugging her slender waist, Xiang Shaolong pondered; “There must be a reason for her moving. I wonder what it is.”

With his arm around her, Qin Qing’s body turned soft instantly and leaned onto him, pressing her own leg against his. Despite the cold winter, her face is burning hot like the summer sun. She joyfully whined: “Can Official Xiang watch his behaviour? The servants may see us!”

Xiang Shaolong let out a loud laugh and lifted her to sit on his lap.

Qin Qing cried out in panic and lost her balance. When she straightened herself, her lips are already locked onto his.

After a round of kissing and teasing, a satisfied Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “This is to punish you for calling me Official Xiang. Do you plead guilty?”

Qin Qing was feeling sweet in her heart. Shooting him a charming look, she wailed; “So domineering!”

Xiang Shaolong is intoxicated by her charm. He hates himself for losing his ability to conceive after coming to this era. If he can impregnate Qin Qing or Ji Yanran, it will be really blissful. Thinking about this, his body shook uncontrollably.

Seeing his changed expression, Qin Qing was shocked: “What is it?”

Looking at the far distance, Xiang Shaolong whispered: “This is bad. Empress must be pregnant.”

Stepping into the Wu Residence, he heard that Zou Yan is back. Xiang Shaolong is overjoyed and inquired on his whereabouts. Zou Yan is chatting with Ji Yanran in the inner chamber and he hurriedly joined them.

Looking great as normal, Zou Yan is also glad to see Xiang Shaolong.

Ji Yanran has already told him the reason for inviting him back. After dinner, Zou Yan dragged Xiang Shaolong to the garden pavilion for a chat. Ji Yanran naturally tagged along. Snowflakes are flying through the sky and illuminated by their lamps, making it a pleasant sight.

Xiang Shaolong embarrassedly began: “Because of us, we have to bother godfather to come all the way here. We are really...”

Zou Yan chuckled and interrupted: “Since when did Shaolong become so polite? You need not feel bad as I am also thinking of traveling back to Qi and see my old friends.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered Shan Rou and was about to say

something when Ji Yanran indicated: “You need not say it. I have already told godfather to help us search for Sister Rou. Based on his contacts in Qi, this should be an easy task.”

He was beginning to get worried about Shan Rou. Thus, Xiang Shaolong is comforted to know this news. Shan Rou’s swordsmanship is outstanding so it should be easy to locate her.

Sitting down beside a stone table, Zou Yan’s eyes twinkled and he state in a deep voice: “To think that in my senior years, I, Zou Yan, is able to help cultivate a New Saint. There are many miracles in this world but none are as amazing as this.”

Ji Yanran gently informed Xiang Shaolong: “Godfather has completed his masterpiece <<The Five Virtues Theory>> and has ordered me to safe keep it for him!”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling strange about this. In a way, he understood that Zou Yan can foresee the future and know that Xiao Pan will unite the world. Therefore, he decided to leave his masterpiece in Qin. Otherwise, it may be destroyed or lost during wars. He was inspired: “Godfather, feel free to tell us what to do with your <<Five Virtues Theory>>.”

His eyes shining with pleasure, Zou Yan smiled: “When the Black Dragon appears, Shaolong will be responsible for presenting it to Crown Prince Zheng. This is a hundred times better than me propagating it.”

Ji Yanran was blown away: “Godfather is leaving us before the

Black Dragon event?”

Zou Yan shook his head, sighing: “Heaven has its plans and I don’t think I can wait so long. Even if you two did not look for me, I would have looked for you to settle my last wishes.”

Ji Yanran’s face lost colour at once. Taking a panic look at Xiang Shaolong, she wailed: “Godfather!”

Zou Yan gave a carefree laugh: “Spring leaves and Summer comes. This is nature and humans are the same. Yanran, do you not understand?”

Ji Yanran is not ordinary person. Forcing a smile, she agreed; “Godfather is right! Thanks for the advice.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. Feeling melancholic, he recited the words of the famous Song Dynasty philosopher Su Shi: “Humans meet and part, undergo joy and sorrow. The moon becomes full and crescent dependingly. Godfather is right.”

Zou Yan is astounded and stared at him along with Ji Yanran for a while before praising: “Shaolong is very better than me in seeing past life and death.” Pausing, he added: “Lu Buwei still has some luck on his side. Before the Crown Prince coronation, Shaolong must bear with him. Do not confront him directly and I can rest in peace.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but sincerely respect him from the

bottom of his heart. Zou Yan is surely the most intelligent man during this ancient period. Only he, Xiang Shaolong, can truly appreciate his deep wisdom. No wonder his five virtues theory is able to spread far and wide, applying to politics, science and even the arts.

Zou Yan continued to stare at the falling snow in silence.

Ji Yanran softly asked: “Godfather! When we create a Black Dragon like this, are we deceiving the gods?”

Zou Yan laughed: “It is something really creative! But Heaven has decreed that the new Saint will be Crown Prince Zheng whose rise will be due to Shaolong’s efforts. Although the six states have some might now, they are fools who plot against one another. In the future when the Crown Prince has received full authority, the end of the six states will be in sight.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “After all, Godfather is a Qi native. Why are you not worried about your own country’s fate?”

Zou Yan calmly replied: “Qi just happens to be my birth place. My mission is to help unite the world. Moreover, the present King is an idiot. Thinking about this, I could not help but feel angry.”

Ji Yanran added: “Godfather and I have the same view. Only when the world is united can the people enjoy real peace and harmony. But when I thought of Shaolong’s ‘Absolute power corrupts absolutely’, I am concerned that Crown Prince Zheng may change and is no longer the wise and responsible person he is now.

That is a system flaw.”

Xiang Shaolong unwittingly let out Heaven’s Secret: “This will only change when the people become democratic and rule the country as a representative group of people rather than a single monarch. But that will only take place around two thousand years later.”

Zou Yan and Ji Yanran are totally swept away. After exchanging looks with each other, Ji Yanran curiously asked: “How can there be such a system? How does hubby know for sure that this will take place two thousand years later?”

Kicking himself, Xiang Shaolong shook his head and awkwardly replied: “I am just making a wild guess!”

Zou Yan smiled: “Shaolong often speaks with great wisdom, proving that you are no ordinary man. Otherwise, my dear daughter will not love you wholeheartedly.”

He looked up to the sky again. The moon and stars are absent and the sky is filled with countless snowflakes. He bleakly concluded: “It is late! I need to rest early. Tomorrow, I will head back to Qi.”

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran exchanged a glance, understanding that this great philosopher has consulted astrology and predicted that his death is near.

This is their last reunion.

Book 18 Chapter 02 – A Grand Scheme

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran and the others sent Zou Yan out of the City. After accompanying him for ten over miles on foot did they finally bade farewell.

Zou Yan left with a laugh and took off with about a hundred family warriors. Wu Guo led a thousand Cavalry soldiers to continue escorting him.

By the time Xiang Shaolong is back at Xianyang City, it is already evening time.

The snowstorm that ended last night started once again.

Thinking about this final departure, he was filled with extreme grief!

He was experiencing mixed emotions after interacting with this great philosopher who also happens to be one of China's foremost mathematician.

If not for this great man, he may not gain Talented Lady Ji's love or may have even lost his life back at Daliang.

Stepping into the residence, Tao Fang welcomed: "Ying Ying has been waiting for you for almost an hour in the eastern chamber."

Xiang Shaolong frowned upon hearing this. Excusing himself from his wives, he headed to the eastern chamber.

Ying Ying is reaching the end of her patience. The moment she saw him, she snarled: “Where the hell have you been?”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden revelation. Even if Ying Ying changes her mind, he will never accept her love.

This is not because she is Guan Zhongxie’s woman. For a modern man like him, a woman’s virginity is unimportant.

In the past, he has been wooing her because he is doing it as a favour to the Lord Changping brothers and he is lecherous too. But after knowing her better, all his feelings for her have been eradicated by her fickle-mindedness and her lack of priorities. Even if someone holds a knife to his neck, he will not be willing to pursue her anymore.

After this enlightening revelation, Xiang Shaolong politely invited her to take a seat, asking: “What can I do for Miss Ying?”

Sensing the cold and unfriendly tone in his voice, Ying Ying was momentarily stunned. Lowering her head, she protested: “I know that you are feeling troubled. Ai! I don’t know what to say. You will be fighting Zhongxie in three days and I am really worried for you!”

Seeing that she is not here to dissuade him from fighting, Xiang

Shaolong's impression of her improved slightly. Recollecting his new secret weapon: Hundred Battle Sabre and his new set of sabre skills, he smiled: "Thanks for your kindness. Life is full of battles, isn't it? Only from battles can life becoming more exciting."

Frankly speaking, if not for Guan Zhongxie's challenge, he may not have created this wonderful sabre skill.

Ying Ying raised her head slightly and panic is written all over her face. She advised: "I don't know why I come to find you. Zhongxie has been practising his swordplay every day and has analyzed every move to counter spear attacks. Ai! Everyone knows that you are not good with spear fighting. Even with the Flying Dragon Spear, I am afraid... Ai! I am very worried!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly checked: "Aren't you worried about Guan Zhongxie?"

Ying Ying nodded her head slightly and softly remarked: "It is best not to fight but I know no one can make both of you change your minds."

Lowering her head again, she slowly thanked: "Thanks for your advice that day. I have given deep thought over your words and have agreed to marry Yang Duanhe. I haven't informed my brothers yet. After the duel, Duanhe will seek my hand in marriage."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback but at the same time, he set his mind at ease.

He has met Yang Duanhe before and he is the most outstanding military leader under Wang Ci's command. In the past, Lu Gong and Xu Xian thought highly of him too. However, he has no idea that Duanhe is also wooing Ying Ying.

Based on the current circumstances, whoever that marries Ying Ying will gain plenty of favours with the military and royal family. Only Guan Zhongxie is an exception.

Slightly fearful, Ying Ying peeped at his expression and tested: "Are you unhappy?"

Xiang Shaolong naturally would not show his strong feelings to her. He is certain that she really loves Guan Zhongxie so even if she does not marry him (GZH), she cannot marry himself (XSL) too. He solemnly state: "This is a wise decision. Yang Duanhe is an excellent man."

Ying Ying stared at him angrily in silence.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Since Miss has decided on her future, she should not waver again."

Ying Ying intimately asked: "Don't you blame me at all?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "What do you want me to say?"

There couldn't be a better answer than this. Ying Ying calmed down and thought for some time. Finally, she concluded: "Be careful!"

She stood up.

Xiang Shaolong sent her to the door. Just before she left, Ying Ying whispered: "If I can choose, I want you to win. This is not only because of me but also for Qin. I have finally understood the big picture."

Before she finished speaking, hot tears are already gushing out of her eyes. Helplessly looking at him intimately for one last time, she turned around and leapt up her horse, galloping away.

In a daze, Xiang Shaolong stared at the snow clad Xianyang City, thinking about the end of this relationship. He swore never to get involved with any more beauties for as long as he lives.

But thinking back, it is hard to know what fate has in store for him.

Madam Zhuang and Li Yanyan are two good examples.

Back at the inner hall, just as he is enjoying some playtime with Xiang Bao'er, Teng Yi and Jing Jun came back from work. Teng Yi has a stern expression on his face while Jing Jun has an apologetic look.

Ji Yanran knew that something is amiss and asked for an explanation.

Sitting down, Teng Yi slapped the table and scolded: “I have told this kid umpteen times not to mess with Guoxin. How was I to know that he could not hold back when he saw him?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Second Brother, calm down first. Little Jun, tell me what this is all about.”

Everyone was shocked at Xiang Shaolong’s indifferent attitude. Even Jing Jun was stunned. He explained: “Third Brother knows me best. Ai. I am not saying Second Brother does not know me but it is two different kinds of knowing.”

Teng Yi was amused and Wu Tingfang cannot help but laughed: “Don’t beat around the bush. What is it?”

Putting on a helpless and innocent expression, Jing Jun shrugged his shoulders: “I am not the chief troublemaker this time. I was just touring Drunken Wind Brothel and ran into those bastards from Weinan Martial Arts School. Naturally, Scarface Guoxin is among them. I intended to ignore them but they made some sarcastic remarks and even insulted Third Brother. I won’t repeat what they said but they are very arrogant because they have Lao Ai supporting them. I can bear with personal insults but I cannot take it when they slander Third Brother.”

Zhao Zhi frowned: “What did they actually say?”

Teng Yi replied in a deep voice: “They did go too far with their comments. They mentioned that Third Brother is Lu Buwei’s gay partner. Hei. To think they even dare to spread such rumours.”

Her eyes shining with agitation, Ji Yanran coldly hissed: “If I hear it personally, I will kill them all on the spot.”

Wu Tingfang was furious: “Little Jun, what did you do to them?”

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: “There are only eight of us but there are ten over of them. Moreover, Guoxin is highly skilled so we did not gain much advantage and two of our men are injured. Incidentally, Lao Ai showed up and got them to back off and apologise. As Second Brother has instructed, I avoided any confrontation with Lao Ai. Holding my anger, I left immediately but Second Brother still holds it against me.”

Teng Yi chided: “What did I tell you? I have told you many times not to patronise the brothels but you keep disobeying me.”

Xiang Shaolong was still as composed as ever because he had long anticipated Lao Ai to become more and more insolent.

After a short contemplation, he questioned: “What are the kinds of people in Weinan Martial Arts School?”

Jing Jun took the chance to redeem himself: “The best fighter is naturally the School Founder and Master Qui Risheng. There are quite a significant number of military leaders who are graduates of

this school. After him are the three key instructors which includes Guoxin. The other two are Changjie and Jinliang. All of them are first rate swordsmen who are now working together with Lao Ai. In a way, Lao Ai has more than a hundred family warriors after they joined him. These men hoped to be promoted based on Lao Ai's close relationship with Empress. I heard that Lu Buwei is very dissatisfied with the school's reopening but cannot say anything because of Empress's support!"

Teng Yi added: "The fighters in Weinan Martial Arts School are made up of swordsmen from different states. Not everyone is a top fighter but there are some experts among them too. Every one of them is using you as an inspiration and hope to defeat you. By defeating you, that person will be crowned the number one swordsman of Qin and his value will increase by many folds. Ai! Everyone thought that you are the Crown Prince's favourite subject because of your sword skill!"

Xiang Shaolong fantasized that this is always the worry of being the number one swordsman as always read in wuxia novels. If not for his high official post and his Guardians protecting him, he would have been waylaid on the streets every now and then.

Nodding, he swore: "Let them say whatever they like! My conscience is clear. If they go overboard, we shall not hesitate to act too but everything must come after my duel with Guan Zhongxie. We will lay low for the time being. If we are forced to act, we will go all the way and send Qiu Risheng to meet his maker."

His eyes shining icily, he stared right at Jing Jun and

commanded: “You have Lu Dan’er already. Take care of your health and improve your skills. Otherwise, when we face off with the Weinan Martial Arts School, you will not be able to take your revenge. Understand?”

It is not often Xiang Shaolong speaks so harshly to Jing Jun, making him sweat profusely and nodding his head non-stop in agreement.

Scanning the crowd, Xiang Shaolong laughed vociferously: “One fine day, we shall confront them and let them have a taste of Second Brother’s Mozi Sword, Yanran’s Flying Dragon Spear and my Hundred Battle Sabre!”

It was early next morning.

Xiang Shaolong began practising the Hundred Battle Sabre Play. The area surrounding him became enveloped with cold flashes of sabre energy. It was powerful beyond measure.

His sparring partner is Teng Yi. Even with Teng Yi’s ability, he cannot attack with the Mozi Sword. However, Mozi Swordplay focuses on defence. With his stronger arm strength and heavier wooden sword, he can still defend himself against the numerous attacks from all different directions.

Seeing the Hundred Battle Sabre in action for the first time, Jing Jun and Tao Fang’s jaws dropped, as they can never envision such a fearsome weapon and such ruthless and swift attacks.

Every time the two weapons clash, a loud sound is produced, adding to the excitement of the fight.

Since they started fighting, both men have exchanged over a hundred strokes but Teng Yi is still unable to find a loophole in the Hundred Battle Sabre Play to counter attack.

Xiang Shaolong is having the time of his life. Using his knowledge of many schools of martial arts and the use of science and body momentum, he applied it to the chopping attack nature of the Hundred Battle Sabre. Adding to the heavy sabre weight and intricate footsteps, the power of the sabre attacks is maximised. Like an endless torrent of earth crushing attacks, any enemy would be hard pressed to defend. Even with Teng Yi's ability, he is at a losing end.

Out of a sudden, Wu Tingfang screamed: "Stop!"

Puzzled, Xiang Shaolong retreated and retrieved his sabre.

Everyone stared at her in amazement.

Her face turning pink, Wu Tingfang awkwardly explained: "Don't look at me this way. I am afraid that hubby will really fight Second Brother like he will fight Guan Zhongxie!"

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a look and burst out laughing.

Looking at his own right hand that was shaking because of over exertion, Teng Yi panted: “Tingfang is right to call for a stop, otherwise; I may be disgraced in public. The Hundred Battle Sabre may be powerful but the real might comes from Third Brother’s sabre play. Although it may be straight chopping styles, the changes are unlimited and the angles are precise as if it was directed by the immortals themselves. It is definitely worthy of its name.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled at Jing Jun: “Does Little Jun want to give it a try?”

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: “Can we do it tomorrow? I am already terrified to death and cannot find the courage to fight you.”

Everyone saw that Jing Jun is so intimidated and burst out into laughter.

Tao Fang remarked: “After witnessing Shaolong’s prowess, I can’t wait for your duel with Guan Zhongxie!”

At this moment, Wu Guang came to Xiang Shaolong’s side and whispered a few words. Xiang Shaolong handed the Hundred Battle Sabre to Zhao Zhi before gesturing to Teng Yi, Jing Jun and his wives to follow him towards the main hall.

Teng Yi caught up to him and inquired: “What is it?”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Meng Wu and Meng Tian have come

secretly to see us.”

After paying their respects and getting seated, Meng Wu sincerely praised: “Official Xiang is truly a military genius. Tang Yi is the best general under my father’s wings but was soundly defeated despite having numerous advantages.”

Meng Tian added: “Father was infuriated but was powerless too. But we know him too well; he will never let the matter rest.”

The three ladies exchanged looks, finally aware that Meng Ao did not take the risk of leading the attack personally.

Meng Wu was frustrated: “We still do not understand why Father is so loyal towards Lu Buwei that heartless traitor.”

Meng Tian surmised: “It must be that beauty that Lu Buwei sent to seduce Father. Now, Father no longer listens to Mother. Mother has reminded us many times that Lu Buwei is a ruthless man and will die a horrible death. Father may be muddle-headed but we will not follow in his footsteps. Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong and the rest finally understood why they are willing to switch loyalty. Except for the strong relationship they built while escaping Lu Buwei’s assassination, it also involves their family conflict.

Their best buddy Jing Jun puffed his chest: “Relax! The Crown Prince knows that the both of you are loyal subjects. No matter

what your father does, both of you will not be implicated.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Little Jun is right. I have told Crown Prince everything and he will assign important tasks for both of you. Now, the most important thing is you must not let your father know that both of you have switch allegiance. In the future, you can inherit your father’s family warriors.”

Both men were overwhelmed and excited. Meng Wu intimately asked: “Is Crown Prince going to do something against Father?”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledges that the main source of Lu Buwei’s power arises from Meng Ao which allows him to last until Xiao Pan’s coronation. Based on this, Meng Ao should be fine these years. He predicted: “You can set your mind at ease. Your father will be fine before the Crown Prince coronation. Use these five years to learn, grow and do your best. When the Crown Prince is crowned King, all these problems will be solved. I will ask the Crown Prince to be lenient on your Father based on your merits.”

Both men were very touched and immediately kowtowed.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly helped them up. Recalling that Meng Tian will be Qin’s best general after Wang Jian, he could not help but feel a sense of pride and wonder at the same time.

He instructed them further before allowing them to leave.

At the main door, Meng Wu worriedly advised: “Official Xiang

must be diligent when fighting Guan Zhongxie the day after tomorrow. Yesterday, he came to our residence to look for sparring partners. Both of us fought against him too but we barely lasted a minute. He is much more formidable compared to the hunting fair duel.”

Meng Tian interrupted: “Can Official Xiang defeat him? This will make that traitor Lu vomit blood.”

Jing Jun smiled: “Don’t worry. My Third Brother is like a general from Heaven. Even if Guan Zhongxie has three heads and six arms, he will be defeated for sure.”

Both brothers stared at Xiang Shaolong with suspicion.

Teng Yi accosted them and smiled: “Little Jun is not bullshitting this time. Your uncle Xiang has even defeated me soundly. Just wait and enjoy the show.”

Both men knew of Teng Yi’s skill and his truthful disposition so they managed to put aside their worries for the time being.

Meng Tian’s eyes suddenly reddened. Lowering his head, he swore: “This time, we are against our father not only because Lu Buwei tried to kill us and Mother. We must also take revenge for Princess Qian and the maids. When it is time to attack him in the future, you must include us in your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded of their close relationship with the

girls. His heart swelled up with pain and he shook his head, sighing.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun knows that he is feeling despondent over the past and quickly led the brothers away.

The three men headed back to the Command Centre and were having lunch when an attendant reported that Wang Ci is here to see him. Xiang Shaolong put down his chopsticks and went to see him in the main hall.

Xiang Shaolong got Wang Ci to be seated in the higher ranked seat, remarking: "Great General need not come all the way here. As long as you send the order, I will report at your General Residence."

Wang Ci smiled: "Aren't you afraid that I may change my mind and try to assassinate you again?"

Xiang Shaolong jested: "If Great General wants my life, it is as easy as killing an ant!"

Wang Ci shook his head: "Your life is not so easy to take. Even Lu Buwei and Meng Ao have been defeated soundly by you and are at their wit's end."

Pausing, his brows furrowed deeper and he solemnly revealed: "Lu Buwei does have the intention to rebel. Using the excuse of needing men to build the Zhengguo Canal, he got the military seal

from Crown Prince and Empress and began redeploying the troops. If not for my strong insistence that my army remains untouched, Xianyang City will be in his hands by now. But sooner or later, I may have to field a campaign and I will be too far to protect Xianyang City. The Crown Prince will be in serious danger. Does Shaolong have any solution?”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to tell him that everything will change after the Black Dragon sighting but he felt that it is better that less people know about this secret. He turned the question around: “Does Great General have any suggestion?”

Wang Ci thought for some time and sighed: “Because I refused to kill you, my relationship with Lu Buwei is strained. You should know that if Tian Dan attacks Yan, Lu Buwei will force Meng Ao and me to attack the Three Allied States. That will also be the best time for him to create chaos. If all of Xianyang City’s standby army is made up of soldiers loyal to him, then Empress and Crown Prince are as good as dead.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: “That should happen in Spring next year. Yan is in the extreme north and winter is very harsh there. Tian Dan needs some time to prepare too so we still have some time to plan.”

Wang Ci is displeased: “Since Guan Zhong took over as the Premier of Qi, the nation should enjoy progress. Unfortunately, the people of Qi are only good at bragging and lack military preparedness. Once, they were nearly annihilated by Yan which is much smaller than them. Although Tian Dan appeared, they are only good at surviving and nothing else. If not for Zhao between us

and them, we would have conquered their lands a long time ago.”

Taking this chance, Xiang Shaolong clarified: “Zhao has lost Lian Po so can they still be considered a threat to us?”

With a suspicious expression, Wang Ci sighed: “The best armies and generals are from Zhao. If not for the muddle-headed King Xiaocheng using Zhao Gua instead of Lian Po, Bai Qi may not necessary win the Battle of Changping. Lian Po may be gone but Li Mu is still around. This man is unfathomable in terms of fighting a war. In fact, he is better than Zhao’s King Wuling. His tactics are unpredictable and he attacks when he is least expected to. If you ever meet him on the battlefield, you must never let your guard down or be prepared to take a heavy loss.”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong prayed that it will never happen too. Concurrently, he was filled with respect at this famous general who has achieved such a godly reputation.

Recollecting the day when Li Mu heroically gave him Bloodwave and even advised him to come to Qin, telling him that should they ever meet on the battlefield, they should fight each other to death. Not many men can match up to his depth.

Wang Ci groaned: “As long as Li Mu is around, we can forget about attacking Zhao.”

Each in his own thoughts, both men are sighing and momentarily forgotten their present danger.

Wang Ci suddenly brought up: “Does Shaolong know that after Chongqiao has been promoted to be Marquis Changan, he has been in secret contact with Zhao General Pang Nuan. With Du Bi’s support, he has been recruiting men and buying horses. If Xianyang City is in chaos, he will surely come back to vie for the throne. He still has many supporters and you must guard against this.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a big headache coming. So it is really not easy to help Xiao Pan become Qin Shi Huang after all. Nodding his head to acknowledge this, he sighed: “Lu Buwei should be more worried than me. He is the first person Du Bi and Chongqiao want to kill. My turn will come much later and Lu Buwei will not take this lying down.”

Wang Ci stifled his laughter: “Talking about scheming, we are not Lu Buwei’s match. These few nights, I have been drinking with Wang He. Whenever we spoke about this, Wang He says that Lu Buwei is purposely allowing Du Bi and Chongqiao to run amok. With this threat hanging over their heads, Empress and Crown Prince will still have to rely on him.”

Xiang Shaolong had seen this coming. He asked: “What is the relationship between Du Bi and Lady Xiuli?”

Lady Xiuli is the other concubine of King Zhuangxiang and Chongqiao’s mother.

Wang Ci replied: “They are cousins but we all know that there is something going on between them.”

Pausing, Wang Ci realised that they have drifted too far off the original topic. He officially suggested: “I have a plan. I heard that you are quite close to the people of Chu. Can you persuade Li Yuan that if Qi annihilates Yan, then Chu will be his next target? Get him to deploy soldiers near the Qi-Chu border so that Tian Dan will not attack Yan recklessly.”

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table and praised this wonderful tactic. At the end of the day, Wang Ci is still more experienced than him. This is akin to surrounding Wei to save Zhao. Moreover, Li Yuan hates Tian Dan to the core and Chu is safe from Qin because of the buffer of the Three Allied States. He nodded in agreement: “This is easy; I will get someone to write a letter to Li Yuan immediately. Consider it done.”

Wang Ci officially state: “This is crucial. Shaolong must do his best to persuade Li Yuan!”

Xiang Shaolong respectfully consented: “I know!”

Wang Ci is pleased: “If we can delay Qi’s attack of Yan, when Wang Jian is back and Huan Yi, Wang Ben has the new army ready, I can set off with a peace of mind.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has secured at least one quarter of the Qin military support and was comforted. Recalling Jing Jun’s marriage proposal, he sincerely explained it to Wang Ci.

Wang Ci laughed loudly: “No problem. I will get Wang He later to

visit the Lu Residence later. Wait for my good news!”

In a second, his expression darkened as he was reminded of Lu Gong and Xu Xian.

After some time, he reminiscence: “Does Shaolong know that Lu Gong is not originally surnamed Lu? During the hunting fair, his hunting catch of deer is unmatched so the late King conferred him the title of Deer King (Lu Wang). Thus, he changed his surname to Lu and as he grows older, people called him Lu Gong (Deer Senior)!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Does Great General know that I am no longer called Xiang Shaolong but Long Shaoxiang? I did swear to write my name backwards if Tian Dan manages to return back to Qi safely.”

Wang Ci was stunned for a while before he left, laughing.

Book 18 Chapter 03 – Irreconcilable

After Wang Ci left, Xiang Shaolong summoned Jing Jun and informed him that Wang Ci has agreed to propose marriage for him and will even bring Wang He along. With a joyful cry, Jing Jun somersaulted several times on the spot and skipped away happily.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi watched in amusement.

Teng Yi's eyes are glittering with tears and signs of memory recall.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is thinking of his first wife and several kinsmen who have died a tragic death and felt sad too.

Teng Yi sighed: "If not for that tragedy, Little Jun will not enjoy today's fortune. Heaven's Will is truly unfathomable. No matter what, our brotherhood will stand the test of time."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that it is not Heaven's Will that is unfathomable but that there is no way to change the Will of Heaven! He himself is living in history and it seems like there is no way he can change anything too.

Teng Yi suggested: "Third Brother can go home to take a rest. I can handle the workload. Except for the occasional disturbance by people of the Premier Mentor Residence, the city is generally peaceful."

Remembering the incident where the Zhou siblings were being beaten up in public, he shook his head, sighing: “Guan Zhongxie is not an upright man so his men are rotten too. When I kill him the day after tomorrow, either you or Little Jun will take charge of the Imperial Infantry. Only till then can the citizens of Xianyang City enjoy real peace.”

Teng Yi laughed: “If you let those people who think you will lose hear these words, they will be bewildered and assume that you are just bragging. Only for those like me who have fought against your Hundred Battle Sabre will understand that you are in fact very humble.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Teng Yi to have a humorous side of him and laughed too: “To be happy, we must work hard for happiness. From my experience of fighting Lian Jin and Wang Jian, every duel I fought has changed my life. I wonder how will my life change after the duel with Guan Zhongxie?”

Teng Yi stood up and escorted him out of the Command Centre main gate. As they walked side by side, Teng Yi remarked: “It is not all hard work but wisdom too. I really cannot comprehend how you can design such a fearsome weapon and a deadly skill to match it. When you went out alone to practice at the farms, Yanran, Qin Qing and I were talking about you. We all agreed that you are deeply mysterious and seems to have the ability to foretell the future. Do you remember that night at Qin Qing’s residence? All she said was Lu Buwei wanted to punish Lao Ai for harassing her and you can predict the rest of Lu Buwei’s actions. That is something impossible.”

Guilt-ridden, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “That is just a moment of inspiration! Second Brother need not think too much.”

At the gate, Xiang Shaolong patted Teng Yi on the shoulder and joked: “Thanks for Second Brother’s reminder. I will make a detour to Qin Qing’s place. In this cold and snowy weather, there is no warmer place than a beauty’s bosom.”

Amidst their laughter, Jing Shan came up to them with Jifeng. Xiang Shaolong somersaulted onto the horse and rode towards the Qin Residence. The northern wind is blowing hard and large amount of snow is accumulated everywhere. There is hardly any passer bys.

As Teng Yi watched Xiang Shaolong galloped off, he could not help by feel a sense of wonder.

This steadfast brother of his is not only changing the fates of everyone around him but is even changing the fate of everything under the sky.

At Qin Qing’s residence, the beauty reported with suspicion: “Your guess that Empress is pregnant with Lao Ai’s child is not without basis. Yesterday, the Empress sent some men to Yong Du. It is speculated that she intends to move to the Dazheng Palace there. Needless to say, she is afraid of being exposed.”

A guess is a guess and facts are facts. Now that this guess has been proven to be a fact, Xiang Shaolong’s mind is in turmoil and he had

to sit down for a while.

The women in this era will use herbs to prevent pregnancy if they wanted to make love without bearing offspring of their partner. That is why Zhu Ji can service Zhao Mu, Guo Kai and many others in Handan City without being impregnated. Now, she willingly got herself pregnant for Lao Ai. This proves that she is completely under his control.

One can say she no longer view Xiao Pan as her child. In the future, she will whole heartedly support Lao Ai and hope that he can replace Xiao Pan.

Qin Qing can tell that he is troubled and quietly sat down beside him.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: “Where is Yong Du?”

Qin Qing answered: “Yong Du is our old capital. Like Xianyang City, it is north of River Wei and is about a hundred miles upriver. You can reach there by boat within three days. It is a huge place with Dazheng Palace and Zhannian Palace. It is also the city with the most temples and religious activities.”

Xiang Shaolong fell into Qin Qing’s bosom and laid down, using her laps as a pillow. Gazing at her unrivaled beautiful face and features, he sighed: “I think Lao Ai will become another Lu Buwei in no time.”

Qin Qing was annoyed: “Isn’t this part of your grand plan?”

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to reply.

How is he supposed to tell Qin Qing that he knows the future and can only act accordingly? Even he has to tolerate the rise of Lao Ai so that one day, Lao Ai will contend with Lu Buwei according to the historical records.

He was indeed the mastermind behind this scheme and in fact, everything is proceeding very smoothly. But due to his deep feelings and guilt for Zhu Ji, he felt terrible inside.

He remained silent.

Instead, Qin Qing comforted: “I am sorry! My words are too harsh. At the end of the day, it is not your fault entirely. You are also acting to circumstances! If Lao Ai listened to every command of Lu Buwei, many people including you would have lost their lives already!”

Xiang Shaolong hooked his hand around Qin Qing’s neck and forced her to bend down, enjoying a fulfilling kiss together. He stretched himself and decided: “I am staying here tonight!”

Qin Qing was embarrassed and shocked at the same time. “How can we do this?” she cried.

Xiang Shaolong knew long ago she will not be so daring and is

just teasing her. Sitting up, he hugged her and softly asked: “Didn’t you say I can do whatever I want?”

Qin Qing solemnly state: “At least you must finish your duel first! Otherwise, Yanran and the others will blame me!”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “It is decided then! If Grand Tutor Qin breaks her promise, don’t blame me for forcing myself on you.”

Qin Qing was stunned: “Forcing yourself on me! Ai! You are terrible! Ai! Get lost! I am not speaking to you anymore.”

Looking at her angry yet delighted expression, Xiang Shaolong can feel all his troubles disappearing. After taking advantage of her again, he left with a happy heart.

Leaving her residence, he saw that it is still early so he entered the palace to look for Li Si. He also took the chance to tell Li Si about Xiao Pan’s intention to make him the Law Minister.

Initially, he thought that Li Si will be disappointed. Unexpectedly, Li Si was overjoyed: “Actually, I am eyeing this post but was concerned that Feng Qie may beat me to it. This is better than I imagined.”

Xiang Shaolong can never understand all the politics and power grabbing. But he is certain that Li Si will be a powerful official supporting the future Qin Shi Huang so he will definitely enjoy

official promotions.

Li Si gratefully thanked: “I owe all my success to Brother Xiang. I do not know what to say to express my heartfelt gratitude.”

Xiang Shaolong humbly replied: “A pearl will shine wherever it is. I am only taking away the cloth that is covering the pearl and Brother Li is such a pearl. It is with your contributions that the Crown Prince will unite the world one day.”

Li Si smiled: “Brother Xiang thinks too highly of me. Since Jiangong started governance, Xiangong started administration, Xiaogong implemented Shang Yang’s reforms and King Huiwen consolidated everything, our Qin state has made significant progress in terms of politics, economy and military. In these turbulent times, we are in the best position to unite the world. The only obstacle is the Crown Prince lack of genuine authority and everything has to be approved by the Empress. When the Crown Prince is coroneted, based on his talents, he will accomplish this impossible task. I am only worthy of carrying his shoes or buttoning up his sleeves! Brother Xiang need not give me too much credit.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Brother Li has done so much and yet do not seek credit for them. No wonder the Crown Prince has a good opinion of you.”

Finishing his words, he sensed something and turned his head towards the door, discovering Lord Changping and Xiao Pan standing there. Xiao Pan’s eyes were shining and he seems to have overheard Li Si’s words.

Both men were taken aback and frantically kneeled down and paid their respects.

Xiao Pan strode over in large steps, helping Li Si up. Moved, he swore: “Subject Li must not be offended that I came without announcing. Otherwise, I may not have overheard your innermost thoughts. Subject Li only needs to do your best and I will not mistreat you.”

On the other hand, Li Si is sweating profusely. If he had made some negative comments earlier, his future will be ruined.

Leaving the palace with Lord Changping in tow, they were celebrating Li Si’s stroke of good luck. With only a few sentences, he has managed to gain Xiao Pan’s complete confidence. With his knowledge of history, Xiang Shaolong went as far to predict that Xiao Pan the future Qin Shi Huang’s unwavering trust of Li Si may have arisen from these few lines.

Both men rode out of the palace gates and turned into the main road of Xianyang City. After crossing the moat. On both sides of the roads are the huge residences of various important high ranking officials, members of the Royal Family and top generals. It was a grand and imposing environment.

He could not help but sigh.

Lord Changping commented: “Shaolong has just come back from Chu and should know about their latest developments. The land in

the south is rich and fertile, surpassing our Qin farmlands. If not for our conquering of Bashu, there is no way we can compete with them. However, it is also due to their wealth that will be the cause of their downfall.”

Xiang Shaolong was interested in this topic and slowed down the horse speed. He was curious: “Wealth is better than poverty. Why would it be the cause of their downfall?”

Lord Changping lamented: “The abundant lands of Chu provides its people with sea salt, bronze, leather, abalone, bamboo, gold, gemstones, rhinoceros, fruits and cloth. The country is big and the population is limited. There is excess land for farming and excess rivers for fishing. There is no lack of firewood, fresh water or seafood. One can earn a good living with little work as the land is extremely fertile so every crop grows easily. Without any natural calamities, everyone is comfortable and relaxed so they indulge in merry making all day. During war, the soldiers have no will to fight. Their armies may be big but without genuine capabilities. Otherwise, they would have conquered the world long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed with everything Lord Changping mentioned. Li Yuan is indeed a flamboyant character but he is hard-working too. He took the chance to ask about Zhao whom he is the most familiar with. When he was masquerading as Dong Horse Fanatic, he had used the analogy of Northern Horses and Southern Horses to differentiate between Zhao and Chu.

For some reason, Lord Changping is in a great mood and started chatting: “Zhao has a big territory too but most of the land is mountainous. The northern part is near Ling Hu where the people

are strong and fierce. Smaller kingdoms like Ding Xiang, Yun Zhong and Wu Yuan are all conquered by Rongdi. The people are good hunters but are weak at farming and business. Regarding the areas near Yuanjing such as Han Xin, Tai Yuan and Shang Dang, there are all occupied by the descendents of many ex-ministers and officials. They spend all their time scheming against one another and seek fame for themselves, leading an extravagant life. For example, the concubines of the Zhao King numbered more than a hundred and they are all dressed in expensive clothes. The aristocrats indulge in wine, meat and women. They may produce the best soldiers on land but they are not able to utilise talented men. In fact, they are jealous of talent; otherwise, Zhao Gua will not replace Lian Po and directly resulted in the loss of the Battle of Changping.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Lord Changping to have such insight and his opinion of him improved. He praised: “These words described the essence of Zhao. What about the other states?”

After being praised by Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping is even more spirited: “Yan is situated in the north east and it will mostly made up of poor mountain folks. Only the capital looks decent. We can disregard them. Han is in dire straits and most of the population live in the hills, making it hard to grow crops. If not for Zhao and Wei supporting them, we would have conquered Han a long time ago.”

Xiang Shaolong has yet to visit Yan and Han so he does not know the details. But remembering the incident when Han Fei came to Daliang to borrow grain, he was sure that Lord Changping is telling the truth.

Lord Changping continued: “Wei has always been our arch enemy. Once, that year, General Wu Qi fortified themselves west of the river and we lost incalculable battles there. They allied themselves with everyone and limited our eastern expansion plans. From the border to their capital Daliang, the distance is over ten thousand miles and protected by three hundred thousand soldiers. Fortunately, Wei has grown arrogant and incurred the wrath of Handan City and the people of Zhao, inciting widespread anger against them, resulting in the loss of the Battle of Guiling. Even their top general Pang Juan was captured by the enemy. Since that mistake, Wei has declined over the years, resulting in their present circumstances.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the sayings of Zhao: The people of Wei cannot be trusted. That year, King Anli of Wei sent men into Zhao to attack him while disguised as horse thieves. Wei deserves the retribution of being annihilated in the future.

He nodded: “Lord has analyzed every state in the east except for Qi.”

Lord Changping thought for some time and mysteriously asked: “Does Shaolong know what is the favourite pastime of Qi people besides making empty talk?”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “How will I know? Tell me quick!”

Lord Changping laughed: “I may have been promoted to be the Left Premier but lack the bearing so everyone is treating me like a normal friend. Ha! But I like it this way.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is easy to get along and broke out into a wide grin.

Lord Changping divulged: “Currently, the most popular trade in Linzi is loan sharking. The richest loan shark is a shady merchant named Zhong Sunlong. He is even richer than Lu Buwei in the past. I don’t think anyone can match his wealth. From this, you can tell how shallow the people of Qi are. The rich spent all their time in singing, dancing, making music or cock-fighting, dog racing. The poor are generally homeless and live from hand to mouth, making up a large portion of the population. Otherwise, based on their seafood trade, salt resources as well as their capable business strategies, how come they were nearly conquered by Yan? If not for the rise of Tian Dan, Qi will be in trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely professed; “This is called: Talking to a wise man is better than ten years of reading. It is a nice coincidence that we have promoted a talented man like you to be the Left Premier.”

Lord Changping burst out laughing: “Shaolong need not tease me. I don’t know how you did it but sister has been convinced to marry Yang Duanhe instead of Guan Zhongxie. Even if you land a few punches on me, I would accept it gladly.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood the reason for his joyfulness. He was about to say something when chaos broke out. On the roadside, everyone was trying to run away from a commotion. It turns out that there are two groups of swordsmen engaged in a fight.

Lord Changping bellowed: “Surround them!”

The Eighteen Guardians and Lord Changping’s personal escorts hurriedly got down their horses and advanced forward.

The two groups of swordsmen have a huge gap in their strength. One group has thirty odd men while the other group only has five men. What was surprising is that the winning group was the group of five men.

Their might comes from one of the swordsmen whose skill is alarmingly high.

This man is around twenty five years old and is tall and handsome. When he moves, his footwork is like the wind and his attacks are ruthless. Every time he strikes, either an opposing weapon will be struck away or an injury will be inflicted. There is no way to resist his attacks. Even the larger group of swordsmen were heavily defeated and were trying to run for their lives.

But the group of five swordsmen refused to let them off and were hot behind their heels.

However, they showed mercy in their attacks. No one was killed and only injuries were sustained, causing many fighters to fall down and being unable to climb back up.

As they fought along the street, a line of injured men can be seen

as they were struck down.

When Jing Shan and the others arrived in front of them, the five swordsmen angrily sheathe their swords. Although they were confronted by official soldiers, the five men remained defiant.

From the other group of men, there were only several of them left standing. Clustered in a group, their eyes are flaming with hatred as they stared hard at the five swordsmen.

Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping exchanged a glance. Both of them were aghast at what they saw.

Noticing the uniform colour of the larger group, they can be identified as family warriors of Premier Mentor. Who are the five swordsmen who have the audacity to attack the subordinates of the Premier Mentor?

Assessing the expert swordsman, Lord Changping coldly breathed: "This man's sword skill is almost as good as Guan Zhongxie's."

Xiang Shaolong nodded once and brought his horse forward, barking: "How dare you people fight on the streets? Is there no regard for the law? Report your names!"

The handsome expert swordsman stood as erect as an immovable mountain and had an imposing aura. He bowed slightly towards Xiang Shaolong, showing his disregard for him. Acting as if

nothing has happened, he simply replied: “I am Han Jie from the Inner Custodian Residence. Using their status as Premier Mentor’s followers, these men tried to force the restaurant singer to drink wine with them. I could not take it lying down so I take it upon myself to teach them a lesson.”

Jing Shan and the rest could not bear with his arrogance and wanted to force him to kneel down but after hearing that he is with Lao Ai, they hurriedly swallowed their words.

Lord Changping came up to Xiang Shaolong’s side and whispered: “Han Jie is from Han and Lao Ai got to know him when he was in Han. He is the number one swordsman of Han and it seems like he deserved this reputation.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled that Xiao Pan did mention his name before. The other man is Ling Qi who is Lao Ai’s advisor. Zhu Ji had wanted to promote both of them.

A spokesperson came out from the group of men belonging to the Premier Mentor’s Residence. His eyes glowing with poisonous anger; he did not even paid his respects and proudly denied: “Official Xiang and Left Premier, please do not listen to one side of the story. Han Jie is lying. We brothers are just drinking and having fun but these men from the Inner Custodian Residence tried to interfere with our private affairs. We will report this matter to Official Guan and let him judge for us.”

Han Jie coldly snorted: “Losers! What audacity! Let’s see what you’ve got!”

He bowed slightly again to Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping before turning around to leave.

Like a bunch of sore losers, the other group proceeded to assist their injured comrades and left with their heads lowered and their fighting spirit gone.

The Guardians and the escorts glanced at one another by the side as neither Xiang Shaolong nor Lord Changping has issued any order.

For the first time, Xiang Shaolong has tasted the arrogance and defiant attitude of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's family warriors. He was powerless though, and can only wait patiently for the day of the Black Dragon sighting.

On the other hand, he was secretly happy. Now, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's disagreement has escalated to a level of irreconcilability.

Finally, he can enjoy some days of peace!

Book 18 Chapter 04 – Undercover Agents

The moon is big and round tonight. Together with his wives, Xiang Shaolong went to the garden to enjoy viewing the moon. Jing Shan and the others set up a campfire and began barbequing good food. They felt like they are in the wilderness.

Xiang Bao'er has already learnt how to walk. His steps are not steady and whenever he falls, everyone is tickled and cheered for him, adding to the lively atmosphere.

Shan Lan, Teng Yi and their son were present too and the two kids are having a good time.

Sitting in a pavilion, Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong watched the kids playing and were filled with joy and satisfaction. At the same time, they realised that their peaceful gathering was the result of their hard work. It is the same in the past, the same in the present and will also be the same in the future.

Moved, Teng Yi remarked: "Another two nights later will be the duel between you and Guan Zhongxie. That fellow hasn't left his house at all and naturally did not show his face around Drunken Wind Brothel. You can say that he is doing his best to prepare for the fight."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Han Jie and asked: "Second Brother is a Han native and has participated in the military before. Have you heard of this man named Han Jie?"

Teng Yi's eyes flashed with surprise: "How did Third Brother know of such a person?"

Xiang Shaolong told him what happened today. His expression turning serious, Teng Yi explained: "Today, in terms of swordsmanship, there is no one better than Ji Xia (place in Qi) Sword Saint, Mister Wang You (Forget Worries) Grandmaster Cao Quidao. Legend says that his sword skills has reached a godly level and can win without fighting. One of the main reasons Mister Zou is going back to Qi is to see him. Shan Rou is his closed door disciple."

Xiang Shaolong had heard from Zhao Zhi about this legendary man and was curious: "What is his relationship with Han Jie? Is Han Jie also his disciple? Does that make him Shan Rou's martial brother?"

Teng Yi revealed: "Cao Quidao may have set up a school in Ji Xia but he is extremely strict when accepting disciples. As a result, his students do not exceed a hundred. He once told the King of Qi that among his disciples; only three of them learnt the essence of his skills. Han Jie is one of them and from this; we can conclude that this man is not easy to deal with."

Recalling Han Jie's snobbish attitude and marvellous sword skill, he enquired: "How old is Cao Quidao now?"

Teng Yi responded: "It is rumoured that he does Qi (energy) meditation so he looks much younger than his real age. By the time he becomes famous, I am just a child. By calculating this way, he should be at least sixty years old."

Thinking about the number one swordsman in wuxia novels, Xiang Shaolong's interest is piqued: "How I wish to visit him someday; but Tian Dan will not welcome me."

Teng Yi was humoured: "Seems like you are more interested in Cao Quidao than Han Jie. Cao Quidao is not concerned about the character of his disciples, only their martial arts potential. In Han, Han Jie is a tyrant who terrorizes the streets and kills anyone he fancies just because he is a member of the royal family. Like his buddy Lao Ai, he is a serial rapist too and that is probably why they can click so well. Now that he has come to Qin to depend on Lao Ai, it is likely that he has run out of options and has to leave Han to escape punishment."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "The more evil expert swordsmen there are, my Hundred Battle Sabre will be less lonely. Second Brother, your hands must be itching too."

Teng Yi laughed: "Even if you do not get rid of Guan Zhongxie, these two men will fight it out sooner or later. Guan Zhongxie and Lian Jin's master is Zhao Jianzhai. He once challenged Cao Quidao and lost his little finger in the duel. Since then, both schools are arch enemies."

Xiang Shaolong joked: "Why did he name himself Zhao Jianzhai (abstaining from using the sword)? Isn't it a name that provokes comments?"

Talented Lady Ji's voice sang out: "He is not the first one to use

Abstain in his name. Hubby must not underestimate him. After Cao Quidao, he is considered the next best swordsman under the sky. Otherwise, he would not have produced a disciple like Guan Zhongxie.”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “There is also someone named Lian Wenzhuo (Drinking mosquito) who has just come to Xianyang City looking for trouble.”

Ji Yanran came up to the back of the two men and leaned on Xiang Shaolong’s back. Looking up at the bright moon, she softly said: “I am the one whose hands are really itchy. Ever since I married you, you fought all my fights for me. It is so unfair.”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a look upon hearing her words. Ji Yanran imagined: “Two nights later and it will be a three way clash between Lu Buwei, Lao Ai and our hubby. The people of Qin values courage and whoever is the winner shall benefit tremendously. At least this is what the common folks will perceive.”

Teng Yi had an inspiration: “It may not be likely but will Lu Buwei take the risk to eliminate everyone who is opposing him? With Meng Ao holding the military seal, they can hold the Crown Prince and Empress hostage. It may cause chaos but it is still a possibility.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned hard and thought for a while, commenting: “Unless they have Wang Ci’s support, otherwise, Lu Buwei will not dare to do it alone. Since the Shang Yang reforms, no one is allowed to have more family warriors than the Imperial

Army. As long as the Palace Guards and Imperial Cavalry work hand in hand, Lu Buwei dare not try any tricks. But it is better to play safe. Tomorrow, I will speak to Lord Changping and Wang Ci just in case.”

Ji Yanran insisted: “Hubby must let us come to the banquet too and see how you fight!”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “How would I dare to leave you behind?”

He sighed: “How I wish to make a trip to Qi. I can pay a visit to Shan Rou and can also pit my skills against the best under the sky.”

Teng Yi advised: “You can think all you like but if you really leave Qin, Lu Buwei will surely know. He may even guess that you are going to Qi to assassinate Tian Dan. Qi will be waiting for you with all sorts of traps and ambushes!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is not joking and shook his head with a smile.

Ji Yanran suddenly recalled: “Lady Qingxiu is here in Qin!”

For a while, Xiang Shaolong had no recollection of her and stared at Ji Yanran with a puzzled expression.

Teng Yi is even more perplexed and asked: “Who is Lady Qingxiu?”

Ji Yanran explained: “Lady Qingxiu is Chu’s Great General Dou Jie’s wife. As Dou Jie wanted to marry Chen Suning as a concubine, she left in anger and even swore to commit suicide if Dou Jie steps into her residence. Do you remember now?”

Xiang Shaolong was finally enlightened. Lady Qingxiu is Lady Hua Yang’s niece. That year, Lady Hua Yang had wanted him to pass something to her but he had failed in his mission.

Teng Yi pondered: “What is she doing here?”

Ji Yanran answered: “It is Li Yanyan who sent her here, hoping to use her close relationship with Lady Hua Yang to resolve the issue over Premier Xu’s assassination. At the same time, she can bring Chu’s Princess home.”

Teng Yi wondered: “Times have changed. Does Lady Hua Yang still have a strong influence over the Qin court?”

Stifling her laughter, Ji Yanran shot Xiang Shaolong a look and smiled: “How can there be no influence? Don’t forget that our Grand Tutor Qin is Lady Hua Yang’s confidante and she can definitely influence our Commander Xiang. Lady Qingxiu is now staying at Sister Qin’s residence. Just now, Sister Qin sent someone to invite her Grand Tutor Xiang to see Lady Qingxiu tomorrow at her place! Hubby, you must not decline!”

Xiang Shaolong was annoyed: “Didn’t your Sister Qin tell her that I have tried my best? Crown Prince will not attack Chu.”

Teng Yi laughed: “Why are all the names coming up? Your Grand Tutor Qin; your Sister Qin? What is going on?”

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran looked at each other and burst out laughing too.

Before Ji Yanran took her leave, she reminded: “I am not paying any more attention to both of you. If you dare, go ahead and disregard Sister Qin’s invitation!”

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong attended morning court.

As usual, Zhu Ji is present and there is nothing abnormal about her. She must have gotten pregnant recently and with the clothes covering up her figure, she is not afraid of being exposed over the next few months.

The officials are busy discussing and analyzing different issues related to the Zhengguo Canal, such as the finances, manpower deployment and the relocation of the affected residents.

Xiang Shaolong had no idea what they were talking about and was completely bewildered. Naturally, he remained silent throughout.

After he endured the entire session, court finally ended and he was dragged to one side by Wang Ci and Wang He. Wang Ci began: “The timing is perfect. After the mourning deadline tomorrow,

Xiang Shaolong can bring Little Jun to the Lu Residence and pay your respects to Mister and Missus Lu. You can discuss with them the details regarding the dowry and the wedding ceremonies.”

Wang He shuddered: “It is really too coincidental. Lu Gong’s mourning period ended exactly on Lu Buwei’s birthday.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own goose pimples rising too.

Wang Ci questioned: “Lord Changping told me that both of you encountered a street brawl between men from the Premier Mentor residence and the Inner Custodian residence. Is it true?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Both groups of men regard us as nothing. How I wish I can slaughter them on the spot.”

Wang He swore: “No matter what, we must grab the Imperial Infantry Commander post back to our side. But it won’t be easy though.”

Wang Ci frowned: “We can talk about this later. Has Shaolong sent out the letter?”

Xiang Shaolong affirmed: “I already sent it out to Chu yesterday.”

Wang He cursed: “Lao Ai is now recruiting men and buying horses. He has also sent head hunters to the eastern states to recruit top swordsmen. With the Empress backing him, we do not

dare to interfere. This fake eunuch is even more irritating than Lu Buwei. Recently, in order to expand his residence, he forcefully took over the surrounding parcels of land. So infuriating!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “The Crown Prince needs the support of Empress so we all have to bear with it for the time being.”

He happened to see Li Si gesturing to him from afar that Xiao Pan wants to see him. After telling the two men about Teng Yi’s guess that Lu Buwei may create some trouble during his birthday celebration, he thanked them and hurriedly went to see Xian Pan.

Besides Xiao Pan, Lord Changping is in the Imperial study too. After Xiang Shaolong and Li Si paid their respects and got seated, Xiao Pan cheerfully started: “I want to introduce someone to you.”

All the three men were stunned.

Xiao Pan sent his order and someone came into the study almost immediately. He paid his respects to Xiao Pan.

After he stood up again, Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at him. This man is around forty years old with a long body and a thick beard. He looks intelligent and scholarly.

Xiao Pan politely invited: “Mister, please have a seat.”

While everyone is still kept in the dark, Xiao Pan began introducing everyone and explained: “This is the famous advisor

Mister Mao Jiao from Qi, Jia Xia. Lao Ai sent someone to invite him to Xianyang City. I shall let Mister Mao explain to you the reason why he came all the way here.”

Mao Jiao plainly smiled: “I came here without any ill intentions. I wanted to check out the might of Qin personally and want to know why the Eastern States are so fearful of it.”

Li Si grew excited: “What does Mister think?”

Mao Jiao coldly state: “The Crown Prince and I chatted for half a day. Our common conclusion is this: Without eliminating Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, Qin can never unite the World.”

Xiao Pan laughed: “I had wanted to give Mister an official post but after thinking further, I thought that it would be better if Mister can work under Lao Ai and be my spy. I have to thank Mister for agreeing so readily.”

Xiang Shaolong is full of praise. At Lu Buwei’s side, he has Tu Xian spying for him. If they have this cunning and intelligent Mao Jiao undercover too, Lao Ai will be doomed for sure.

At the same time, he can see that Xiao Pan is maturing as the days go by. Now, he knows how to use spies to his advantage.

Li Si and Lord Changping slapped their armrests in praise.

After discussing their plans and future communication methods,

Mao Jiao left.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Meng Wu and Meng Tian's issue and brought it up, swearing their loyalty to the Crown Prince.

Since young, Xiao Pan has been sparring with them and knows them well. With Xiang Shaolong's guarantee, he fully trusts them. But after thinking for some time, he still cannot come up with suitable posts for them.

Xiang Shaolong had a realization: "When I kill Guan Zhongxie tomorrow night, the Imperial Infantry Commander post will be vacant. No matter whom we propose, Lu Buwei will object and even Lao Ai would not want all three armies to fall under our jurisdiction. Only by choosing Meng Wu or Meng Tian will there be no objection. The other brother can follow his father to battle and keep us informed of any updates. This way, we are invincible."

This time, it is Xiao Pan's turn to slap the armrest in praise. To Lord Changping, he ordered: "Left Premier, try to arrange the two brothers to see me. Let me encourage them personally and assure their conviction."

Just as he was leaving the palace, Xiang Shaolong recalled Lady Qingxiu's appointment and quickly rushed towards Qin Residence.

Qin Qing and Lady Qingxiu were chatting in the hall. Seeing that he appeared as summoned, Qin Qing joyfully introduced them to each other.

Lady Qingxiu is wearing Xiang Shaolong's favourite Chu dress with wide sleeves and intricate embroidery. The most attractive ornament is her jewelled belt that is shimmering with numerous precious gemstones.

It may be due to Xiang Shaolong abrupt appearance that Lady Qingxiu did not have her veil on, letting Xiang Shaolong view her fine features.

Probably due to her marital woes, she looks slightly unhealthy. However, it did not affect her graceful disposition which separates her from other women.

Her eyes are shining with intelligence and self-respect, making others respects her too.

After he got seated, using her melodious voice, Lady Qingxiu uttered some polite words of courtesy before gratefully thanking: "Grand Tutor Qin has told me everything. Luckily, we have Official Xiang helping us to put in a good word in front of Crown Prince and prevented a war between Qin and Chu. On behalf of my country, I sincere express my thanks to Official Xiang for treasuring our friendship."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling funny inside. He thought that since this is the case, why did you still want to see me? Of course he put on a normal expression.

Lady Qingxiu plainly asked: "In actual fact, we have met before, right?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this is a top secret. Is it Li Yanyan or Li Yuan who told her this big secret? He was shocked: “What makes Lady say this?”

As unassuming and unmoved as ever, Lady Qingxiu replied: “Besides expressing my thanks personally, I asked to see Official Xiang because I have to give you two presents. They are from Empress Dowager Li Yanyan and Lady Xiu’er (Guo Xiu’er). I heard from Grand Tutor Qin that you came back from Shouchun recently. Now that I have seen you personally, I can recognize you.”

Feeling extremely awkward, Xiang Shaolong stole a peep at Qin Qing. Fortunately, she only batted an eye at him and did not blame him for flirting with other women. Composed, he admitted: “Since Lady has recognised me, how can I deny any further. Hei! Lady has sharp observation skills. That day, you did not even look at me in the eye but yet you still manage to recognize me.”

Lady Qingxiu smiled slightly and gestured to her attendant. Two exquisite boxes were presented and she explained: “Before I left, Empress Dowager summoned me to the palace and specially instructed that no one else must know about this. I hope Official Xiang understands.”

Due to Li Yanyan and Guo Xiu’er special status, they can only conceal their feelings for him deep inside their hearts, making him feel even more melancholic. Discovering that the two girls in front of him are scrutinizing his reaction, he frantically changed the topic: “How is Chancellor Li doing?”

Lady Qingxiu seems to be unwilling to talk about Li Yuan. She simply brushed off: “He is well. If you have the time, feel free to visit him in Shouchun. He will treat you with utmost sincerity.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot find any more conversation topics with this nonchalant and icy beauty. He tried ending the interview: “When is Lady leaving for Chu?”

Lady Qingxiu replied: “After meeting Empress Zhu Ji tonight, I will leave for Chu tomorrow. I am not used to the climate here. I know that Official Xiang has important things to see to and will not hold you back any longer.”

Xiang Shaolong is won over by her diplomacy and tact. After winking secretly at Qin Qing, he turned around and left.

Book 18 Chapter 05 – The Day Before The Fight

Carrying the two boxes, Xiang Shaolong returned to the Command Centre. In his own room, he opened them up and discovered two well-embroidered gowns inside. His heart is filled with warmth.

In this male dominant society, it is not easy for woman to achieve true happiness. Guo Xiu'er and Li Yanyan are two good examples. Despite their regal status, they cannot pursue what their hearts truly desire.

Their fates are still in the hands of men.

Filled with immeasurable emotions, he was distracted by an attendant sent by Teng Yi to summon him.

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and went to the main hall.

Teng Yi reported: "Another conflict has occurred. Some men from the Weinan Martial Arts School are shipping some weapons into the City and were stopped at the gates by the guards. A dispute broke out and the head guard was injured. The men were detained by Guan Zhongxie but Lao Ai showed up personally and Guan Zhongxie had to release the men. Seems like Lu Buwei is also tolerating Lao Ai's antics."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "I want to see how far he can tolerate.

Right! Help me inform Little Jun that his marriage to Lu Dan'er shouldn't be much of an issue. After my duel, we can officially seek her hand in marriage."

Teng Yi was overjoyed and hurriedly sent someone to inform Jing Jun.

Xiang Shaolong advised: "With Lu Dan'er as his wife, he should be satisfied. Second Brother must watch him carefully and not let him visit the brothels anymore. Presently, Xianyang City is a dangerous place with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai fighting it out. We better not get involved."

Teng Yi bitterly laughed: "I have spoken to him countless times but this kid loves to flirt, socialize and entertain. If you really want him to stay in the house, we have to resort to breaking both his legs."

Xiang Shaolong sighed.

Jing Jun will get into trouble later but as long as he is not injured or killed, Xiang Shaolong can still bear with him. He nodded: "Since this is the case, let's get more men to escort him. If he runs into a fight, at least he is not out-numbered."

Teng Yi reasoned: "If he becomes the son-in-law of the Lu family, his status will be greatly elevated. Lu Gong has tremendous influence over many civil officials and military leaders. Everyone will have to give him face. After his marriage, anyone would have to think twice before provoking him."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that if Lu Gong is still alive, he may oppose this marriage as Jing Jun is not a Qin native.

Teng Yi continued: “As long as Jing Jun doesn’t step into Drunken Wind Brothel, everything should be fine. Currently, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei are indirectly using Drunken Wind Brothel as their contending ground. Poor Wu Fu.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of the complicated relationship between Dan Meimei and Lao Ai.

After Qin Qing and Ji Yanran, Dan Meimei is next in terms of beauty. She is prettier than Ying Ying, Lu Dan’er, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi. Even if Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are absent, other men will try their best to secure her for their private pleasure.

Somehow, he did not have the least bit of affection for her. It may be due to his experience with Zhao Ya, Lady Pingyuan and Empress Jing that he has a fear of beauties who lie with their eyes wide open.

Teng Yi slapped his forehead: “I nearly forgot to tell you something. Housekeeper Tu wanted to meet you at the old place at the ‘jia’ hour. I am sure he has something important to tell you.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “I think Lu Buwei is really going to rebel.”

Two hours later, Xiang Shaolong and Tu Xian met up again at their secret spot. Tu Xian's hair is turning grey since they met two months ago. He must have been working under high amounts of stress.

After both men got seated, Tu Xian raised his thumb: "Shaolong is a genius to make Meng Ao and Lu Buwei suffer a tragic loss. Meng Ao is especially embarrassed but Lu Buwei dare not blame him. With this defeat, their plans are in disarray."

Xiang Shaolong knew that his guess is correct. Lu Buwei is a temperamental person and patience is not one of his virtues. He would not stand by and watch Xiao Pan grow in power each day. He joked: "Is he ready to rebel?"

Tu Xian coldly smiled: "He is not capable of rebelling yet but he knows how to wrest power from others. Originally, he has two parts (Meng Ao & Wang Ci) of the military supporting him. With your death, Lao Ai the fake eunuch can only do so much and Wang Jian cum An Gu are too far away to be of assistance. But he just cannot get rid of you and now, Wang Ci has deflected to your side. Last night, he blew his top and cursed you and Wang Ci nonstop in front of Guan Zhongxie and Meng Ao. This man is without a conscience and has never reflected on all the horrendous crimes that he has committed."

Xiang Shaolong thought of something and questioned: "Did Wang Ci tell Lu Buwei about the blood test Lu Gong did on Crown Prince? The one that proved Crown Prince is not related to Lu Buwei?"

This is the first time Tu Xian heard about the blood test. After hearing the details, his face changed colour: “Shaolong, you are mad. Even I dare not gamble that Crown Prince is the son of Lu Buwei or not. If he is indeed Lu Buwei’s son, wouldn’t all the hard work go down the drain?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong will not tell him the truth. He sighed: “If I appear hesitant, Lu Gong and the rest will begin to suspect that Crown Prince is that traitor’s bastard child, right? I am also glad we placed a right bet this time.”

Still fearful, Tu Xian took some time to compose himself before commenting: “I am sure Wang Ci did not tell Lu Buwei about this matter. Every time he got into trouble, he will curse Zhu Ji. He hates Zhu Ji for not telling Crown Prince the truth about him being his real father. It is really strange. With Lu Buwei’s intelligence, how can he make such a mistake? When he gave Zhu Ji away, he had the intention to make his own son the King of Qin... How can there be a mistake? In the past, he did tell me once that the Crown Prince is his own flesh and blood.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but asked: “But Zhu Ji told me personally that even she cannot be sure whether the Crown Prince is Lu Buwei’s son or King Zhuangxiang’s son.”

Tu Xian lamented: “Even if she knew, this ambitious woman will not tell the truth. If the Crown Prince is still close to her, she will not rely on Lao Ai. At the end of the day, it is just a fight for power.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken as he had never thought of Zhu Ji

this way.

If someone else said these words, he would not pay any attention but Tu Xian knew her all the way back when she is still a courtesan in Lu Buwei's residence.

The 'Ji' is Zhu Ji refers to her profession, which is courtesan.

When King Zhuangxiang is in power, she behaved herself well, knowing that she can enjoy wealth and power. Moreover, her own son is the future King of Qin so she has nothing more to ask for.

When Lu Buwei murdered King Zhuangxiang, she saw through him and did not want to depend on him alone. She tried to win Xiang Shaolong to her side but discovered that he is loyal to Xiao Pan and the late King so she got together with Lao Ai. First, she can satisfy her sexual needs and second, she can cultivate her authority through him.

Recently, she found out that her son is really holding different views so she hardened her heart and submitted wholeheartedly to Lao Ai and even become pregnant for him. Ultimately, she refuses to give up her authority.

After analyzing things from this angle, Xiang Shaolong can feel his burden lightening and his guilt towards Zhu Ji lessened greatly.

His mood improving, he enquired: "What does Lu Buwei plan to

do now?”

Tu Xian revealed: “As long as you are around, Lu Buwei dare not let his guard down. With Wang Ci supporting you and Crown Prince, Meng Ao does not have the confidence to do anything too. If there comes a day when both Wang Ci and Meng Ao are out at war, we should be extra careful. Meng Ao possesses the military seal and can come back anytime. With Lu Buwei’s eight thousand family warriors, they can find any excuse and kill whoever that opposes them. I think Shaolong knows this better than me.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded with a smile.

Tu Xian continued; “At the present moment, Lu Buwei and Meng Ao are pinning all their hopes on the duel tomorrow night. If Guan Zhongxie manages to win, you will be killed for sure. Shaolong must think twice before you act.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: “The bigger the hopes, the bigger the disappointment.”

Still worried for him, Tu Xian sighed: “Excuse me for being frank. For the past six months, Guan Zhongxie has been practising nonstop. He is at his peak regardless of sword skills or fitness. Shaolong need not gamble your life with him. The impact of this duel is bigger than you imagine.”

Xiang Shaolong is aware of his true concern for him. Grabbing his shoulders, he promised: “Please have confidence in me. You will enjoy a good show tomorrow.”

He took the chance to ask: “How is Third Mistress doing?”

Tu Xian sighed: “Within the Premier Mentor Residence, she is the only person I care for. She treats me better than the others. Unfortunately, she is the daughter of that traitor. These few days, she has been worrying a lot. I can see that she prefers Guan Zhongxie over you. Initially, I thought that she had really wanted both of you to fight again but recently, I learnt that it is Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie’s conspiracy. During the hunting fair, you may seemed to have gain the upper hand but privately, Guan Zhongxie insisted that he did not wish to kill you so he let you off that night. Otherwise, you would have lost for sure. Hei! That is why I have tried many times to persuade you not to fight if you can help it.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Honestly speaking, that day, I did not show my true prowess so Guan Zhongxie managed to survive. Tomorrow, I will give it my best shot.”

Tu Xian was astonished; “Really?”

To comfort him, Xiang Shaolong sprouted nonsense: “Of course! Otherwise, why did I only defend and not attack during the second round?”

Tu Xian eyed him suspiciously before adding: “Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are in an arms race now. Both of them are recruiting talented men all over the states to be added to their army of family warriors. Besides absorbing the Weinan Martial Arts School, Lao Ai managed to recruit this man named Han Jie. This man is

rumoured to have learnt the essence of Ji Xia Sword Saint Cao Quidao's sword skills and even Guan Zhongxie considers him to be a significant threat. Shaolong must be careful when dealing with this man. He is a top assassin and several high ranking officials of Qi have fallen under his sword."

Xiang Shaolong has seen how Han Jie fights and admits that he is capable of contending with Guan Zhongxie.

Tu Xian revealed: "Among Lu Buwei's latest recruits, the most outstanding ones are Xu Shang, Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu. Xu Shang is the best swordsman among them and is now Guan Zhongxie's sparring partner. His skill is not far from Guan Zhongxie's level, only losing to him in terms of arm strength. However, his sword skill is very creative and agile which covers up this weakness. Lu Buwei has the intention to make him the Assistant Imperial Infantry Commander."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Lu Buwei can plan all he wants but let's see if they can come into fruit. Right! Any news from Xiao Yuetan?"

Tu Xian cheerfully divulged: "A talent is a talent wherever he goes. Yuetan is now named Biantan and is recognized for his abilities. At present, he is serving the Chancellor of Han. I am happy for him."

After further discussion, they parted.

That night, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun the three

brothers are having dinner at the Command Centre. Knowing that his marriage is secured, Jing Jun is especially happy and proud.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to advise: “If there is nothing important, do not go to Drunken Wind Brothel. Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are fighting over Dan Meimei and we should not get involved in their fight.”

Jing Jun was stunned and awkwardly confessed: “Coincidentally, Lord Changwen has an appointment with me to go there for drinks tonight. Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong will be accompanying us. Ai! I will tolerate everything and I guarantee I will not get into trouble.”

Teng Yi scolded: “You can refrain from provoking others but won’t others provoke you? Don’t forget that you defeated Zhou Zihen during the hunting fair. Because of this, every follower of Lu Buwei bore grudges against you and will do their best to make things difficult for you. With Guoxin and the rest also against you and with Lao Ai supporting them, you must understand that you are still alive because of your Assistant Imperial Cavalry Commander Post. Otherwise, you would have been mincemeat long ago. Up till now you still have no idea how foolish you are.”

Jing Jun dare not speak back to Teng Yi and looked pleadingly at Xiang Shaolong.

Seeing that he is still young and immature, Xiang Shaolong’s heart softened. He suggested: “Since we are quite free, why don’t we all join in the fun and see what is really going on?”

Teng Yi was petrified: “Third Brother must not forget your duel tomorrow night. If you went out merry making tonight; will Yanran and the rest forgive you?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I want to intentionally let Guan Zhongxie know that I am not bothered by the duel tomorrow. This will make him complacent and think that he will win for sure. As long as we bring Little Jun back home early, there shouldn’t be any problem. Otherwise, I cannot get to sleep worrying about this brat.”

Jing Jun was touched: “Third Brother treats me the best. No! Second Brother treats me well too.”

Following that, he jumped up and exclaimed: “I must look for Lord Changping. If all of us are going but we leave him out, he will hold it against me.”

Looking at Jing Jun sprinting away, both men can only smile bitterly.

After talking for some time, Xiang Shaolong sent someone to inform his wives that he will be back home late. Just as they were about to leave, Huan Yi showed up.

This young and capable general has tiredness written all over his face but looks more cheerful than before. It must be due to the fact that he can finally put his talents to good use.

Seeing the two men, Huan Yi knelt down immediately.

Both men hurriedly helped him up.

Teng Yi was surprised: “Little Yi, why are you not busy training the new army? Did you travel throughout the night to Xianyang City?”

Huan Yi replied: “With Wang Ben managing them, there is nothing to worry about. It is my top priority to come back and cheer for Official Xiang’s duel tomorrow. Ai! I spent many hours before finally convincing Wang Ben to stay behind. I came back with Left Premier’s permission so I did not break any rules.’

Teng Yi laughed: “I see. I heard that there are many people like you who have come a long way from where they are in order to take part in the birthday celebration tomorrow.”

Huan Yi informed: “On my way, I ran into Po Hu from Tunliu. His entourage is amazing, with over five hundred family warriors and a large group of courtesans. But I do not like this man at all.”

Lord Changping’s voice sounded out: “I do not like this man too. Great minds do think alike.”

The three men are talking at the main gate. Turning around, they saw Lord Changping and Li Si coming towards them. The number of their armed escorts is three times larger than usual.

Huan Yi dared not be as friendly towards Lord Changping compared to Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi. He quickly paid his respects and kept quiet.

After the usual pleasantries, Li Si sighed: “Thinking about your duel tomorrow, the Crown Prince and I are not in the mood to work. Suddenly, Little Jun came to look for Lord Changping, saying that all of you are going to Drunken Wind Brothel to have a pre-celebration for tomorrow’s victory. I am bored to death so I thought I come along too.”

He whispered: “The Crown Prince is here too!”

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Huan Yi were blown away. Looking towards the group of riders, they finally spotted Xiao Pan between Jing Jun and Lord Changping. This future Qin Shi Huang has put on a fake moustache and dressed in a normal warrior clothes, nodding and smiling at them.

Before Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi can react, Huan Yi had already kneeled down and tried to kowtow. Lord Changping dragged him up and hissed: “Crown Prince has strict orders that no one must pay respects to him. This is to hide his identity. Violators will be severely punished.”

Huan Yi frantically stood up.

Reining his horse, Xiao Pan laughed: “It is getting late. Let’s make a move.”

Xiang Shaolong and the rest quickly mounted their horses and accompanied Xiao Pan towards the lighted streets and Drunken Wind Brothel.

Only Xiang Shaolong dared to ride side by side Xiao Pan.

In a great mood, Xiao Pan joked: “Will Master blame me for fooling around despite being the Crown Prince?”

Not wanting to spoil his mood, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Even if you are King, you should also find time to relax.”

Xiao Pan is only afraid of him. Since he has given the green light, he teased: “When I heard that Master is going merry making on the day before the duel, I have nothing but admiration for you. That is the sign of a true hero. Empress summoned me earlier and wanted me to stop this fight, saying that your chances of winning are not high. Hng! In this world, only I know that Master is invincible.”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that Xiao Pan has hero-worshipped himself since young. His invincible image has been deeply imprinted in his mind and nobody can alter this. Luckily, he created the Hundred Battle Sabre and the Hundred Battle Sabre Play. Otherwise, he will be feeling very stressed now. He simply replied: “Looks like Crown... Hei... What should I call you instead? Otherwise, your identity may be leaked.”

Enthusiastically looking at the normal houses and passersby,

Xiao Pan easily replied: “Call me Qin Shi! Qin is my country and Master mentioned that I will be the Qin Shi Huang who will unite the world. All right. Call me Qin Shi. This is such a nice name.”

While Xiang Shaolong was stunned at this development, Xiao Pan summoned Lord Changping and got him to notify everyone of his new name.

Turning back to him, Xiao Pan asked: “What did Master want to say?”

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the incredulous feeling he had upon hearing the two words: Qin Shi. He thought for a while and remembered his earlier question: “I wanted to ask if you will be going to Lu Buwei’s banquet tomorrow.”

Xiao Pan was puzzled: “Do you need to ask this question? How I wish tonight is tomorrow night! Empress will be there too. Nobody in Xianyang City will give this fight a miss. I heard that there are many people who are gambling on the results of the duel. Hng! According to Lord Changwen’s report, most people believe that Guan Zhongxie is well prepared and has a higher chance of winning but I know that the resulting victor will be Master.”

Xiang Shaolong was tickled, thinking that gambling is already so widespread now. Perhaps it is just a basic human nature to try their luck.

With the large signboard of Drunken Wind Brothel in sight, Xiao Pan became even more excited and updated: “The Po Hu fellow

whom Huan Yi mentioned is Tunliu's richest man. It is often said that he is the second richest man in Qin after your Wu Family. He specializes in salt and iron business and his business is very successful. This man is very ambitious and used to work with Lord Yangquan. Now, he is quite intimate with Du Bi. We must be careful of this man."

Lord Changping rode forward and enquired: "Crown... Hei! No! Brother Qin, are we going to a quiet spot of our own or are we going to the main hall to participate in the rowdiness?"

Xiao Pan naturally replied: "Of course we are going to the main hall. I even wanted to see the four top beauties. I want to personally see how beautiful they are that so many men have fallen head over heels over them. "

With these words, Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping exchanged a look, thinking that there is no way to stay low profile tonight.

Book 18 Chapter 06 – Assembly Of Talents

Drunken Wind Brothel is especially crowded tonight. At the front door, the line of carriages stretches for some distance and people need to queue to enter it.

After discussing with Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong decided to bring only the Eighteen Guardians and another eighteen of the best Palace Guards inside the brothel. This is to prevent others from seeing their true strength and guessing that something is amiss.

After passing through the high wall surrounding the brothel, this future Qin Shi Huang was elated at seeing the well lit main building, isolated halls and pavilions. He pointed everywhere excitedly and was in a great mood.

Incidentally, on the other side of a pavilion, there are courtesans and their clients lighting fireworks, making the night sky bright and beautiful. It was a scenic and lively atmosphere.

Brothel Owner Wu Fu is at the main door welcoming the guests. When he caught sight of Lord Changping and Xiang Shaolong's group, however occupied he is, he still excruciate himself from his position and went forward, welcoming: "Successful people don't bear small grudges. I may have been dishonest in the past but I don't have a choice too. Will Left Premier, Official Xiang and other officials please forgive me."

Xiang Shaolong can only swallow his grudge bitterly. Wu Fu has made such an honest and upfront confession; how can he continue

to make things difficult for him?

Ten over maids came up to them and amidst their joyful laughter; they helped everyone take off their winter cloaks and presented hot towels for refreshing themselves. The service here is one of the best.

Since he is temporary free, Wu Fu paid his respects to everyone.

He is amazingly knowledgeable about the influential people of Qin. When he heard Li Si and Huan Yi's names, he bowed respectfully and even managed to bring up some related conversational topics.

When Xiang Shaolong introduced 'Qin Shi', Wu Fu was stunned and could not recollect such a person. But since this person can hang around Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping plus the fact that everyone is very polite to him, he must be someone important too. Moreover, this person looks neither young nor old. With a square face and large ears, he may not be handsome but carries an air of dominance. When this person stares at himself, Wu Fu can feel the urge to kneel down and pay his respects. He dared not be rude and respectfully greeted: "Official Qin looks imposing and is a rare breed among men. In the future, you must treat me well."

It was a timely flatter. Xiao Pan initially did not have a good opinion of him but after hearing these praises, he laughed: "Brothel Owner Wu is too polite. Ha! I traveled a long way here to visit Drunken Wind Brothel and see the four beauties. Please make the necessary arrangements."

They were speaking at the reception area. As Xiang Shaolong is here with a big group and with the eighteen Guardians and eighteen palace guards fanning out in a bodyguard formation, they have occupied half of the reception area.

Other incoming guests noticed Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping and other influential officials so they automatically took a detour around them. Only a group of sturdy warriors was irritated at Wu Fu's attention at Xiang Shaolong's group. They stopped where they are with an ugly expression on their faces.

The Guardians are quite sensible and stayed immobile. However, the palace guards are used to serving the Crown Prince and could not take it lying down. They stared back at the warriors with hostility.

Wu Fu heard Xiao Pan's request and his face changed colour. But Xiao Pan has an aura of dominance that makes it impossible for anyone to reject him. Wu Fu hurriedly replied: "This is a little challenging. Let me try my best to arrange for them to spend some time with you."

Jing Jun glanced once at the warriors and was overjoyed. Leaning towards Xiang Shaolong, he whispered: "Scarface Guoxin is here and so is Chang Jie. Ha! They must be tired of living. How dare they compete with the Crown Prince for Wu Fu's attention."

Xiang Shaolong turned around and recognized Guoxin first. Of course, he is the easiest to recognize because of the scars over his

face and forehead. Guoxin is more well-built than the ordinary person and has an air of seriousness. With one look, one can tell that he is not a common person. He may not be considered good looking but he reeks of manly charm.

Guoxin and the rest appeared to have recognized Xiang Shaolong too. They were surprised to see him but stared back at him without fear.

Xiao Pan can sense them staring at himself too. Turning around, he saw Guoxin and his fellow warriors staring arrogantly at him. He coldly hissed: “Who are these men?”

Lord Changping quickly and respectfully reported: “They are from Weinan Martial Arts School. The group there is headed by Head Instructors Guoxin and Chang Jie.”

Wu Fu has never seen Lord Changping speaking at anyone so respectfully before. His eyes lit up with fear.

Xiao Pan is about to arrest them when Xiang Shaolong gently reminded: “We are here to have fun!”

Xiao Pan acknowledged his reminder and laughed: “Right! Right! Let’s have fun tonight!”

Before he can take a step, someone at the door announced: “Tunliu Master Po is here!”

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan and everyone stopped moving and turned around, looking towards the door.

Twelve imposing warriors dressed in a uniform warrior suit first paved the way and behind them is a middle aged man with a tall hat. He is taller than most individuals by a head and is almost as tall as Xiang Shaolong. With his wide and exquisite gown, he exudes an aristocratic aura.

His eyes are the most striking. After he scanned the entire area, he looks confident and assured.

He did not resemble a merchant at all but more like a scholar. He is slightly arrogant and could not be bothered with Chunhua and the maids who are attending to him.

Besides him are two warriors dressed in elaborate warrior suits. From one glance, one can tell that both are expert swordsmen.

Wu Fu was in a dilemma. Po Hu is a famous tycoon from eastern Qin. He did not know who to attend to. Moreover, Guoxin and his group are showing signs of impatience.

Xiang Shaolong can see his dilemma and smiled: "Brothel Owner Wu can attend to your guests. We can go upstairs on our own."

Under the sky, only Xiang Shaolong dares to say these words. If it was Lord Changping, he will never have the guts to tell Wu Fu to abandon the Crown Prince and serve other guests.

Wu Fu was extremely grateful and bowed as he retreated. Meanwhile, he gestured for another helper to lead Xiang Shaolong's group upstairs.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest walked towards the inner part of the main building. Just as they were about to climb the stairs, Guoxin stepped out and chased after them. He hollered: "Please hold your step!"

Xiao Pan's eyes flashed with a killing glint and halted. Xiang Shaolong patted him lightly, hinting to him to control his anger before turning around with the rest and faced Guoxin who is approaching them.

The bodyguards fanned out to prevent him from getting too close.

Away from them, Wu Fu is attending to Po Hu.

Guoxin greeted: "I hereby wishes Official Xiang a victorious fight tomorrow night."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is just being polite before saying his true intention. He coldly questioned: "What can I do for you?"

Eyeing the guards in front of him, Guoxin's anger subsided before it shows on his face. He invited: "Everyone in our martial arts school admires your sword skills. If you are free, please make a

trip to our school and give us some pointers.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this is as good as challenging him to a duel. He wonders if this is Lao Ai's idea or Weinan Martial Arts School founder Qiu Risheng's idea.

Lord Changping and the rest snorted coldly, expressing their displeasure.

Scarface Guoxin did not exhibit the least fear and did not frown the least bit. He stood there firmly, awaiting Xiang Shaolong's reply.

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: “Your School has always been very concerned about my affairs. I have always wanted to see how good you are. Let's see! Over the next few days, when I happen to be in a bad mood, I will definitely make a trip to exchange pointers!”

Guoxin was incensed to hear Xiang Shaolong's merciless words. Just as his eyes shone with cold murderous energy, Xiao Pan clapped: “Well said! When that happens, Official Xiang must bring me along.”

Guoxin stared at Xiao Pan with shock. Not knowing his real identity, he barked: “Who are you?”

JIANG!

The eighteen Palace Guards drew their swords simultaneously but only one sound is heard. These men protecting the Crown Prince are not only highly-skilled but well trained too.

One of the guards coldly ordered: “How are you be rude to Master. Kneel down at once!”

The martial arts school warriors saw that something is wrong and hurriedly dashed forward, protecting Guoxin. They understood that almost every person in Xiang Shaolong’s group is not to be trifled with and for some time, there is a stalemate.

Po Hu and Wu Fu looked over in astonishment.

Xiang Shaolong laughed heartily: “Brother Qin, we need not waste our time with these clowns. Let’s have fun instead.”

Ignoring Guoxin and his warriors whose faces have completely darkened, he led Xiao Pan upstairs.

Concurrently, he was laughing inside. In a way, he has saved Guoxin’s life. Otherwise, even if Lao Ai or Zhu Ji is here personally, Guoxin and his group will still be executed.

As they stepped into the wide hall on the second floor, it seems like everyone present has already known that Xiang Shaolong is here and the entire hall is very solemn. Everyone is looking at this man who will be duelling with Guan Zhongxie tomorrow night.

Xiao Pan is afraid to be recognized and walked behind the others. Teng Yi and Huan Yi walked in front of him, preventing others from taking a close look at him.

Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong are waiting for them already. Before they saw Xiao Pan, they welcomed: "Rare guest."

If it was anyone else who is about to fight a formidable opponent like Guan Zhongxie tomorrow, he will be at home practising instead of coming to a brothel.

Jing Jun rushed forward and whispered to them that the Crown Prince is here. He warned them not to kneel or pay respects. Both men have uncontrollable fear and shock written all over their faces. Lost, they fumbled on the spot.

Their table is situated on one side of the hall besides the window. There are ten seats altogether. Xiao Pan smilingly greeted the two generals and sat down with his back to the hall so as to prevent others from seeing his face.

Everyone got seated too.

Tonight is especially crowded and there are no empty seats. Moreover, no one anticipated Xiao Pan will come along too. The thirty six guards have to remain standing. Fortunately, the hall is quite spacious. As instructed by Wu Fu earlier, Chunhua and the other staff quickly set up another two tables by the side. After some disruption, the lively atmosphere resumed.

Maids dressed in beautiful costumes approached their table and begin filling up their wine cups.

After he ordered some dishes, Xiao Pan smiled: “Fellow brothers, please chat and joke as per normal.”

Despite his words, nobody dared to even breathe loudly. It was slightly awkward.

Xiang Shaolong broke the ice by smiling: “General Yang and General Bai have been here for some time. Why didn’t you get some girls to accompany you?”

Yang Duanhe gave a dry cough and replied with discomfort: “Before Official Xiang came up, everyone here was talking about the big fight tomorrow. There was a huge debate and we were so absorbed we forgot all about the girls.”

Bai Chong lowered his head and dared not face Xiao Pan. He replied in a low voice: “When someone reported that you are at the reception area, there was an uproar. Some said that you are confident of victory while some said that you have no self... Hei... No self... Ai! I shall not say anymore. Anyway, no one dares to say anything now.”

Teng Yi laughed: “No self respect?”

Bai Chong nodded embarrassedly.

Xiang Shaolong is scanning the hall and noticed several familiar figures. At one table are the expert swordsmen from Premier Mentor Residence. Except for Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan, the newcomers Xu Shang, Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu are all present. Amazingly, Tu Xian is accompanying them.

Xu Shang, Zhao Pu and Tu Xian saw Xiang Shaolong looking at them and gestured back with a smile. However, Zhou Zihen, Lu Chan the two old birds as well as Lian Jian's martial brother Lian Jiao are showing signs of displeasure.

They each have a lady companion but none of them are as top notched as the four beauties Dan Meimei, Yang Yu, Guiyan and Bailei.

Three tables away is a table belonging to Lao Ai's men. Except for the handsome but arrogant Han Jie, there are another two men. Jing Jun pointed out that they are Lao Si, Lao Ai's clansman and Ling Qi, Lao Ai's advisor.

Lao Si's appearance differs greatly from Lao Ai. He is short and fat but his eyes are moving energetically, betraying his cunningness and intelligence.

Ling Qi is smart looking with an elegant and graceful disposition. He looks like a typical advisor.

Guoxin and his men came up to the second floor and joined their table.

Xiao Pan secretly looked around the hall and chanced upon a table of high ranking officials. Normally, they put on a serious demeanour with plenty of self-respect and integrity but now, they are hugging courtesans and cracking silly jokes. Amused, he proclaimed: "Gentlemen, please feel free to pick any girls and drink to your heart's content. Do not let me affect your mood."

Even the playboy Jing Jun can only smile in return. With Xiao Pan around, even breathing normally is a challenge; how could he summon a female companion? Worse still, a foolish girl may unwittingly expose his flirting secrets and create a big headache for him.

Wu Fu came upstairs too at this point in time and he is personally escorting Po Hu to one of the isolated halls. Along the way, he greeted everyone. Passing by Xiang Shaolong's table, he respectfully reported: "Miss Yang Yu will come after finishing her song. When she heard that Official Xiang is here, she forgot all her other engagements."

Spending his energy in hating such a despicable cad is a waste of his time and effort. Forgiving his past mistake, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Our main guest tonight is this Mister Qin who has come from afar. Yang Yu will accompany him, not me."

Having gone too far in his flattery, Wu Fu laughed: "Official can put your mind at ease. I have already informed Meimei, Little Lei (Bailei) and Yanyan (Guiyan, not Li Yanyan). They will come as soon as they can afford the time. By then, you can punish them by asking them to sing or drink."

Wu Fu lives up to his reputation of handling difficult clients and questions. No one can hold it against him after his eloquent answer.

A cold snort was heard from Guoxin's table and someone coldly remarked: "It is really different if you are holding an official appointment. No matter how busy the beauties are, they will still make time for you."

These words are meant for Xiang Shaolong's table and everyone's countenance changed upon hearing it. It seems like Lao Ai's men are really much more arrogant and detestable compared to Lu Buwei's men.

Everyone in Xiang Shaolong's table is someone of considerable influence. Moreover, Lord Changping is the powerful Left Premier and is many ranks higher than Lao Ai. They must be relying heavily on Zhu Ji's backing to pass such insolent remarks.

Their hands on their sword hilts, the Palace Guards are waiting for Xiao Pan's command before they started killing.

For the first time, Xiao Pan is experiencing the arrogance of Lao Ai's men. His expression turned grave and his eyes are glowing with anger, causing the blood of everyone and Wu Fu to turn cold.

In this intense and fragile moment where swords can be drawn in an instance, Li Si stood up with a smile and walked towards Han Jie and Guoxin's table.

The entire hall quietened down and watched with tense breaths.

Everyone from Guoxin to Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan are puzzled at Li Si's behaviour.

Li Si whispered some words to Guoxin's table. At that table, everyone's face lost colour and kept quiet while Li Si walked back nonchalantly.

Every table began to whisper nonstop among themselves and were wondering what did Li Si say to make Lao Ai's men behave themselves obediently.

Under the enquiring gaze of everyone, Li Si sat down and simply explained: "I only told them that Crown Prince has strict orders to kill anyone who dares to annoy Official Xiang before the duel. Thus, the Palace Guards are protecting him and will execute Crown Prince's orders if necessary."

Everyone was full of praise for his quick wit. Overhearing his words, Wu Fu secretly praised Li Si for his intelligence and he thought that Li Si is making it all up.

Xiao Pan was delighted. First, Li Si is clever and resolved the situation and second, Guoxin and his men are afraid of his authority and dared not create any more trouble.

At this moment, someone chortled: "I thought I was mistaken but it is really Shaolong. We did not come here for nothing!"

Everyone glanced over and saw that it was Wang Ci and Wang He. They seemed to be based at another hall but were just passing through.

Just as everyone was panicking inside, the two Generals walked even closer and saw Xiao Pan. Stunned, they exclaimed at the same time: “Crown Prince!”

Book 18 Chapter 07 – Peak Condition

Everyone heard the words “Crown Prince” and looked towards their table. Before half a second passed, Huan Yi stood up and bellowed: “Generals are right. It is indeed Crown Prince who asked us to accompany Official Xiang tonight. Will Generals please take a seat?”

When everyone heard his comment, they realised it was just a careless remark and resumed their activities.

Wang Ci and Wang He noticed Xiao Pan’s fake moustache and ordinary warrior suit dressing and could guess what is going on. They sat down without another word.

Suddenly they heard sounds of teeth chattering. It is Wu Fu whose face has turned entirely green and his lips completely white. He appears to have seen through their cover and identified this Qin Shi as the Crown Prince. He looks as if he wanted to kneel down and pay his respects.

Just as everyone was panicking a second time tonight, Wu Fu’s legs softened and he kneeled down.

Teng Yi was quicker than the rest. His hand quickly shot out and supported him, preventing Wu Fu from completely kneeling down and pulling him towards himself. From afar, it looks as if Wu Fu is sitting down besides Teng Yi.

Lord Changping leaned forward and whispered to him: “If

Brothel Owner Wu lets anyone know that Crown Prince is here, I will close down your Drunken Wind Brothel and sentence your whole family to death. Are you clear? Hng! You are not allowed to kowtow.”

Wu Fu was frightened beyond words. His whole body became limp and he did not even have the energy to nod in agreement.

Xiao Pan lightly praised: “Seeing that everyone acted with wisdom and creativity, I am certain that our country is in good hands and the days of prosperity is near.”

With Wu Fu around, Xiang Shaolong cannot say what he truly wants. He warmly warned: “As long as Brothel Owner Wu acts accordingly, I will guarantee your safety. Get moving and you must not warn the four beauties that Crown Prince is here.”

Wu Fu clumsily got up and paid his respects before slipping away.

Wang Ci raised his cup and wanted to toast Xiao Pan when he recalled something. “Has the wine been tested for poison?” he questioned.

Behind him, a Palace Guard reported: “Great General, all the wine has been tested and they are safe.”

Wang Ci toasted Xiao Pan.

Everyone does not dare to raise their cups yet until Xiao Pan gave the indication. After Xiao Pan's approval, they drank to their heart's content.

After the two close encounters, the atmosphere began to return to normal.

Xiao Pan started to speak to Wang Ci and Wang He and learnt that they are here on Po Hu's invitation.

Wang He coldly state: "This Po Hu is unpredictable. The moment we met, he passed negative comments about Lu Buwei and hinted at Empress's misbehaviour. It was a waste of time talking to him. We spotted Wu Fu and overheard him telling an attendant to inform Yang Yu and Bailei that Official Xiang is here. Using this opportunity, we excused ourselves."

Xiao Pan gave a cold snort but did not reply.

Wang Ci laughed: "Shaolong is really charming. When the two ladies heard that you are here, they both wanted to come immediately but were stopped by Wu Fu. Due to the busy crowd, they can only take turns to come. Yang Yu is presently getting a change of clothes and should be here in a while."

Xiao Pan was amazed: "Are generals mistaken? I thought they are Lu Buwei's followers?"

Wang Ci explained: "At the end of the day, they do not have a

real owner. They will belong to whoever that is more powerful. Besides, women adore heroes and Shaolong is our foremost hero of Qin and even Talented Lady Ji has submitted to him. Under the sky, who would not want to be close to him?"

Pleased, Xiao Pan toasted Xiang Shaolong for his success and Xiang Shaolong hurriedly accepted the toast.

Everyone is full of respect for Xiao Pan's magnanimity.

The twinkling sounds of accessories can be heard. With Wu Fu guiding the way, Yang Yu appeared and she is accompanied by two maids. Her steps were delicate and her figure is alluring, captivating the attention of everyone.

Xiao Pan was thrilled: "She truly lives up to her reputation!"

Out of the blue, someone called out: "Miss Yang, please hold your step!"

As everyone turned to look at the speaker with surprise, he turned out to be Shangcai number one swordsman, the young and handsome new recruit of Lu Buwei, Xu Shang.

With a look of displeasure, he walked over.

Yang Yu stopped walking and frowned heavily. She stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong and looked back at Xu Shang who is striding towards her. She was in a difficult position.

Wu Fu is the most anxious and signalled to the two maids to bring Yang Yu to Xiao Pan's table but Yang Yu waved the two maids away.

Instead, Xiao Pan finds it interesting and smiled: "No wonder this place has such good business. Everyone is here to fight over these beauties."

Xu Shang has the coldest expression on his face. He icily interrogated Wu Fu: "Brothel Owner Wu told me earlier that Miss Yang has been reserved by General Du. Why is she able to come out and serve another table now?"

Yang Yu seems to have good intentions towards Xu Shang. Leaning towards him, she mentioned some words and pointed at Xiang Shaolong's table.

Wang Ci is currently the most important military leader in Qin. He coldly dismissed: "Who is this kid? Is he tired of living? Even if Guan Zhongxie is here, he will still have to give me face."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Great General need not bother yourself with these men. Lu Buwei's men are known to be insolent and arrogant. I will make sure they suffer in the future."

Wang Ci sighed with boredom and did not reply.

Wu Fu quickly came up to their table to seek forgiveness. Before

he can say a single word, Xiao Pan stated upfront: “This is not your fault and Brothel Owner Wu need not feel bad about it. If Miss Yang wants to come over, so be it. If not, it is ok too.”

Not expecting the Crown Prince to be so accommodating, Wu Fu is momentarily stunned.

Lord Changping pulled him over and whispered something to him. Wu Fu left quickly after hearing his words.

Xu Shang looks as if he is going to come to their table but was detained by Yang Yu. She seems to have mentioned Wang Ci’s name while talking to Xu Shang.

Yang Duanhe is Wang Ci’s most capable general. His expression turning very ugly; he stood up and was about to scold Xu Shang when Li Si dragged him down to his seat. Seated beside him, Li Si smiled: “Why waste your energy over such a man like him?”

Xu Shang stared fiercely once at Xiang Shaolong before returning to his seat. Yang Yu maintained a cheerful expression and the aura of anger in the air quickly dissipated.

As pointed out by Xiang Shaolong, a mystified Yang Yu sat down besides Xiao Pan. She only knew that Xiao Pan is named Qin Shi but does not know his background. But since this person can hang around with Lord Changping, Wang Ci and Xiang Shaolong, he must be someone important. Wu Fu also reminded her many times to offer her best service so she naturally dare not be negligent. She did her best to toast wine, make jokes and flatter everyone. Xiao

Pan is delighted with her services and the atmosphere became livelier as if nothing has happened before.

After a while, Guiyan came to their table too. None of the other guests felt uncomfortable. Based on Wang Ci's standing in Qin, he alone is qualified to ask for the company of these two top beauties.

Guiyan intimately sat down besides Xiang Shaolong and toasted everyone first. Toasting Xiang Shaolong last, she whispered: "Official Xiang is powerful and successful. Please do not bear grudges with a weak woman like me."

After their previous encounter, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can ever trust her again but on the surface, he naturally accepted her apology.

Yang Yu took her leave and she looked once at Xiang Shaolong with deep emotions before turning around. Soon after, Bailei showed up and only the top beauty Dan Meimei has yet to appear.

Among the four beauties, Bailei is the only one who hasn't interacted with Xiang Shaolong before. She treated Xiao Pan well and their communication is quite amiable.

Guiyan whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ears: "Will you stay back tonight? I will do my best to service you." And batted her eyes at him seductively.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say: "Others say that wild flowers

smell better than home grown flowers but my feelings are the exact opposite. How would I know you will not try to kill me again?”

He rejected her on the spot.

With a look of disappointment, Guiyan is about to say something when Wu Fu turned up with a heavy expression: “I am afraid Meimei cannot come.”

Lord Changping frowned: “Meimei is not giving us any face?”

Wu Fu was frightened and he shook his head and hands: “No! She has been taken to Premier Mentor Residence. I have tried sending for her three times but was declined. Ai! I cannot say... Hei! It is nothing!”

Everyone’s curiosity is aroused.

His eyes flashing with coldness, Xiao Pan concluded: “So it is. Let’s finish up. Ha! What an exciting night!”

Wu Fu calmed down but Guiyan and Bailei were unwilling to leave and whined incessantly.

Their persuasion skills are top-notch and effective but it absolutely has no effect on Xiao Pan. This future Qin Shi Huang smiled plainly and stood up, turning around to take his leave. Everyone hurriedly scrambled after him.

With his arm around Guiyan's neck, Xiang Shaolong kissed her cheek and gently advised: "If you want to lead a happy and fulfilling life, you better know what is good for you."

Guiyan's expression darkened. Lowering her head, she promised: "Yanyan will heed your advice. As long as Official Xiang thinks about me once in a while, I will be more than grateful."

Xiang Shaolong smiled and bade farewell to Bailei before taking his leave.

Back home, Jing Jun is still full of energy. In the main hall, he prevented Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi from returning back to their rooms and scolded: "Wu Fu that bastard sure knows how to change according to the circumstances. When he saw Wang Ci and Wang He supporting Crown Prince, he told me secretly before we left that he will come personally to pay his respects to Third Brother. Ha! What an *****."

Teng Yi interjected: "But I believe that he is caught in between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. He cannot afford to offend either side and is in serious dilemma. Bai Chong told me earlier that Lu Buwei is keen to marry Dan Meimei as a concubine. Wu Fu is naturally troubled."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Tonight may be quite a mess but I can derive deep meanings from it. Firstly, the Crown Prince understood the invisible fight between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. He also learnt about Po Hu and Du Bi's ulterior motives. There are also three men who benefitted a lot. Second Brother does not hanker

after fame and riches so we can dismiss your case. Li Si and Huan Yi displayed intelligence and courage, gaining the favour of Crown Prince. They should enjoy plenty of promotions in the days to come.”

After a short discussion, Xiang Shaolong can feel the effects of alcohol and had to go back to his bedroom to sleep.

His wives reprimanded him slightly. In his drowsy state, he slept till late morning.

Tian Zheng and Tian Feng helped him to get up and get dressed. Retrieving his Hundred Battle Sabre, he got Teng Yi to spar with him and felt even more rejuvenated than before. He is brimming with energy and vigour.

Ji Yanran was puzzled: “Hubby was out partying last night and came home drunk but now, you look so fresh and energetic. This doesn’t make sense.”

Putting the Hundred Battle Sabre aside, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I will be lying if I say I am not concerned about Guan Zhongxie’s challenge. But last night was a good time to get drunk, allowing me forget everything. Therefore, I am very relaxed today and with a good night’s sleep, I am in my peak condition.”

Teng Yi mumbled: “I can vouch for that. I nearly lost hold of the Mozi Sword fighting him.”

The girls burst out laughing and it was a joyful sight.

Among their laughter, Wu Yingyuan came up to them with Tao Fang and Jing Jun in tow.

Everyone sat down for breakfast happily and no one is nervous about the imminent battle.

Jing Jun and Teng Yi left for the Command Centre while Xiang Shaolong engaged his father-in-law in conversation. They spoke about Wu Zhuo setting up a giant farm at the northern lands and Xiang Shaolong was filled with a strong yearning. How he wished it is Xiao Pan's coronation tomorrow and he can begin his new life after that.

While talking, Xiang Shaolong unconsciously fell asleep on the floor rug.

He had a strange dream and saw Zhao Ya, Zhao Qian, Chunying and the other three maids. They are toasting him for finally defeating Guan Zhongxie. Intoxicated, he somehow can sense that he is creating his own fantasy dream. He was stirred by Wu Tingfang patting him.

As he sat up in shock, Wu Tingfang commented: "The Crown Prince has sent someone to summon you into the palace. I wonder what it is. He should give you more time to rest."

Since the death of Zhao Qian, Wu Tingfang is the only person

other than Teng Yi who knows about Xiao Pan's real identity. Thus, she is not very respectful when she is speaking about him.

Xiang Shaolong stretched his limbs and can feel that he is at the peak of his mental and physical strength. He himself was surprised that he can sleep so peacefully before the duel. He dared not waste any more time and hurriedly showered, got changed and left towards the palace.

As usual, Xiao Pan received him in his Imperial Study. Lord Changping and Li Si were present as well.

Xiao Pan began: "The Spring Festival is five days later. I will pray at the Wei River that day. Grand Tutor Xiang's Black Dragon should be ready by then!"

Xiang Shaolong confirmed: "Everything is prepared. All we need to know is the exact prayer location and we can act accordingly."

Xiao Pan's eyes lit up followed by a sigh: "It is indeed hard to work without the Empress's support. Looks like I have to mend fences with her."

Li Si advised: "Military control should be our top priority. The rest can come later."

Xiao Pan was furious: "I am unhappy every time I thought of making that fake eunuch a Marquis. Now that Empress has moved to Oasis Palace, I have utterly no idea what the two of them are

planning.”

Lord Changping comforted: “Mao Jiao will notify us about Lao Ai’s activities. Crown Prince please set your mind at ease.”

Xiao Pan was angered: “How can I set my mind at ease? There are spies all over and everyone is only thinking for themselves. If not for the Black Dragon, I will summon everyone and conduct a massacre. After that, we will then try to salvage the situation.”

Lord Changping knows that he is very mad and dared not comment.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Crown Prince must look at the bright side. Don’t forget about the exciting performance tonight. After Guan Zhongxie is killed, we can assign a new Imperial Infantry Commander.”

Xiao Pan finally calmed down and everyone discussed further about the Black Dragon after which everyone parted.

Leaving alongside Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong can feel the dominance of the Crown Prince increasing day by day. If he is not angry, his dominance can be heavily felt already. When he is angry, the dominance can be considered stifling. Even Xiang Shaolong who has seen him grow up can feel this effect. The others must be having a worse experience.

Stepping out of the study, a palace maid detained Xiang

Shaolong, reporting that Qin Qing wanted to see him.

With an envious look on his face, Lord Changping took his leave.

While he is being led by the palace maid through the winding corridors of the huge palace, Xiang Shaolong thought that with Zhu Ji away in Oasis Palace and Xiao Pan yet to be coroneted, the most influential person in Xianyang Palace now is probably Qin Qing.

Coming to a large and plain building in the rear palace, the palace maid kneeled down: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please enter."

Pleased, Xiang Shaolong entered and noticed Qin Qing waiting at the door for him. He could not be bothered with manners and hugged her in his embrace. Qin Qing struggled for a while and leaned back, scrutinizing him for a while. Comforted, she surrendered: "You win! You looked great! You idiot. Why did you go merry making at Drunken Wind Brothel last night? Now, the whole city knows about your terrible deed."

Xiang Shaolong already knew that nothing escapes her attention and sat down on one side, still hugging her slender waist. Qin Qing helped him to take off his coat and massaged his shoulder muscles.

Xiang Shaolong is so comfortable he is flying among the clouds. It is truly different after they have made love. In the past, it is difficult for him to even hold her hand but now, she offered to massage him willingly.

Qin Qing gently reminded: “Do not underestimate your enemy! I have word that Guan Zhongxie is even better than before. Ordinary fighters will lose the spirit to fight and surrender after seeing his attacking pose. You may have the Hundred Battle Sabre and Sabre Play but if you are too complacent, you may still lose.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed that he has been underestimating his opponent but it was also because he wasn't bothered about the duel and thus, was very calm, relaxed and focused. He nodded: “Thanks for Grand Tutor Qin's reminder. I will not be so reckless anymore.”

Seeing that he is willing to listen to her advice, Qin Qing was thrilled: “I did not choose the wrong lover. Most men will find us women nagging too much or that our advice is impractical. Only Hubby is the real gentleman.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Grand Tutor Qin seems to be very experienced!”

Qin Qing protested: “You think too much. I have only heard about it from others.”

Xiang Shaolong quickly apologised and Qin Qing turned happy again: “Tonight's fight is something that everyone has been anxiously waiting for. From the Crown Prince to the common man, no one is spared. Originally, most people are betting that you will win but after knowing about your drinking and trysts last night, they switched their bets to Guan Zhongxie instead.”

Xiang Shaolong clarified: “I did drink but we only asked for the beauties because of the Crown Prince. We only enjoyed their company at the table and did nothing else.”

Qin Qing laughed: “But others do not think the same. Moreover, such gossips are bound to be exaggerated. Everyone on the street is saying that you slept with the four beauties. Let’s see if you will behave yourself in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed so hard he cried.

Qin Qing added: “The latest odds are Guan Zhongxie three to one against you. This shows that he is the people’s favourite choice to win.”

“What!” Xiang Shaolong exclaimed.

Qin Qing laughed so hard she leaned on him and whined: “If I am a greedy woman, I will lay huge bets on you and make a fortune.”

Xiang Shaolong pondered: “Who is hosting this gamble? Without money and a good reputation, it is hard to convince people.”

Qin Qing replied: “Have you heard of this man named Po Hu? He operates a few large casinos in Tunliu. If not for the gambling ban in Xianyang City, he would have set up casinos here too. Now, he is the mastermind behind the gamble between you and Guan Zhongxie.”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Didn’t he just arrive in Xianyang City yesterday?”

Qin Qing answered: “He did only arrive yesterday but his men already set up the gamble thirty days ago. He is the king of money making.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Who is this Po Hu exactly?”

Qin Qing responded: “I am not too sure myself. He wields great influence in the three new eastern provinces and is on intimate relations with Du Bi and Zhao General Pang Nuan. During his trip here, he has been busy socializing and giving presents. I am sure he is trying to win friends and open connections to assist Lord Changan Chongqiao in the future.”

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong joked: “Shall we make some money from him? In terms of wealth, my Wu Family is second to none. If he refuses to accept, it will be a loss of face for him. Hng! With three to one, I want to see his face after I win.”

Moved, Qin Qing gave him a tight hug and lamented: “Xiang Shaolong ah! Is your confidence born naturally with you? You seemed to be undefeated in terms of words and actions.”

Embracing her tightly in return, they shared a passionate kiss before he left reluctantly.

Back home, he told Wu Yingyuan about the gamble and odds. Wu

Yingyuan was highly interested and quickly went to find Tao Fang for a discussion. Xiang Shaolong returned to the back hall and took this time to rest while being entertained by his wives and son. Soon, it was evening time.

Despite the lack of prior arrangements, Huan Yi, Lord Changping, Jing Jun, Teng Yi, Li Si, Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong arrived at the Wu residence. They all planned to set off with him and showcase their might.

Xiang Shaolong took a shower and put on the warrior suit Qin Qing sewed for him. Beneath, he wore the plated armour. He definitely looks majestic and imposing.

He placed the Hundred Battle Sabre and the Flying Dragon Spear in a black bag and got Jing Shan to carry them, preventing anyone from knowing his true intentions.

After all his preparations, he led his three wives and for the first time, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng, along towards the Premier Mentor Residence. Under the cheering of his household, he left. Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang also went along.

Travelling along the well lit path of the Xianyang City main street, he was filled with many emotions.

When he first came to this era, he never would have imagined his present success.

At the same time, he can see the ugliness behind all the beautiful things in front of him. In the future, Xiao Pan will use his absolute authority to create the absolute legacy.

Fighting for one's dream is the noblest aspiration.

But after success has been achieved, emotions will have no room in the never ending quest to preserve one's power and wealth.

In the future, Li Si will be a different person too and he is most unwilling to witness this heart-breaking transformation.

In this very moment, he swore to leave immediately after eliminating Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

The Premier Mentor Residence is appearing in his sight and diagonally opposite it is Lao Ai's Inner Custodian Residence. These two will represent the two pillars of influence before Xiao Pan's coronation.

And he is the fish swimming between these two powers.

Thinking about this, he was filled with heroism. He nearly wanted to face the sky and shout out loud, expressing his righteous pride.

Book 18 Chapter 08 – The Birthday Banquet

The newly built Premier Mentor Residence is the most imposing architecture besides Xianyang Palace. It is even more outstanding than Zhu Ji's Oasis Palace.

The residence faces the Palace exactly and is surrounded by high walls. After passing through the main gate, there is a large courtyard that can serve as a training ground for one thousand men. There are three main buildings and they are connected by extensive corridors. From south to north, everything is made of the best wood or clay. The four sides are surrounded by slopes and all the buildings have elaborate roofs and are supported by double pillars. It is as imposing as can be.

A room in the main hall is dedicated to be the ancestral hall. Besides the main halls, there are nearly thirty separate blocks of buildings which are used for housing, storage, cooking and other purposes. The buildings are divided neatly according to left and right side of the halls.

Lush greenery can be found around the main halls and it was an inviting environment. The residence must have been designed by a famous architect, highlighting Lu Buwei's enormous wealth.

Anyone of importance in Xianyang City was all present. With the additional excitement of witnessing Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie's duel, everyone was highly enthusiastic and the atmosphere has reached a feverish pitch.

Over ten thousand lanterns were lighted for the celebrations and congratulatory messages on auspicious red cloth can be found hanging on the main gate and all over the gardens, adding to the celebratory mood.

Scores of family warriors are dressed in neat warrior uniforms and were guarding the main gate, preventing people from coming in uninvited.

After entering the door, there are counters for guests to register themselves and present their gifts. It was a well prepared arrangement. Despite the numerous guests streaming in incessantly, everything was well laid out and there were no signs of chaos.

All the three main halls are open to accommodate the guests and the hall in the centre is naturally the largest, with the ability to seat a thousand guests. The other two halls can only seat about five hundred guests each.

Those who were assigned to the sub halls can only accept their fate helplessly as they are not as influential as those in the main centre hall. They can only pray to squeeze into the main hall to watch the fight later on.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived, none of the guests have been seated yet and were dispersed around the hall exteriors and gardens, chatting among themselves. The air is filled by their voices.

It is a beautiful night with a new moon and the absence of snow. There is still five days before the beginning of spring so the weather is warming up, adding flavour to the birthday event.

For those who lack the awareness, this boisterous celebration is just a cover for the intense power struggle of the Qin empire. Xiang Shaolong is confident that tonight's victory or loss will directly impact the future of the seven states during the Warring Period and decide the history of China.

He is the pivotal point in this struggle.

When his large entourage arrived at the main gate of the Premier Mentor Residence, there was a mad rush as everyone wanted to see their hero.

Riding besides Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping joked: "Those people who bet on your loss must be very disappointed to see you so energetic and refreshed despite the brothel visit last night."

Xiang Shaolong joked back: "If I really lose, I need not go back to the Wu Residence. My father in law has placed a huge bet on me. If I caused him to lose money, what do you think will happen?"

Lord Changping was stunned: "I did not know your father in law is a gambler."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "He is not a gambler but he will love to see Po Hu going bankrupt when honouring his loss. After that,

let's see what he can use to bribe the officials and royal family members.”

Lord Changping burst out laughing and leapt down his horse.

Tu Xian who is in charge of welcoming the guests advanced towards them. Ordering his men to rein in the horses, he whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “That man is secretly wearing a soft armour that is specially made by Yue Blacksmiths. You better attack his head. Otherwise, he can allow himself to be pierced by your spear without suffering any harm and take this chance to kill you.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered back: “Did you see me bring a spear tonight?”

Tu Xian was taken aback and seemed to understand but doesn't seem to understand too. Someone came up to them and he can only swallow his question and spoke about some other unimportant stuff.

Sounds of music can be heard playing from the main hall, indicating that some important guest has just entered.

As Tao Fang is busy presenting their gifts, Xiang Shaolong glanced around and noticed most of the guests are unwilling to enter the halls to see Lu Buwei but are loitering around the courtyard engaging in idle chatter while enjoying the decorations and landscaping. Qin Qing just arrived too and joined Ji Yanran and the girls. With other female members of the royal family, they

were joking and giggling, attracting plenty of attention from other guests. On one hand, they were attracted by their beauty and other the other hand, they were puzzled that they can still joke and laugh in a relaxed mood despite knowing that their hubby is going to fight a strong opponent later on.

The people of Qin are open-minded and loved this kind of environment. Those who have the most fun are the young beauties from prestigious families like Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er. It is also a good time for the young men to showcase their literacy talents. The scenic settings make it even better for them.

While Xiang Shaolong and the others are talking about Po Hu's gambling racket; Lu Dan'er appeared out of nowhere and wriggled her finger, signalling Jing Jun to go over to her.

It so happens that a group of young children walked between Jing Jun and Lu Dan'er so Jing Jun did not see her signal. Xiang Shaolong saw her first and feeling cheeky, he walked over and pretended to lecture in a strict tone: "You are going to get married soon and do not even know how to greet your elders. What is the world coming too?"

With her hands on her waist, Lu Dan'er wailed: "Hng! Whose elder are you? Do you even care if I am getting married? Yi!" She recalled that Xiang Shaolong is Jing Jun's Third Brother and her face turned red instantly. Stomping her foot, she cried: "You are so irritating, you big bully."

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing and pushed Jing Jun who has just came up to them towards her. He proudly smiled: "Dear

Dan'er, I will wait for the day you kneel down and offer me your wedding toast!"

At a disadvantage, Lu Dan'er dared not berate him. Holding Jing Jun's hand, she slipped away into the crowd with him.

Shaking his head and sighing, Ying Ying's voice suddenly rang out beside him: "Official Xiang!"

Turning around, Xiang Shaolong got a big fright: "What is your expression so pale?"

Ying Ying bitterly smiled: "I did not sleep well for many nights. Ai! Since things have come to such a stage, what more can I say?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "No matter what happens tonight, it can be considered a closure for you. In the future, dedicate all your love to Brother Duanhe and be a good wife and mother!"

Ying Ying moved closer and softly asked: "Tell me, if Guan Zhongxie never appeared, would you have married me?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "By now, I think there is no need for such kinds of questions or answers!"

Ying Ying insisted: "No! If I do not find out the truth, I will never be satisfied."

Xiang Shaolong helplessly confessed: “Once, I did have feelings for you.”

Ying Ying lowered her head and whispered: “If anything happens to you tonight, I will not marry... Ai! I will not say anymore. Ah!”

Looking at her crestfallen face, Xiang Shaolong can only shake his head with a bitter smile. Ying Ying seems to think that he will certainly lose.

Xiang Shaolong naturally wasn't bothered by her thoughts and went back to Lord Changping and Teng Yi's side. Lord Changping inquired: “What did my sister say?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Nothing interesting.”

Lord Changping coldly snorted: “How can there be nothing interesting? She may have decided to marry Duanhe but is still pining for Guan Zhongxie. She kept saying you are not his match. How infuriating.”

The other guests are beginning to enter the banquet halls. Wu Yingyuan felt embarrassed to stay outside for too long and waved to everyone to enter together.

Since he is their senior, everyone obeyed without question.

Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and his sons are at the main door welcoming the guests. The air is filled with congratulatory

messages.

Lord Changping is probably the most unassuming and easy going Left Premier of Qin. Despite his exalted status, he entered the hall alongside Xiang Shaolong and Wu Yingyuan, offering his congratulations to Lu Buwei.

Wu Yingyuan is an experienced man when it comes to socializing. He comfortably wished Lu Buwei a long list of auspicious congratulatory phrases.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but think about the close relationship between Lu Buwei and the Wu Family in the past compared to all the present hostility. His heart is troubled with mixed emotions.

In his mind, Lu Buwei must have condemned Xiang Shaolong to lose the fight and his life. With a delighted and welcoming expression, his face is glowing with pleasure and was chatting and joking without a care in the world. When he spotted Xiang Shaolong, his eyes lit up. Abandoning his other guests, he personally welcomed: "Tonight is my lucky night. I celebrate my birthday and will gain a fine son in law. With my success, life has no more regrets."

Xiang Shaolong was thinking that his biggest regret is his inability to be the King of Qin. On the surface, he acted normal and offered his congratulations like everybody else.

Before Lu Buwei can say anything else, Xiang Shaolong gestured

to the people behind him. Everyone breezed through the door and do not have to offer any hypocritical wishes.

After a few steps, a silhouette flashed by. Lu Niang Rong appeared in front of Xiang Shaolong and with a cold expression, she state: “Official Xiang, I need to speak to you privately.”

Huan Yi, Teng Yi and the rest moved on and followed the ushers to their seats.

Lu Niang Rong plainly remarked: “Official Xiang, please come with me!”

Xiang Shaolong is certain that she has nothing good to say and can feel a grudge for her. Following her through the banquet tables, they came to an external door leading towards the central garden. Xiang Shaolong stopped and insisted: “Can we just say it here? Otherwise, others may start to gossip about us.”

The Guardians are initially behind him. Hearing his words, they fanned out in all four directions and prevent people from getting close to them.

Lu Niang Rong turned around and icily commented: “Since when did you become so timid and afraid of gossip? Moreover, if you win, I will be your woman. What is there to be frightened of?”

Xiang Shaolong can detect the sarcasm in her voice. Though angered, he would not hold it against her. He simply smiled: “I am

sure Third Mistress asked me here for a better reason than just ridiculing me.”

Lu Niang Rong’s eyes shone sharply and she replied in a deep voice: “Of course! I am not in the mood to chat with you and only want to ask you a question: Since you do not love me, why did you accept Zhongxie’s challenge?”

Unable to hold it any longer, Xiang Shaolong coldly smiled: “All Third Mistress needs to do later is to publicly announce that you are only willing to marry Official Guan. Then, even if I want to fight him, there is no reason to.”

Her pretty face turning grave cold, Lu Niang Rong stared fiercely at him for some time before slowly nodding: “Fine! I shall see how you end up tonight.”

With a vicious stomp, she returned to the main hall.

After her fragrance has dissipated from the air, Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself.

Lu Niang Rong may be an evil woman but she has his interests at heart. She wanted to dissuade him from fighting because like Ying Ying, she thinks he will surely lose the fight.

But in order to kill Guan Zhongxie, he had to ignore her good intentions.

Back at the main hall, most of the guests have already been seated. Everyone is turning their heads, looking and pointing at him. It seems like the duel between him and Guan Zhongxie is a recurring topic in their conversations.

Due to the large number of guests, besides the three hosting tables at the south, the rest of the tables are divided into two sides, the left and right side. Each side has four layers of tables and each table can seat four persons. They are all facing the spacious stage in the middle of the hall which will soon be the centre of attraction for song and dance performances and the duel as well.

As it is time to be seated, an usher came up to them and led them towards their seats.

Xiang Shaolong is seated in the first row of the right side, eight tables away from the hosting tables.

The other people in the first rows are naturally Lord Changping, Wang He, Wang Ci and other prominent generals. Opposite them in the first rows are Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Lao Ai and the influential people in the Premier Mentor Residence. Guan Zhongxie, however, cannot be found.

Sitting down besides Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong discovered his three wives and Qin Qing seated on the same row ahead of them and are sending him sweet looks and smiles, adding to his joy. Looking behind them, he saw the same sweet looks and smiles from the pretty and attractive Tian sisters. Incidentally, Tao Fang is sharing their table.

The Guardians are sitting behind Xiang Shaolong's table.

After some idle chat with Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong looked towards the main door. The group of thirty odd musicians on both sides of the door have stopped playing while Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and the others have disappeared. Only Tu Xian is left welcoming the guests.

Out of the blue, Wu Yingyuan poked Xiang Shaolong under the table. Xiang Shaolong broke out of his trance and scanned around. He finally noticed Du Bi and Po Hu seated opposite them and were leaving their seats and walking towards them. Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun can only follow Wu Yingyuan's example by standing up to greet them.

Po Hu is looking straight ahead while Du Bi stared viciously at Ji Yanran and Qin Qing with jealousy. Although he pretended to be looking around aimlessly, his behaviour did not escape the sharp observation skills of Xiang Shaolong.

In between the adjoining tables, everyone introduced themselves and mentioned the usual courtesies. Po Hu's sharp eyes assessed Xiang Shaolong for a while and he chuckled: "Official Xiang is truly an outstanding talent which is rare among men. No wonder Master Wu placed a huge bet on you. As a friend, I wish you victory but as a businessman, I wish for the opposite. My heart is in a dilemma!"

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand Huan Yi's dislike for

this man. Based on his demeanour and attitude, he seems to regard everyone and everything as a business transaction. It is even more obvious just by looking at his eyes.

Wu Yingyuan is an experienced socialite. He laughed: “Master Po is too serious. My little bet in nothing in your eyes and of course, will hardly affect your wealth and harming our friendship.”

Xiang Shaolong and his wives overheard his words and were full of admiration.

Du Bi smiled: “Master Wu’s answer is really great. If Official Xiang’s sword skill is as great, he will definitely win tonight. When that happens, I am afraid Master Po will have to sell his properties in order to honour his loss.”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “Today, I finally learnt that Great General knows how to tell jokes too. Master Po’s wealth is immeasurable; just by taking any banknote from his wallet is more than enough for all of us to be VIP clients in Drunken Wind Brothel night after night.”

Hearing his exaggerated words, everyone is highly amused and even Ji Yanran and the girls are smiling like flowers in full blossom, attracting the attention of those who are interested in them.

The door attendant announced: “The Empress and Crown Prince arrives!”

The music began to start playing.

All the elegantly dressed maids who are serving wine and food are the first to kneel down.

Po Hu and Du Bi bade their farewells and returned to their table.

The rest of the guests kneeled down and prepare to welcome the Empress and Crown Prince.

Jing Jun reminded: “The man seated between Lao Ai and Han Jie is Headmaster Qiu Risheng of the Weinan Martial Arts School.”

Xiang Shaolong slanted his face to one side, facing Lao Ai’s table and promptly identified Qiu Risheng.

It so happens that Qiu Risheng and Han Jie are looking over at him too. When their eyes met, all three men felt slightly awkward.

This is the second time Xiang Shaolong has seen Qiu Risheng. He first saw him during his duel with Wang Jian. Due to the distance between them during that time, he did not have a clear impression of this man. This expert swordsman has fine features and his limbs are longer than the ordinary man, giving the impression that they are very sensitive and agile. Around the age of thirty five, his eyes are brimming with energy and he has the air of an extraordinary man. Looking at his appearance alone, one can already feel that he is an extremely fearsome opponent. No wonder Lao Ai is so keen to recruit him.

He also noticed Xiao Pan's spy, Mao Jiao seated behind their table with Ling Qi and Guoxin. His status is below that of Qiu Risheng, Han Jie and Lao Si who are sharing Lao Ai's table.

The door attendant made another announcement and the music played even louder. Sixteen palace guards first paved the way before Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei strode into the hall.

Behind them are Lord Changwen and another sixteen palace guards. They are followed by the key people of Lu Buwei's household including Lu Niang Rong and the newly arrived Guan Zhongxie.

Despite the short interval, Guan Zhongxie is certainly more powerful than before. He walked with strong, confident steps and his eyes are shining as if they are electrified. In an intimidating manner, he walked ahead of a group of family warriors. Except for his near equal swordsman Xu Shang, everyone else seems to be despised by him.

When Xiang Shaolong caught sight of him, Guan Zhongxie happened to see him too. Exchanging a long stare, it was like two lightning bolts striking from each other's eyes.

As tonight is Lu Buwei's grand birthday celebration and given his special status as the Premier Mentor, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan displayed their respect and insisted that he take the main seat.

After some tussling, Lu Buwei finally sat down.

Guan Zhongxie and his men took their seats.

After everyone got seated too, their attention subconsciously turned towards Guan Zhongxie.

The most annoying thing is Lu Niang Rong sitting right besides Guan Zhongxie, highlighting Lu Buwei's dissatisfaction with Xiang Shaolong and hinting that Guan Zhongxie will win the duel without question.

In the front row too, Guan Zhongxie is seated one table lower than Lao Ai. Sharing his table are Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu the two expert swordsmen. The old birds Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen are seated behind them. They must have lost favour with Lu Buwei after failing to live up to expectations during the hunting fair. They have been replaced by the new swordsmen.

This is typical of Lu Buwei's ingratitude character.

After Xiao Pan mentioned some hypocritical words commending Lu Buwei's achievements, the long awaited birthday banquet finally began.

Book 18 Chapter 09 – Appetizers

After a teasing performance by the song courtesans of Premier Mentor Residence, Meng Ao, Wang Wan and Cai Ze led the entire hall in toasting Lu Buwei for his birthday, adding to the lively atmosphere.

Following that, Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong and the other clansmen led Lu Buwei to the other two halls to toast the other guests.

As Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji are still around, the thousand strong banquet is still quite noisy and were chatting about the imminent duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie, speculating who the winner will be.

Opposite him, Lao Ai faced Xiang Shaolong and raised his cup, wishing him success in his fight. Xiang Shaolong smiled back knowingly and put his own cup to his lips. He did not drink at all but is just putting on a show. Out of a sudden, Wu Tingfang gestured to him to come over. Puzzled, Xiang Shaolong shifted nearer to them and asked in a low voice: “What is it?”

Ji Yanran inched closer to him and replied in a deep voice: “Lu Buwei is really despicable. Earlier, Meng Tian walked past us and secretly whispered: Qi ambush in front of Wu Residence. Lu Buwei is going all out to kill you tonight. If Guan Zhongxie failed to kill you, others will. But even I cannot understand why the assassins from Qi?”

It is not unusual for people to ambush him but given Lu Buwei's risk-taking style, even Xiang Shaolong is baffled over Lu Buwei's choice to use Qi assassins.

He had wanted to tease Qin Qing who is sitting on the other side but noticed Zhu Ji staring at them. Frightened out of his senses, Xiang Shaolong swallowed all his words and returned to his seat, taking the chance to update Teng Yi and Jing Jun about the ambush.

Teng Yi coldly snorted and turned around to speak to Jing Shan sitting behind him. Within a few minutes, Wu Yan Zhu left to make the necessary arrangements.

The sound of music was being played once again. Before Lu Buwei can be seen, his delightful laughter can already be heard. With Guan Zhongxue and his family escorting him, he entered the main hall a second time in his best ever mood. Everyone stood up and gave him a standing ovation.

Extremely flattered, Lu Buwei strode right to the centre of the hall. When his cup is filled again, he raised his cup towards Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan, bellowing: "Let's toast Empress and Crown Prince first."

Besides Xiang Shaolong, Wu Yingyuan coldly cursed: "I want to see how long this heartless man can continue like this."

Looking at Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei toasting each other, Xiang Shaolong cannot help but feel emotional.

This can be considered the peak of Lu Buwei's glory. Later, he will fail to kill himself and shortly after, the Black Dragon will be sighted. Significant changes will be made to the Qin Court and his authority will be vastly limited. Another reason for his decline in influence is the rise of Lao Ai.

By now, Lu Buwei's toasting party has arrived in front of their table. Holding a full cup of wine, Guan Zhongxie walked closer and facing Xiang Shaolong, he toasted: "No matter who wins tonight, I am full of admiration for Official Xiang."

Glancing at his formidable opponent, Xiang Shaolong returned the courtesies with a smile.

Both men only made a show of drinking the wine.

When everyone has returned to their seats, Lu Buwei stood up again and announced: "The Chancellor of Qi, Tian Dan, has sent me a troupe of circus performers. Every person in the circus has an amazing talent to perform and I guarantee everyone will be blown away."

The guests were expecting him to announce the duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie instead. Slightly disappointed, their thoughts were interrupted by a circus of over a hundred performers. The performers are elaborately dressed and agile, earning loud praises and applause from the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong and his men were alarmed.

The Qi assassins must be referring to these circus performers.

Everyone is captivated by their first impression of the circus. On the outer circle, there were ten odd strongmen somersaulting on the spot. In the centre, there is a cheerleader stacking formation of thirty over people. Under the leadership of a midget dressed as a clown, it was a highly entertaining show. The most enthralling part is the formation. Except for the eight hunks forming the base, the next three layers are all sexy women. The Qi lady at the top of the pyramid is as beautiful as a goddess from heaven. She may not be as pretty as Ji Yanran and the others but can be considered the top of her league.

The other performers are gathered around the formation and are performing different kinds of difficult stunts.

With the accompanying music and cheering of the crowd, the formation spread open like a flower blossoming. Four of the hunks rolled out in four different directions while the ladies slide down like cascading water. Some of them are seated on the floor and some are lying down, performing 'soft bone' twisting of their bodies. Most of their poses are highly seductive and teasing.

The prettiest Qi lady somersaulted down and continued to somersault till the front of Lu Buwei, presenting him with a longevity peach made of solid gold.

In charge of Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji's safety, Lord Changwen and his Palace Guards are very anxious, eyeing the performers with utmost

suspicion. They cannot allow anyone with ulterior motives to come too close to the rulers.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and his men watched the performance with rapt attention. Witnessing the abilities of these men and women, they know they mustn't take them lightly during the ambush later.

If not for Meng Tian's warning, they may be caught with their pants down and suffer a severe setback.

The beauties continued to perform their 'soft bone' techniques and dance, attracting thunderous applause.

After the circus group has left, the various guests are still talking among themselves and could not seem to forget the lasting impression of the 'soft bone' beauties.

Lu Buwei stood up again and everyone quietened down in anticipation of a good show.

Nearly a thousand pairs of eyes are staring at this huge risk-taker.

Lu Buwei dryly cough and was about to speak when Lao Ai stood up with a grin. Paying his respects to Lu Buwei, Lao Ai smiled at the bewildered guests: "If I did not guess incorrectly, Premier Mentor is going to announce the duel between Official Xiang and Official Guan."

Lu Buwei chuckled: “Official Lao truly know me well. You are absolutely correct. May I know if you have anything important to say?”

Lu Buwei’s tone is very sarcastic, secretly warning Lao Ai that he is what he is because of Zhu Ji’s support. If not, he’ll be a dead man by now.

Even if Lao Ai is unhappy, it did not show on his face. He plainly suggested: “Good things come in pairs. We should have some appetizers before the main dish. Why don’t we have a duel between your family warriors and mine? It can add to the excitement of the main duel. What does Premier Mentor think?”

None of the guests expected Lao Ai to abruptly stand out and challenge Lu Buwei. The people of Qin love fights and duelling is common during banquets. Most of them began to cheer loudly in support.

Xiao Pan saw that Lao Ai spoke up without consulting his opinion first. He knows that with Zhu Ji’s support, Lao Ai does not hold himself in high regard and is even more arrogant than Lu Buwei. His mind began to detest this man even more.

Wu Yingyuan whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “Lao Ai wants a piece of the action.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled knowingly.

He naturally understood what Wu Yingyuan meant.

Since the rise of the warlords in the Zhou Dynasty, it became popular to recruit and house family warriors as a show of might. Besides having talented men to assist oneself, it is also a status symbol.

It is also common for the family warriors of different warlords to engage each other in friendly competitions.

With Zhu Ji's support, Lao Ai's influence has been growing exponentially. He wanted to use this platform as an opportunity for himself to showcase his might and gain recognition and fame. If his own warrior can defeat Lu Buwei's warrior, the value of the warrior will go up and it will also look good on him, killing two birds with one stone.

To a certain extent, Lao Ai believes that Guan Zhongxie has a higher chance of winning the duel. If he can clock his own victory, even if Guan Zhongxie really defeated Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie is not the sole winner tonight. Lao Ai himself will have a winner too and ruin the perfect winning dream of Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong scanned the expressions of Lao Ai's followers and noticed that Ling Qi's expression is slightly abnormal. He immediately knew that this scheme is hatched from his brain and reminded himself to be extra cautious of this man.

Lu Buwei chuckled again and seems to have seen through Lao Ai's intention. He turned around and bowed to Xiao Pan: "Friendly

competitions can add to the excitement and liveliness of the banquet. It can also showcase our talents of Qin. Will the Crown Prince please approve.”

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji’s face lost some colour, knowing that Lu Buwei intentionally asked Xiao Pan for permission because of ill intentions. He wanted to increase the discontentment between Zhu Ji, Lao Ai and Xiao Pan. He behaves as if he is the only one who respects Xiao Pan.

The whole hall quietened down and the thousand pairs of eyes are now staring at this future Qin Shi Huang.

Xiao Pan was smart enough to ignore Lu Buwei’s intrinsic meaning. Grinning, he faced Lao Ai and asked: “Who is Subject Lao sending out to show his expert sword skills?”

Han Jie stood up and strode towards the centre of the hall. Kneeling down, he reported: “I am Han Jie from Inner Custodian Residence. Will Empress and Crown Prince grant me the permission to fight.”

His words hint of arrogance and he emphasized Zhu Ji’s title, openly opposing Lu Buwei lack of consideration for Zhu Ji earlier.

For the past month, Han Jie is gaining some reputation in Xianyang City and he is almost as famous as Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie. Every guest is thrilled to see him stepping out to fight and cheered even louder.

Lu Buwei smiled slightly and sat down.

Xiao Pan faced Zhu Ji and proposed: “Will Empress please decide.”

With his words, everyone became even more excited. This ‘appetizer’ fight is definitely taking place. After all, Zhu Ji will not go against the wishes of her favourite subject Lao Ai.

As anticipated, Zhu Ji softly consented: “Han Jie is one of the best students of Ji Xia Sword Saint Mister Wang You, Cao Quidao. Your swordsmanship must be unparalleled. However, Premier Mentor Residence has no lack of talent. Please send your best man and make Mister Han exhibit his top skills, giving us the chance to marvel at his proficiency.”

Teng Yi saw that Zhu Ji is obviously supporting Lao Ai and putting Lu Buwei down. Even though he has no good feelings for Lu Buwei, he could not help but whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “How I wish I can go up there myself and kick Han Jie that Damn turtle’s sorry ass.”

Amused, Xiang Shaolong replied: “Second Brother will have your chance. Why not use this chance to see what wondrous skill this Damn turtle has?”

Jing Jun affirmed: “I am confident Traitor Lu will send Xu Shang out. Except for him and Guan Zhongxie, there is no one who can match the Damn turtle’s skills.”

Besides the three of them, all the other guests are also speculating who will be the representative from Lu Buwei's side.

The outcome of this fight will affect Lu Buwei's standing and prestige. Lu Buwei will have to make a careful choice.

True enough, Lu Buwei's eyes rested on Xu Shang. Without prior notice, Xu Shang's martial brother Lian Jiao coldly snorted and stood up, bowing: "Will Premier Mentor please allow me to fight on your behalf."

Lian Jiao is also considered a hot favourite among the expert swordsmen in Qin. He displayed his skills on many occasions and has helped Lu Buwei won many battles. Seeing him volunteering to fight, everyone cheered loudly for him.

Apparently, Lu Buwei has confidence in him too. He approved with a nod: "All right. Remember, this is a friendly match."

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang frowned at the same time, showing their lack of confidence in Lian Jiao.

Drumbeats are being sounded.

Everyone knows that a good fight is about to happen.

Both men stood several feet away from each other and are lined up so that Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei can see both of the equally well from the hosting tables. Both men paid their respects

to the hosts before quickly turning around and facing each other. The four eyes met one another.

Normally, Han Jie maintains a proud look but presently, he is like a completely different person. He looks extremely serious and focused all his energy in assessing his opponent. He did not show the least sign of underestimating his opponent.

His right hand is holding onto his sword hilt in a firm but relaxed manner. His legs are apart and he looked as steady as a mountain. He did not strike any fighting pose but his simple standing there has already given everyone the impression of a terrifying expert swordsman.

Even Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are secretly rooting for him.

His eyes became as sharp as a sword and he showed no signs of emotion, making him appear to be a deeply mysterious and unfathomable character.

The hall is so quiet one can hear a pin drop. Everyone held their breaths in silence and did not show any signs of impatience. It is not that everyone is patient tonight but somehow, the immobile Han Jie's fighting aura has already filled the hall and stifled everyone.

The stifling aura conveys one clear message: He will not attack unnecessarily but if he attacks, it will be an earth shattering attack with ultimate strength and precision.

Across Wu Yingyuan's back, Teng Yi wondered: "This kid is Shan Rou's martial disciple. Why are their sword styles so different?"

Xiang Shaolong had just exchanged a knowing look with Ji Yanran. Hearing his words, he explained: "Since Cao Quidao can train two completely different students according to their abilities, we have to accept that he is already at Grandmaster level."

Teng Yi nodded in agreement.

An ordinary Sword Master will only know how to impart his own skills to his disciples and create copies of himself.

Only someone who has transcended all sword skills can teach according to the aptitudes, strengths and shortcomings of his students.

Shan Rou's strength lies in speed and her sword styles focused on agility.

Han Jie's forte is his steadiness so his sword attacks are ruthless.

From these two person's accomplishments, one can know the unparalleled level of swordsmanship Cao Quidao has attained.

Opposite him, the usually insolent Lian Jiao is equally serious in this life-and-death situation. He waits patiently for Han Jie's first move.

On the surface, there is no sign of him losing out in terms of fighting spirit. His long sword has been drawn and held horizontally in front of his chest. However, everyone can feel that he is inferior compared to Han Jie who hasn't even drawn his sword.

After some time, both men are still waiting for each other to move first. Out of a sudden, Han Jie moved slightly forward, like a hunter who is looking for the weakness of his prey. His eyes grew even sharper and he stared unblinkingly at Lian Jiao.

Although the distance between the two men is still about the same as before, it felt like Han Jie had already made the first move. It is a feeling that cannot be put into words.

Finally, Lian Jiao can no longer withstand Han Jie's pressure and reacted. With a loud roar, the sword in his hand began to move. Matching it with precise footwork, he closed the distance between him and Han Jie.

After a few fake moves, the sword eventually cumulated in a strike at Han Jie's right hand that is holding onto the sword hilt.

In the eyes of the experienced swordsmen, Lian Jiao's every move can be used to deceive the enemy and increase his own ferocity. His sword moves have reached the peak in terms of attacking strength management.

He is also wise in attacking his opponent's hand directly. This

way, it is more difficult for Han Jie to pull out his sword to counter attack.

Even if Han Jie does not suffer any heavy injury, a small mistake during a duel of expert swordsmen can be the cause for failure. In conclusion, Lian Jiao is worthy of being classified as a top expert swordsman based on his sword skill and attacking strategy.

Even Xiang Shaolong felt that Han Jie has underestimated his opponent and is feeling sorry for him.

JIANG!

Using his right foot, Han Jie stepped forward by one step and his body is in an odd position. His sword slid out in a bright shimmering flash. In the split second that was too close for comfort, he managed to use his half-drawn sword to block Lian Jiao devastating blow.

Never in his wildest dreams did Lian Jiao expect such a bizarre move from Han Jie. He could not change his attack as he had put in all his effort.

Han Jie actually took another step forward and hit out with his right shoulder, knocking squarely into Lian Jiao's chest. Using his right hand, he forcefully pushed his sword back into the sheath. The tip of Lian Jiao's sword is locked in a grip between the sheath and Han Jie's sword.

Everyone present is thoroughly shaken. This kind of swordplay is indeed rare and unique.

Of course Lian Jiao's sword can still be retrieved but his attacking aura has completely dissipated. After receiving the blow on his chest, it is even more embarrassing for Lian Jiao. Pulling back his sword, Lian Jiao hurriedly retreated.

An overwhelming attack has been totally negated and Lian Jiao has lost his first-mover advantage.

JIANG!

Han Jie's smooth and sharp blade finally left its sheath.

As long as one is not blind, anyone can tell that this is a priceless and exquisite weapon.

Xiang Shaolong had to admit that Han Jie's sword is even better than Bloodwave which is given to him by Li Mu.

Teng Yi sighed: "Lian Jiao is finished!"

"Stop!"

Everyone was stunned.

Originally, Han Jie's sword is about to press on with an attack but after hearing this command, he sheathe his sword.

Lian Jiao is still heavily pressured by Han Jie's aura and took seven consecutive steps back. Although he has yet to lose officially, anyone can tell that he is at a serious disadvantage.

After everyone collected themselves and look for the speaker, they discovered that it is Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie heartily laughed: "Brother Han, may I know who is the blacksmith who forged your sword is and what is its name?"

If it was anyone else, the crowd would have jeered and protested, saying that Guan Zhongxie is trying to help Lian Jiao as they belong to the same gang. But Guan Zhongxie has an unassuming air around him so no one will hold it against him for having ulterior motives.

So happens that Han Jie is facing Guan Zhongxie anyway. He smiled once and drew his sword again. He unexpectedly threw his sword towards Guan Zhongxie. Due to his special throwing method, by the time the sword is about three feet away from Guan Zhongxie, the sword hilt is facing towards Guan Zhongxie.

Under the dazed expression of the crowd, Guan Zhongxie comfortably stretched out his hand and formed a tiger claw with his thumb facing down. He caught the sword precisely without any hesitation.

Time seems to have stop in its tracks.

The conceited aura of the sword has been dissolved as it lay obediently in Guan Zhongxie's hands.

Holding the sword horizontally in front of his eyes, Guan Zhongxie could not help but praise.

Witnessing Guan Zhongxie's skill in catching his flying sword, Han Jie is slightly agitated like everyone else. He smiled: "The sword is named Breaking Armies and is one of the ten swords in my Master's collection. It is forged by Ouyezi."

The crowd began to mumble among themselves.

Ouyezi is a master forger and he is only second to Gan Jiang Mo Xie couple in terms of sword forgery. The sword is worth a king's ransom.

Lian Jiao is in an awkward position. Standing there, he can neither retreat nor attack.

After admiring the sword for some time, Guan Zhongxie threw the sword back at Han Jie, smiling: "The sword is good but the swordsman is great. My martial brother has lost this round. In the future, I will definitely seek your advice."

Everyone began to clap loudly. The applause are not for Han Jie's unassailable sword skills but for Guan Zhongxie's magnanimous

handling of the situation

Lao Ai and his men naturally felt uncomfortable.

Xiang Shaolong and his men are full of admiration. In one move, Guan Zhongxie pacified the crowd, saved Lian Jiao's life and put down Han Jie's arrogance, killing three birds in one stone. Only he has this kind of ability.

All the guests unconsciously looked at Guan Zhongxie, followed by Xiang Shaolong. In a way, Guan Zhongxie has gain an edge over Xiang Shaolong and Xiang Shaolong is temporarily a forgotten hero.

Lu Buwei is extremely pleased with the turn of events; from a potential loss of life and face to a neutral conclusion. Raising his cup, he toasted: "Come! Let's drink to this extraordinary fight!"

Amidst the loud cheering, everyone toasted in return.

Without saying another word, Lian Jiao returned to his seat.

Han Jie received a cup of wine from an attendant and drank it like the victor before returning to his seat. He continued to put on the airs of someone who has won the fight.

Lu Buwei is about to say something else when Guoxin abruptly stood up from his seat behind Lao Ai. After paying his respects to the hosts, he loudly declared: "The earlier battle was thrilling but

not thrilling enough. I am interested to fight as well and would like to challenge someone to add to the liveliness. Will Empress, Crown Prince and Premier Mentor please give me your consent.”

Hearing his words, the crowd turned silent and everyone has the same question on his mind: Who does he want to challenge?

Even Lao Ai frowned, indicating that the matter has not been approved by him.

Only Qiu Risheng and the other members of Weinan Martial Arts School have a look of preparedness on their faces. Needless to say, they have planned for this a long time ago and wanted to use this golden opportunity to bring fame and glory to the school.

Xiang Shaolong has a sudden realization and knows the identity of the person Guoxin wanted to challenge.

Book 18 Chapter 10 – Repaying Enmity With Kindness

Within Lao Ai's faction, there are some differences between those personally recruited by Lao Ai and those who are under the banner of the Weinan Martial Arts School.

They had existed before Lao Ai and have been a reputable organization within Qin.

Qiu Risheng has to work with Lao Ai because he had offended Lu Buwei. With the downfall of Lord Yangquan, they have to close down and stay hidden for some time. In actual fact, they are a force worth reckoning with and they maintain close ties with the Qin military.

In an agreement with mutual benefits, they relied on Lao Ai's backing to reopen their martial arts school and Lao Ai's influence grew tremendously because of their connections.

This is only a win-win partnership without a dominant party.

They have long planned for Guoxin to come out and fight to regain the former glory of the martial arts school but even Lao Ai has been kept in the dark until the last moment.

Xiang Shaolong managed to deduce all these just by observing the different expressions of Lao Ai and Qiu Risheng.

Lu Buwei saw that Guoxin is so insistent on fighting somebody and assumed that it will be against another member of his family warriors. He was secretly glad and no matter what, he will send out Xu Shang whose sword skill is almost as good as Guan Zhongxie. Xu Shang will definitely emerge victorious and at the same time, put down the arrogance of Lao Ai and Qiu Risheng.

Full of enthusiasm, he forgot to seek Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan's advice. Lu Buwei laughed: "Mister Guo is a worthy hero indeed. May I know who do you want to challenge?" Guoxin bowed again and his eyes swept over the different faces of the guests. His gaze finally resting on Jing Jun's face, he coldly mentioned: "I wish to seek pointers from Assistant Commander Jing."

The moment he said these words, the crowd erupted into an uproar.

Jing Jun was initially surprised followed by extreme delight. He was about to answer the challenge when an angelic voice called out: "No way, this fight is mine!" Everyone including Guoxin looked at the speaker and was swept off their feet.

The speaker is none other Ji Yanran who beauty is mentioned in the same breath as Qin Qing.

All the guests acknowledged that Ji Yanran is highly skilled but knowledge is just knowledge. It is hard to imagine such a fine and delicate lady can match up to a man in terms of rough fighting.

Guoxin is one of the most prominent swordsmen under

Headmaster Qiu Risheng and his fame is quite widespread too. But regardless of Talented Lady's ability, her stamina and strength would be inferior to Guoxin, causing everyone to be concerned for her.

Jing Jun naturally cannot let his sister in law take this risk. Just as he was about to protest, Teng Yi restrained him.

Guoxin is feeling awkward too and stared blankly at Ji Yanran for some time before commenting with some difficulty: "Ai, Talented Lady Ji is of royal birth and status. I dared not offend you. Hei!"

Xiang Shaolong is not surprised at all with Ji Yanran's intervention. Two days ago, she had learnt about Guoxin slandering Xiang Shaolong and blew her top, promising to teach Guoxin a lesson. She will definitely not let such an opportunity slip by.

Concurrently, he noticed Zhu Ji staring at Ji Yanran with hatred and jealousy.

All the guests kept quiet and awaited further developments.

Still maintaining her charming and leisurely appearance unlike someone who is preparing for a fight; Ji Yanran smiled sweetly at Xiang Shaolong first and slowly stood up from her seat, taking her time to walk to the centre of the hall.

Under normal circumstances, people will try to avoid looking straight at her because it is considered rude. Now, everyone is spending every second scrutinizing her and relishing her peerless beauty.

Ji Yanran first paid her respects to the hosts Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei and took off her exquisite outer robe and discarded it on the floor. Beneath her robe is her ultimate voluptuous figure in a body-hugging white warrior suit.

The crowd went wild.

Xiang Shaolong recalled the time when they were pursued by Du Bi. Du Bi had given strict orders for the live capture of Ji Yanran and Xiang Shaolong took this chance to peep at him. Like all others, Du Bi is totally fixated on Ji Yanran. Beside him, Po Hu is looking so hard that his eyeballs are nearly dropping out of their sockets. In fact, he was salivating.

Xiang Shaolong had a revelation. Regardless of their gender, everyone present is absolutely overwhelmed by Ji Yanran's grandeur.

In her melodious voice, Ji Yanran warned: "Mister Guo should not underestimate me because of my gender or you will live to regret it. Don't say I didn't warn you beforehand. Bring me my spear."

Wu Guang who is in charge of safeguarding the Flying Dragon Spear hurriedly untied the bundle holding the spear.

After his eyes feasted on Ji Yanran's beauty, Guoxin is mesmerized too and his body became soft. He sighed: "Consider this match to be my loss. There is no way I can bring myself to attack you."

Catching the Flying Dragon Spear thrown to her by Wu Guang, Ji Yanran ignored Guoxin's remark and began twirling the spear around, creating a trail of spear shadows. She followed up with a series of spear strokes that sent spear flashes everywhere around her ever moving body. After her demonstration, she finally stopped in an attacking pose with the spear horizontally across her chest.

Thunderous cheers erupted from the crowd and even Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei are clapping hard for her.

Guoxin's face instantly turned serious.

Seeing is believing.

He finally acknowledged that Ji Yanran's reputation is not undeserved.

The members of the Weinan Martial Arts School including Qiu Risheng exchanged looks of amazement. They had to admit that they would be in a difficult position if they are in the shoes of Guoxin. None of them has any idea on how to overcome such a potent spear skill.

Letting out a long laugh and gaining everyone's attention in the process, Po Hu addressed: "No matter who is fighting against her, this person will lose for sure. Who in this room will harden his heart to attack Talented Lady Ji with all his might!?" Many people clapped in response, supporting Po Hu's reasoning.

Without even looking at the conceited Po Hu, Ji Yanran smiled lightly: "If this is the case, I will invite Mister Guo to block ten spear attacks from me. If I failed to defeat you by then, then you are considered the winner."

No one among the guests would want to see her injured but at the same time, everyone wanted to see her formidable skills. The hall began to cheer upon hearing her suggestion.

Teng Yi softly laughed: "Guoxin is in trouble!" Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. If he was Guoxin and can only defend without attacking, he will be easily defeated in three strokes.

Before Guoxin has the chance to reply, Xiao Pan icily indicated: "Mister Guo is the one who ask to fight, now that a challenger has appeared, Mister Guo should not shy away. If Mister Guo cannot block the ten spear attacks, you shall be banned for life from holding any official appointments. Mister Guo should know what to do."

Hearing this, Qiu Risheng and his men's faces changed colour.

People join the Weinan Martial Arts School to be trained and

eventually hope to be talent-spotted and promoted to a military post. If Guoxin is banned for life, his future is as good as gone.

Everyone immediately understood that Xiao Pan is angry over Guoxin's challenge towards Xiang Shaolong's men. At the same time, they can feel the insufferable dominance of this future Qin Shi Huang.

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji exchanged a look and detect each other's shock and resentment.

Because of Lao Ai, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan are drifting further and further apart.

This time round, Lao Ai has suffered a big setback. His biggest issue now is neither Lu Buwei nor Xiang Shaolong. If he says he is not bothered by Qiu Risheng and his men, he is lying with his eyes wide open.

All these information and analysis are secretly observed and assimilated by Xiang Shaolong who is eyeing them all these time. In the future, he can use this data to create a wedge between Weinan Martial Arts School and Lao Ai.

Guoxin bowed and drew his sword with a loud JIANG! Facing Ji Yanran, he respectfully invited: "Miss Yanran, please give me some pointers."

Ji Yanran plainly state: "My ten spear attacks will only attack

your sword and not any part of your body. Mister can do your best to defend without any reservations.”

Everyone including Guoxin was initially shocked and the feeling is soon replaced by respect. Everyone can feel Ji Yanran’s compassion.

Anyone with eyes can tell that Ji Yanran’s spear skill is something out of this world. Moreover, the spear is a long weapon that can be used to attack the enemy from a distance. Due to the strong attacking nature of a spear, a purely-defending swordsman is at a serious disadvantage.

Guoxin may be Ji Yanran’s sworn enemy because he slandered Xiang Shaolong but because this fight concerns Guoxin’s future, Ji Yanran intentionally gave him some leeway. Guoxin can do his best to defend without guarding the vital areas of his body. Guoxin’s rate of success has greatly increased without this restriction.

From another point of view, Ji Yanran is going against Xiao Pan’s wishes and will not use this fight to make Guoxin lose his reputation and lifelong career. From this, one can conclude the independent mindset of this beauty. She will not allow anyone to violate her life principles.

At the end of the day, Guoxin and his men are not like Lu Buwei who has irreconcilable hatred with Xiang Shaolong.

Seated among the guests, Qiu Risheng’s face darkened. He gave a

cold snort and does not appreciate Ji Yanran's kindness.

On the other hand, Guoxin's face is filled with appreciation. Bowing deeply to Ji Yanran, he struck a pose and invited: "I await Miss's pointers." The crowd turned silent in anticipation of Talented Lady Ji's first move.

Guests from the other two halls are all squeezing into the main hall to catch a glimpse of the fight. The main hall is fully crowded to the brim.

Tonight has been a night of many unexpected surprises and no one can predict what will happen next.

Ji Yanran may have 'disobeyed' Xiao Pan's wishes but she is Xiang Shaolong's wife and is one of the ladies Xiao Pan admired the most so this Crown Prince of Qin is not bothered by her leniency but is eagerly waiting for the battle to start too.

The jealousy in Zhu Ji's eyes became more significant.

Birds of a feather flock together. After Zhu Ji got together with a despicable man like Lao Ai, she is beginning to turn to the dark side.

Lu Buwei's hatred for Guoxin deepened.

Earlier, Guan Zhongxie had brilliantly salvaged the situation and put down Lao Ai's arrogance and things are proceeding smoothly.

After Guan Zhongxie kills Xiang Shaolong, tonight will be his best night ever.

With Guoxin appearing out of nowhere and instigating Talented Lady Ji into a fight, Xiang Shaolong and his men are now looking good whereas he and Lao Ai have disappeared into the shadows.

Sitting besides Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong is looking blankly at Ji Yanran and she felt an unexplained sense of loss. Under the table, Guan Zhongxie's hand snaked over undetected and held onto her tender hand.

Lu Niang Rong was shaken. In her mind, she imagined that this will probably be the hand that will kill Xiang Shaolong and could not help but turned her head towards Xiang Shaolong. She could tell that he is staring at his attractive wife with deep love and is totally unconcerned about herself. Feeling even more despair, she wrenched her hand from Guan Zhongxie's grasp.

DANG! The sound of the sword and spear clashing resonated throughout the hall.

Talented Lady Ji had finally attacked.

Like a lightning bolt, the long spear shot out from Ji Yanran's hand and it is flying in the direction of Guoxin's face, albeit higher. The spearhead flew past Guoxin's hair bun, indicating the beginning of the fight.

If Guoxin can make a guess about Ji Yanran's first attack, he will think that based on her agile spear play, she will try to trick him with some false moves, forcing him to be unable to defend himself properly and retreat accordingly. When he retreats backwards, he will lose the strong support of his feet to meet the spear attack head on.

As a matter of fact, Ji Yanran's earlier demonstration has left a strong impression in Guoxin's mind, teaching him that a simple and straight spear can have many attacking variations.

Ji Yanran's Flying Dragon Spear is different from other spears mainly because it is entirely made of best quality steel and does not have the spring effect of normal wooden spears. The spear is also heavier and cannot be easily cut into two. During a piercing attack, the speed can be incredibly fast with the support of its heavy weight. Since Guoxin is defending, he expected a devastating first attack. He did his best to defend himself and when he discovered that the blow wasn't as strong as he expected, he was filled with fear and panic. In the split second, he steadied his horse stance and swung his sword up, clashing with the spear.

Guan Zhongxie is secretly overjoyed and he focused all his attention on this special spear skill.

It is well known that Xiang Shaolong is not well versed with the spear. If he is using the spear to fight Guan Zhongxie, it is natural that he will have to learn his spear skills from Talented Lady Ji. This is a rare opportunity for Guan Zhongxie to witness and understand her spear skill and it is as good as watching Xiang Shaolong in battle. When he finds a weakness in the spear skill, he

can make use of it to gain victory.

Although Guoxin's sword has flown up and made contact with the spear, he continued to feel helpless about his situation.

This is something totally illogical but logical too.

The long spear was deflected and it flew up a little.

Under such a situation, Guoxin should make use of Ji Yanran's proximity to attack since the close distance between them has eroded the advantage of the long weapon. However, Guoxin can only defend so he can only let this opportunity slip by.

Under the gaze of over a thousand pairs of eyes, Ji Yanran employed a special footwork and twisted her waist, quickly retrieving the Flying Dragon Spear. When she held onto the spear again with both hands, she sent the spear flying out again using the strength from her horse stance.

Due to his wrong estimation of the earlier attack, Guoxin's long sword is still suspended in mid air from the strong momentum. He became the slower person to fully control his weapon while the Flying Dragon Spear is shooting towards him like a poisonous snake, aiming for his sword sheath.

Finally comprehending the might of Ji Yanran's spear skill, Guoxin was forced to step back and sideways to avoid losing.

The crowd went mad with cheers except for Lao Ai's men and Weinan Martial Arts students who are sitting there in silence. All the guests are rooting for Ji Yanran. Jing Jun, Wu Yan Zhu, Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong and all their followers are shouting themselves hoarse.

Gazing at this attractive and enticing beauty, Xiang Shaolong felt exceedingly proud and satisfied to be her husband and he was utterly inebriated.

Even he did not expect Guoxin to falter as early as the second spear attack.

There was a lovely smile on Ji Yanran's face which makes others feel at ease but the spear in her hands is certainly unfriendly. Under her quick steps, the piercing spear changed directions and is now attacking an empty spot on Guoxin's right.

Everyone including Guoxin was taken aback, not understanding the reason behind such a bizarre attack.

Beyond comprehension, Ji Yanran took another two steps forward and placed the body of the spear tightly against her waist. Her body begin to spin around speedily and using the power of rotation, the piercing spear attack became a sweeping attack. Again, the target is Guoxin's sword sheath.

If Guoxin is hit by the sweeping attack, he will surely fall flat on his face but there will be no major injuries so Ji Yanran is not breaking her promise.

The crowd is simply mesmerized.

Every one of Ji Yanran's spear attack is unpredicted yet pleasing to the eye.

The fluid movements of her body and her relentless energy captivated everyone.

Guoxin had lost out on the first two strokes and had wanted to fight Ji Yanran face on, relying on his manly strength to counter her feminine blow. This is the best way for him to match her ever-powerful spear attacks.

But faced with the overpowering rotation strength of her sweeping attack, Guoxin can only abandon this idea and react accordingly. His long sword sliced down from the top towards the Flying Dragon Spear. At the same time, he had to take another step back.

When the two weapons are about to make contact, the Flying Dragon spear abruptly bounced up and transformed into a multitude of several agile spear images. Like a tsunami, the spear images crushed down towards Guoxin's face.

Even an expert like Guan Zhongxie has to concede that this spear skill is truly awesome. The others are cheering even louder for Ji Yanran. The whole hall is reverberating with the mad shouts and wild cheering of her supporters and the atmosphere has reached a feverish pitch.

DANG! Guoxin is considered skilful enough to pick out the real spear among all the spear images and flashes. However, he had to change his sword movement to block the spear and his strength is limited. After the clash, he was forced to take another step back and his arm is numb with pain.

By now, Ji Yanran has attacked four times and Guoxin has been at a disadvantage every time. Strictly speaking, he has failed to appropriately defend himself. He may have yet to lose the fight but all his reputation has gone down the drain.

Guoxin secretly thought that if this carries on, he will surely lose hold of his sword after another two blows. Gritting his teeth, he hurriedly retreated to a spacious corner of the open area.

The crowd jeered noisily at his cowardice.

But this is the best way out for him.

Ji Yanran has the fight completely under her control and is toying around with Guoxin. The last resort for him is to retreat away from the attacking range of the spear and consolidate his strength and maintain his horse stance. Simultaneously, he can let his numb and tortured hand get a quick rest.

Letting out a shrill cry, Ji Yanran rolled forward and with her left hand holding tightly to the end of the Flying Dragon Spear, she used the force generated by the spear head against the floor to spring up, following the retreating Guoxin like a shadow and

aiming for his sword sheath.

The top experts like Guan Zhongxie, Han Jie and Xu Shang were full of admiration. It was noteworthy that by using the strength of the spear against the floor, Ji Yanran managed to make the impossible possible.

This attack will not hurt Guoxin but once the sword sheath is hit, he is considered to have lost the fight.

Guoxin is completely bowled over. At his wits' end, he desperately made a back flip.

Everyone knew that he has already lost the fight. When Ji Yanran sprang up from the floor, the fumbling Guoxin can only hatefully await the next spear attack to end his livelihood.

Qiu Risheng and his men could not bear to watch any further.

The reputation of Weinan Martial Arts School has been eradicated. In the future, no one will trust them as the premier swordsmen training institute of Qin. Just when Guoxin has given up resisting, Ji Yanran stood still with the spear behind her back, her aura changing from a strong attacker to a silent onlooker. Coupled with her calm and laid-back disposition, she had everyone infatuated.

After landing on the floor, Guoxin took another three steps back and held his sword at chest level. His chest is rising and falling

very quickly as he stared at his gorgeous opponent with astonishment.

This unparalleled beauty is still going strong and steady. She smiled: “I have attacked five times and Mister has defended five times. I have been gaining the upper hand as Mister has kept his word and did not counterattack at all. Why don’t we end our fight here and declare it a draw?”

Xiao Pan stood up clapping and laughed: “Talented Lady Ji indeed. I am fully convinced by your capabilities and from this day onwards, you will be my Grand Tutor.”

Turning to Guoxin, he proclaimed: “Mister Guo has followed my orders and defended himself well without attacking. This is not something easy to achieve. I hereby promote you to be the third Assistant Imperial Cavalry Commander under Commander Xiang.”

A delighted Ji Yanran and a guilty-looking Guoxin kneeled down to give their thanks.

Xiang Shaolong is filled with wonder and comfort at the same time.

Xiao Pan has finally grown up. Not only has he been able to see through the gains-seeking partnership of Weinan Martial Arts School and Lao Ai, he can control his emotions and employ such a unique method to pull Guoxin to his side. This is not something any man can easily accomplish.

Nobody expected the fight to have such a happy ending. Loud cheers are heard from all four corners of the hall and everyone is cheering for Ji Yanran.

The people were chanting “Talented Lady” without any rest.

Only Qiu Risheng still has an ugly expression on his face and ferociousness in his eyes. He remained silent.

Also full of hatred, Lu Buwei secretly thought that as long as Xiang Shaolong is killed, the rest don't really matter. Standing up again, he loudly laughed: “I think it is time for the main dish.” The thousand over guests quietened down at once and turned their attention to this powerful Qin official.

Book 18 Chapter 11 – Clash Of The Titans 2

Lu Buwei was slightly hesitant to announce the commencement of the duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie. To him, it is as good as announcing the death of Xiang Shaolong. Like a bolt from the blue, Lu Niang Rong jumped up from her seat and firmly declared: “There is no need to compete any more. I have decided to disappoint Official Xiang and marry Zhongxie.”

The moment she finished her words, Lu Buwei’s smile was erased from his face.

Guan Zhongxie was thoroughly shaken and his eyes were shining brightly, looking at Xiang Shaolong who is staring at Lu Niang Rong with shock. This normally composed man has evidently lost his bearings.

All the guests are exchanging looks of surprises with one another.

In this case, the widely anticipated battle is as good as cancelled.

Disappointment is written all over the faces of Du Bi and Lao Ai because they will only stand to gain regardless of the duel result.

Ying Ying, Lord Changping, Wang Ci and the others can feel a huge burden off their chests as they sighed with relief.

Qin has strict laws prohibiting private duels between military commanders and both Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie are

military commanders. Even Xiao Pan who wanted Xiang Shaolong to kill Guan Zhongxie had to stick to this rule and suffer the disappointment. If he insisted on their duel, it will be impossible to enforce this law in the future. The banquet hall is momentarily silent.

Lu Niang Rong sat down in her seat with her head lowered. Her chest is rising up and down very quickly, betraying her emotional state.

After staring at Lu Niang Rong for some time, Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be angry or amused. He acknowledged that he had offended her earlier so she is now retaliating by making him lose face in front of everyone by using her marriage as an excuse.

At the end of the day, just like Ying Ying, she favours Guan Zhongxie.

Lu Buwei is so incensed his face has turned completely red. Staring viciously at Lu Niang Rong briefly, he rolled his eyeballs and sat down with a chuckle. To Xiao Pan sitting on his right, he sighed: "Kids can never make up their mind but since I had given my word, I think I should decide or I would be deceiving the world. What does Crown Prince think?" Lu Niang Rong trembled strongly and raised her head. Just as she was about to say something, Guan Zhongxie grabbed her hand below the table and whispered into her ear: "Niang Rong should stop making things difficult for Premier Mentor."

Lu Niang Rong was stunned and secretly peeped at Xiang

Shaolong before lowering her head again.

Xiao Pan calmly replied: “Premier Mentor’s words cannot be taken lightly indeed. Moreover, it is common for people to choose a spouse by holding a martial arts competition. If Premier Mentor believes that the fight should not be cancelled and Empress has no objections; I will fully support your decision.”

Everyone’s gaze fell onto Zhu Ji, awaiting her reply. The tension in the air is like a drawn bow.

The every-powerful Empress of Qin has complicated emotions shining from her eyes. She took a good look at Lao Ai before shifting her gaze to Xiang Shaolong. Her face suddenly losing colour rapidly, she lowered her head and proclaimed: “As Premier Mentor has recommended, the duel between Subject Guan and Subject Xiang shall proceed as normal.”

The air is filled with loud cheering as the atmosphere began to resume the earlier enthusiasm.

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart being sliced into two, knowing that between him and Lao Ai, Zhu Ji has unreservedly dedicated her entire future to Lao Ai.

Whoever that understands Guan Zhongxie’s ability will believe that Xiang Shaolong will lose without question. Zhu Ji’s support of the duel is as good as wishing Guan Zhongxie to eliminate Xiang Shaolong once and for all.

He can only accept fate now that his relationship with Zhu Ji has deteriorated to such a state. Lu Buwei energetic laughter rang out and he barked: “Let the duel begin!” The hall broke out into ear-splitting cheers and applause.

The drumbeats sounded again, adding to the liveliness.

After comforting Lu Niang Rong softly, Guan Zhongxie rose from his seat and the crowd quietened down at once.

Just by simply standing up, this super swordsman whose fame is only second compared to Xiang Shaolong exudes an aura of arrogance, earning the respect and fear of everyone.

Stepping out of his seat, Guan Zhongxie carried a smile as he enjoyed the cheering and scrutiny of the crowd. Reaching the centre of the stage, he stood still at ease and bowed to the hosts: “It is my happiest moment in life to exchange pointers with Official Xiang. I will die with no regrets.”

Hearing his valiant words and his indifferent attitude towards death, the crowd became even more roused and were clapping madly and shouting at the top of their voices.

Xiang Shaolong had an ugly expression on his face. It is not so much about the fight but the pain he is undergoing from Zhu Ji's change of heart.

The guests mistook it for fear and were baffled.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and suppressed his surging emotions before standing up.

He realised that he has been heavily affected by Zhu Ji's 'severing' of relationship.

Xiang Shaolong is someone who values true friendship and relationships. For his friends, he is willing to forsake anything. It is because of this quality that he has won the unwavering trust of Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Tu Xian.

Despite his support for Xiao Pan, his devotion to Zhu Ji is strong too. But all he got in return for his dedication is her heartlessness, making him feel that life is meaningless.

Under the gaze of the entire hall, he walked towards Guan Zhongxie and stopped a distance away. After paying his respects to the hosts, he looked straight at Zhu Ji's face.

After their eyes met, Zhu Ji instantly lowered her head.

Converting his sorrow into strength, Xiang Shaolong vigorously laughed: "Bring my sabre!" Hearing the word 'Sabre', everyone was dumbfounded. Guan Zhongxie trembled strongly on the spot and he looked at Xiang Shaolong with his sharp eyes.

Jing Shan walked out and kneeled down, presenting the Hundred Battle Sabre in its sabre scabbard.

Xiang Shaolong took the sabre from him and held it in his left hand.

Cries of surprise can be heard among the guests as everyone is trying to catch a glimpse of the strange looking weapon.

Even Xiao Pan was curious: “What is the weapon Subject Xiang is holding?” Holding his sabre, Xiang Shaolong was rejuvenated on the spot as he fully abandoned all the negative emotions related to Zhu Ji. Brimming with heroism, he vociferously replied: “This is a new weapon I designed myself. It is named Hundred Battle which is taken from Hundred Battles; Hundred Victories proverb from Sun Zi’s Art of War.”

The guests began to discuss among themselves and could not wait for him to draw his weapon out of the scabbard for a good look.

However, Xiang Shaolong did not have the least intention of doing so.

Lu Buwei was blown away: “Didn’t Shaolong say you will fight using the Flying Dragon Spear? Why are you breaking you promise?”

Lord Changping laughingly interceded: “Premier Mentor has misunderstood. All military books advocate ever-changing tactics to take the enemy by surprise every time. Shaolong said that he would use a spear is to cover up his intention to use a sabre and it is an appropriate military strategy. Why did Premier Mentor say he

is breaking his promise?”

Lord Changping’s words are firm and steady, stirring up a special emotion among those present.

Lord Changping may be the Left Premier but he lacks the experience and has always been slighted by others. He knows that he lacks the ability as well and dared not be too outspoken and maintained a low profile. Presently, he spoke out righteously and took the initiative to shield Xiang Shaolong. This shows that he is gradually gaining more confidence to assume his rightful position and contend with Lu Buwei.

Xiao Pan would definitely support Lord Changping. He smiled: “Left Premier is right. Official Xiang has created this extraordinary weapon and even I cannot wait to see what it is. If Premier Mentor has nothing to add, I will announce the commencement of the duel.”

Suppressing his anger, Lu Buwei swore to go after Lord Changping after Xiang Shaolong has been killed. He solemnly agreed: “Crown Prince, please go ahead!” Shifting his view to the Hundred Battle Sabre Scabbard in Xiang Shaolong’s left hand, a pleased Xiao Pan proclaimed: “Begin!” The drums are sounded again.

Everyone began to tense up.

Xiang Shaolong’s supporters who did not know about the power of the Hundred Battle Sabre are so nervous their hearts seem to be

stuck in their throats.

First, they have no confidence in this new and strange weapon; Second, Xiang Shaolong is known for his sword skills. With this new weapon, he will need to devise a different fighting style and given the short time he has to practise, it is indeed an unwise decision.

Po Hu is the happiest man in the hall. If the duel is called off, at the most, he will have to refund all the gamblers but if Xiang Shaolong wins, he will suffer a huge loss because of Wu Yingyuan exorbitant bet. Seeing that Xiang Shaolong is introducing a new and strange weapon to fight the highly skilled Guan Zhongxie, he was utterly thrilled.

Since ancient times, the sword has been used as a primary weapon and has an irreplaceable status in the minds of everyone. Every warrior would know how to handle a sword first and the sword fighting culture is deeply embedded in society. This is a kind of mindset that nobody can change in a short while.

Except for Ji Yanran and those who knows about the Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiao Pan has the most confidence in Xiang Shaolong. His hero-worship for Xiang Shaolong has begun since he was a child and there is nothing that can convince him otherwise.

The other person who dared not underestimate the Hundred Battle Sabre is Xiang Shaolong's opponent, Guan Zhongxie.

From his acute senses as a top expert swordsman, he can detect

the strong confidence and powerful aura that is emitting from Xiang Shaolong the minute he held onto the Hundred Battle Sabre.

The drums gradually stopped.

The banquet hall is completely noiseless except for the sounds of heavy breathing or occasional coughing.

By now, every guest has squeezed themselves into the main hall and there are even people sitting in between the tables.

Both men slowly turned around and faced each other.

Holding onto Longstrike sword sheath, Guan Zhongxie bowed: “Official Xiang is full of surprises every time and you never fail to interest me. Regardless of the duel outcome, I am full of admiration for you.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sensation from the sabre scabbard.

The scabbard containing the number one sabre of China is no ordinary scabbard. It contains chromium alloy which Uncle Qing formulated. It will not rust and can even be used as a blocking weapon. Guan Zhongxie has no idea about this but Xiang Shaolong will not hide this fact from him too. He smiled back: “Official Guan must be careful. My Hundred Battle Sabre Scabbard can double up as a weapon too.”

His eyes flashing with mixed emotions, Guan Zhongxie nodded:

“Thanks for reminding me. Please give me some pointers.”

Grinning from the corner of his mouth, Xiang Shaolong glimpsed briefly at Lao Ai's men. Han Jie is looking at him so seriously as if he is the one fighting Guan Zhongxie.

A table away, Lu Niang Rong's face is filled with despair and she is looking at them with panic in her eyes. When she caught Xiang Shaolong looking at her, her lips quivered slightly but she did not shy away from his glance.

Finally resting his eyes back on Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Are you ready?” Guan Zhongxie took three steps back and with a JIANG! He drew Longstrike sword and adopted an attacking stance with the sword diagonally across his chest and the sword tip pointing at Xiang Shaolong.

A gust of strong killing aura instantly enveloped the entire hall and filled everyone's mind with fear and danger.

JIANG! His eyes shining like electricity, Xiang Shaolong stared hard at Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, he leaned forward slightly and partially drew out the Hundred Battle Sabre. The bright flash of the sabre created an immense fighting pressure that seems to totally surround Guan Zhongxie.

Everyone stopped breathing in anticipation of an earth-shattering fight.

Xiang Shaolong bellowed: “Official Guan, please!” His eyes turning even sharper, Guan Zhongxie seriously replied: “Official Xiang, please!”

Others may be thinking that Guan Zhongxie is being modest but only Xiang Shaolong understands that he is not familiar with the might of the Hundred Battle Sabre and has decided to defend first, countering movement with stillness.

In a low voice, Xiang Shaolong warned: “The Hundred Battle Sabre never loses. Official Guan, please be careful.”

JIANG! The Hundred Battle Sabre finally left its scabbard but not many people are able to see how it looks like.

Nobody has expected this Hundred Battle Sabre to be so domineering.

Even Teng Yi and the rest who have fought against this sabre before could not imagine the sabre to have such an overwhelming effect when used to fight with all of Xiang Shaolong’s might.

As everyone look on, the Hundred Battle Sabre exited the scabbard like a flash of rainbow and with Xiang Shaolong’s swift advance, it transformed into a lightning attack. The distance between the two men disappeared as the sabre chopped down heavily on Guan Zhongxie.

All the guests were amazed by the attack but yet nobody cry out.

Guan Zhongxie was taken aback at he did not expect an all out first attack from Xiang Shaolong. Shifting a step to his side, he steadied his horse stance and met his blow head on with his own sword.

DANG! The clashing sound resonated throughout the hall.

The whistling sound of the sabre cutting through the air has everyone captivated. When the two weapons met, Guan Zhongxie's body was terribly shaken along with the loud clashing sound. He may have successfully parried Xiang Shaolong devastating blow but it is something that is definitely not easy.

This chopping attack has been executed with every single effort of Xiang Shaolong, creating a terrifying aura. However, the disadvantage is that he cannot follow up quickly with a second blow.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed too and had assumed that this chop can make Guan Zhongxie move back by at least half a step. However, Guan Zhongxie managed to stay rooted to the spot and absorb the impact of his first blow.

Guan Zhongxie's martial arts have indeed improved vastly. No wonder people who are close to him have been trying to dissuade Xiang Shaolong from fighting him.

Based on Guan Zhongxie's high level of fitness, it is really hard for him to become even better. For him to reach this new level of

fitness, Xiang Shaolong is the main reason. Without Xiang Shaolong as a motivation and a form of competition, Guan Zhongxie will never reach his current peak.

After utilising all his strength, Guan Zhongxie managed to block Xiang Shaolong's attack. He thought that he will be in danger if Xiang Shaolong continued with more blows like this. Now that Xiang Shaolong has yet to recover, he made use of his body weight and pushed back at Hundred Battle Sabre with Longstrike Sword.

AO! The friction between the sabre and the sword created an annoying noise. Ultimately, Xiang Shaolong's arm strength is inferior to Guan Zhongxie's and was pushed two steps back.

Ji Yanran and the others lost some colour on their faces. Making full use of this advantage, Guan Zhongxie withdrew Longstrike sword and made another attack at Xiang Shaolong's exposed left side. At the same time, he shifted sideways and exited the attacking range of the Hundred Battle Sabre.

Moreover, Guan Zhongxie is a left-handed swordsman and he has the advantage in terms of angle, speed and strength. He is in a superior position.

Just as Xiang Shaolong's supporters could not bear to look any further and those who hate him or gambled that he will lose are getting ready to go wild with happiness, JIANG! Using his left hand holding the scabbard, Xiang Shaolong executed a Mozi "Defending Attack" move and successfully blocked Guan Zhongxie's killing strike with plenty of energy leftover, forcing Guan Zhongxie to retreat with astonishment.

No matter which side they are on, everyone was stunned at Xiang Shaolong's unexpected move.

Blocking an attack using a scabbard is nothing new but for Xiang Shaolong to use his left hand to block the attack with his scabbard as if it was a weapon is something new and refreshing. There has never been any precedent.

This is a wonder strategy that Xiang Shaolong thought of recently to cover up Hundred Battle Sabre's weakness at defending. Of course, if his opponent is not Guan Zhongxie, Hundred Battle Sabre's forceful attack would have been sufficient to overcome them. But in the earlier scenario, the Hundred Battle Scabbard would serve as an additional protection.

Mozi Swordplay is the best defensive swordplay in the world and it will be a waste not to use it. This swordplay can still be performed by using the Hundred Battle Scabbard.

And this is also possible because chromium has been used in making the scabbard.

All these conditions have resulted in the present Hundred Battle Sabre Play.

Among all the swordsmen Guan Zhongxie has ever fought, only Xiang Shaolong is able to force him to retreat in the last battle and the present one. He was groaning inside when a flash of sabre appeared in front of his eyes. Like a tsunami, they Hundred Battle

Sabre is crushing down on him with ferocity.

DANG! DANG! The sounds of clashing filled the ears of everyone.

Xiang Shaolong began executing his full set of sabre play. In the blink of an eye, he had chopped seven consecutive times at Guan Zhongxie and every chop is performed with the best angle and in the best direction. The chops are swift as lightning strikes and the whistling of the sabre is piercing to the ear. As both weapons continued to clash, given Guan Zhongxie's ability, he was able to maintain his position but can only defend himself from this amazing sabre attacks that has incorporated science and the essence of martial arts all over the world.

Finally, the crowd went wild with their cheering.

The ones who shouted the loudest are the Tian Sisters and the Guardians. They are simply star-struck.

Even top experts like Han Jie and Xu Shang's faces lost colour after witnessing Xiang Shaolong's dominating attacks.

The worst of them is Po Hu. He could not imagine that Xiang Shaolong is a hundred times better than rumoured.

Every time the Hundred Battle Sabre clash with Longstrike sword, Longstrike sword would be deflected slightly, providing a small opening. At the same time, Guan Zhongxie will be shaken by the blow and his steadiness is gradually decreasing.

By the time Guan Zhongxie blocked the seventh blow, he can more or less understand Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battle Sabre Play. Every chop actually has a weakness but because the chop is too fierce, overwhelming and unpredictable, there is no way he can counter attack.

This is the difference between swords and sabres. A normal sword can defend well but when up against a chopping sabre, moreover it is a newly invented weapon, even Guan Zhongxie would be caught unprepared and be at a huge disadvantage.

The Hundred Battle Sabre is like a combination of a snowstorm and a thunderstorm, manifesting countless flashes of sabre around both men. Every single chop will approach Guan Zhongxie in the most unpredictable direction and angle.

Xiang Shaolong has transformed into an all-powerful mighty immortal and performed his Hundred Battle Sabre Play to its best. He focused primarily on merciless attacks and did not have to worry about any counter attacks.

If Guan Zhongxie can somehow retaliate, the scabbard will be used to block him with Mozi Swordplay.

The observers can only feel that the sabre play is like a flock of grazing sheep that will go wherever they please. There is neither a beginning point nor an ending point of each chop.

Guan Zhongxie who is on the receiving end of the chops know it

better than anyone else.

DANG! Another loud clashing sound rang out. Using his full abilities, Guan Zhongxie blocked another blow from Xiang Shaolong but could not take the blow any more. He staggered two steps backwards and his footwork is in a mess.

Xiang Shaolong knows that this is the moment he has been waiting for. With a loud howl, he took three steps forward, trailing Guan Zhongxie like a shadow. Raising the sabre above his head, he chopped down heavily at the third step towards Guan Zhongxie's forehead.

Still as composed as ever, Guan Zhongxie could not retreat in time and used his sword to block the attack as a last resort.

DANG! The sword and the sabre clashed again.

Unable to withstand the blow, Longstrike Sword was broken into two and just as Hundred Battle Sabre is approaching his forehead, Guan Zhongxie displayed his top martial arts and shifted his head aside.

Sighing, Xiang Shaolong retrieved his sabre and did not attack anymore.

Guan Zhongxie staggered another step back, grasping onto his broken Longstrike sword. A trail of blood can be seen on his forehead which is caused by the sabre energy.

The sounds of cheering died down.

Both men exchanged looks.

Time seems to have stop.

After some time, Guan Zhongxie threw away his broken sword and smiled helplessly. He bowed: “Official Xiang’s Hundred Battle Sabre is truly extraordinary. I admit defeat.”

He did not praise Xiang Shaolong for his skills but only praised the Hundred Battle Sabre, indicating that he had lost in terms of weaponry and does not fully submit to Xiang Shaolong. But this is indeed a true fact.

Amidst the thunderous applause, Xiao Pan and the others could not help but secretly sighed. If not for the Longstrike Sword breaking into two, Guan Zhongxie will be a lifeless corpse by now.

Lu Buwei is green with shock and he sat there in silence.

There is no more trace of blood left in Lu Niang Rong’s face as she stared at both men with a lost expression.

Xiao Pan secretly peeped at Zhu Ji who is maintaining a wooden look. He then smiled: “This fight is truly awesome. Grand Tutor Xiang’s invention of the Sabre and Sabre play is so amazing.”

Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie hurriedly paid their respects to Xiao Pan.

Unconsciously, everyone's gaze turned to Lu Buwei, wondering if he will announce the marriage between Lu Niang Rong and Xiang Shaolong.

Just as Lu Buwei was fumbling, Zhu Ji dryly coughed and coldly questioned: "This duel may be hedging on Niang Rong's marriage but they are not literally fighting over her. I suppose we can do away with the marriage agreement. What does Shaolong think?" Of course Xiang Shaolong will not object. He nodded: "As per Empress decision."

Wang Ci stood up and walked out of the seating area. Coming to Xiang Shaolong, he took the Hundred Battle Sabre from him and scrutinized the weapon closely. After some time, he faced Xiao Pan and reported: "It is not an easy feat for Shaolong to create such a fearsome weapon. During a cavalry skirmish, this will greatly benefit our armies' attacking power. This is a great merit with far-reaching effects and is even better than conquering a city. This is considered a military contribution. I recommend that Shaolong be promoted to be a Great General and be in charge of training the three armies. At the same time, he can oversee the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry, Imperial Infantry and protect the Royal Family. Will the Crown Prince please approve."

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's expression became very ugly at the same time but they could not intervene as given Wang Ci's status and his reasonable explanation, there is no reason for objection.

Xiao Pan was overjoyed and nearly wanted to run towards Wang Ci and hug him, showing his appreciation. After all, Wang Ci had mentioned exactly what Xiao Pan was trying to implement. Pleased, he replied: “My sentiments exactly. Will Empress please approve.”

Zhu Ji was flustered and looked at Lao Ai before gritting her teeth and replying in a deep voice: “Shaolong deserves to be a Great General but regarding the control of the three Xianyang armies is something that needs to be considered thoroughly.”

Xiao Pan was cursing inside as Wang Ci suggestion was brilliant. By making Xiang Shaolong in charge of all the armies in Xianyang City, there is no fear of any rebellions. With this suggestion, Zhu Ji cannot reject both ideas so no matter what, she must still give face and at least make Xiang Shaolong a Great General. Xiao Pan may be feeling hateful but was powerless too. He proceeded to announce that Xiang Shaolong has been immediately promoted to Great General Xiang.

The guests are generally happy at the outcome. However, Po Hu who has suffered a huge loss can only stare blankly at the delicious food in front of him without any appetite.

Xiang Shaolong has begun receiving congratulatory toasts from everyone while Xiao Pan announced the Spring Festival Prayers to be held five days later at River Wei. His announcement causes everyone to momentarily forget about the effects of the earlier duel.

Noticing a disillusioned Po Hu whispering to Du Bi, Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask his father-in-law Wu Yingyuan how much he betted on his victory.

Holding back his laughter, Wu Yingyuan had a good look at the crestfallen Po Hu before whispering: "Only three thousand taels of gold!" Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck.

To an ordinary man, a hundred taels of gold can allow the entire family to live comfortably for their lifetime. Three thousand taels of gold is an astronomical amount. With the odds of three-for-one, even a tycoon like Po Hu will be severely affected.

The banquet is coming to a close and Lu Buwei personally sent Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji to the main door. After they left, everybody began to relax and offer their congratulations to Xiang Shaolong. Guan Zhongxie and Lu Niang Rong have quietly slipped away.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun took this break to leave first and prepare themselves for the Qi ambush.

As the guests gradually took their leave, under the company of Wu Yingyuan, Wang Ci, Wang He, Lord Changping, Huan Yi and the others, Xiang Shaolong left for the main door too. Ji Yanran, Qin Qing and the other girls followed closely behind him.

Lord Changping smiled: "From my deductions, there will not be many people who will dare to challenge Shaolong in the future."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled. Back in the 21st century, all the wuxia novels, movies and drama serials will have a male protagonist who is the best fighter but will be plagued by countless troubles. He hopes he will be an exception.

Book 18 Chapter 12 – The Assassin In The Starry Night

Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, and the other women rode to a place a few streets just outside the Wu family manor, meeting Teng Yi and several dozen crack troopers who were waiting for them there.

They all dismounted.

Teng Yi walked next to Xiang Shaolong. In a low voice, he said, "Our people have seized the advantage by taking strategic hiding spots prior to the arrival of the assassination squad which Tian Dan sent. We know exactly where our enemies are emplaced. Shaolong, do you wish to exterminate them all? Or shall we do our best to take as many alive as possible. Xiang Shaolong stared hard at the deep, dark alleyways. One of them had ancient, towering trees on both sides, making it look especially gloomy and hidden. This was the best place for the opponent to ambush them.

Xiang Shaolong said in a deep voice, "Second Brother, what are your thoughts?" Teng Yi said, "To capture them alive would require only that we exert a bit more effort. We have many times their number of people, and so we can wait for them to flee when they realize that they have been discovered before springing our trap on them. Jing Jun has already deployed a squad of five hundred horsemen nearby, ready to assist us. I can guarantee that no one will escape."

Xiang Shaolong nodded. "We'll do it as Second Brother suggests. Tian Dan, that sly fox, really is formidable. Right after returning to Qi, he immediately sent this assassination squad to Xianyang. And,

due to Lu Buwei's protection, we've only discovered their existence just now. From this, we can tell that there are critical, glaring gaps in our intelligence. After we deal with the situation, we must come up with a way to close the gaps."

Teng Yi nodded in response. "Let's go!" Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, and the Eighteen Guardians followed Teng Yi and his men, swiftly traversing the dimly lit alleyway. Quite soon, they arrived at the section where the assassins lay in ambush.

Aside from the entrance to the street, which was lit by two large lanterns, the only light throughout the street was the silvery light of the moon, giving it an aura of desolate beauty.

Xiang Shaolong pressed himself against Ji Yanran's and whispered into her ear, "Today, the Learned Lady has really displayed her awe-inspiring majesty!" Ji Yanran pressed her fragrant, jade-like face against his lips, happily cooing, "Can it compare to milord husband? But the Hundred Battles Sabre is a bit too powerful, as Guan Zhongxie would have died if it hadn't snapped his sword. As the saying goes, 'Going too far is as bad as not going far enough.'" Teng Yi also thought it was funny. "How can there be such a thing as being 'too powerful'? It simply wasn't Guan Zhongxie's time to die yet. But his talent really is astonishing. He was actually able to dodge the Hundred Battles Sabre at the exact moment that his sword shattered."

At this point in time, the Eighteen Guardians and the fifty-odd crack troopers dispersed themselves, taking strategic positions on the field, even clambering up onto trees to assume the highest strategic position. They sealed off every avenue of escape for the

street.

Xiang Shaolong said in a low voice, "Only now do I realize that Guan Zhongxie intentionally allowed me to strike at an already-damaged section of his sword. He lost his sword, but preserved his life. His foresight really is astonishing." Ji Yanran and Teng Yi were simultaneously shocked. In a situation like that, on the verge of death, Guan Zhongxie still maintained his calm and presence of mind, using such a shocking method to preserve his life. He really was formidable.

Another person came with a report. Everything was in place, and they could make their move at any time.

Everyone waited for Xiang Shaolong's order.

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "The enemies must be anxious right now. Let's wait another hour, til the point there are absolutely bewildered and frightened. That will be the best time to strike."

Teng Yi and Ji Yanran both exclaimed their approval. The former said, "If that's the case, let me order some people to go and procure some nets and ropes, so that we might capture them more easily."

As Teng Yi went to do this, Xiang Shaolong pulled Ji Yanran over to sit beneath a nearby tree. Laughing, he said, "Tonight really is a night filled with excitement and danger. Based on Lu Buwei's temperament, after having lost so much face, his desire to revolt must have grown only stronger. Fortunately, we have the ultimate

backup plan of the Black Dragon. Otherwise, this really would cause a headache."

Ji Yanran stared up at the starry skies, a look of contentment flashing across her eyes. Leaning against him, she said in a shy voice, "With milord husband here, what can Lu Buwei possibly pull off? And when it comes to marshalling troops and fighting battles, Wang Ci is even more formidable than Xu Xian and Lu Gong. As long as we can prevent him from being murdered by Lu Buwei, Lu Buwei and Meng Ao will find it very hard to openly rebel. In addition, the people of Qin's devotion to crown and country is famous throughout the world. How could Lu Buwei possibly rebel so easily? I'm actually more concerned about Du Bi and Pu Hu. In their hands, they hold Cheng Qiao, the Lord of Chang'an, as a card to be played against the Crown Prince. They might be able to use the Qin people's dislike towards Lu Buwei. Combine that with his local influence, and the instability of the three eastern provinces, and their collusion with the people of Zhao...let's hope they don't act. If they do, they will cause disaster. My dear, you must be wary of them."

Xiang Shaolong had always held the advice of this beloved wife in the highest of esteem. Nodding, he said, "Thank you, Learned Lady, for your reminder. Tomorrow, when I enter the palace, I will discuss this with the Crown Prince, Li Si, and Lord Changping. This way, if something happens, we won't be caught flatfooted."

Ji Yanran leisurely sighed. Resting her head against his broad shoulders, she said, "That which I thank the Heaven the most for is Heaven allowing me to marry you, milord, after my country and home collapsed. In the past, each time I thought about those events, I would always contemplate ending this meaningless life of

mine. Fortunately, I did not. If I had, I wouldn't have been able to experience this deadly yet beautiful night."

Xiang Shaolong reached out and embraced her fragrant shoulder. Moved, he said, "Learned Lady, you favor me with your love. I should be the one moved to tears."

Ji Yanran straightened her lovely body, as joy sparkled across her face. "This is precisely the unique characteristic of milord husband, never treating women as servants or slaves. Sister Qing must be with Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Xiao Zhen, and Xiao Feng at this moment, spending the night talking about you. No one's heart is ever away from your own.

Just as Xiang Shaolong thought to reply, a striking sound was heard as a brilliant flower of light exploded above the dark street, illuminating it.

Beneath the glare of this 'flash-bang grenade', several dozen people could be seen charging down the street.

The two rose to their feet and gave the order.

The battle began.

Instantly, the sounds of battle and killing filled their ears.

In the blink of an eye, the battle changed into a rout, with them pursuing after the fleeing targets.

In the face of Xiang Shaolong's ambush, all of the enemies were either killed, injured, or captured.

The commoners nearby were startled awake. Naturally, no one would dare to go out and look.

The sound of hooves and men had shattered this neighborhood's tranquility.

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the entrance, all of the captured Qi assassins had been bound in a group and held within the Wu manor.

Jing Jun reported, "We killed twenty five and captured sixty seven. Heh, looks like the midget and the prettiest 'soft-boned' performer didn't participate in this event. As a matter of fact, there isn't a single person from Qi who we've met before that is here."

Xiang Shaolong rode into the Wu family manor. He saw that although the prisoners looked dispirited, all of them had unyielding looks on their faces. His heart sank.

How should he deal with them? Just as he was hesitating, the sound of hoofsteps from afar could be heard as Guan Zhongxie led a squad of men rushing towards them. Bowing, he said, "Sir, I came a moment too late. Please forgive my tardiness."

Xiang Shaolong and the others knew that they came with no good

intentions in mind. The air immediately became tense.

Xiang Shaolong leapt off his horse and calmly said, "Nothing major. Just a group of petty thugs who had some unscrupulous designs. Master Guan, feel free to take them away. You can report your disposition of them afterwards. I hope that this will not happen again."

Aside from Guan Zhongxie, even Teng Yi, Jing Jun, and Ji Yanran were shocked.

Everyone knew that Xiang Shaolong wasn't so easily handled. They just didn't know what he was plotting.

Guan Zhongxie was stunned for a long period of time. Just as he intended to speak, Xiang Shaolong impatiently waved his hand. "Take them away. Give me a report tomorrow so that I might know if there's anyone behind their actions, and find out their histories."

Although Guan Zhongxie was still suspicious, what more could he say? He immediately ordered his men to take the assassins away, not leaving so much as a corpse behind.

When Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi strode into the main hall, Jing Jun asked curiously, "Third Brother, why did you so easily give up this opportunity to pull down Lu Buwei?" Xiang Shaolong smiled. "None of these people had appeared tonight at the dance display. From this, we can tell that that scoundrel Lu made preparations in advance. Even though we captured them, none of them would have revealed any connection to that traitor Lu."

Ji Yanran nodded. "Lu Buwei would be an idiot to do otherwise. Cleaning up after the disastrous early battle at our farm had already caused him a lot of headaches. Naturally, he would have learned to do better this time."

Jing Jun frowned. "But there was still no need for Third Brother to hand these people to Guan Zhongxie. If we questioned them severely, we would at least be able to discover how these people entered Xianyang, and from there find clues to follow. It would be worth it if we could cause Lu Buwei a few more headaches."

The four sat down in the hall, as a serving girl brought them tea. The bodyguards patrolled all around them.

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "The purpose of allowing Guan Zhongxie to take these murderers away is to catch him, the biggest fish of them all. We know that in tomorrow's report, Lu Buwei will have many excuses for these people. This is their long-planned out reserve strategy. That way, after dealing with me, they can still keep these people to deal with others."

Ji Yanran suddenly cried out, "Then it must be Du Bi!" Teng Yi slapped the table and called out, "I get it now. For Guan Zhongxie to allow so many people to sneak into the city is a gross breach of his duties. I want to see how he can possibly keep his position by tomorrow."

Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "If we didn't have two marvelous chess-pieces in the form of Meng Wu and Meng Tian, I'm afraid

that we still wouldn't be able to budge Guan Zhongxie from his position. But with one of them being the next Imperial Infantry Commander, why would Lu Buwei continue to fight against it? Starting from tomorrow, both of the major military commands of the city will be in my hands. It will be even more difficult for Lu Buwei to rebel."

Ji Yanran sighed in admiration. "Milord husband's calculations are never wrong. But we must be prepared to deal with Lao Ai fighting for that position. With the Empress supporting him, he still has a chance."

Teng Yi laughed. "Then let us allow Lu Buwei to fight against him and batter each other into pieces."

At this moment, the sound of hoofsteps could distantly be heard coming from far away. Ji Yanran happily rose to her feet. "It must be Ting Fang and the others returning!" After speaking, she stepped outside.

Jing Jun's expression became extremely excited. In a low voice, he said, "Third Brother, didn't you say that you were going to find Qiu Risheng and cause misfortune for him? It's such a fine night tonight that tomorrow must be a wonderful day as well. We can't let such a great opportunity go to waste!" Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi simultaneously burst into laughter.

Grabbing Jing Jun by the shoulder, Teng Yi said, "Kid, don't forget that tomorrow, General Xiang is going to take you to Lu Gong's family residence to formally propose marriage. All you can think about is fighting and killing."

A look of joy appeared on Jing Jun's face. He slapped himself once, blushing in acknowledgment.

At this moment, a female servant came by Xiang Shaolong's side. In a low voice, she said, "Lord, please have some tea."

Xiang Shaolong didn't think too much as he casually accepted her teacup.

Suddenly, a knife flashed.

With a flip of her left wrist and a twist of her slim waist, the serving girl pulled out a dagger which flashed with cold light, piercing it towards Xiang Shaolong's throat like a bolt of lightning.

This was totally unexpected. Xiang Shaolong fell over backwards, barely escaping this lethal blow as the teacup flew backwards as well.

With loud roars, Teng Yi and Jing Jun simultaneously jumped up. Jing Shan and the others were shocked stiff.

With another twist of her hip, the serving girl shot out another dagger as she simultaneously dodged towards the left. Her movements were fast and nimble, causing others to exclaim in admiration.

Just as Xiang Shaolong leapt to his feet, the dagger plunged into his chest. With a miserable cry, he fell back down.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun were frightened out of their wits as they threw themselves towards Xiang Shaolong.

By this time, the Guardians had already detained the assassin and began battling with her.

Supporting Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun tore open his gown at the point of the dagger's entrance, only to find that he was wearing the armored vest which Qin Qing had personally woven for him. The dagger had only been able to penetrate the outer garments. Only then did the two let out a breath.

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Still badly shaken, he said, "Do not kill her!" Teng Yi roared, "Master Xiang is fine! Take her alive!" With a shriek, the serving girl was thrown by Wu Guang to the floor.

Xiang Shaolong pulled out the dagger. Its tip was only slightly wet with blood, having barely cut through the doublet to lightly slice his skin.

The Guardians dragged the serving girl before them.

Xiang Shaolong glanced at her. Amazingly, it was the main performing girl from last night, the most beautiful soft-boned beauty.

end of Book 18

Book 19 Chapter 1 – Endless Future Troubles

Despite being held prisoner under the iron hands of the indomitable Guardians, this tender, lovely girl still maintained a look of fearlessness. A look of disdain on her face, she icily said to Xiang Shaolong, "So Master Xiang wears a set of impenetrable armor beneath his clothes. No wonder you are so bold and fearless!"

For some reason, Xiang Shaolong felt that something was out of place, but he couldn't quite figure out what the problem was.

Jing Shan and Wu Guang had each seized her by an arm and bent them behind her back. Reasonably speaking, it should be very difficult for her to make any movements at this time.

Teng Yi clearly felt the same strange feeling that he had. This man of steel was different from the likes of Jing Jun and the Guardians, whose eyes were feasting on the sight of her chest, pushed straight due to her arms being pressed against her back. He icily shouted, "Kneel!"

Jing Shan and Wu Guang pressed down hard. How could the soft-boned beauty resist? Even her beautiful, flexible legs had lost their ability to threaten anyone now.

The sound of people coming in from outside could be heard, as Ji Yanran and the rest came in as well.

Right at this moment, a thought flashed across Xiang Shaolong's

mind. He realized what the problem was.

She shouldn't have been so easily seized.

Based on her skill as demonstrated at Lu Buwei's performance, it would not be an easy feat for his men to seize her and take her alive. And if she had just taken a step towards the window instead, how could the Guardians have so easily caught her? She must have been feigning.

The reason was because she saw that he was still alive, and heard him command his men not to kill her. That was why she purposefully allowed his men to capture her, so as to make yet another attempt at assassination.

At this moment, everyone was naturally looking towards the main entrance.

Xiang Shaolong also feigned distraction.

At that moment, the soft-boned beauty took in a deep breath, then spat out. A bolt of light shot out of her mouth, streaking towards Xiang Shaolong's face.

Teng Yi and the others were caught by surprise, utterly shocked.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly dodged, slipping past the hidden weapon. The soft-boned beauty's body made a few strange contortions and somehow managed to slip away from Wu Guang

and Jing Shan's grasps. Then, as slippery as a loach, she somehow threw the two away, into the midst of the company. Her movements were astonishingly fast and slick, causing all the watchers to praise her skills.

Just as everyone was shouting in anger and shock, the soft-boned beauty grabbed herself by the knees and curled up into a ball. Like a large rubber ball, she rolled next to a window in the blink of an eye. Before anyone had a chance to stop her, she shot out, flying away through the window.

The Guardians had just suffered a tremendous loss of face. They furiously chased after her.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest exchanged amazed glances. None of them had expected that the soft-boned beauty would be so formidable. At this moment, Lords Changping and Changwen, along with Huan Yi, came rushing in, having just heard the news. The entire manor became very lively, both inside and out.

When Xiang Shaolong awoke, he felt refreshed and energetic. All of the previous night's worries had been washed clean away.

As he got out of bed, he accidentally woke up the ever-lazy-a-bed Ji Yanran. She sleepily threw herself into his embrace, cooing absent-mindedly, "It's still dark outside, isn't it? Let's sleep for a while longer." Xiang Shaolong pulled her close. After affectionately cuddling for a time, he said, "Going forwards, I'm going to wake up before the rooster crows in order to practice the Hundred Battles Sabreplay as well as barehanded martial arts. Just by observing that soft-boned assassin, we can tell that the world contains

countless numbers of skilled people. If we aren't careful, we'll suffer calamity."

When Ji Yanran recalled how that soft-boned beauty had spat a hair-thin needle out from her mouth last night, she felt a sense of lingering fear. "How astounding. She could hold a needle like that in her mouth but speak easily and normally, without raising any suspicions."

Xiang Shaolong slapped her white buttocks hard. Laughing, he said, "Dear wife, sleep for a bit longer!"

Making a lovable face, Ji Yanran got up as well. She grumbled, "After that spank of yours, my desire to sleep has flown away."

Xiang Shaolong's gaze naturally and unconsciously fell upon the half-open neckline of her sleepware, which revealed the deep valley of her cleavage. He felt his pulse quicken, and just barely kept himself from pressing this alluring woman down against the bed. He secretly steadied himself and forced himself away.

He couldn't help but suddenly recall the warning which Li Mu had given him. If he wasn't careful, he would allow the natural lust between man and woman to entangle him, causing himself not to live up to this famous Zhao general's hopes.

Ji Yanran jumped down from the bed as well. Smiling joyfully, her face like a flower, she said, "Allow me to service Great General Xiang by bathing him and dressing him, alright?"

By the time the first rays of dawn began to peek over the horizon, Xiang Shaolong had already rushed to the Imperial Palace. Xiao Pan was in the middle of eating breakfast. When he saw him arrive, Xiao Pan hurriedly told him to join. Upon hearing Xiang Shaolong explain what had happened last night, he flew into a royal rage. "Lu Buwei, that treacherous dog. In the future, We shall make sure that he doesn't even have a burial plot! He knows that you, master, are Our most beloved subject, and yet he still dares to act so rashly and presumptuously."

Xiang Shaolong laughed. "Crown Prince, it isn't as though you are discovering for the first time what type of person he is! Getting angry is a waste of time. It was fortunate that Meng Tian reported this to us this time. But that female assassin really is a first-rate expert."

Xiao Pan was stunned for a long moment, before suddenly laughing in spite of himself. "If anyone else had said those words, We would only be even more furious. But since you were the one to say the words, master, We....ahem, I only feel a warm feeling in my heart. I feel very comfortable. Hah! Those words of mine really were pointless. But I really don't understand why you handed those people over to Guan Zhongxie, master." Xiang Shaolong naturally didn't tell them that it was because he knew that they wouldn't be able to overthrow Lu Buwei in the next few years, making any attempt at doing so meaningless. Instead, he calmly said, "For an event of this magnitude to happen within the city, someone must take responsibility. Weren't we trying to come up with a suitable position for Meng Wu and Meng Tian?" Xiao Pan's royal countenance trembled. Joy shooting from his eyes, he cried out in approval. "Master, that really is a formidable plan! Especially seeing as how last night, Guan Zhongxie was forced to submit to your sword...ahem, that is, your sabre. His prestige has

taken a huge tumble. This is what is known as...what's the proper way to describe this?" Xiang Shaolong knew that he was feeling extremely excited and so found it difficult to convey his thoughts. He completed Xiao Pan's phrase. "When he's ill, go for the kill!"

Xiao Pan slapped the table. "Just so! When he's ill, go for the kill. If even the city defense force falls into my hands, even if Lu Buwei and Lao Ai sprout three heads and six arms apiece, they won't be able to move against me."

At this moment, a servant came with the news that the ministers had been assembled for the morning court.

Exchanging grins, the two went off to attend morning court.

The great hall was filled with a solemn, stately air.

With all of the amazing events which had occurred last night, everyone present had heard at least some of the stories. Everyone felt that this affair would be difficult to wrap up.

After Xiang Shaolong was promoted to the rank of Great General, his position became much higher than it had been previously. He ranked only behind Wang He, Wang Ci, Meng Ao, and Du Bi, and so calmly seated himself besides them.

Aside from the five of them, the only other two Great Generals were Wang Jian and An Gu.

Of the three people placed at the highest position, Xiao Pan's expression looked the most vigorous. Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei, seated by his side and a little lower, both looked extremely tired. Clearly, they hadn't slept well last night.

After everyone paid their obeisance, Xiao Pan launched the first attack as he began to question Xiang Shaolong about the previous night's events.

Xiang Shaolong slowly, systematically described everything which had happened last night, then said towards Guan Zhongxie, "Official Guan, please present us with the results of your interrogation."

Guan Zhongxie, seated below Huan Yi, took a few steps forward and bowed down. "All of those thugs died from drugs they had hidden on their bodies. Afterwards, we discovered poison pills hidden in their mouths. They bit into the pills, causing the poison to enter their stomachs. By the time we discovered it, it was too late."

These words immediately caused a commotion.

Xiang Shaolong naturally didn't believe a word of it. This clearly was Lu Buwei's plan, to kill these people in order to silence them.

But there was no need for him to speak. Lao Ai, standing opposite to him, solemnly said, "Crown Prince, please guide us with your wisdom. For such a large group of men to be able to sneak into the city and attempt to assassinate a senior minister, with a careful,

meticulous plot that was clearly premeditated and planned out long ago, is a serious event that cannot be easily dismissed. Not only must we seek out and pursue the mastermind behind their actions, we also must find out what weakness in our city defenses was exposed. How else can we explain the fact that so many people snuck into our city without us knowing?" Everyone nodded in agreement. Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan simultaneously groaned in silence.

Judging from Lao Ai's attitude, and how directly he was trying to assign blame on someone, they could tell that he and Zhu Ji had made an agreement to try and seize the position of the Imperial Infantry Commander for their own.

Lu Buwei, Guang Zhongxie, and Meng Ao also saw what Lao Ai was attempting to do. Instantly, their faces changed.

But Lord Changping hadn't quite thought things through yet. He berated Guan Zhongxie, "Official Guan, are you saying that you don't know anything about those people's origins?" Guan Zhongxie calmly said, "I have asked for instructions from the Premier Mentor. Since the situation was strange and unusual, the Premier Mentor ordered me to fully investigate this matter before making my report to the Crown Prince."

Du Bi let out a cold harrumph. "Official Guan, after being busy for an entire night, you have nothing to report at all? Actually, just from their weapons and their clothes, you should have enough information as to pinpoint their status and origins, and to point out the person behind their actions."

Lu Buwei laughed loudly. "Great General Du's words are wise. These assassin's weapons were all forged at the weapon foundry in Tunliu [near modern Shanxi], owned by Pu Juan. The only reason why I didn't allow this to be reported was because I feared that others were framing him, which is why I ordered Zhongxie to make additional inquiries. But if Great General Du feels that this evidence is already sufficient and conclusive, please request the Crown Prince to issue the order and have Pu Juan immediately executed."

Du Bi's expression changed dramatically. He roared out, "That's outrageous!"

He turned towards Xiao Pan and was about to speak, but Xiao Pan calmly said, "Great General Du, calm yourself. Naturally, We know that that someone is trying to frame Mr. Pu!"

Only then did Du Bi slowly regain his former calm. He glared at Lu Buwei fiercely, but no longer spoke.

Naturally, Xiao Pan didn't feel any particular good will towards Du Bi or Pu Juan. But at this point in time, he still needed to wait for the Black Dragon to appear and for his own footing to be solidified before he could make his move against Du Bi and Pu Juan.

Otherwise, if he tried to take on too much, Lu Buwei would seize the opportunity to increase his own power and maybe even try to revolt in the ensuing chaos. In that case, the losses would be greater than the potential gains.

The military clique which Du Bi and Pu Juan were representing were primarily based upon popular discontent and the instability of the three eastern prefectures. If they also colluded with the country of Zhao, they would be very difficult to deal with.

Lu Buwei seized the chance to speak. "For such a group of people to enter the city to cause trouble, there clearly must be someone protecting them for them to pass the city walls. Thus, the question we should be asking is not who to assign blame to, but rather, who the mastermind is. This is similar to Lord Gaoling's attempt to rebel during the imperial hunting party. Someone must have been protecting him and covering for him the entire time. Great General Xiang, you were given orders to investigate this affair. Do you have a report for us?" This technique of 'defending while attacking' really was formidable. The focus of attention was suddenly thrust upon Great General Xiang.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly furious that he hadn't been able to seize that soft-boned beauty from last night. If he had, he would be able to produce her and see how Lu Buwei would handle the situation. Just as he planned to speak, Xiao Pan calmly said, "Great General Xiang, under Our orders, was investigating the matter. But halfway through, he was waylaid and pursued, causing him to miss his mark. We are in the process of examining this matter and should have results soon."

In saying so, Xiao Pan was resting that entire affair on his own person. Lu Buwei could only awkwardly smile and had nothing else to say.

The atmosphere suddenly became extremely awkward.

If anyone else were to continue pursuing this matter and attempt to assign blame, they would be directly opposing Lu Buwei.

Although Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei were clearly on opposite, irreconcilable sides, he did not want to push the situation too far here.

Zhu Ji, who had been silent up to now, said in a soft voice, "Since the Premier Mentor feels that there is no need to assign blame over this matter, I will certainly respect his advice. But increasing the city's defenses is an important, pressing matter. I fear that Official Guan will not be able to handle this weighty responsibility by himself. The position of Assistant Infantry Commander really should no longer be left empty. Inner Custodian, you should be more familiar with city defense than any others, due to your rank. Do you have any suggestions as to who should fill this position?" Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, and even Lu Buwei all silently cried out in alarm. For Zhu Ji to openly ask Lao Ai his opinion on who to appoint, wasn't this clearly inviting him to appoint one of his own men and whittle away Guan Zhongxie's authority? Since Zhu Ji spoke so openly, not even Xiao Pan or Lu Buwei could openly countermand her.

Lao Ai really did do as everyone expected. He leisurely said, "This humble official has a guest named Han Jie. Before he came here, he participated in the defense of the capital of Yan. He is a rare talent. When it comes to selecting an Assistant Infantry Commander, he really would be the best choice."

Zhu Ji said, "Your suggestion is very much in line with my own thoughts. If none of the ministers present have any objections, then let it be so."

Lu Buwei said in a deep voice, "Right now, the Imperial Cavalry have three Assistant Commanders. We should also add yet another Assistant Infantry Commander as well, so that he, along with Han Jie, may better assist Guan Zhongxie in performing his duties. This old minister already has a person in mind; Xu Shang of Shangcai. With his assistance, nothing else will go wrong."

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan, Li Si, and Lord Changping's faces all dropped. None of them had imagined that things would progress to such a stage.

It was a good thing that the palace guard commander was, by tradition, a member of the royal family. Else, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai would probably try to divide that post up as well.

Wang Wen, Cai Ze, and Meng Ao immediately voiced their approval.

Since Lao Ai had already recommended Han Jie, it was now difficult for him to oppose Lu Buwei's suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong and the others could no longer recommend Meng Wu or Meng Tian. If they did so, they would arouse Lu Buwei's suspicions and make the suggestion pointless.

In the end, the result was that Xu Shang was chosen.

Xiang Shaolong sighed in dismay, but the rice was already cooked, and there was no going back.

Not only were they unable to budge Guan Zhongxie, Lao Ai's authority actually increased. This was what was known as "Failing to steal the chicken, and losing the rice as well."

With the positions of Assistant Infantry Commander, under Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's auspices, Xu Shang and Han Jie both were in a position to secure powerful, prominent military positions. By that time, they would have endless future troubles.

After the morning court was concluded, Xiang Shaolong felt greatly dispirited. As he hurriedly left the palace, he passed by Qin Qing's residence. His heart suddenly moved, he went to go seek her. This peerless beauty was in her garden, embroidering a flower. Winter had just ended and spring had just arrived. The wind and the sun were both beautiful, and the day was warm. Qin Qing was hard at work, beneath the auspices of a lively, flourishing tree. Her plain, simple dress only accentuated her own jade-like visage, possessing an allure all her own.

Qin Qing saw that Xiang Shaolong made the time to come visit her, despite being so busy, and felt a sense of unexpected joy. Laying down the embroidery, she slipped her hand into his and took him on a tour of the garden.

Xiang Shaolong, feeling her smooth hand, sighed, "The purpose

of my trip here today is to thank Grand Tutor Qin for saving my life."

Qin Qing smiled. "You're always like this. You'd rather die than not startle others. When did I ever save your life?" Xiang Shaolong related to her the story of how her protective vest had deflected the assassin's knife. As Qin Qing listened, all the blood drained from her flower-like face. "How could there be such a deadly female assassin in the world? Even an expert such as Jing Shan found himself helpless against her! Oh Shaolong! I really am going to die from worry."

Xiang Shaolong laughed. "No need to fret. Although it is true that the assassin was highly skilled, the primary reason she was able to escape is that most men are lecherous and are usually not on their guard against a skinny lass. That's what gave her the chance to escape. If it had been a male assassin, Jing Shan and the others would've given her several good punches right from the start and caused her face to swell up like a pig, and then would've also paralyzed her entire body. How would she have had the chance to make another attempt at assassination?"

Qin Qing was deeply amused by his words. Laughing so hard that she made the flowers tremble, she gently rested her arm against his shoulder. Only after a long time did she manage to gasp out, "With you by my side, I'm always laughing without end! Hmph! You terrible man, you've stolen my wits from me!"

This was the first time that Xiang Shaolong had heard Qin Qing speak so candidly and expose her innermost thoughts. His heart growing warm, he pulled her into his embrace. Overjoyed, he said,

"Grand Tutor Qin, please don't forget what you have promised me!"

Qin Qing raised her flower-like face towards him, a look of desire upon it. "What I promised you?...oh...I'm not talking to you about that anymore! Quickly let me go, it would be terrible if someone saw us together like this."

Xiang Shaolong's mood improved as he saw that look of lust mixed with reluctance on her face. Laughing, he said, "Grand Tutor Qin, it seems as though you finally remember that you promised me that I can do whatever I wish to you after my battle with ole' Guan. Hah! The weather is stupendous today. Why don't we..."

Qin Qing was terribly embarrassed. With a forceful push, she escaped from his clutches. Stamping her foot, she yelled, "Don't say anything else, or I'll call for my bodyguards and have you expelled!"

Xiang Shaolong roared with laughter, filled with unspeakable merriment. Opening his arms widely, he said, "My little darling, quickly come back to my arms!"

Qin Qing's ears were a fiery red. Feeling both happy and embarrassed, there naturally was nothing she could do to him. After rolling her eyes at him, she said in a soft voice, "Would it be acceptable for me to accompany you after the Spring Sacrifices? Hey! Weren't you supposed to go with little Jun to Lu Gong's residence to propose marriage? Why are you dawdling here instead?" Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that Jing Jun

was impatiently waiting for him at their offices. All he could do was pull her into his arms one more time and give her a thorough groping before he left.

When he returned to his office, he found Jing Jun there fidgeting impatiently. Lord Changping and Huan Qi had arrived as well. Xiang Shaolong wanted to sit down and drink a cup of tea first, but Jing Jun grabbed him immediately. And so their entire group headed towards Lu Gong's residence.

There were many people on the street. It was both bustling and peaceful.

By this point in time, Xiang Shaolong was a person who was often spoken about by the common man in the streets. The people of Qin have always worshipped heroes. Knowing that last night, he had utterly triumphed over Guan Zhongxie, everyone was filled with the utmost admiration and pointed towards him as he passed by. When he courteously smiled at a group of young ladies who were chasing after him and staring at him, they were so mesmerized that they almost fainted.

Although Lord Changping's rank was that of the Left Premier, his public notoriety was far lower than that of Xiang Shaolong's. Tremendously envious, he said, "Shaolong, your battle last night has shaken the entirety of Xianyang. I'm basking in your victory as well. After I went home last night, Ying Ying couldn't stop praising you. I'm terrified that she might change her mind again and come chasing after you once more, refusing to marry Duanhe."

Xiang Shaolong felt very gratified, feeling as though he had

finally managed to do a big favor for this close friend of his. He casually asked about something else. "When is little Yi going to return to the palace?" Huan Yi respectfully replied, "The Crown Prince bade me return only after the Spring Sacrifices are over. Alas! Right now, my special army's troops are not fully equipped and armored yet. There are many things that I wish to do but do not have the strength to. After this morning's court was held, Lu Buwei hunted me down to have a talk. He wanted me to accept Meng Wu and Meng Tian into my army as assistant commanders. But how could I possibly agree?" A look of shock appeared on Xiang Shaolong's face, as well as everyone else's.

Lord Changping laughed softly, "What are you afraid of? Go ahead and satisfy him!"

Astonished, Huan Yi stared at Lord Changping.

Xiang Shaolong said in a quiet voice, "The Left Premier's words are correct. Little Wu and little Tian are both on our side."

Overjoyed, Huan Yi said, "Then my rapid-response army is saved!"

Teng Yi laughed from behind them. "Go quickly and agree to the offer!"

Just as Huan Yi was about to leave the group, Lord Changping pulled him over. He instructed, "Little Yi, if you can pretend that you are throwing in with Lu Buwei's side and joining him, the Crown Prince will be even more appreciative."

Huan Yi was not a person who was good at deception. A look of discomfort appeared on his face.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Little Yi only needs to act in accordance with his usual attitude and behavior. If you try too hard, you'll actually raise Lu Buwei's suspicions instead. Understood?" Nodding, Huan Yi accepted the advice and joyfully departed.

As they crossed the last street, Lu Gong's residence appeared in plain sight. Jing Jun began to feel nervous and hesitant and hid himself in the back of the group.

The group roaring with laughter, Xiang Shaolong took the front and led them into the residence.

To be able to create a blissful, happy future for one's brother truly was one of the greatest delights in one's life.

Book 19 Chapter 2 – Distilling Spirits, Discussing Wine

This night, the Wu family residence put on a magnificent feast, in honor of Jing Jun's impending marriage. As a side-benefit, they also celebrated Xiang Shaolong's fierce defeat of Lu Buwei's vile schemes.

Aside from their own people and Qin Qing, the only outsiders present were Lords Changping and Changwen, Wang He, Wang Ling, Huan Yi, Li Si, Yang Duanhe, and a few others.

The most amazing thing was that Lu Dan'er managed to sneak out as well to join the celebration. Naturally, she and Jing Jun became the butt of their good-natured jokes and added to the festivities.

Just as the festivities were reaching its peak, Wu Yingyuan joyfully shouted, "Recently, I won a large sum of money, and have been vexed as to how I should spend it all. Friends, do you have any suggestions?" Wang He laughed, "This is the vexation of all gamblers. When they have money, all they can think about is how to spend it. But when they lose and owe others money, they have to painfully scrape it together from various sources. But of course! Mr. Wu's wealth matches that of an entire nation. Naturally, he only suffers from the first vexation!"

Everyone roared with laughter, aside from Huan Yi, whose lips pursed.

Seeing the situation, Xiang Shaolong suddenly came up with an idea. "Why don't we spend this money by helping little Yi outfit his rapid-response army!"

Everyone unanimously acclaimed the idea, but also felt it was a bit inappropriate.

Lord Changping asked, "Little Yi, you haven't yet told us what happened when you met with Lu Buwei."

Huan Yi let out several sighs before speaking. "When it comes to playing tricks, how can I be a match for that slippery old bandit? Although I agreed to propose to the court tomorrow morning that Meng Tian and Meng Wu be made my assistant commanders, he still uses the construction of the canal as an excuse for only gradually increasing my rapid-response army's funding. This clearly is for the sake of pressuring and controlling me."

Everyone felt a massive headache oncoming upon hearing these words. Lu Buwei was tightly grasping the purse strings of the kingdom, and using it to control the armies in a roundabout way. Any army setting out on an expedition or which required additional funding had to go through his permission and meet his demands.

Of the people present, Li Si was the most familiar with their national financial situation. He reminded, "Mr. Wu, why don't you offer this sum of money to the Crown Prince? The Crown Prince can place the money in his royal treasure and use it whenever an outlay of funds is needed, rather than needing to go through Lu Buwei and dealing with his blandishments."

Filled with a heroic aura, Wu Yingyuan said, "That's easy enough. I can add an additional sum of money on top of it as well and make the royal treasury very impressive indeed. As long as it causes difficulty for Lu Buwei, there is nothing that I, Wu Yingyuan, am not willing to do."

Everyone shouted in support.

As they were still discussing the details of the matter and were filled with optimism, Wang He let out a sigh. "All my life, I, Wang He, have only admired three people. Generals Bai Qi, Li Mu, and Lian Po. Bai Qi was ruthless and cunning, and Lian Po is unshakeable and profound. But when it comes to a divine-like ability to direct armies and unspeakably brilliant military tactics, Li Mu is the best. Even though the country of Zhao has lost Lian Po, so long as it has Li Mu, Great Qin will find it difficult to easily subjugate Zhao.

Curious, Wang Ling asked, "Everyone is filled with joy and happiness tonight. Ole' He, why must you suddenly be so gloomy?"

Under everyone's curious gaze, Wang He forced out a laugh. "Because I just received a message from the country of Wei. King Anli has fallen ill. This led me to remember that Lian Po's days are numbered as well, which saddens me."

Jing Jun didn't understand. "I've heard that King Anli was never willing to put Lian Po's services to good use. His passing should only bring benefit to Lian Po. Why do you say that Lian Po's days

are numbered as well?"

Also surprised, Tao Fang remarked, "Lian Po is currently residing at Lord Xinling's residence. Clearly, he has a very close relationship with Prince Wuji. If King Anli passes away, Lord Xinling will become the most powerful man in Wei. When the river rises, the boat rises with it. Lian Po's situation will only improve, not worsen. Great General, why do you suggest otherwise?"

Wang He saw that all of the onlookers seemed befuddled. Only Ji Yanran alone seemed to understand his thoughts. A gloomy look shooting forth from his eyes, he mournfully said, "As the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together. Although I have always faced Lian Po across the field of slaughter as enemies, seeing him fall to such a state causes me great pain. As to why I have this view of things, I am sure Learned Lady Ji already knows. I'd like to ask the Learned Lady to explain to everyone!"

Everyone present knew that Ji Yanran had lived in Daliang for a long period of time, and was clearly informed as to the going-on's of that place. Everyone's eyes turned towards her.

A lost, chilly look had already appeared in the eyes of this learned, world-famous beauty. Her fragrant lips gently sighed. "If King Anli is about to die, Prince Xinling will not long survive him. After Lian Po loses his source of support, the only option he will have is to flee Wei and depart. Although the people of Chu have Li Yuan, they are too satisfied to simply hold their current territories. It is likely that Lian Po will never accomplish anything ever again.

Only now did everyone understand.

Based on King Anli's temperament, in the days before his death, he would come up with vicious ways to murder Lord Xinling or force him to his death somehow. Otherwise, the Crown Prince of Wei would find his position difficult to maintain. When it comes to a struggle over royal power, there would be no mercy or humanity.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Lord Longyang. He would naturally be a member of the Crown Prince's clique. With King Anli's illness, Lord Longyang would naturally now be in the middle of a fierce, ferocious life-and-death battle. This was a battle of either total victory or total defeat. There wouldn't be the slightest bit of gray.

Huan Yi respectfully asked Wang He for more advice. "Elder General Wang, earlier, you said that Bai Qi was a hair inferior to Li Mu. Might I ask why you say this? All know that he has never lost a battle. Over thirty seven years of war, he had conquered over seventy cities and displayed his power. He understood his enemies and was extremely adaptable, filled with endless stratagems and never once tasting defeat. At the battle of Changping, he feigned a retreat to lure the opponent in, then encircled and cut them off. This strategy resulted in victory in a single swoop, causing Zhao to be dramatically weakened. Who can compare with his accomplishments in that single short battle?"

Huan Yi clearly held a tremendous amount of esteem for that elder, now-deceased general, Bai Qi. He couldn't resist from speaking in Bai Qi's defense.

A nostalgic look appeared in Wang He's eyes. He slowly said, "Bai Qi was the principal commander at the battle of Changping. I was the subordinate commander. At this time, that was a highly classified secret. The late king had actually issued an order: 'Anyone who reveals the presence of Bai Qi, the Lord of Martial Peace, is to be executed.' The people of Zhao did not know that the commander of our army was actually the Lord of Martial Peace. This was a tactic which Bai Qi often employed. In order to use it successfully, he would refrain from nothing."

Xiang Shaolong felt a very peculiar sensation in his heart.

For a man of the twenty first century to return to the ancient Warring States period and listen to a famous general like Wang He slowly narrate that most critical, most pivotal of battles, was a difficult-to-describe feeling.

The battle of Changping could be said to be the most commonly-discussed battle by people of this era. Aside from the people of Zhao, who were unwilling to discuss that heart-breaking event, everyone else talked about it nonstop. But as they listened to Wang He, who had actually participated in the battle as an important general on the Qin side, everyone present felt a sense of awe towards him, and felt all the more interested and thrilled to listen.

Wang He sighed. "Lian Po really did grow even more unyielding with age. He knew that I was in a strong position and he was in a weak one. He diverted all of his efforts into defending, with the goal of exhausting my armies. It appeared to be a conservative decision, but actually it was an entirely wise one. You must understand, Changping is surrounded by natural barriers. It really

is an un-paralleled defensive hub. Before the battle of Changping, Bai Qi and I came to a strategic agreement. First, we would attack the country of Han. Bai Qi would take the lead in occupying the border between Han and Wei, a strategic point, while I would attack from the north and charge towards Changping. But the opposing general, Lian Po, had already foreseen our actions and made preparations. He had already ordered that defensive structures be emplaced and stockpiled large amounts of food. He was prepared to engage with us in a long, grinding battle.

Wang Ling nodded. "Lian Po really is full of schemes. Not only did he cause our grand army to be faced a fortified region against which an army would be useless, he also constantly sent people out to harass and attack our supply lines, causing our armies to run short on rations and supplies. At the time, I was in charge of providing our reinforcements with their supplies. In the meantime, Lian Po was waiting at his ease for us to collapse of exhaustion. He had built that sturdy defense line as well as a solid line of communication between him and their capital, Handan. This put us in an extremely unfavorable position. The Zhao king, Xiaocheng, was young and brash and thought that Lian Po had grown timid in his old age. He fell prey to rumors of dissension which we sowed. He underestimated us and arrogantly replaced Lian Po with Zhao Kuo. If he hadn't done those things, it most likely would have been we who would have been defeated. Thus, the Battle of Changping was determined by King Xiaocheng's erroneous decision in replacing generals. The military strategies of the Lord of Martial Peace played only a secondary role."

Wang He continued to explain, "This old warrior is still filled with the utmost admiration for Great General Bai. But a formidable ruler will have formidable ministers. The late king relied heavily on Bai Qi from the very beginning. Starting from the

rank of senior minister, after two years, he ascended to the rank of supreme commander of our forces. And the Lord of Martial Peace never let the late king down. In his second year of commanding the army, he used his world-shaking armored mounted chargers at the battle of Yique to shatter the combined Han-Wei army of over two hundred and forty thousand troops with barely a third of their number and capture their general, Gongsun Xi. The country of Wei lost all five of its western provinces. The next year, he successively attacked Wei's former capital, Anyi, as well as sixty one nearby cities. This is why Wei, formerly the most powerful of all the states, has now been reduced to tottering on its last legs."

A look of deep respect appeared in Lord Changping's eyes. Sighing, he said, "Such amazing exploits are rarely seen indeed. Why is it that you still believe him to be inferior to Li Mu?"

Wang He shook his head, smiling bitterly. "The reason that the Lord of Martial Peace was able to enjoy such unprecedented success was because his tactics and stratagems were also unprecedented in their ruthlessness. After every victorious battle, he would slaughter every single captured enemy soldier so as to weaken his opponent's strength. Although this is the most formidable of tactics, it isn't a tactic which others are incapable of carrying out. In addition, it goes against the laws of heaven. It's far inferior to Li Mu's calm magnanimity. Compared to Li Mu, he is still slightly inferior.

Only now did everyone understand why it was that in Wang He's heart, Bai Qi still could not match Li Mu.

Li Mu was able to cause his enemy's leading general to be filled

with admiration towards him. From this alone, one could tell how formidable he must be.

Li Si sighed. "The Battle of Changping really was the critical pivot point where Great Qin swung from a position of weakness to a position of strength. Who would have thought that the son of Zhao She, who had inflicted such a dramatic defeat on our armies in years past, would prove to be so useless. The battle which Zhao She won was the only defeat which the Lord of Martial Peace ever suffered."

Blushing, Huan Yi said, "I never considered that battle to be Bai Qi's defeat."

Wang He said with great sincerity towards Xiang Shaolong, "The reason this old warrior suggested to the Crown Prince that you be promoted to the rank of Great General was for you to serve as a counter to Li Mu. When I look about me at the generals of Qin, only you and Wang Jian could give Li Mu a good tussle. Although Wang Ling and I both have a high reputation, we lack the ability you have of making soldiers willing to give their lives for you.

Deep inside, Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly. He might be able to deal with others, but with Li Mu? Even if he could harden his heart to do so, the chances for success were slim. But hatefully, this was something which would happen sooner or later.

Lord Changping nodded. "The Great General's words are like an arrow that flies straight to the mark. Recently, Li Mu has annihilated over a hundred thousand Xiongnu horsemen, then forced several barbarian tribes in Donghu and Linhu to surrender.

He has forced Chanyu [the traditional title for the Xiongnu leader] Wang of the Xiongnu into a very difficult position. In the short term, he won't be able to infringe upon Zhao territories. In a time of chaos and danger such as we are in now, no matter how suspicious and jealous Empress Jing and Guo Kai might be of Li Mu, they'll be forced to recall him and have him defend the eastern borders."

Li Si calmly said, "Aside from General Li Mu, the country of Zhao have two other major generals as well; Pang Yuan and Sima Shang. For the moment, Guo Kai is still suppressing Li Mu with all his might. But once Pang Yuan and Sima Shang taste the sting of defeat, the time for Li Mu's return will draw near."

Xiang Shaolong's admiration for Li Mu increased even more. Even such a ferocious general such as Wang He seemed to turn pale when even mentioning Li Mu's name. From this, one could tell that he really was an extraordinary hero.

Everyone discussed this for a while longer before they all departed.

When he woke up the next morning, Xiang Shaolong first painstakingly practiced his sabre style for a while before leaving the manor with Ji Yanran. The latter was heading out for the sake of preparing for the Black Dragon's appearance during the Spring Sacrifices. If anything went wrong, they would become the greatest laughingstocks of the world.

Li Si had already informed Xiao Pan in advance regarding Wu Yingyuan's donation to the imperial coffers and Huan Yi needing

financial support for the outfitting of his rapid-response army. Thus, he didn't need to see Xiao Pan immediately, and proceeded directly to the morning court, saving much time.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt incomparably relaxed. Ever since King Zhuan's murder, good things and bad things had come crashing forward in waves, starting with the imperial hunt, then the trip to the country of Chu, followed by the battle just two nights ago. He had been so busy that he hadn't even had the chance to take a breath. But at this moment, the pressure was greatly relieved.

For the near future at least, there shouldn't be anything particularly troublesome.

He could be considered somewhat pitiable. Aside from those few short days of bliss when he first arrived and lived with Mei Canniang, he hadn't been able to whole-heartedly enjoy this marvelous life in the past which had been given to him.

Just as his thoughts began to wander, the sound of hoofsteps behind him could be heard.

Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians simultaneously turned their heads. It was Lao Ai. Behind him was Han Jie, and behind them was a large group of their followers, clearing a path for them.

In terms of style and air, Xiang Shaolong did appear a bit inferior.

Lao Ai turned in towards Xiang Shaolong. Laughing, he said, "Official Xiang, why did you leave out your younger brother and not invite me to last night's banquet?"

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely awkward. As he busily greeted Han Jie and the others, he suddenly managed to come up with an answer. Smiling, he said, "How could that be considered a banquet? It was just that Lord Changping spontaneously decided to throw me a congratulatory party, and forced the Wang generals to come as well. But the food and wine they drank all belonged to me, and they took full advantage of it! Official Lao, please don't blame me; if you must blame someone, blame that dratted Left Premier!"

Hearing his amusing words, Lao Ai, Han Jie, and everyone else present roared with laughter. The atmosphere became, at least superficially, much more friendly.

Lao Ai laughed so hard that he began to pant for breath. "Official Xiang's eloquence can perhaps match that of Su Qi and Zhang Yi. You make it impossible for your younger brother to blame anyone. By the by, I also wish to apologize to you. The other night, Qiu Risheng decided of his own accord to act so audaciously. Your younger brother has already severely scolded him. I hope that Official Xiang won't take it to heart."

Xiang Shaolong secretly cheered. He knew that Lao Ai had decided to focus on Lu Buwei as his principle enemy, which is why he had so humbly and courteously come to mend fences with him. Laughing, he said, "Sometimes, subordinates just aren't very obedient. Oh! Why hasn't Guo Xing come to report to me yet?"

Behind them, Han Jie laughed. "I'm the one who is the most familiar with this matter. Before ten days or half a month or so has passed, none of his seals, stamps, or regalia will be ready. How could he dare to visit you before then?"

By this point in time, the palace gates could be seen. Catching Xiang Shaolong by surprise, Lao Ai said, "In short, the Drunken Wind Pavilion has recently been graced with the presence of a song-and-dance troop of world-class beauties. Official Xiang, tonight, you simply must come to the Drunken Wind Pavilion with me and get drunk with me. If you refuse, it means that you do not consider me, Lao Ai, as your friend."

Xiang Shaolong secretly said, "Bastard, I've never considered you to be my friend." But naturally, he couldn't reveal those thoughts. Forcing out a smile, he said, "If my wife, Ji Yanran, scolds me for not coming home and staying out late at night, then I'm afraid that you, the Inner Custodian, will have to bear the brunt of her displeasure."

Lao Ai couldn't help but laugh. "I never knew that Official Xiang was so witty! Alas! I wish night would come sooner, so that I might enjoy a few cups of wine with you. Tonight at dusk, your younger brother will respectfully await your honored presence at the Drunken Wind Pavilion."

Xiang Shaolong secretly grumbled to himself. His hope was the exact opposite of Lao Ai's. He hoped that it would forever be day, so that he wouldn't have to spend an entire night putting on a false, hypocritical display of friendship with Lao Ai.

Book 19 Chapter 3 – Yet Another Venomous Scheme

In the tug-of-war between officials and the crown, Huan Yi's rapid-response army really was a crucial chess piece. If Xiao Pan was able to take it under his control, then anyone thinking about rebelling would have to worry about Huan Yi's crack troops.

The people in the rapid-response army were all selected from outside the capital. They were kept apart from everyone else and formed an entirely separate body of their own. Unlike the Imperial Infantry, the Imperial Cavalry, or the city guards, they wouldn't be so easily bribed or bought.

This was why Lu Buwei was extremely cautious towards them, using both soft and hard techniques to place his own people within the rapid-response army.

Fortunately, the two people he selected were Meng Wu and Meng Tian. His selection of these two candidates was also an attempt to please their father, Meng Ao.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong would naturally be 'disadvantaged' by this.

When Huan Yi made the request for two assistant commander slots to be opened under him, Lu Buwei and his men immediately and strongly recommended the Meng brothers for the positions. Xiao Pan put on an act of being hesitant and unwilling, before finally, 'reluctantly' agreeing.

Lao Ai was caught flatfooted. In those few moments, he was unable to immediately come up with candidates amongst his own people who had more military accomplishments and who came from more influential backgrounds than those two. He could only sigh in disappointment.

The marvelous thing was, this increased his animosity and wariness towards Lu Buwei all the more.

Naturally, Xiang Shaolong was laughing inside. Right now, his only desire was to spend the rest of his life in peaceful happiness after the Black Dragon made its appearance. By the time Xiao Pan ascended to the throne, Lu Buwei's position would have been drastically weakened. With a single blow, they would lay both Lu Buwei and Lao Ai flat, and then he would naturally retire from office. Aside from his distaste towards war, he couldn't bear to watch the six nations be flattened by the Qin juggernaut. And there was a third, hidden reason which even he himself wasn't willing to clearly think about. It was Xiao Pan's imminent 'deterioration'.

The historical Qin Shihuang became brutal, tyrannical, and utterly despotic in all of his dealings. If he were to remain by Xiao Pan's side, how could he bear to watch Xiao Pan devolve into such a person?

Thus, the only option he had was to avoid watching and depart.

He was affecting history, but history was also affecting him. As to the questions of cause and effect, of the chicken and the egg? Most

likely, even Heaven wouldn't be able to discern the answers clearly.

After the morning court ended, Lu Buwei was openly jubilant while Xiao Pan and the others were secretly so.

Xiang Shaolong was summoned by Xiao Pan to his study room. Together with Li Si and Lord Changping, they analyzed the plans behind the Black Dragon's appearance in great detail before departing the palace.

As he passed by the Qin residence, he couldn't resist from sneaking in and seeking her yet again. He didn't expect to find her ordering people to pack her belongings. When she saw him, she pulled him off to one side. A single tear trembling in her eyes, she said, "I was just about to send someone to find you. Lady Huayang has fallen ill. I'm going to go see her immediately. Alas!"

Xiang Shaolong seemed to be totally stunned. "You are leaving in such a hurry..."

Qin Qing leaned against his chest. "The benevolence which the Lady has shown towards me is weightier than a mountain. Over the past few years, her health has grown poorer and poorer. It's amazing that she's made it as long as she has. That is why Qin Qing must be by her side, no matter what, during these last few days that she will have. After this affair is finished, I will return to your side. Please don't say anything which would make me feel even worse, alright?" Xiang Shaolong calmed himself. "Does the Crown Prince know?"

Qin Qing said, "I just ordered someone to go inform him and the Empress Dowager."

What else could Xiang Shaolong say? He personally escorted her out of the city. They traveled for over ten li before reluctantly parting. By the time he returned to Xianyang, it was nightfall and gaudy lanterns had already been raised. He remembered his appointment with Lao Ai, and let out a helpless sigh. And then, he went to keep his appointment.

As he entered the Drunken Wind Pavilion, Wu Fu came to greet him, personally escorting him to the private courtyard which Lao Ai had reserved. Bowing, he said, "The Lord Inner Custodian came long ago."

Xiang Shaolong casually asked, "Who else is here?"

Wu Fu said, "The majority of the people present are the Lord Inner Custodian's guests. The only exception is Mister Pu."

Astonished, Xiang Shaolong came to a halt. Losing his voice, he cried out, "Pu Hu actually came?"

At the moment, the two were standing on a small pathway outside of the courtyard with a grove. Many customers and serving girls were crossing by. Wu Fu pulled Xiang Shaolong aside, into the grove, checking to see if anyone was near, aside from the Eighteen Guardians. Only then did he say in a low voice, "Great General, would you be willing to hear a few sincere, heartfelt words from I,

Wu Fu?"

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Any who believed the 'sincere, heartfelt words' from a person like Wu Fu would surely be either an idiot or a retard.

But of course, on the surface, he acted very interested. "Owner Wu, please feel free to speak openly." At the same time, he made a few hand motions to Jing Shan and the others, ordering them to keep an eye on their surroundings."

Wu Fu suddenly fell to his knees. Kowtowing, he said, "Wu Fu wishes to follow you, lord. In the future, I will be loyal to you, and you alone."

Xiang Shaolong didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. When it comes down to it, Wu Fu is a person of means and stature, as the owner of the largest brothel in Xianyang.

For such a person to abase himself before Xiang Shaolong and 'surrender' to him...how to deal with such a man?

He hurriedly pulled Wu Fu up and said, "Owner Wu, you mustn't act in such a way!"

Who would've expected that Wu Fu obstinately continued to cling to the ground? This fellow's acting ability really was something. In a tear-filled voice, he said, "Wu Fu foolishly assisted in the plan to harm Great General Xiang. Now, I am filled with

regrets, but it is too late. I only hope that in the future, I be allowed to wholeheartedly devote myself to you and do something on your behalf. If you, great sir, are not willing to agree to this, then why don't you simply go and...alas!...go and kill me with a single chop of the sabre."

How could Xiang Shaolong be unaware of Wu Fu's intentions?

A lowly, base man like Wu Fu was like a man who had grass growing from his forehead. Whichever way the wind blew, he would follow.

In the past, he thought that Lu Buwei had the upper hand, and so he conspired to harm Xiang Shaolong. But now, he was slowly beginning to discover that Xiang Shaolong wasn't a man to be easily crossed. And over the past few days, he was also beginning to discover that Xiang Shaolong and the Crown Prince were as close to one another as one's lips were to one's teeth, and that Xiang Shaolong had the support of Great Generals such as Wang He and Wang Ling. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong had triumphed over Guan Zhongxie and was himself promoted to the rank of Great General. If this continued, after Lu Buwei was defeated, he, Wu Fu, would be driven away from Xianyang, and in the worst case scenario, even his kinsmen might be affected. Considering the circumstances, the only solution was for him to profess undying loyalty towards Xiang Shaolong.

From this, he could also tell that Wu Fu had decided to place his bets on Xiao Pan in the competition for military control.

Thus, although Wu Fu was a person whose eyes were solely fixed

upon the marketplace, he had far better vision and foresight than many others.

Xiang Shaolong was silent for some time, before saying in a stern voice, "If you wish for me, Xiang Shaolong, to consider you one of my people, then you must prove your loyalty to me through deeds. In addition, in the future, you must serve me with wholehearted loyalty. Otherwise, I definitely will not spare you."

Kowtowing, Wu Fu said, "Great General, please trust me. In the end, I, Wu Fu, am an ethnic Qin. In the past, I was just foolish and muddle-headed. I thought that the Premier Mentor had the trust and affection of the Crown Prince, while you, Great General, were...were..." Xiang Shaolong didn't know how many people in the past Wu Fu had pledged his loyalty to. How could he now so easily trust him? Filled with disgust, he shouted, "Stand up before talking!"

Wu Fu continued to kowtow. "Tonight, even if this humble one has to risk life and limb, I still need to tell the Great General about Lao Ai's vile plot."

Xiang Shaolong knew from the very beginning that Wu Fu must have a card which he was preparing to play. That was why Wu Fu was willing to come to him and pledge loyalty. But he hadn't expected it to be related to Lao Ai. Half-believing, half-doubting, he said, "If Lao Ai is planning something, how would you possibly find out?" Wu Fu said, "Please allow me to explain this matter fully."

Xiang Shaolong growled softly. "If you still refuse to get up, I will

immediately turn and walk away."

Wu Fu was so terrified that he leapt to his feet.

Xiang Shaolong pulled him deeper within the courtyard, to sit beneath a small bridge. "Speak. But say not a single word which is false. Otherwise, you won't live to see the next sunrise."

Ashamed, Wu Fu said, "This humble one wouldn't dare to deceive you, great sir, Great General."

After pausing for a moment, Wu Fu focused on the subject at hand. "The Inner Custodian has recently received a guest from Qi called Mao Jiao. This person has reached the acme of fame in his chosen field of medicine."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. Wasn't Mao Jiao the spy which Xiao Pan had sent into Lao Ai's services? How did he get caught up in this affair? Could he actually be a double agent?

Wu Fu saw that he was silent and uncommunicative. How could he guess the reason behind it? He thought that Xiang Shaolong didn't believe him, and so spoke more forcefully. "This person was once the Imperial Physician to the King of Qi. He is a man of real talent and genuine learning."

Frowning mightily, Xiang Shaolong said, "Lao Ai is going to use him to poison me? That is probably more difficult than using actual assassins."

In a hushed voice, Wu Fu said, "The person Lao Ai is going to poison is the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong involuntarily cried out, "What?!"

Wu Fu solemnly and cautiously explained, "Ever since that day I met the Crown Prince, I have been unable to forget that lofty, hegemonic air he carries about him, capable of overcome the entire world. When the Crown Prince's gaze swept across me, I felt incapable of hiding anything from him. The most impressive, hardest to accomplish feat was that when he was faced with beautiful women, he maintained his presence, unlike the likes of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, who immediately lose their bearings. Thus, last night, when Meimei came back from accompanying Lao Ai and jauntily told me that Lao Ai would soon be able to overthrow Lu Buwei, I immediately grew anxious, although she told me no more."

Xiang Shaolong felt as though he was slowly beginning to be convinced by this person whom he had always held in contempt.

The main point of doubt was that at the moment, Lao Ai didn't have a strong enough base of supporters and assistants. If he were to assassinate Xiao Pan at this point in time, there would be little direct benefit for himself and Zhu Ji. It would also be of no benefit to Lu Buwei. Both Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji's source of authority ultimately sprang from Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "If Lao Ai were to dare engage in an

act of treason which would result in his entire clan being exterminated, how could he easily let others know?" Wu Fu said, "The relationship between Meimei and Lao Ai is not a superficial one. They have been intimate for many years, but in the past, because of Lu Buwei, they could only meet furtively. Now, although he has become the Inner Custodian, he still isn't able to overcome Lu Buwei. And now, with Lu Buwei intending to take her as his concubine, how could Lao Ai not grow desperate? It's very natural for him to expose some secrets to her."

Xiang Shaolong had learned long ago of the intimate relationship between Dan Meimei and Lao Ai. Deep inside, his belief increased by a few more points. Frowning, he said, "What benefit would assassinating the Crown Prince bring Lao Ai?"

Wu Fu solemnly said, "In order to assassinate the Crown Prince, there's no need at all for him to use an expert doctor like Mao Jiao. Many of the Crown Prince's aides are Lao Ai's men. What's more, if anything happened to the Crown Prince, everyone would place the blame squarely on Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong nodded. "The situation is indeed as you describe."

Wu Fu saw that Xiang Shaolong was beginning to believe him. He began to grow excited, but lowered his voice as much as possible. "After Meimei spoke those words which aroused my suspicions, she retired to her room. I knew that she was not the type of person who could keep a secret, and that she would go speak to her closest, most trusted friends about it. And so I eavesdropped for an entire night, before I finally learned just a little bit more."

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's eyes grow wide, Wu Fu awkwardly explained, "Xiang Shaolong, please don't misunderstand. It's an old trick to install copper hearing tubes and other eavesdropping devices in the rooms of the courtesans. She doesn't know about it at all. It's fortunate that this was the case, as I otherwise wouldn't have been able to uncover Lao Ai's plot."

Listening to this story, Xiang Shaolong's gaze grew dazed and his mouth became slack. If Wu Fu hadn't personally explained this to him, he would never have realized that when the Four Beauties of the Drunken Wind Pavilion were engaged in 'flipping flowers and overturning islands', someone might be listening with one ear respectfully pressed against the hearing mechanisms."

8:25

Wu Fu continued, "Meimei told her confidante, Xiu Ju, that Lao Ai was going to have Mao Jiao prepare a special medicine which, if taken several times, would cause a person to become stupid and dull, and do nothing but want to sleep all day. As long as the Crown Prince is administered this medicine a few times, it will be very difficult for him to handle the affairs of state during the morning court. By then, the Empress will control all the power of the court. If Lao Ai wants there to be wind, there will be wind; if he wants there to be rain, there will be rain.

Xiang Shaolong was instantly covered in cold sweat.

This scheme really was extraordinarily vicious. The most ingenious part of it was that anyone suspicious about the matter

would turn his attention towards Lu Buwei. After all, Lu Buwei had done something similar in the past.

Just as his heart began to tremble, Wu Fu continued, "Actually, Meimei feels something for you as well, great sir. It's only because you paid her no mind at all that her love for you has turned to hate. I've raised her since she was young; ever since she was a child, she's been arrogant and proud. She pays no mind at all to most people. Many people have offered to buy her and give her freedom, but she's refused. But now, it looks as though she has wholeheartedly decided to follow Lao Ai."

At this point in time, how could Xiang Shaolong possibly be bothered to worry about whether or not Dan Meimei is interested in him? Lowering his head, he asked, "Is Yang Yu intertwined with Xu Shang? Isn't she Guan Zhongxie's woman?"

Wu Fu sneered, "Guan Zhongxie has always considered women to be nothing more than sexual playthings. How could he be bothered to care about Yang Yu? Little Yu has always been a very sentimental person. I think she's more interested in you than in Xu Shang! If you are interested, sir, I can give her to you. Aside from Gui Yan, all four of the women listen to me."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but laugh. "Don't say these things to intentionally flatter me. Why is it that Gui Yan doesn't listen to you?"

Wu Fu forced out a laugh. "This girl has always been stubborn. Ever since Mo Ao's death, her temperament has totally changed, and she thinks of nothing besides avenging him. She won't even

listen to my entreaties. I only hope that you, great sir, won't be bothered to deal with her."

Xiang Shaolong didn't expect that Wu Fu had a benevolent side to him as well. Smiling, he said, "Relax! If I wanted to deal with her, I would've done so long ago."

Realizing that he shouldn't stay here too long, he grew solemn. "I will report this matter to the Crown Prince. When the day of Lao Ai's demise comes, we naturally will not forget this meritorious service which you rendered."

Overflowing with thanks, Wu Fu fell down and prostrated on the floor once more.

Xiang Shaolong pulled him up. Only then did he leave the courtyard to meet his appointment with Lao Ai.

He couldn't help but feel many emotions at once.

For Lao Ai to act in such a way, he most certainly must have Zhu Ji's concurrence.

It's said that even vicious tigers won't consume their own offspring. Who would've that for her lover's sake, Zhu Ji would be willing to harden her heart and harm her "own son"?

From this moment forward, he wouldn't feel any more guilt towards Zhu Ji at all.

When they reached the private courtyard, Xiang Shaolong ordered Jing Shan and the others to remain outside, while he and Wu Fu strode into the main pavilion.

Six placemats were arranged in two lines within the pavilion. When Lao Ai saw Xiang Shaolong walk in, that treacherous thug revealed a look of joy on his face. He led Pu Hu, Han Jie, Ling Qi, Lao Si, and the others in rising to their feet. All of the accompanying girls instantly prostrated on the floors as well. It was a very grand and solemn welcome.

Xiang Shaolong paused for a moment, sweeping the room with a vigorous gaze. All four of the Four Flowers had arrived. Bai Lei was accompanying Pu Hu, Dan Meimei and Yang Yu were both by Lao Ai's side, while Gui Yan was seated next to Lao Si. Han Jie and Ling Qi both had different girls accompanying them. Although they couldn't compare to Bai Lei, they were definitely above-average.

Seeing that they hadn't yet started the banquet, Xiang Shaolong knew that everyone had been waiting for him. Apologetically, he said, "Please forgive me for the sin of being tardy. But please do not punish me with wine either; otherwise, although I'm the last to arrive, I'll be the first to leave."

Hearing his clever, pearl-like words, everyone roared in laughter. Delicate female laughter intermingled with the coarse, heroic laughter of the men, carrying with it an indescribable, intoxicating allure.

Wu Fu led Xiang Shaolong to his seat, next to Lao Ai's. Lao Ai happily laughed, "For Great General Xiang, well-known to rarely appear in houses of lust, to be willing to grace us with his presence gives us ravenous, lustful wolves a great deal of face. How can we quibble about whether or not the Great General arrives late or leaves early?"

Xiang Shaolong sat down. His seat was directly opposite that of the great traitor, Pu Hu. The latter raised his glass. "This toast isn't a punishment, but a congratulatory toast. That night, I lost so much money that I even forgot my old man's name. I forgot to congratulate the Great General for his victory as well! Allow me to offer you this toast in recompense."

Everyone raised their cups in salute.

Xiang Shaolong hesitated for a moment as he suddenly thought of Mao Jiao. If he were to tell himself that he wasn't concerned, he would be lying to himself.

Wu Fu pretended to bow down, while seizing the chance to whisper, "The wine is fine. All of it is newly opened." Only then did he bow out.

Perhaps it was all in his head, but Xiang Shaolong could feel that the gazes of Meimei and Yang Yu were different from before as they watched him. It seemed as though the gazes weren't just filled with hate, and had love as well.

Putting his cup down, Lao Ai first introduced the two remaining

girls. The girl by Han Jie's side was Dan Fu; the girl by Ling Qi's side was Hua Ling. He laughed, "Please don't blame me for trying to monopolize the ladies. Of the two ladies by my side, one of them came here with the express purpose of accompanying you. I'm just taking care of her on your behalf while you weren't here. Now, I'll return her to her proper host. Sir, please take your pick!"

Xiang Shaolong naturally wouldn't treat women as commodities to be traded, but this was simply how people of the age viewed things. Flowers with owners were private property; flowers without owners were commodities to be traded. Thus, Dan Meimei and Yang Yu were both happy to obey, without any intention of disobedience. They even revealed traces of a smile as they gazed at Xiang Shaolong, looking slightly competitive as they awaited Xiang Shaolong's selection.

Xiang Shaolong wasn't sure what to do. It would've been best if he hadn't listened to Wu Fu's words. After he had, he wasn't sure how he should treat the two girls.

But he knew quite well that although it wasn't necessary to "avoid them like a serpent's tongue", he should still "maintain a solemn, respectful distance". Laughing, he said, "How would ole Xiang dare to seize Official Lao's fortune? For you to have all the beauties to yourself is a very wonderful thing. It would be better if I called for another girl instead."

The two girls immediately put on an appearance of disagreement, even acting like spoiled children with Lao Ai, filling the entire pavilion with just the right aura of spring love. At the same time, they gave face to both Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong. They really lived

up to their reputations as the two top girls of the place of pleasure.

Pu Hu laughed loudly. "Master Xiang really is formidable! With this masterstroke, he's managed to avoiding both of our girls and causing them to be disappointed. If I, Pu Hu, had known long ago about how talented you were, I wouldn't have made the wrong judgment at your duel, exhausting myself while losing all of my money. I have to rely on Master Ao's financial assistance, now, to be able to afford a bit of intimacy with my dear Little Lei."

After speaking, he gave Bai Lei, whom he held in his arms, a kiss on the lips.

Bai Lei not only refused his advances, she even snaked her arms up his thighs and gave him a hard pinch, arousing everyone's amusement and causing great laughter.

Perhaps it was because he was now aware of Lao Ai's plot, but Xiang Shaolong simply couldn't connect with the merriment and pleasure at the pavilion. When he thought of how he was back in the 21st century at those places of drunken debauchery, he realized how formidable he'd become.

To this point, he still wasn't sure what Lao Ai and Pu Hu's connection was. Logically speaking, Pu Hu should be Du Bi's man, who in turn supported Cheng Qiao, who had the backing of Madame Xiuli. He should be at loggerheads with Lao Ai, who belonged to the faction of the Empress Dowager. But now, he acted as if he were old friends with Lao Ai, causing others to feel strange.

And Pu Hu's eyes were filled with craftiness and wisdom; clearly, he was a man of ambition who was bold. But the appearance he put on in front of others was that of a lecherous, alcoholic businessman! From this, one can tell that this person wasn't simple at all.

Ling Qi, seated next to Pu Hu, laughed. "Boss Hu is always so humorous. Who doesn't know that your wealth has exceeded that of Qin or Zhao, and is only increasing day after day?" Pu Hu sighed. "When it comes to doing business, how can I compare to the Great General's father-in-law? He's even taken into his possession the territories of Quezhong, Bashu, and Hedong. Even if we ignore his holdings in livestock, his trade in mulberries, flax, fish, plates, copper, iron, and other goods turns enough profit to astonish and frighten. How could a humble, small-time businessman compare?"

Lao Ai couldn't help but laugh. "Boss Pu, you aren't trying to arouse General Xiang's sympathy and have him urge Boss Wu to return his winnings to you, are you?"

At this, even Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but laugh. This man really did have a talent for charming others.

Ling Qi laughed. "Boss Pu's supreme headquarters is in Sanchuan, which has always been the province of Emperors. The others, such as Shangyang, are all too far away. Sanchuan is a fertile, rich province, with huge amounts of commercial traffic and a flourishing economy. Boss Pu, for you to complain in such a way, isn't this the same as the saying, 'Another man's woman is more desirable than your own'?"

These words once more provoked everyone into a round of loud laughter.

Xiang Shaolong secretly raised his guard against Lao Ai's strategic advisor by a few more notches. Just from these few words, one could tell that he was a man with vision and knowledge.

Mao Jiao, whom Xiao Pan had appointed to be a spy, hadn't yet appeared. Most likely, it was because he had arrived too soon and had not yet had a chance to penetrate this inner circle. Only after he harmed Xiao Pan would his situation improve.

At this moment, Gui Yan, who was accompanying Lao Si, let out a sharp cry. It turned out Lao Si hadn't been able to refrain from making a move against her, rubbing her arms and legs.

The Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion were the most famous courtesans of Xianyang. People of slightly lower status would find it easier to enter heaven than to touch a single finger of theirs.

Even powerful officials like Lu Buwei and Lao Ai had to exhaust all of their skills in order to enter their fragrant rooms.

From this, one could tell that the price of their bodies was not an ordinary one. For Lao Si to be so hurriedly lecherous, one could tell that this gentleman was nothing more than a common, vulgar person. The only reason he was able to come here was because of his connection to Lao Ai.

The relationship between Lao Ai and Lao Si was similar to that of Lu Buwei and the deposed Lu Xiong. Appointing one's relatives to a high position was a common act in this day, but it also led to disaster and failure.

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of regret.

Previously, for a brief moment of joy, he pulled down Lu Xiong. This was an unwise decision. If he remained in the position of City Guard Commander, he could be used to tie down Guan Zhongxie.

When he recalled this, he made a decision to himself, that no matter what, before Lao Ai's fall, he must 'be kind' to Lao Si.

Lao Ai angrily glared at Lao Si before raising a cup in apology to Gui Yan. Only then did this beautiful woman who hated Xiang Shaolong return to being demure and alluring, even though later, she would most certainly curse out Lao Si in front of her sisters.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Wu Fu's 'precious treasure' which would enable to eavesdrop on the girls. He felt it was both preposterous and laughable.

In order to improve the atmosphere, Pu Hu sighed, "In terms of business acumen, the Premier Mentor is the real expert. The section on farming in his 'Lu Family Annals' is filled with broad wisdom and tremendous knowledge. It discusses how to fertilize the soil, how to utilize every corner of the field, how to spread out seeds, exterminate weeds, wipe out pests, apply manure, how to properly plow and aerate the soil, and the proper seasons for

planting. From this, we can tell that his experience really is remarkable."

Han Jie sneered. "If I had as much money as him, I could put out a 'Han Family Annals' for fun. Right now, Qin is filled with so many people of talent. What can't we produce?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that Pu Hu had no good intentions, and was purposefully increasing the enmity between the Lu faction and the Lao faction. He couldn't help but secretly be covered in cold sweat.

When he came up with their plan to use the 'Five Eternal Elements' to counter the 'Lu Family Annals', he had stopped thinking about the Annals. Actually, the creation of the Annals was an epochal event which had deeply affected the thinking of all intellectuals and philosophers of this era. It was an entire doctrine and ideology, which could best be described as the "Lu Family Doctrine".

Thus, even if Lao Ai's plot succeeded, the person who stood to benefit in the end most likely would still be Lu Buwei, and not Lao Ai.

Under the auspices of the court and the commoners, Lu Buwei could easily generate the momentum to push his power past that of Zhu Ji. By the time he formally took the position of Imperial Regent, based on his influence in both the civil sector and the military sector, great disaster would befall both Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong.

Just as he was pondering all of this and as his mind was swimming across the vastness of the void, a warbling, oriole like voice could be heard. "Great General Xiang, your mind seems to be absent. There is wine, but it moistens not your lips; is your honored self lacking in rest?"

Xiang Shaolong was startled awake and saw that everyone's eyes were on him, while the person who had spoken was Yang Yu, whom Wu Fu has described as very sentimental. Using the opportunity to 'push the boat along with the current', he said, "Last night, I had a few too many cups of wine. Even after I woke up, my head still hurt and my legs were still wobbly...heh!"

Just as he wanted to use this as an excuse to slip away, Lao Ai interrupted, "If Master Mao hadn't been summoned to the palace by the Crown Prince to deal with his illness, we could call him here to take a look at you. Master Mao is an illustrious, famous physician. I'm sure he has medicine to cure a hangover."

Xiang Shaolong was immediately covered in cold sweat.

For Xiao Pan to summon Master Mao into the court, he must be using illness as an excuse to receive a report. But Mao Jiao was a tool which Lao Ai was using in his plot. If, using flowery words or secretive actions, he was able to deceive Xiao Pan into drinking the poisoned medicine, it would be a calamity.

Although he realized that Xiao Pan was Qin Shihuang, and thus should not be turned into an idiot by others so easily, how could he

be at ease, given how difficult it might be to predict certain things? When he thought of this, his heart was so anxious, it felt set aflame. He immediately rose to his feet and saluted everyone present. "Everyone, please forgive me. I just remembered an urgent task which I must immediately deal with."

Everyone stared at him in astonishment.

Book 19 Chapter 4 – An Open Challenge To Battle

Frowning, Lao Ai said, "What is so urgent? Can you order your subordinates to handle it? The banquet hasn't even started yet! And in addition, there is the song-and-dance routine which I specially prepared for you."

Pu Hu also spoke. "Master Xiang, you haven't even warmed your seat yet. How can you leave in such a rush? None of us will let you leave."

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed at himself. This really could be handled by someone else. Wu Zhuo would be the best person. So long as he sent word to Teng Yi, Teng Yi could then convey the message to Lord Changping. Smiling, he said, "You're right; I became foolish in my urgency. I'll go relay the instructions to my subordinates now. Everyone, please pardon me."

Only then did Lao Ai and the others relax and allow him to go.

Xiang Shaolong strode outside and arrived at the small pavilion where Jing Shan and the others were in the middle of a feast, while flirting with the pretty serving girls who were taking care of them. Wu Zhuo was nowhere to be seen.

At the same time, Wu Guang said in a terrified voice, "Wu Zhuo went to find his old lover. Master, please do not blame him."

How could Xiang Shaolong blame him? He wanted to send Jing Shan instead, but then decided that this would be a good chance to take a walk outside and relax. After finding out where Wu Zhuo had gone, he wanted to leave, but everyone hurriedly stood up behind him.

Xiang Shaolong had never liked a crowd following behind him wherever he went. When he saw them enjoying their feast, he told them to stop following him and slipped out on his own.

When he stepped into the copse of trees outside, he felt reinvigorated. When he remembered that he had a tender wife and loving child waiting at home, while he had to feign friendship with these people at this sort of place, he could only let out a long sigh.

Quite soon, he arrived at the main road leading to the primary courtyard. It was late at night, while he was by himself, and so all of the courtesans and serving girls he encountered assumed that he was just a common man-at-arms and didn't pay much attention to him.

By the time he neared the primary courtyard, he suddenly saw Wu Fu rush towards him without a lantern. His head lowered, he didn't notice Xiang Shaolong at all as he scurried into a small path.

Xiang Shaolong grew suspicious and quickly, quietly followed him.

If he hadn't seen the man scurry towards the bamboo pavilion housing the Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion, he

definitely wouldn't have followed.

This was because all four of the Flowers were at Lao Ai's banquet. Wu Fu should be busy taking care of the guests. There was no reason for him to head in this direction...unless someone was waiting for him.

Anyone waiting in the boudoir of any one of the Flowers must belong to Lao Ai's people or Lu Buwei's people. Otherwise, who would dare contend with them?

Since Lao Ai's people were all at the pavilion, who could it be besides Lu Buwei's subordinate?

Using the 21st century techniques of the special ops division, Xiang Shaolong closely followed behind Wu Fu and quickly arrived at the bamboo residence.

He could see people milling around the entrance and escorting Wu Fu inside.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt inadequate to the task at hand. Previously, it was all thanks to Han Chuang's assistance that he managed to secretly enter this 'Secluded Bamboo Residence', which all men dreamed of entering. Right now, he didn't even have his climbing hooks. There was no possible way he could enter!

Just as he wanted to leave, a ray of light appeared in his head.

Didn't Wu Fu say that there were a series of copper tubes that allowed people to listen in on the Four Flowers, while they themselves wouldn't know about it?

This probably wasn't a lie, because all Xiang Shaolong had to do was to investigate in order to determine whether Wu Fu was telling the truth or not. This sort of listening device was probably similar to the hollow copper tube listening device installed at Lord Xinling's residence. It couldn't be installed in any of the four rooms, as it would otherwise have been discovered long ago.

But it should also be installed nearby, as the longer the distance became, the lower the transmission quality would be.

Xiang Shaolong no longer hesitated, as he went searching amidst the bamboo. Soon, he found a small storage building within the bamboo grove. Behind it was a tall wall.

He quickly struck a match and became to search the building. Soon, he found a room that was particularly clean that had four large cabinets in it. They looked different compared to all of the other storage cabinets in the building, and were locked as well.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly took out his flying needles. In a short period of time, he unlocked one of the cabinets. Opening the cabinet, he couldn't help but cheer.

He saw a copper tube rise up from the floor, with the end appearing like a small loudspeaker, perfectly positioned for a

person standing here to press his ears against.

At least Wu Fu, that brat, hadn't lied to him on the question of the eavesdropping installation.

of the eavesdropping installation.

But this copper tube clearly wasn't connected to the room Wu Fu had gone to, because he couldn't hear anything.

Xiang Shaolong tried opening the other cabinets. By the time he reached the third, he heard a faint sound, and he hurriedly pressed his ear against the tube.

From the sound of it, it was wine cups being clinked against one another.

After a long time, a man's voice could be heard, laughing.

After a person's voice traveled through these copper tubes, it would become distorted and unclear, so for the moment, he could not tell who it was that had just laughed.

Following that, another person said, "The Premier Mentor's plot really is formidable. Although Xiang Shaolong is crafty and suspicious, he wholly fell for my story."

How could Xiang Shaolong not realize that it was Wu Fu who was speaking? He was so furious that he gnashed his teeth.

The other voice laughed, "It's mostly because Boss Wu has naturally good acting skills. That's why this chain-of-pearls strategy the Premier Mentor came up with can succeed. When, in the future, the Crown Prince meets with disaster, no one will think that we had anything to do with it."

Just from the way the man spoke, it was obvious that the man was Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed to himself, "What a narrow escape!"

If he hadn't decided to stealthily spy on the conversation and hear these words, he would have taken a tremendous tumble, one which he might never recover from.

From this, he could also tell that Xiao Pan really was the heaven-ordained Qin Shihuang, whose good fortune was determined by heaven.

Whereas Lu Buwei was only defeated because of luck. Or perhaps it was because this had all been planned out according to the will of heaven.

At the same time, he felt a sense of exhaustion.

Lu Buwei was filled with countless venomous schemes, one after the other. When would he have time for peace?

Only when the Black Dragon appeared.

Lu Buwei's voice could be heard from the copper tube. "Is Meimei still accompanying those bandits?"

Wu Fu laughed. "Premier Mentor, please be at ease. Xiang Shaolong was terrified by my words and will find an excuse to leave early, so that he can inform the Crown Prince. Whereas I have already informed Lao Ai that tonight, Meimei can only accompany him until ten, after which she must leave. I'll escort her back here at that time."

Lu Buwei coldly sneered. Disdainfully, he said, "This fake eunuch actually dares to fight with me, Lu Buwei, over a woman. I think he's tired of living."

After listening for a while longer, Xiang Shaolong realized that he wouldn't be able to discover anything else. Re-locking the cupboards, he quietly snuck out.

Returning to Lao Ai's pavilion, he saw that Qiu Risheng and the three principal instructors of the Weinan Martial School, Guo Xin, An Jinliang, and Chang Jie had all arrived as well. They sat on four freshly prepared seats. Four more beautiful courtesans had appeared as well, pouring wine for them. In beauty, they were slightly inferior to Dan Xia and Hua Ling, who were serving Han Jie and Ling Qi.

Seeing his return, Yang Yu and Dan Meimei were the first to

voice their discontent, while everyone else chimed in, blaming him for having taken so long.

The way Xiang Shaolong felt now as opposed to earlier was tremendously different. He first greeted Qiu Risheng and the others, before willingly accepting a cup of wine in punishment, so as to appease the 'public indignation'.

When Qiu Risheng toasted him, his expression was extraordinarily cold and calm. An Jinliang and Chang Jie showed hints of hostility on their faces as well. Unexpectedly, although Guo Xin was slightly less than ardent, Xiang Shaolong could feel that Guo Xin was grateful towards him in Guo Xin's courteous toast.

Lao Ai clearly wasn't pleased with the attitudes of Qiu Risheng and his men. He constantly signaled with his eyes, but Qiu Risheng pretended not to notice as the atmosphere immediately began to change.

At this time, Xiang Shaolong noticed that Dan Meimei's pretty eyes, which gazed towards him at times, were filled with a hidden hatred and detestation. He secretly exclaimed that that the power of suggestion really was powerful. Because he had resolved to never believe Wu Fu's words again, his entire impression of her had changed.

Right now, there were eight feasts going on in the pavilion. Only Xiang Shaolong alone was missing a female companion.

At this moment, the food was served. The chopsticks were made of silver, as a guard against people using poison.

Lao Ai said, "Master Hu never comes to visit friends empty-handed. On this trip to Xianyang, he brought several groups of world-class beauties in a song-and-dance troop, so as to broaden our horizons. The primary leader, Shi Sufang, is known as the Lady of Three Perfections, referring to her voice, her looks, and her artistic skill, which have mesmerized the world."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly astonished. From Lao Ai's words, he could tell that this was a traveling group of professional, independent entertainers, not subject or subordinate to any organization. At this place and time, when everyone is fighting for advantage, how was it possible that Shi Sufang was able to keep their liberty and perform wherever they please?

In this ancient era, aside from the common folk, everyone had a political scheme or plan. Logically speaking, this entertainment group was not an exception. For them to be able to link up with Pu Hu was showed that they were not a simple group at all.

Pu Hu contentedly said, "It took me two months of time and effort as well as a personal trip to Hanye to visit Boss Jin, the master of this troop, and present him with rich gifts before I was able to convince him to take his troop here to Xianyang. I have already arranged for them to put on a presentation at the Spring Sacrifices, so as to liven up the place. We can consider this to be a preview performance."

Qiu Risheng interrupted, "I heard that the 'Lady of Three

Perfections', Shi Sufang, along with the 'Soft Boned Beauty', Fu Gongyuan, who performed at the Premier Mentor's residence the other night, and the country of Yan's 'Exquisite Swallow' Feng Fei, are known as the 'Three Legendary Courtesans'. Who would've imagined that two of them would be in Xianyang at the same time? We really are blessed with good fortune."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that the soft boned beauty who had attempted to assassinate him the other night was named Fu Gongyuan.

Of the Three Legendary Courtesans, at least one of them was a remarkable female assassin.

What of the other two?

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but feel curious.

Lao Ai grinned lecherously. "I imagine that the Premier Mentor has tasted the loveliness of the Soft-Boned Beauty. I wonder if Boss Pu has tried Shi Sufang's 'Three Perfections' in the bedroom, and if he would be willing to reveal a bit to us?"

All of them men roared in laughter, while all of the girls laughed while ridiculing him. They were all used to these men speaking such brazen words and all knew the proper way to respond.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing inside. One of the reasons of Lao Ai's eventual downfall was the fact that he only had these

lecherous men as his subordinates.

Pu Hu first laughed alongside everyone else, before responding, "If it was so easy to gain her favor, Shi Sufang would've been taken into someone's private residence long ago. Every time Shi Sufang comes to a place, she always must have a guarantee that no one will force her to sell herself. On this trip, the guarantor is myself. How could I be a mean, contemptible man who will rob what I have been assigned to guard?"

An Jinliang, seated behind Qiu and Guo, was chewing on a chicken leg. He vaguely muttered out, "What a shame, what a waste!"

Instantly, everyone roared in laughter once more.

At this point in time, Yang Yu rose to her feet. Carrying a wine flagon, she walked towards Xiang Shaolong. First her knees touched the floor, before she sat down on his leg. Laughing beautifully, she said, "Master Xiang, please allow your servant to offer you a toast!"

Xiang Shaolong casually raised his glass, allowing her to fill it.

Lao Ai laughed. "Since Miss Yang shows such interest in Master Xiang, then Master Xiang should just accept her. I can guarantee that her 'Three Perfections' in the bedroom is not a whit inferior to Shi Sufang."

Everyone laughed again, adding fuel to the flames. Only Qiu Risheng and the others revealed a look of disdain, showing that he still held a grudge against Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong saw that this charming, mesmerizing beauty was blushing, her head lowered. Even if she was just putting on an act, he still felt deeply moved. This was the normal reaction any man would have towards a beauty. The thought that she might be as venomous as a serpent's fangs added a dangerous, flaming spice to the mixture.

In the midst of the laughter, Yang Yu lifted her beautiful face to gaze up at him through her mesmerizing eyes, before lowering her head again. She lightly whispered, "If Master Xiang is able to find a little free time, Yang Yu is willing to attend to you on the pillow mat."

Those two lines were spoken very softly and delicately. Only Xiang Shaolong could hear them, adding an indescribable spice.

Xiang Shaolong's gaze traveled across her firm, crisp bosom, and almost agreed out of hand. But fortunately, over the past few days, he had been getting up every morning to practice his martial arts, and in the process had fortified his willpower immensely. In a gentle voice, he said, "It is difficult to untie the knots in one's heart. Miss Yang, please forgive me."

Yang Yu's scorching gaze trailed across his face with the hidden bitterness of a young woman thwarted in love, before returning to Lao Ai's side.

Xiang Shaolong voluntarily raised his cup and offered a toast to everyone. Everyone loudly toasted in him return. But in Qiu Risheng's party, aside from Guo Xin, everyone appeared forced, clearly just going through the motions.

Afterwards, Qiu Risheng and Pu Hu toasted each other.

Just as Xiang Shaolong thought that it was strange how Lao Ai was totally unable to control Qiu Risheng, he saw Pu Hu and Qiu Risheng exchange knowing, secretive smiles. In a flash, he understood Qiu Risheng and Lao Ai's relationship.

Qiu Risheng used to be Lord Yangquan's man, who favored Xiao Pan's "younger brother", Cheng Qiao. Now, he still favored Cheng Qiao, but decided to conspire with Du Bi and Pu Hu instead.

Du Bi and Pu Hu's influence was great, but was concentrated in the three eastern provinces. That had become Cheng Qiao's bastion of power.

This was the result of Lu Buwei's handiwork; he had intentionally allowed this situation to come about, so as to force Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji to rely on him to deal with them.

But Du Bi and the others wanted to make inroads into Xianyang, which is why he had Qiu Risheng and the others pretend to ally with Lao Ai, causing both Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji to be unable to touch them.

The strange, complicated relationship was as simple as that.

Naturally, he wouldn't reveal this precious knowledge which he had suddenly acquired to Lao Ai.

Lu Buwei was playing a game of 'balance of power'. He had no choice but to play along as well.

After gaining this understanding, Xiang Shaolong instantly realized that he had become the primary antagonist for Du Bi, Pu Hu, and Qiu Risheng to attack.

With his death, they could immediately smash apart the balance of power maintained by the various powerful interests in Xianyang.

To Du Bi and Pu Hu, naturally, the more chaos there was, the better for them.

Right now, there were more than a few people in the military command structure of Qin who opposed Lu Buwei. If Du Bi was able to ally with several of the most powerful people, such as Wang He, Wang Ling, Wang Jian, Lord Changping, or Lords An, Gu, and Xi, Cheng Qiao would be in a powerful position to fight with the ruler which Lu Buwei superficially supported, Xiao Pan.

Once they got rid of Xiao Pan, Cheng Qiao would naturally become the successor to the throne of Qin. And the first thing to do

as part of that plan would be to get rid of him, Xiang Shaolong, throwing Xianyang into chaos. Only then, with the waters muddied, would they be able to snatch the biggest fish of all, Xiao Pan.

Right at this moment, he saw Qiu Risheng repeatedly signal to Guo Xin with his eyes. After a long time, Guo Xin somewhat unwillingly said, "Great General, would you be willing to come to our school in the next few days to display your sabre skill to all of us and broaden our horizons?"

The words were the same, but compared to the way in which Guo Xin spoke those words at the Drunken Wind Pavilion the night before the great duel, there was no longer that sense of danger and tension. From this, one could tell that Ji Yanran's kindness and Xiao Pan's promotion of him had moved him at least a little.

When it comes down to it, at this moment in time, Xiao Pan was ascendant and all authority was concentrated in him. In the past, it was Guo Xin decision to follow Lord Yangquan which resulted in him being given no path to join Xiang Shaolong's side. Right now, given this wonderful opportunity, for him to sacrifice it on Qiu Risheng's behalf really was asking quite a lot from him.

Before Xiang Shaolong had a chance to speak, Lao Ai feigned ignorance and said, "Master Guo, haven't you already personally witnessed Great General Xiang's godlike sabre skills? Why do you insist on seeing it yet another time?"

These words were extremely impolite. Clearly, Lao Ai was extremely unhappy.

Qiu Risheng laughed loudly. "It's precisely because the Great General's sabre skills are godlike, that we want him to go to our school and display it to our children. Inner Custodian, you misunderstood."

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "If tomorrow, Headmaster Qiu is willing to personally enter the arena, then no matter what, I Xiang Shaolong will be at the school to be instructed by you."

After these words came out, everyone's face immediately changed, including Pu Hu's.

Although these words were very politely said, they clearly showed that Xiang Shaolong had the intention of killing Qiu Risheng. And, afterwards, no one would dare to investigate, because Qiu Risheng would have no one to blame but himself.

The reason Pu Hu and Qiu Risheng's expressions changed was because they felt that Xiang Shaolong had already seen through to the real nature of the relationship between them and Lao Ai, which is why he was being so merciless.

The reason Lao Ai and his companion's expressions changed was because based on Qiu Risheng's reputation, after Xiang Shaolong said these words, even if Qiu Risheng knew that he was going to be defeated, all he could do was stiffen his spine and do battle, without any recourse whatsoever.

Dan Meimei and the other girls were absolutely stunned by Xiang

Shaolong's awe-inspiring aura, a heroic spirit seen once in a generation. Their fragrant hearts beat faster.

Qiu Risheng really did raise his head to the sky and laugh loudly, before heroically saying, "In recent years, there hasn't been a single person like Master Xiang, who is willing to exchange a few stances with this Headmaster. Tomorrow at noon, I will respectfully await your presence within the school."

After he was finished speaking, he immediately rose. He bowed towards Pu Hu and Lao Ai before flicking his sleeves and leaving.

Guo Xin and the others had no other choice but to bow as well, before following him out.

The atmosphere in the courtyard immediately became extremely awkward.

Everyone glanced at one another. None of them had expected Qiu Risheng to be so intolerant and so petty. At this moment, his face filled with doubt, Wu Fu walked in, before turning and watching Qiu Risheng and the others depart.

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Has Owner Wu come to take Meimei away and bring her to meet with the Premier Mentor?"

Lao Ai and Wu Fu's faces simultaneously appeared shocked.

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Wu Fu's legs went soft, and he collapsed into a kneeling position.

He honestly had no idea what had just happened before his very eyes just now.

All he knew was that Xiang Shaolong had exposed his intentions with a single sentence. As he had a guilty conscience, he felt like a man who was previously wrapped in thick clothes, who had been suddenly stripped naked without a single garment to protect his modesty.

Although Xiang Shaolong had only seen past a single part of his intentions, Wu Fu felt as though Xiang Shaolong knew everything.

Although he hadn't consciously thought of the repercussions, his subconsciousness realized that if his mean, base, contemptible actions were revealed to Xiang Shaolong and the Crown Prince, his entire family line would be exterminated.

Thus, his act of kneeling down sprang from his subconscious mind.

The reason Lao Ai's face changed was because Wu Fu had deceived him.

Earlier, Wu Fu had lied to him and told him that Dan Meimei wasn't feeling well, and so had to retire early. Naturally, she wouldn't be able to accompany him for the entire night tonight. Who would have imagined that it was a lie, so that she could go and be with the Premier Mentor. This really was intolerable and unforgivable.

Although he thought it was strange that Xiang Shaolong knew that Dan Meimei was going to accompany the Lu Buwei, his fury surpassed his sense of curiosity.

Only Dan Meimei had guessed a little bit! Everyone else stared at Wu Fu in total astonishment as he knelt there on the ground, not understanding what had happened. Xiang Shaolong said, 'astonished', "Owner Wu, did you do something wrong? As the saying goes, 'A man without a guilty conscience won't be afraid if someone knocks on his door at night.' But Owner Wu, you look like the exact opposite. After a single sentence, you knelt down. Why is this?"

Wu Fu was sly, crafty old fox. After calming down, he cursed himself secretly for being cowardly and acting in such a guilty manner. He hurriedly jumped up before coughing drily, "I just lost my footing momentarily and accidentally fell to my knees. I hope that everyone here will not laugh at me."

Lao Ai coldly snorted. "Owner Wu, I'm sure that you didn't come here in accordance with what Master Xiang said, with the intention of taking Meimei to see the Premier Mentor, right?" Wu Fu's fear of Lao Ai was far less than his dread of Xiang Shaolong. He hurriedly said, "That really is the truth. But if the Inner

Custodian is not happy, I will go and refuse the Premier Mentor right away." At the moment, Wu Fu was still badly shaken. All he wanted to do was escape quickly and discover how Xiang Shaolong found out about this affair. One of the possibilities, naturally, was that Xiang Shaolong's men had discovered Lu Buwei's arrival.

Dan Meimei let out a light, bell-like laugh. After dispersing the tense atmosphere, she sweetly said, "Great General Xiang, when you took a stroll outside earlier, did you run into the Premier Mentor?" Xiang Shaolong knew that Dan Meimei was using this method to communicate to Wu Fu that he was not to worry, and that Xiang Shaolong hadn't seen through all their secrets. Just from this point alone! One could tell that Dan Meimei really was on Lu Buwei's side. He calmly said, "I didn't see the Premier Mentor, but my subordinates did see some of his followers, which is why I made a wild guess. How could I have known that it would cause Owner Wu to fall to his knees?" Only now did Wu Fu and the others feel relieved, while Xiang Shaolong laughed inside.

Lao Ai reached out and grabbed Dan Meimei by her slender waist before barking towards Wu Fu, "Owner Wu, do you know how you should proceed?" Wu Fu lowered his head in response and awkwardly left the pavilion."

Pu Hu raised his glass in a toast. "'A man without a guilty conscience won't be afraid if someone knocks on his door at night.' I've never heard this interesting phrase before. General Xiang's words are as precious and marvelous as pearls. Pu Hu offers you a toast!" Everyone had the same feeling and uniformly toasted Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly inside. He knew that he had once more used a phrase which came from after this period of time. Pu Hu intentionally repeated those two lines, showing that he had seen straight through Wu Fu's evil designs and guilty conscience.

By this time, everyone was feeling at least a little tipsy. Lao Ai laughed, "Why don't we forget about what is to happen tomorrow, and instead enjoy the astonishing performance of Shi Sufang, one of the Three Legendary Courtesans!" Xiang Shaolong raised his cup in response. "Tonight, there is wine, so tonight, let us drink; if there are troubles tomorrow, then let me worry about them tomorrow. Let's take another cup!" Everyone, including Dan Meimei and the other ladies, held their breath as they awaited Shi Sufang's arrival.

Even Xiang Shaolong was secretly in awe of her reputation as having reached 'Three Perfections', and waited for her with great anticipation.

The troop consisted of eighteen women. They entered as a group, some playing the flute, others beating the drums, causing many interweaving, exotic melodies to be heard at the same time. They danced as they played, their graceful, lithesome bodies pleasing to the eye.

They were all young, jade-like beauties. They wore short sleeved gowns which, when matched with the music and their dance, was extremely mesmerizing.

Suddenly, the music changed. Two rows of eight beautiful

dancing courtesans holding dancing fans appeared, wearing a thin, light gauze as they danced their way into the pavilion, through the main door. Their movements were fluid and graceful as their bodies formed all sorts of artificial patterns and designs. All of the men watching sighed with admiration as they watched.

Although Qin was the strongest nation at this time, when it comes to culture and the arts, how can it compare to the rest of the Six Nations?

Dan Meimei and the other girls were the number one entertainers and dancers of Qin, but when they saw these girls from the eastern dance troop, they couldn't help but feel that they didn't match up.

The most exciting thing was that beneath the gauze could be faintly seen the image of a short-sleeved red dress. Their bare shoulder were as white as snow, their arms were jade-like and their legs as white as powder. All of them men watching stared, their eyes shining. Lao Si, that lustful pervert, was all the more salivating.

Xiang Shaolong seized the opportunity to see everyone's reactions. Although Lao Ai, Ling Qi, Han Jie, and the others had not lost self-control like Lao Si had, they were all stunned as they watched. Only Pu Hu's expression was calm and icy. From this, one could tell that the appearance he put on was totally for the purpose of giving others a false impression.

After thousands and tens of thousands of transformations, the two dancing groups reformed into one large group. Cooing sweetly

beneath the eaves of the roofs, they burst out into incomparably beautiful song.

Xiang Shaolong didn't understand a single word of what they were singing. Just as he was pondering, the dancers suddenly flew to the four corners like butterflies as a woman of incomparable beauty awe-inspiringly appeared right in the middle.

Nobody had seen this beauty arrive, or when she had entered the group of dancers. Only when Pu Hu led them in clapping did they awaken from their stupor and began to cheer as well.

This beauty wore a fresh yellow flowered skirt, and on her feet she wore a pair of embroidered silk slippers. On her head, she wore a hairpin with the seal of a hawkbill turtle! On her ears, she wore a pair of beautiful pearl earrings, while around her powdered neck, she wore a chain of linked pearls. Every inch of her body was shiny and trembled, alongside every movement of her towering, erect, firm bosom! Thin silk streamers covered her slender, graceful arms and legs. Her skin was as white as silk satin, and her body was perfectly proportioned, giving her an irresistible allure.

She had a beautiful, melon-seed shaped face, within which was set a pair of brilliant, pearl-like eyes. Beneath her beautiful dimples was a pair of luscious lips, which looked like they had been painted scarlet red by the hands of heaven itself. She was beautiful, gorgeous, and full of vitality and life, but didn't appear vulgar in the slightest.

Although she sat on the ground and didn't move, her posture alone caused everyone to feel that she was a refined, elegant lady of

peerless dexterity. Her long, white neck left the deepest impression on Xiang Shaolong, especially the way she held it up loftily, giving her an incomparably noble, ladylike aura. Even the likes of Qin Qing and Ji Yanran could be considered at most a hair better than her.

The pose which Shi Sufang struck was just like that of the sun beginning to rise in the morning. All of the spectators, male or female, couldn't control the awe they felt for her peerless, world-class beauty, poise, and appearance.

The other dancers had already seated themselves in a circle around her. They gently fluttered peacock fans about her, letting onlookers know quite clearly that she was the real heart and soul of the troupe.

Shi Sufang appeared to be wholly unaware that she had become the center of attention for everyone in the room. She sat as though she were alone in her boudoir. After turning around and showing on a few soul-stirring expressions on her face and in her posture, she slowly began to sing.

From Shi Sufang's red lips came a most graceful, delicate, beautiful voice, which felt like the flying clouds or the running water. Her voice flowed out as though pushed by incessant waves, and the notes seemed to hang and linger in the heavy, silent air. Not only were the notes reluctant to leave; the people listening were unable to leave as well.

Xiang Shaolong was a person who originally knew nothing of music, but in recent years, thanks to Ji Yanran's influence, he had

learned a thing or two. Now, hearing her dreary, remote song, a beautiful image appeared in his mind. He visualized a goddess hidden within a secluded valley, bobbing up and down in the waves of the river, passionately singing to her own beautiful reflection in the water. The beauty and emotions evoked by her song was not one whit inferior to those evoked by Ji Yanran with the flute.

The song she was picking came from the poem, 'Picking Royal Ferns', of the 'Book of Odes'. It portrayed the letters and poems kept in the hearts of generals and soldiers as they went entered the field of war, repeatedly singing the words, "Picking royal ferns, picking royal ferns." The next segment portrayed the remembrances and recollections of old generals and soldiers. Nobody could resist the power of that lingering, plaintive melody.

Although her voice seemed both smooth and choppy, solid and vacant, it was extraordinarily clear, and her enunciation was perfect, so that the listeners wouldn't miss a single word. Her voice became fine and delicate once she reached the lines, "When I departed in the past, the weeping willows beckoned to me, as though they were unwilling for us to part. Today I have returned, as the rain and snow falls thick and fast. My movements are slow, for I suffer from both thirst and hunger. My heart is full of sorrow, and you know not my pain." Slowly, her voice died away with the music, drifting off to a place far away, filled with thousands of mountains and tens of thousands of rivers. Just at this moment, the other dancers pressed forward, screening her body with their own until she totally disappeared. Then, as a group, they departed from the entrance way.

Everyone was so moved that they forgot to applaud or cheer.

Xiang Shaolong had been totally enraptured as well, all of his senses lost.

Just as everyone was lost in the throes of a silent daze, a large, forty-something year old man with gaudy clothes walked in. Bowing, he said, "Jin Cheng pays his respect to Boss Pu and everyone else present." Pu Hu, recovering his senses, laughed, "This person is Boss Jin. It's all thanks to his rigorous training efforts that everyone present had the fortune to listen to that divine, heavenly melody."

Next, he introduced everyone to Boss Jin.

Lao Ai joyfully said, "Someone, give Boss Jin ten taels of gold!" One of his servants immediately gave the gold to Boss Jin.

Xiang Shaolong secretly pondered to himself that Lao Ai must recently have acquired a great deal of money, as he otherwise wouldn't be so free with his gold.

Just as Boss Jin was profusely thanking Lao Ai, Pu Hu delicately asked, "Is Miss Shi feeling well tonight? Could you invite her to come out and chat with us for a short while, so that we might properly thank her for her moving performance?" Boss Jin clearly was used to handling such questions. Intentionally putting on a mysterious air, he said softly, "This girl of mine definitely cannot be rushed. Let me find the proper time to arrange a meeting between her and all of you here. I guarantee I will handle this." Only then did everyone let out a breath.

Dan Meimei and the rest of the Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion all had faint looks of disdain on their faces, as though they were contemptuous of the airs that Shi Sufang was putting on. But deep in their hearts, they were all insanely jealous of the way in which she had mesmerized every single person here.

In terms of appearance alone, Dan Meimei really was only very slightly inferior to Shi Sufang. But in singing, she was a large step behind. And when it came to presentation and image, she was even farther behind. If this was all planned out by Boss Jin's "producers", then Boss Jin really was a formidable person.

Boss Jin turned towards Xiang Shaolong. "This girl of mine has always been extremely arrogant and her gaze has always been high. But she's been quite interested towards Master Xiang. Tonight, after she heard that you were coming, she was extremely happy and even sang her most famous song." Xiang Shaolong hurriedly disagreed modestly. At the same time, he cursed fiercely to himself. Earlier, when she was singing, Shi Sufang hadn't even glanced at him. Clearly, Boss Jin made this claim at Pu Hu's instigation, with the intention of arousing jealousy and envy between him and Lao Ai.

A look of hatred really did flash by Lao Ai's eyes. Laughing loudly, he said, "If that's the case, then Boss Jin only needs to arrange for Miss Shi to meet privately with Master Xiang. Bystanders like us are just ruining the moment for them." Xiang Shaolong really wanted to give Boss Jin two hard slaps, while simultaneously feeling startled at how Pu Hu was able to gain victory without firing a shot, using this evil scheme.

This particularly tactic was more effective against Lao Ai than anyone else.

Lao Ai had always been jealous about the relationship between Xiang Shaolong and Zhu Ji. Thus, these words of Boss Jin struck directly at his most sensitive spot.

Xiang Shaolong turned sideways to glance at Lao Ai and forced out a smile. "Master Lao, please don't take Boss Jin's words to be the truth. I think the truth is that Miss Shi doesn't care about anyone at all." Lao Ai let out two dry chuckles. Clearly, he still felt uncomfortable.

The happiest person, naturally, was Pu Hu. Raising his cup, he urged everyone to drink.

Boss Jin took the chance to depart.

Shortly afterwards, Wu Fu returned. He brought with him Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, and Xu Shang. They had escorted Boss Jin back as well.

Everyone present felt astonished, and they traded confused glances.

Lu Buwei, arriving at the center of the room, swept all of the guests with his gaze. His eyes alighted on Lao Ai, and he laughed loudly. "I came here today to force the Inner Custodian to drink

three cups of wine as punishment." Lao Ai, Xiang Shaolong, and the others all immediately saluted him, as Dan Meimei and the other women prostrated themselves on the floor.

In the past, Lao Ai had always lived under Lu Buwei's tyrannical rule. It was true that he now had the support of Zhu Ji and had flown to higher places. When Lu Buwei wasn't around, Lao Ai could flaunt his might, but when faced with his old patron directly, he seemed to have shrunk in size by half. Haltingly, he said, "Why is it that the Premier Mentor has come to punish this humble official?" Lu Buwei stroked his beard and laughed. "Shaolong, Boss Hu, and beautiful ladies present. You be my witnesses and my judges. Let me enumerate his crimes, one by one, and you tell me if I'm fair or not." Xu Shang shouted from behind Lu Buwei, "Why haven't you poured the wine for the Inner Custodian yet?" Lu Buwei happily said, "Beauties, be seated!" The ladies all began to sit in accordance with his orders.

Dan Meimei picked up the wine-kettle, while Yang Yu collected a cup. They filled it with wine before delivering it to Lao Ai, who looked like a mouse faced with a cat.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly full of admiration. As soon as Lu Buwei appeared, his reputation and prestige alone was sufficient to cow everyone present, and he totally seized the initiative.

Boss Jin, who had been 'dragged' back, stood besides Wu Fu, his head covered in sweat. He had no clue what had just happened.

When Lao Ai's subordinates, Han Jie, Ling Qi and Lao Si saw that even Pu Hu and Xiang Shaolong had fallen silent and were

rendered hoarse, they knew that they had even less space to interrupt.

Guan Zhongxie, standing to the other side of Lu Buwei, revealed a trace of a smile on his lips. His manner and bearing was natural and self-composed. No one could tell that he had been defeated by Xiang Shaolong's sabre just a few days ago.

Lu Buwei clasped his hands behind his back. He casually strode forward, stopping directly in front of Lao Ai. Smiling, he said, "The first crime is this: You knew that I, the Premier Mentor, had come to the Drunken Wind Pavilion. And yet, you didn't even come by to greet me. When did the relationship between us become no different than that of two strangers?"

Lao Ai felt extremely awkward. Forcing out a laugh, he replied, "I deserve to be punished! I deserve to be punished!" Raising his cup, he drank the first glass of wine.

Pu Hu, watching Dan Meimei fill the second cup for Lao Ai, laughed loudly. "The Premier Mentor should have punished all of us present with this first cup of wine."

Lu Buwei shook his head and laughed. "How would the Premier Mentor dare to punish Boss Pu? But it's entirely natural and reasonable for me to punish Little Lao. Isn't that right, Inner Custodian?"

A furious flame erupted in Lao Ai's eyes. These words were clearly intended to say that he was a person who forgot other's

benevolence towards him. Lowering his head, he said in a low voice, "The Premier Mentor's words are naturally never wrong. But I don't know what the reason is behind this second cup?"

Lu Buwei's gaze fell upon Xiang Shaolong. Smiling, he said, "Shaolong foretells with miraculous accuracy. Why don't you guess first?"

Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances with Lao Ai. Forcing out a smile, he said, "Premier Mentor, you act in unpredictably brilliant ways. How can I possibly predict what the reason is?" Lu Buwei felt extremely delighted. Under everyone's attentive gaze, he began to walk back towards the place where he originally stood. As he reached the main entrance, he turned around and laughed towards everyone, "The second punishment is related to the reason behind the first punishment. Earlier, I ran into Boss Jin and discovered that Little Lao had secretly arranged for everyone to come here and enjoy the songs and dances of the Lady of Three Perfections. Why is it that Little Lao didn't invite me, Lu Buwei, to partake of this rare opportunity?"

Guan Zhongxie chimed in, "Naturally, I'm not qualified to punish Little Lao, but I still can't help but blame Little Lao for not being a good enough friend."

Lao Ai was mocked by them repeatedly, and in addition, time and time again, they belittled him by addressing him as 'Little Lao', as they had in the past. His face grew very ugly to behold. But unfortunately, at this point in time, his power and influence was still weaker than Lu Buwei's. All he could do was to swallow his rage, forcing it down along with the second glass of punishment

wine. Letting out a sigh, he said, "Please forgive me, but this lowly official really cannot fathom what the third glass of punishment wine is for." Pu Hu, frowning, stared at Lao and at Lu. Head in a fog, he clearly didn't understand why Lu Buwei had come to openly humiliate Lao Ai.

Only Xiang Shaolong vaguely guessed the real reason. Lu Buwei had used Wu Fu to try and deceive Xiang Shaolong, so that they might link hands and simultaneously attack Lao Ai. The tip of this spear was really directed at Zhu Ji.

If Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei were to link hands and attack Lao Ai together, even Zhu Ji wouldn't be able to protect him.

Thinking one layer deeper, Lu Buwei clearly was trying to feel out Xiang Shaolong, testing to see if he had fallen for their trick.

When he realized this, Xiang Shaolong's heart was suddenly moved. "If the third glass of wine has to do with Miss Meimei, I would like to ask the Premier Mentor to spare the Inner Custodian and not speak the reason aloud, to the satisfaction of all. Everyone will be able to depart happily to their own homes and go to sleep." This time, it was Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie's turn to start slightly. Clearly, Xiang Shaolong's words struck home.

Dan Meimei's flowery countenance lost all color. Darting a glance at Xiang Shaolong, she knelt down on the floor, her slender figure quivering.

Lao Ai suddenly realized what was happening. Lu Buwei was

about to openly express his intention of taking Dan Meimei as his concubine. If Lao Ai were to continue fighting with Lu Buwei over this woman, he naturally would be committing a grievous sin in betraying the previous benevolence Lu Buwei had shown him by promoting him.

The courtyard became so quiet that even a leaf falling could be heard.

Lu Buwei was, after all, a once-in-a-generation figure. He was able to live and let live. Raising his thumb towards Xiang Shaolong, he praised, "Shaolong remains the most capable! Because of your words, I, the Premier Mentor, shall rescind the third cup of punishment wine." Following this, he coldly shouted, "Meimei, return to your room for now. I shall go visit you soon."

Dan Meimei anxiously glanced at Lao Ai, whose face was as pale and ghastly as a corpse. Lowering her head, she stood up. Suddenly, tears began to flow as she fled from the room.

Han Jie pressed his hand against his sword as he glanced at Lao Ai. Clearly, all Lao Ai had to do was signal him with his eyes, and he would immediately strike.

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang gripped the hilts of their swords as well, but intentionally did not look at Han Jie, pretending not to see anything.

The hall was filled with a murderous aura.

Lao Ai's eyes flashed with fierce light, but he immediately restrained himself. Sighing, he slowly said, "It's getting late. Everyone should go home and get some rest." Lu Buwei raised his face to the heavens. Letting out a single loud laugh, he then bade Pu Hu and Xiang Shaolong farewell before turning away and leaving, with Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang following him.

Lao Ai was silent for a long moment, before shaking his head and smiling bitterly. "Right now, I just want to step outside, take a walk, and enjoy some fresh air." Xiang Shaolong also let out a sigh, but it was because he suddenly felt relaxed. The powder keg of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's opposition to each other had been ignited by the blasting fuse of Dan Meimei, and they would now be openly against each other.

Book 19 Chapter 6 – Rays Of Light Shooting In All Directions

Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong rode out together, their horses leisurely pacing through the ancient streets of Xianyang.

The Eighteen Guardians acted as their vanguard, clearing the road in front of them, while Lao Ai's personal bodyguards followed behind.

Because an assassination attempt had been made not long ago, everyone was on high alert and dared not to be relaxed.

Han Jie, Lao Si, and Ling Qi followed directly behind the two of them, but there was still some distance between them, allowing the two of them to freely exchange their innermost thoughts and plans. The last traces of humility slid away from Lao Ai's face, leaving behind a silent face, frozen like ice.

After riding for the space of time it takes to drink half a cup of tea, Lao Ai, staring at the next street down which was covered in torchlight, said in a low voice, "Lu Buwei really goes way too far." Xiang Shaolong listened to the sound of their horses hooves echo in the silent street. Sighing, he said, "Given the current situation, I would recommend that the Inner Custodian continue to exercise restraint for now! There's no need to directly clash with him for the sake of a woman." Lao Ai ground his teeth. "Brother Xiang, didn't you see that look of helplessness and pain on Meimei's face? Her heart is actually with me." Xiang Shaolong, recalling the look in Dan Meimei's eyes as she left while crying, couldn't help but imagine her beautiful torso being pressed down by Lu Buwei's foul

body. Smiling bitterly, he couldn't give voice to what he wanted to say. With a quiet growl, Lao Ai spoke the words in Shaolong's mind. "I am going to kill Lu Buwei." Xiang Shaolong glanced aside at Lao Ai, just as Lao Ai turned to look at him. After the exchange of glances, Xiang Shaolong said, "Let's not discuss the question of whether or not you can kill him. First, please consider that if Lu Buwei were to actually die, Qin would immediately fall into chaos. Brother Lao, please reconsider." Lao Ai's lips tightened, as though he had tasted something bitter, and he let out a depressed sigh.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong also sighed.

He really was too sentimental. Even though he knew that Lao Ai was a man who was as rapacious as a wolf and savage as a dog, and was filled with malice towards himself, he still felt pity for him upon seeing him be oppressed by Lu Buwei. He decided that really wasn't the right sort of person to get involved in politics. He was too soft-hearted towards his enemies.

At this moment, they arrived at a four-way intersection. To the left was the Ganquan Palace of the south, while the path in front led to Xiang Shaolong's home. Lao Ai halted his horse, and the entire procession came to a halt as well.

Xiang Shaolong knew all too well that Lao Ai was headed towards the Ganquan Palace, so as to complain to Zhuji while in bed with her. He instantly felt extremely uncomfortable.

With an effort, Lao Ai forced his spirits to rouse. "Brother Xiang, are you intending to kill Qiu Risheng tomorrow?" Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but give Lao Ai a little bit of face on this matter.

Smiling, he replied, "Brother Lao, I'll listen to your instructions on this matter." Lao Ai didn't expect Xiang Shaolong to be so willing to give him face. Shocked, he said, "Brother Xiang, you really are a good friend. I know all too well that Qiu Risheng really went too far today. But he still remains slightly useful to me. Brother Xiang, please just teach him a lesson!" Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "I will act as you request, brother Lao." Seizing the opportunity, he asked, "What is the nature of the relationship between yourself and Pu Hu, brother Lao?" Lao Ai frowned, responding only after a long pause. "Right now, he is desperately fawning on me and trying to gain my favor. I don't see any risk in him doing so, which is why I accepted him. This man has an enormous amount of influence in both Qin and Zhao. In the past, he always colluded with Lord Yangquan. Now he is lacking a powerful supporter. After seeing that Du Bi isn't that useful, it's natural that he would look for a different patron." Upon hearing these words, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew that Pu Hu had given Lao Ai many great gifts. He decided not to expose him.

After bidding each other farewell, the two of them went their separate ways.

By the time he returned to the Wu family manor, it was around nine or ten at night. Many rooms were still lit, showing that most people had not yet gone to sleep. Wu Guo was preparing to escort Zou Yan out of Qin. Zou Yan was dearly beloved by every single person in the Wu household. At this moment, Zou Yan was in the main courtyard, energetically discussing the sights they would see on this trip. Listening to him talk, Ji Yanran, Zhao Da, and the others couldn't help but burst into laughter time and time again. He was one of those people who could take an extremely dull topic and make people very excited and be willing to discuss it. Everyone looked cheerful, while the Tian sisters laughed hardest.

Teng Yi and Shan Lan sat off to one side in a corner, enjoying the friendly atmosphere. Because Jing Jun was on night duty tonight, he wasn't present.

After spending so much time in a backstabbing, deceitful atmosphere, Xiang Shaolong felt his heart grow warm as he returned to this loving, friendly place.

Seeing him return, Wu Guo hurriedly stood up and saluted. "Master Xiang has returned after a night of hard drinking!" As soon as he spoke, everyone present roared with laughter.

Teng Yi stood up. Laughing, he said, "It's late! Let's talk tomorrow!" Everyone departed merrily, leaving only Ji Yanran and the other ladies, Teng Yi, and his wife.

Ji Yanran gave him a glance. "I thought that milord husband wouldn't be returning tonight." Protesting innocence, Xiang Shaolong said, "Worthy wife, did you think that I wanted to fool around with the likes of Lao Ai and his men? But in truth, tonight was a very profitable night." Teng Yi immediately questioned him, and Xiang Shaolong explained all which had happened.

Shan Lan angrily said, "Lu Buwei really is a shameless scoundrel. But Lao Ai isn't exactly a good person either. It'd be best if they both dropped dead."

But Wu Tingfang was interested in something else entirely. "Was Shi Sufang very beautiful?" Xiang Shaolong tactfully replied, "I

suppose she's not bad, but how can she be compared to our Fang'er's beauty?" Wu Tingfang immediately beamed with joy and no longer questioned him.

Teng Yi said in a solemn voice, "Third Brother, tomorrow, are you really going to forego your plan of killing Qiu Risheng, all for Lao Ai's sake?" Xiang Shaolong sighed. "Thinking on a deeper level, it isn't a good time to get rid of Qiu Risheng. The more foes Lu Buwei has, the better." Changing the topic, he asked Ji Yanran about how the Black Dragon was proceeding.

Beautiful eyes flashing, Ji Yanran leisurely replied, "With Yanran in charge, milord husband should set his mind at ease." Teng Yi stood up. Stretching lazily, he said, "Everyone should go get some early rest so we will be energetic tomorrow. Tomorrow, we'll go to that failure of a martial school and show everyone that we aren't to be provoked lightly." Zhao Zhi laughed, "Our Master Xiang has now become accustomed to taking a stroll around the Drunken Wind Pavilion before battle. But this time, I think no one will dare to wager that he will lose."

Laughing, everyone retired to their rooms.

This morning, due to Spring having almost arrived and a new year to begin, every household in Qin was discussing financial matters.

Lu Buwei was in charge of handling the national economy, and had prepared a surfeit of documents long ago. A full month in advance, he had submitted a complete and detailed 'national budgetary report'.

Overall, he had increased the national income by increasing taxes, for the purposes of funding large-scale military maneuvers as well as the construction of the Zhengguo Canal.

Over the past few days, Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Changping, and Wang Ling had been engaging in nonstop private talk regarding financial matters. Because Xiang Shaolong knew nothing about finances, and had been preparing nonstop for his battle with Guan Zhongxie, he managed to avoid this unpleasant discuss.

By the time Lu Buwei had finished once more discussing his budgetary report in detail, all of the military and civil officials had been standing for four full hours. Xiao Pan, showing uncommon generosity, had ordered people to prepare sitting mats to allow those present to sit.

After finishing his narration, Lu Buwei energetically said, "The way of finances lies in increasing what needs to be increased and decreasing what needs to be decreased; in using things appropriately. Right now, our great country of Qin is very wealthy. Our supplies of grain are piled as high as mountains, our population is flourishing, the nation is rich and powerful, the commoners are happy, and the nobles are pacified. Naturally, we should increase our revenues by increasing taxes and fearlessly advancing east. Only by continuing our conquests can Great Qin continue to be strong militarily and financially. Ever since the founding of Great Qin, this is the best opportunity for unifying the world." When Lu Buwei sat down, all the other officials immediately followed.

Zhu Ji was definitely not particularly skilled in this area, and so could do nothing but nod.

Xiang Shaolong could tell that Lu Buwei was secretly suggesting that Qin's present successes were all due to his own hard work. Naturally, Xiang Shaolong didn't wish for Qin to whole-heartedly invade the east. But, since he had no basis of rebuking Lu Buwei, he could only sit in angry silence.

Fortunately, Xiao Pan and Li Si had come to a different conclusion through their deliberations, and so did not express approval.

The likes of Wang Wen and Cai Ze immediately rose up and sang Lu Buwei's praises, claiming him to be a brilliant statesman and a master warrior. Xiao Pan lightly said, "Left Premier, do you have any opinions?"

Lord Changping roused himself and stood up. Moving to the center of the hall, he faced the royal dais, upon which sat Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, and Lu Buwei. "Ever since Xiaogong defeated Chu and Wei, our great country of Qin has expanded our territory vastly. We have dominated Sanchuan to the east, and incorporate the territories of Ba and Shu to the west. To the north, we have tended to the Shang prefecture. To the south, we have taken over Hanzhong, pacified the nine barbarian tribes, and have restricted the movements of Zou and Chu. Meanwhile, the other six countries continue to eye us suspiciously, concerned about the rise of Great Qin. And more recently, we have taken over the three eastern provinces. Our goal right now should be to increase the prosperity of the people and consolidate our holdings. Moreover,

right now, the Zhengguo Canal is costing us a large outlay of funds. A large number of farmers have been drafted to assist in the construction of the canal as well, which means their farmlands now lie barren and unused. With regards to the matter of increasing the taxes, I would like to ask the Crown Prince to consider thrice before acting."

Before Xiao Pan had a chance to express his thoughts, Wang Wen sneered, "Left Premier, your words are in error. Great Qin is a land of abundance and plenty, easy to defend and easy to launch attacks from. To the left of the central plains are the territories of Zuowei, Han, Youlong, Shu, and Woye, which are very fertile and rich. To the south, we have the fertile grounds of Ba and Shu, while to the north we have our vast grasslands. All three of these sides are guarded by tough defenses, while the opening to the east is heavily fortified and our soldiers there well-stocked and equipped. The cost of building the Zhengguo Canal is but a drop in the bucket of our finances. The territories of Ba and Shu are more than enough to cover its costs. Crown Prince, please inspect my words for truth."

Meng Ao added, "Ever since the days of King Zhaoxiang, our Great Qin has spared no effort in advancing eastwards. Not only have we seized large swaths of territory belonging to Zhao, Wei, Han, and Chu, we have also exterminated over ten million enemy soldiers in hundreds of large battles and have greatly weakened the combat strength of the eastern kingdoms. Right now, we can see that in the Six Kingdoms, the commoners are poor, the ancestral clans are weak, and the governance is chaotic. At such a time, when they are weak and we are strong, when Great Qin holds an advantage in geography, weather, manpower, and force, if we were to waste this priceless opportunity, how could we face the late King?" Xiang Shaolong, seeing Lord Changping's face change color

several times, knew that things weren't looking good.

Although Lord Changping was resourceful and full of intelligence, but in terms of experience, how could he be a match for the likes of Lu Buwei or Wang Wen? There would come a certain point or time in a debate when he would be unable to come up with an effective retort.

The annual budget which Lu Buwei presented today really was an effective and carefully thought out plan for seizing more power. Lu Buwei had a wide amount of discretion when it comes to collecting tax, and by increasing taxes, his control over the army's budgeting would increase as well.

As soon as Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji approved, Lu Buwei would be able to do as he pleased to benefit himself and harm others. Generals like Huan Yi would have to defer to his desires all the more.

Xiao Pan could perhaps maintain control over the three military commands in Xianyang, but all the armies outside of Xianyang would naturally fall under Lu Buwei's sway.

Thus, he absolutely had to contest this.

Lord Changping was silent for a long time, then suddenly laughed loudly. "Would Lord Li Si please come and present your findings to the Crown Prince."

He actually called Li Si to the front.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan immediately relaxed. They knew that this was the best tactic to use in a time when one had no strategies available.

As the Senior Historian, Li Si normally should only be fit to act as Xiao Pan's secretary-general and handle his letters and documents. But now that Lord Changping had called on him by name, it would be hard for others to object.

Wang He and Wang Ling were military officials. They were outstanding when it comes to questions of warfare and leading armies, but when it comes to politics and economics, they were far from being a match for the likes of Lu Buwei and Wang Wen. Just like Xiang Shaolong, they were unable to assist.

Only Li Si, this minister who would be legendary for thousands of years after his death, would be a suitable opponent.

Li Si was secretly elated. He gladly stepped forward towards the dais to speak in Lord Changping's stead. After paying the proper respects, he said with an air of confidence, "The unification of the world is the national strategic objective of Great Qin. No one holds any doubt about this. Right now, if this administration were to angrily rock the boat, if we aren't careful, the entire ship will capsize and all hands on board perish. Misfortune can quite easily heap upon misfortune, which is why we absolutely cannot be hasty. We should first observe the common sentiment, then act accordingly." Cai Ze clearly held Li Si in contempt. With a somewhat disdainful air, he said, "This old minister, under the instructions of the Premier Mentor, has done a full investigation of

every single prefecture in Great Qin and has assigned taxes according to local conditions. We definitely won't act rashly. The Senior Historian really worries too much."

Still beaming, Lu Buwei said, "Lord Inner Historian, if you were to personally inspect my proposed budget, you would understand that this budget which I, the Premier Mentor, have presented to the Crown Prince, is a thoroughly researched, all-encompassing budget which has cost countless man hours for accuracy's sake. Great Qin's future fortune lies within this budget. Would the Empress and the Crown Prince immediately approve it, so that we may begin our work immediately." All of the officials their chimed in with approval.

Lord Changping and the others immediately began to frown mightily.

Only Xiang Shaolong remained calm and unhurried, knowing that Li Si would definitely have a brilliant counter response.

Li Si really did smile naturally in response. "The so-called 'understanding of the public sentiment' must be grounded in fact and evidence in order for others to be convinced. According to the Premier Mentor's intentions, out of all the prefectures, Shu and Ba would have the most severe taxes. But that absolutely must not be the case."

Lu Buwei didn't expect that Li Si would dare to openly dispute with an old business boss like him. Face changing, he unhappily said, "Taxing the rich heavily, taxing the poor lightly. This is the basic, golden rule of finance. Ba and Shu are wealthy, abundant

areas. Great Qin should take some of their wealth and spread it around the world. Senior Historian, why do you say such a thing?"

Li Si wasn't the slightest bit frightened by his severe words and fierce countenance. Remaining calm and composed, he said, "Ba and Shu are not just the base upon which Great Qin grows. They are also a critical strategic region. If our armies there follow the Min River south, within five days, they can arrive at the capital of the Chu kingdom. It is a critical region for any campaign to consolidate the southwest or attack Chu. In order to consolidate and strengthen our rule over Ba and Shu, we must administer it in accordance with the situation on the ground and rule with a benevolent, gentle manner. But this humble official cannot see this important point in the Premier Mentor's budget." After pausing for a moment, he began to speak with even stronger points. "You must know that although Ba and Shu have abundant natural resources, there is a relatively small amount of people living in that wide expanse of land. Many parts of it still engage in simple, slash-and-burn cultivation of farmland. If we were to suddenly increase their taxes, I'm afraid that the people there might not be able to withstand the additional pressure, resulting in less revenue despite the increased tax rate. Furthermore, there are many barbarian tribes in Ba and Shu who are formidable warriors and who love to give battle. If popular sentiment were to be roused against us, even if we were able to quell any uprising, it would cost us greatly and increase their hatred towards us. It would be better if we were to lower the tax rate and cause the people's hearts to turn towards us. This would be the best plan. In this humble official's opinion, having a strong and stable footing in Ba and Shu is more important than any economic considerations. Would the Crown Prince, the Empress, and the Premier Mentor please consider my words."

Xiao Pan's royal gaze immediately gleamed with light. Lifting his

voice, he said, "Li Si's words are reasonable. We should first enrich the people before we take money from them. This really is correct. When considering the question of struggling for supremacy in the world, what does one or two years matter? What's more, the amount of money being spent on the Zhengguo Canal is significant, and can in no way be described as a mere 'drop in the bucket'. If we were to exhaust the resources of the two regions of Ba and Shu! It will cause public sentiment to turn against us, at which point, We really would be unable to face our late royal father." Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed at the brilliance of it all.

The power of Li Si's argument came from him changing the discussion from economics to military strategy. Although he had focused all of his ammunition on just that single point, he caused listeners to feel as though the entire budget proposal was riddled with holes, and that it did not really take public sentiment into account.

And Xiao Pan definitely would not fail to live up to his reputation as the world-conquering Emperor of the future. Following the opening which had been given, he used the excuse of the Zhengguo Canal's construction to repudiate Lu Buwei's plan to increase taxes. After he spoke in such a way, aside from a limited number of people such as Lu Buwei, none of the officials present dared to object any further.

Lu Buwei still hadn't had a chance to speak. Li Si continued, "With regards to the three eastern provinces, although a tax cut is proposed, that will not be enough to satisfy the populace. In this humble official's opinion, it would be better if we lightened the local laws and punishments. Right now, Great Qin doesn't suffer

from a lack of punishments, it suffers from punishments being too heavy. A person who steals a single coin is punished severely, and anyone who doesn't report the crime suffers the same penalty. The crime is light, but the punishment is heavy. Why must the punishment be so heavy? In places like Ba, Shu, and the newly conquered provinces, imposing such harsh punishments will only cause the people's hearts to harden against us. This will be greatly disadvantageous to our plan of unifying the world." This discussion had already ranged far astray from Lu Buwei's budget recommendation, but it was firmly on track regarding the question of unifying the world. This clearly came from Li Si's long pondering and was not something which Lu's clique could match.

A ferocious, ugly light flickered in Lu Buwei's eyes repeatedly. Just as he was at a loss as to what to do, Li Si continued to speak. "In a rich nation's strategy, no matter how many transformations and changes there are, none of them should change the original goal. All strategies should be aimed towards that goal. Places like Ba and Shu have much land but few people. But if we were to sway the people's hearts and promote commerce or subsidize farming, there is a great chance that those two places will flourish. Only then would Great Qin be able to use its resources in our aim to unify the world, without destroying the resource in the process." Xiao Pan was ecstatic over what he heard. Slapping his table, he expressed his admiration. "Li Si's words are extremely correct. Do my other ministers have anything else to say?" Lu Buwei and the others were caught totally unprepared. Staring at each other, they did not know what to say, as no one had expected this. Lao Ai left his seat and knelt down, respectfully saying, "Lord Li's wisdom can be considered to be greater than that of Lord Shang Yang himself. This humble official audaciously dares to request the Crown Prince to make an exception and, with the Premier Mentor's concurrence, restart the budgeting proposal process with Li Si at the head. Crown Prince, please consider my suggestion." As soon as he

finished speaking, the entire palace was filled with an uproar.

Only Xiang Shaolong understood that Lao Ai was helping them now out of a desire to avenge the three arrows which Lu Buwei had shot at him last night.

Lu Buwei's fierce eyes flashed with angry light as he glared at Lao Ai, wanting to do nothing but rip Lao Ai apart with his teeth and swallow him.

Only now did Wang Wen and the others come to realize the normally low-key Li Si's brilliant, awe-inspiring tactics.

This was the first time since he arrived in Qin that Li Si had lifted his head up and spoken forcefully, exposing his unusual spirit, showing exactly how he would, in the future, guarantee himself a political influence which couldn't be diminished.

How could Xiao Pan not understand the opportunity? He immediately asked Zhu Ji for her advice.

Although Zhu Ji felt that it was greatly inappropriate to openly whittle away Lu Buwei's authority in such a manner, she couldn't not support Lao Ai. Nodding, she said, "Royal son, do as you see fit." Feeling extremely gratified, Xiao Pan happily said, "Li Si, immediately begin carrying this task out. After doing so, prepare two copies, one for Ourselves, one for the Premier Mentor. We will confer with the Premier Mentor first before discussing this in audience." Xiang Shaolong secretly praised this decision. Although Xiao Pan was clearly diminishing Lu Buwei's influence and

authority, he was also giving Lu Buwei a face-saving retreat.

At this point, everyone's gaze fell upon Lu Buwei as they wondered whether or not he would accept this.

Lu Buwei clearly knew himself to have been bested in oral arguments, as he couldn't come up with anything to refute Li Si's points. But he still remained a wily old fox, and he actually laughed freely. "Lord Senior Historian, you absolutely live up to the Premier Mentor's expectations. You have accomplished a great deed in the service of Great Qin, and should therefore be rewarded. Why don't you come to my residence, where I will put you in charge of handling taxes and revenues, and thus allow you to do all that you are capable of doing." Smiling, Xiao Pan said, "The Premier Mentor's words are very correct. But We have, for quite some time, had another position in mind for the Senior Historian. During the Spring Sacrifices, I will make it public." Then, he said in a loud and clear voice, "Today, we'll stop here for now. All other affairs shall be tabled until tomorrow. Court dismissed!" Xiang Shaolong, waking up, only now realized that noon, the time of his duel with Qiu Risheng, had long passed.

This day at court had been unusually exciting and unusually long-winded. It had lasted for nearly five full sichen, or approximately ten full hours.

Book 19 Chapter 7 – Experts Converge

Xiao Pan had just won a beautiful victory and was in high spirits. He invited his closest officials to join him for lunch, and aside from Huan Yi, who had to leave Xianyang early and was unable to participate, even Teng Yi and Jing Jun, who had been miserably waiting outside the palace for Xiang Shaolong to join them and cause trouble at the martial arts school, were invited.

Wang He, Wang Ling, Lords Changping and Changwen, Li Si, and the others were naturally the guests of honor.

The lunch banquet was hosted at the inner halls of the imperial palace. Without Zhu Ji present, Xiao Pan could act as he wished, and was extremely happy.

After the servants finished pouring the wine and bringing the dishes, he immediately shooed them out, so that everyone present could speak freely.

After Xiao Pan and the guests wholeheartedly congratulated Li Si, it fell to Xiang Shaolong to clearly and in great detail discuss the events of the previous night.

When he heard about the games which Lu Buwei was playing, Wang He suddenly grew furious. "It sounds as though the accusations which the departed Lu Gong and Xu Xian made regarding Lu Buwei's involvement in the death of the late King were not baseless after all. He now wants to return to his old tricks. Why don't we gain the initiative by launching a preemptive

strike and kill that traitor, Lu, and wipe out all of his traitorous supporters. Crown Prince, please permit me to do so!"

Xiao Pan let out a sigh. "If this matter could be handled so easily, We would have long since summoned him to the palace and executed him. But right now, Lu Buwei's supporters are strong and numerous, and the likes of Du Bi and Pu Hu are waiting on the sidelines, eyes gleaming like hungry tigers. If chaos were to befall the city, Du Bi and the others would collude with outsiders to cause trouble. The three eastern provinces would immediately become difficult to keep. The most dangerous person of all is Meng Ao. So long as he maintains his military command, it will be difficult for us to act rashly."

Wang Ling, ever steady and reliable, concurred. "At this point in time, the best strategy is to wait for the Black Dragon's appearance, while supporting Lao Ai against Lu Buwei. The tactic of 'painting a picture with two brushes at once' is the best strategy."

As he spoke, he saw Li Si frantically winking at him. Only then did he realize his mistake, and his face turned as gray as ash.

Wang He, naturally, said with astonishment, "What do you mean, the Black Dragon's appearance?"

Xiao Pan had previously issued a stern command, that no one was to divulge the Black Dragon's existence. Now, as Wang Ling realized that he had exposed the secret, he was so terrified that his face turned pale.

Xiao Pan laughed, "Minister Wang, don't be too worried. But I'll only give you this free pass once."

Wang Ling sighed in relief, immediately kneeling down and apologizing for his mistake.

Seeing Xiao Pan's authority increase day by day, Xiang Shaolong was both frightened and exhilarated. Even he himself could not clearly describe what he was feeling.

Xiao Pan personally explained to Wang He about this matter. Overjoyed, Wang He praised Xiang Shaolong, "Only Shaolong could come up with such a brilliant plan that is both exacting and actionable. Using Lao Ai to counter Lu Buwei is even more unspeakably brilliant. Just now was proof of this approach's brilliance. In the future, no matter how great Lao Ai's influence becomes, in the end a castrated dog remains a castrated dog. Unlike Lu Buwei, he cannot win the hearts of others. Even if he grows two additional heads and sprouts two more sets of arms, he won't be able to escape this old general's hands."

Wang He was the general who, aside from Meng Ao, controlled the greatest amount of power. Naturally, he didn't hold Lao Ai in high regard.

Lu Buwei's power came from the fact that he had strong influence in both the civil side and the military side. Without a suitably complete plan to dispose of him at the proper time, things would become extremely chaotic. And when it comes right down to it, Lao Ai is nothing more than Zhu Ji's boytoy. Getting rid of him wouldn't result in any real repercussions, there would just be

a period of struggle and turmoil. Especially now that Xiao Pan had assigned Mao Jiao to spy on him, what damage could he possibly do? Lord Changping coldly snorted, "Qiu Risheng is the real root of the problem. Shaolong, you are free this afternoon anyhow. Although you've promised Lao Ai not to kill him, it'll be easy for you to diminish his prestige."

Up till now, Xiang Shaolong still didn't understand the importance of the martial arts school, and so he seized the chance to ask.

Wang Ling replied, "The turbulence this school is causing was invited into Xianyang by Lord Yangquan from the country of Chu. They specialize in swordsmanship, and they serve in the employ of high officials and ministers. For warriors, they serve as a shortcut for gaining riches and glory, and thus they are flourishing quite well. There are many ministers and officials who have sent their children to the school to learn. Shaolong, in your battle with Qiu Risheng, you must be careful. For him to sit so securely as the headmaster of a school with so many different swordsmen is no mean feat, and requires real skill."

Everyone agreed, raising their glasses and drinking merrily. Their conversation turned towards the subject of the Three Legendary Courtesans. Chatting and laughing, by the time they finished the meal, Xiang Shaolong was totally full. How could he possibly be bothered to go hunt down Qiu Risheng and start punching and kicking him, without even being allowed to kill him? Happy and satisfied, he returned to his government office.

When Xiang Shaolong entered the room, he saw Lao Si there.

Teng Yi was in the process of unhappily yet politely listening to him talk. When he saw Xiang Shaolong, he hurriedly disappeared.

When Lao Si saw Xiang Shaolong, he said in a fawning manner, "This humble one comes at the request of his elder brother, who asked me to invite the Great General to the Inner Custodian's Residence to enjoy a dinner banquet together."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly crying out for his mother. Could it be he would have to face Lao Ai for another goddamn night? He immediately wracked his brains, trying to find an excuse to decline.

Lao Si crept closer, putting on a mysterious air. "Tonight, my elder brother invited the Lady of the Three Perfections, Shi Sufang, to go to his manor for drinks. Naturally, he couldn't exclude you, Great General, from the gathering!"

Xiang Shaolong's mind immediately went blank, as a confused buzzing sound filled his mind. No matter how much he might want to deny it, he was moved.

There aren't many men in the world who would be able to resist the allure of rarely seen women of unparalleled beauty such as Shi Sufang or the "Soft Boned Beauty", Lan Gongyuan, even if they were in the position of enemies. Xiang Shaolong was no different.

Naturally, Lao Ai wouldn't be so generous as to allow Xiang Shaolong the chance to become intimate with Shi Sufang. There must have been some sort of condition which Shi Sufang had

attached, such as his presence being necessary for her to be present as well. When he came to realize this, he couldn't help but feel immensely proud of himself.

The only issue was that he had just spent the previous night dawdling around at the Drunken Wind Pavilion. If he were to go visit Shi Sufang tonight, what would his tender wives think?

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. "I thank your brother for his kind intentions, but I do not have the good fortune to attend. Tonight, I must stay at home to accompany my wives. Please inform your brother that I, Xiang Shaolong, consider him to be an excellent friend indeed!"

A small smile on his face, Lao Si appeared extremely disappointed. Clearly, Xiang Shaolong's guess wasn't far off the mark.

After failing in his mission, Lao Si could do nothing besides leave.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a strong sense of longing for his tender wives and beloved son, and so hurriedly returned home.

Ji Yanran returned home at about the same time that he reached the Wu residence. She had just returned from the river, where they had performed a drill on the 'appearance' of the Black Dragon in two days time.

The Tian sisters happily bathed them and changed their clothes.

Their gentle, charming care was difficult to describe.

By the time he began to luxuriate in the light of the setting sun with his beloved wives and son in their garden, Xiang Shaolong had long since forgotten all about the matter of Shi Sufang, casting it beyond the highest heavens.

Perhaps he was getting old, or perhaps he had suffered too many deadly, life-and-death setbacks. Right now, he desired nothing more than the feeling of being together with his family and enjoying life with them.

As he engaged in idle family gossip with his three beloved wives, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, and Wu Tingfang, as he watched Tian Zhen and Tian Feng play with Xiang Bao'er, who had just learned to walk, he felt a sense of joy which could not be replaced by anything whatsoever.

Wu Tingfang, having perhaps heard the news from the Guardians, knew that there had been a dispute in the morning court session and began to ask questions.

Naturally, Xiang Shaolong wouldn't hold anything back from them. He described everything which happened that morning in court, and even told them how he had declined the opportunity to feast with Shi Sufang tonight.

Surprised, Wu Tingfang said, "Beloved Xiang, aren't you afraid of offending Lao Ai as well as that beautiful woman whom every man wishes to get close to? After having witnessed the Soft Boned

Beauty, Lan Gongyuan's good looks, I too would like to witness the artistry and skill of Shi Sufang."

Xiang Shaolong was sitting in the courtyard with his three wives. Every so often, the laughter of Xiang Bao'er and the Tian sisters would drift into the courtyard from the soft grassy terrain of the garden. His heart was filled with bliss and contentment, and he said wholeheartedly, "As long as a single one of my three worthy wives are willing to be with me, I, Xiang Shaolong, am wholly contented. Heaven is so kind as to allow me, such a trifle of a man, to have three celestial maidens from heaven as my wives. How would I, Xiang Shaolong, dare to ask for anything more?"

All three tender wives trembled lightly, their beautiful gazes flashing brightly with a loving flame.

Zhao Zhi, her heart enchanted and her soul intoxicated, said, "A husband such as this, what more can one ask? Every day I am with beloved Xiang feels like the first day we fell in love. Ah! I am so happy, I don't know what to say."

Ji Yanran sighed, "A pity that sister Qing has left for the prefecture of Shu. If she were here, this moment would be even more perfect and flawless. I really wish that milord husband would never have to go off to war again. The taste of parting is really indescribably bitter."

In accordance with Qin military law, when an army is mobilized, no soldier is allowed to bring his spouse or family. And thus, marching off to war is what wives fear the most.

Thinking about the cruelty of war, Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but let out a sigh.

Wu Tingfang moved closer to him. Seating herself within his embrace, she circled her arms around his neck. "Beloved Xiang, you didn't keep your appointment today. Qiu Risheng is sure to brag and claim that you are afraid of him!"

Ji Yanran also sidled over. Leaning against his tiger-like back, she said softly, "Anyone who has seen our Great General's "Hundred Battle Sabreplay" knows that Qiu Risheng just had a stroke of unbelievably good luck. Hmph! I, Ji Yanran, already showed mercy to Guo Xing, but these people still don't know what's good for them. When milord husband goes to the martial arts school, Yanran will go as well!" Invigorated, Xiang Shaolong boldly said, "Then after tomorrow's morning court, why don't we go to their school to settle accounts!"

Just as Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi were both exclaiming in approval, Ji Yanran let out a cry of dismay. "It has to be later! The Crown Prince asked me to go to the imperial palace tomorrow for his reading lessons. Alas! Since sister Qing isn't here, I have to be her replacement. I hear that sister Qing is very strict with the Crown Prince, but I cannot! It's far too much work for me to scrunch and stiffen up my face like that."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong discover that Ji Yanran had been given the title of Grand Tutor.

At the same time, he felt very touched.

Although Xiao Pan never expressed it, in reality, the longing he felt for his departed mother, Lady Ni, was a source of deeply engraved pain in his heart. He needed a replacement for her, and first, the replacement was Zhu Ji. Then, it was Qin Qing.

Now, it was Ji Yanran.

Otherwise, based on his current intelligence, how could he possibly need others to give him reading lessons?

Wu Tingfang kissed Xiang Shaolong on the side of his face with her soft, fragrant red lips. She gently kissed all across his face, making him feel indescribably comfortable as he listened to his beautiful, tender young wife say, "Husband Xiang, did you know that Sister Qing owns a very large business in Ba and Shu? Sister Qing is extremely competent when it comes to business."

Xiang Shaolong knew nothing at all about Qin Qing and her history or background, all he knew was that she came from the royal family. Surprised, he pursued this line of question.

Ji Yanran knew more about this than anyone else, so she explained. "Sister Qing originally came from a major clan in Ba, which owned a major cinnabar mine. Cinnabar can be used for medicinal or chemical purposes. Their wealth accumulated over the centuries. By Sister Qing's generation, the Qin family has become the richest family in the Ba prefecture. Hoping to foster cordial relations with their family, the Qin royal family had one of

their royal scions propose marriage to Sister Qing. Unexpectedly, right after their wedding rites were completed, her husband was sent on a military mission and died in foreign lands. In order to avoid getting entangled with other nobles, Sister Qing returned to Ba prefecture to focus on the family business. She did resoundingly well, and when the Crown Prince returned to Qin, Lady Huayang recommended her to return to Xianyang and become the Grand Tutor for the Crown Prince. And then, she met you, you affectionate lover, who entangled her in the web of love once more.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why Qin Qing’s personal status and stature was so unusually high. It wasn’t due solely to Lady Huayang and Xiao Pan’s affection towards her; it was also because she had the powerful backing of a mighty clan in the Ba and Shu prefectures.

It was just as Li Si had stated. When dealing with exceptionally large and powerful prefectures such as Ba and Shu, the only acceptable policy was one of conciliation.

At the same time, he began to understand why she had been so close with Lady Huayang, this noblewoman who had come from the kingdom of Chu. Ba and Shu were, after all, located next to the borders of Chu. A rich and powerful family such as the Qin family would naturally have thousands of connections with the Chu royal family.

Whoever married Qin Qing would not only obtain this beauty of a hundred charms and a thousand fascinations; he would also gain access to her enormous family fortune. Who wouldn’t grow red-

eyed with desire at this prospect? This was why Qin Qing didn't dare to be with him openly.

Although Qin Qing became a royal kinswoman via her marriage to the royal family here in Xianyang, her marriage was nonetheless a matter filled with political implications.

Just as his thoughts were flying about, Wu Guang came to report that Guo Xing had come looking for him.

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Leaving the pavilion, he first lifted up Xiang Bao'er and kissed him on his face, before handing him to Tian Zhen as he went to the main hall to meet Guo Xing.

Guo Xing was drinking tea. Upon seeing him, he actually knelt down and kowtowed thrice, frightening Xiang Shaolong so badly that he hurriedly lifted the man up. "Mr. Guo, you honor me far too much!"

After the two sat down, Guo Xing smiled uncomfortably. "This lower official originally came with evil intentions to meet you on this trip."

Xiang Shaolong knew very well that Guo Xing had the desire to capitulate to him. But by now, he had learned to not easily trust others. Smiling, he said, "Assistant Commander, have you come to cause misfortune upon me, on Headmaster Qiu's orders?"

Guo Xing was clearly in the midst of a spat with Qiu Risheng.

Coldly snorting, he said, "On what basis would he dare to cause misfortune to you, lord? Today, because milord was busy with morning court and did not show up, he put on an appearance of being disappointed, but everyone could tell that he was relieved of a heavy load. He even took the opportunity to go boar-hunting with Pu Hu. We all knew that it was because he was afraid that Lord Xiang would go a'knocking on his door. After viewing the prowess of Lord Xiang's "Hundred Battles Sabreplay", who would have the courage to dare and try to stroke Lord Xiang's tiger-whiskers?" Surprised, Xiang Shaolong said, "Then why would he instigate you to come see me?"

Embarrassed, Guo Xing said, "To tell the absolute truth, we all used to work for the second prince, and the school's expenditures continue to be paid for by Pu Hu. Were it not for him, with Lord Yangquan's demise, we would have had to shut down long ago. But superficially, we must appear to be subordinate to the Lord Inner Custodian. Lu Buwei has tried to seize control over the school several times, but each time, the Lord Inner Custodian has used all his strength to resist."

Sighing, he continued, "Lu Buwei is very crafty. He enticed many of our warriors to his side, then hinted both openly and obliquely that the court wouldn't make use of any of the people we have trained. He wore us out and caused us to suffer shortages of funds. It wasn't until the Lord Inner Custodian aided us that we were able to stabilize our footing and have a short reprieve."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he wasn't too sure of the relationship between himself and Lao Ai, and thus spoke of Lao Ai in a cautious, respectful manner.

Naturally, he wouldn't reveal the real situation to Guo Xing. Nodding, he said, "Brother Guo, what are your future plans?"

Guo Xing once more fell to his knees, calling out, "In the past, Guo Xing did many unforgivable deeds against Lord Xiang, and also used shameful, despicable means to injure Lord Jing. I deserve a thousand deaths. I only hope that in the future, I can atone for my misdeeds by performing meritoriously and be allowed to wholeheartedly serve Lord Xiang. If so, I will be able to die without any regrets."

After having been taught a lesson by Wu Fu, Xiang Shaolong would never again fully trust someone just because of a few words. First, he lifted Guo Xing up, before saying, "Brother Guo, please feel free to speak your mind, and don't do anything like that again."

Guo Xing excitedly said, "Ever since that day when Talented Lady Ji showed me mercy, I, Guo Xing, have been thinking about this. Right now, everyone in Xianyang knows that Lord Xiang's sense of righteousness reaches the heavens, and is extremely considerate to his men. Lord Xiang, please allow this humble one to follow you!"

Forcing out a smile, Xiang Shaolong said, "Is my reputation really that good?"

Guo Xing said, "Lord Xiang, you had two chances to become Premier, but easily gave those chances up. You promoted Li Si, Huan Yi, and Lord Changping, and showed great benevolence to those followers who came with you from Handan. You righteously rescued Prince Dan of Yan. Your good deeds are too many to

enumerate. We've been quite aware of all these things this entire time. But because my personal desires and greed had closed my eyes, I only truly awakened after the Talented Lady Ji's spear thrusts. I only hope to be able to follow Lord Xiang and no longer need to worry about fighting and fawning for favor from others, and what's worse, worry that tomorrow, that person will sell me out."

After Xiang Shaolong seriously contemplated his words, he nodded. "Fine! I'll do as you wish, but you had best remember that I'm not an easy man to deceive. If I feel that a single word passes from your lips which are insincere, I will immediately kill you without any hesitation."

Overjoyed, Guo Xing once again knelt on the floor.

Xiang Shaolong had him lift his head up and ordered him to sit down again. "Earlier, it seemed as though there was something you wished to say to me. What is it?"

Guo Xing's expression became solemn, and he said in a lowered voice, "What I'm about to tell you is the result of my own observations and guesses, because I'm not qualified to join the secret meetings held by the Headmaster, Du Bi, and Pu Hu. But due to the many tasks they have assigned to us, I was able to guess a large part of it."

Xiang Shaolong was a person who had experienced many calamities. Quite calmly, he said, "Speak!"

Guo Xing said, “I believe they have made a complete set of plans for the second prince to take over the Crown Prince’s position. The critical point is the three eastern prefectures. Although Pu Hu is a native Qin, he has always been zig-zagging between Qin and Zhao. When we consider how wealthy and powerful his family, and the fact that he is linked to both the Qin and the Zhao royal families by intermarriages, he has deep-rooted influences in both countries. If it weren’t for his support, the second prince would definitely not be able to thrive as he has.”

Xiang Shaolong came to a sudden realization.

Just like how Xiao Pan was the unique resource of Lu Buwei, Cheng Qiao was the unique resource of Pu Hu, the leader of yet another wealthy merchant family.

In previous years, no one could have imagined that Xiao Pan would return and forcibly seize the position of Crown Prince. This is why Pu Hu, Du Bi, and Lord Yangquan had constant fawned upon Madame Xiuli and Cheng Qiao.

Who would have thought that Xiao Pan would successfully escape Zhao and return to Qin, immediately shattering their beautiful dreams.

At first, perhaps they continued to hold Lu Buwei, this rich merchant, in contempt. Only after Lu Buwei had caused Lord Yangquan’s death did they know that the situation had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. But they had no place to turn. Their only avenue of escape was to retake the imperial seat.

If Xiao Pan's court was as stable as Mt. Tai, it would naturally be very hard for them to succeed. But fortunately, the court was splint into the Crown Prince faction, the Lu faction, and the Lao Ai faction, three centers of power. Thus, Pu Hu and the others were in a position to cause trouble.

Guo Xing continued, "Pu Hu's most dangerous tactic is his collusion with Zhao's Great General Pang Nuan, who is arrogant in his power. Although I don't know the particulars, from the way the Headmaster speaks, Pang Nuan is in the process of secretly coordinating with the three eastern prefectures, the country of Chu, and the country of Yan to disrupt Lu Buwei and Tian Dan's secret treaties, while simultaneously assisting the second prince in ascending to the imperial throne. We can imagine how important it is for Du Bi to cause an upheaval in Xianyang. If Lu Buwei made any sudden moves, it would be even better, as that would definitely cause Qin's military force to splinter into multiple factions. At that time, he would openly raise the banner of the second prince with the Zhao army's assistance. His power would be greatly different than it is now."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly proud of himself. His musings from long ago were quite similar to that of Guo Xing's. The only thing he hadn't thought of was the possibility that Pang Nuan would once again try to build a coalition of Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei, and Han.

At the same time, he felt a little wounded at heart. Although Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, and Crown Prince Dan all professed to be as close as brothers to him, in this situation, where kingdoms faced off against each other, not the slightest bit of decision-making being affected by personal relationships could be tolerated.

Reality is always cruel.

Guo Xing said in a low voice, “To cause upheaval, the best thing to do is to assassinate you, Lord Xiang. Everyone would put the blame on Lu Buwei’s head. You can imagine what the results would be.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled. “There’s definitely quite a few people who want to kill me!”

Guo Xing solemnly admonished, “Lord Xiang, please don’t take the threat too lightly. Pu Hu and Pang Nuan have prepared for quite a long time now. They have recruited a gang of strange warriors and have also trained warriors in all of Zhao’s assassination techniques. They have been smuggling these people into Xianyang in groups. I personally escorted three of them in. There are all first-class experts. One of them is known as the ‘Barefoot Immortal’, Kou Lie. He is the most extraordinary expert which Chu has produced in over twenty years. Just from the way he puts on his shoes, one can tell that he is determined to assassinate you, Lord Xiang, even if it costs him his life in the process.”

Xiang Shaolong felt a cold shudder pass through him. How could one enjoy life if, every day, he had to worry about a suicidal assassin being after him? He asked, “Does Pu Hu’s dancing troupe also have assassins hidden within?”

Guo Xing said, “There should be. But my knowledge is limited,

and I cannot say for sure.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “The three people you escorted, do you maintain contact with them?”

At the same time, he felt that for Chu to send an assassin to come here to slay him, they must have obtained Li Yuan’s permission. Could that mean that Li Yuan also wished to kill him? His heart became ill-at-ease, and he didn’t dare to follow that line of thought any further.

But he couldn’t help but begin guessing again. It wasn’t a big deal if Li Yuan were to want to kill him. But if Lord Longyang were also to desire his death, it would be very difficult for him to accept that.

Or perhaps these actions were the individual actions of individual swordsmen!

Guo Xing replied, “After I brought them within the city, they went their own ways.”

After pausing, he said, “Several unfamiliar faces appeared at our school as well. They follow the Headmaster all day long. They seem to be experts who are hiding their real identities.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed to himself that this was an example of “Another wave arising, before the first had calmed.”

Right now, Qin had become the public enemy of all of the eastern

kingdoms. Since they couldn't win on the battlefield, their only option was to incite internal unrest. This was the same way modern history operated as well. There were no differences.

Guo Xing said, "Today, I came at Headmaster Qiu's orders to arrange another appointment for the duel. However, it is for fifteen days in the future. I think that he expects that his death-squads will be able to assassinate you before then."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Then go tell him that it will depend on what sort of mood I'm in. Hah! Aren't you worried that they will get suspicious due to you having stayed here this long?"

Guo Xing laughed. "I'll just tell them that Lord Xiang was putting on airs and made me wait here for an hour! After I go back, I'll find out what I can about the assassins, then think of a way to give the information to you."

Xiang Shaolong clapped him on his shoulders. "Isn't notifying me a very easy thing? Come report in as my assistant, quickly! You are, after all, my assistant commander."

The two laughed loudly at each other. Only then did Guo Xing joyfully depart.

Returning to the inner courtyard, he explained the situation to his three tender wives, telling them to be careful when they went outside. Ji Yanran said, "Their target isn't actually you. It's the Crown Prince. Claiming to be attempting to assassinate you is nothing more than a smokescreen for the general public!"

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly, violently shocked awake. “I’m such an idiot. If they were to kill the Crown Prince, they would immediately cause real unrest, and Cheng Qiao would be able to openly, honorably take the throne as his successor.”

To be honest, he actually became more relieved, because if Xiao Pan were to die, then Qin Shihuang would disappear from history, and China would probably not arise.

Ji Yanran said, “We must seize the initiative in this matter. The problem is that the City Guards are tightly controlled by Guan Zhongxie. Otherwise, it would be much easier to act.”

Just as Xiang Shaolong was pondering his next move, one of his Guardians came to report that Lao Ai had personally come to visit him.

Just as Xiang Shaolong’s face twisted in distaste, Wu Tingfang laughed and said, “If you can’t turn him down, then just go through the motions for tonight! All of us have our utmost faith and trust in husband Xiang.”

Sighing, Xiang Shaolong went to meet Lao Ai.

Book 19 Chapter 8 – The Three Legendary Courtesans

Lao Ai stood in the middle of the hall and with him were Han Jie and four of his personal guards.

Tao Fang was playing host to them and retreated into the inner hall when Xiang Shaolong arrived.

Lao Ai sighed, “Shaolong, how can you not treat me like a friend?”

After Xiang Shaolong greeted Han Jie and the rest, he pulled him aside and whispered, “It’s better that I don’t touch this type of beauty. Last night that Boss Jin deliberately hinted in front of both of us that Shi Sufang was interested in me. He’s obviously trying to make Brother Lao jealous and put me on the alert. That’s why I had to decline tonight’s meeting. Does Brother Lao understand my kind intentions?”

Lao Ai was stunned for a moment before he blushed and said, “I didn’t think of that point. Hei! At the most Shi Sufang is just a difficult courtesan to get into bed, how can she possibly sow any discord between us. Brother Xiang, do not be overly suspicious.”

Xiang Shaolong knew very well that he doesn’t mean what he said but he did not expose him. Instead he said quietly, “In my opinion, this is Pu Hu’s devious plot. You must not belittle pretty women, for they can bring down a country. Da Ji and Bao Si are examples of a fine specimen who can bring downfall upon a

country and sometimes they are even more formidable than an army, and they can be almost impossible to guard against. In my opinion, if I attend the feast at your residence, Shi Sufang will certainly pretend to be attracted to me and at the same time flirt with Brother Lao. If we are not mentally prepared, what do you think will happen?”

Since Lao Ai is pretending to be a man, of course he cannot give up his deception halfway and he stubbornly continued, “Shaolong, do not worry. I, Lao Ai, can be considered one who grew up among flowers and I’ve met all kinds of women. If she try to entice me, I naturally have my own ways to deal with it. I guarantee that our relationship will not be strained because of her. Ha! Why don’t we use her as a competition, to see who can get his hands on her but without any jealousy involved. This will spoil Pu Hu’s plan. If we can win her heart, we can find out instead what secret collusion Pu Hu has.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly finds this amusing and knows that Lao Ai is ultimately not a man made for great things for he cannot control his own sexual urges. He chortled and said, “This is the reason why I have to reject Brother Lao’s drinking invitation tonight so that Brother Lao can expand all your efforts to get Shi Sufang in your hands.”

Lao Ai sighed, “Of course I won’t blame Shaolong now. It’s just that Shi Sufang openly declared that she will only attend the feast if Shaolong is around. With her temper, won’t it be a damper on the occasion if she were to leave.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a straight face, “See! This is exactly Pu

Hu's trap waiting for us to be hooked. So what do you want me to do?"

Lao Ai replied with some embarrassment, "I wish even more that Shaolong can make a trip. Let's see what tricks Shi Sufang can come up with. Maybe I can even drug her a little and turn the tables on Pu Hu instead."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing him for being despicable but then he remembered that he too had made an unsuccessful attempt to drug the Empress of Zhao, Han Jing so he dared not curse Lao Ai too much. Because the truth is, Shi Sufang is indeed up to no good. He said, "If it's so easy to get her, she would have been toyed with by many others already. A woman like her who is in the business will naturally have her ways of handling such matters. If she exposes the plan, it'll be worse instead."

Lao Ai pulled his sleeve and said, "Time is running out, Shaolong come with me quickly!"

Xiang Shaolong was unable to resist his 'warm offers' so had no choice but to follow him.

After they left Wu Residence, the direction they were traveling in was not towards Lao Ai's Department of Interior Affairs. Xiang Shaolong enquired in surprise and Lao Ai replied with a sigh, "When I found out earlier that Shaolong refused to come, I tasked someone to inform Pu Hu and asked him to subtly find out Shi Sufang's intentions. Never did I expect that she would immediately reply that she won't be coming. Hei! So I had no choice but to come and beg for Shaolong's help. Now we're going to Du Bi's General

Residence in Xianyang. As to whether Shi Sufang will agree to see us, it's still an uncertainty.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that men are really naturally worthless scamps. The more a beautiful woman acts high and mighty, the more they feel she's a rarity. Lao Ai has always been popular amongst women and now that he has met someone like Shi Sufang who totally disregards him, he's feeling an intolerable itch instead.

The more he interacts with Pu Hu, the more he feels that this person really has formidable tricks.

After all his years of struggles since coming to this ancient warring period and with the knowledge regarding this period's history he gleaned occasionally from the talented Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong is no longer as ignorant as he once was when he first came to this era.

And because he came from the 21st century, all the more he can look at everything in this era from an objective angle.

The appointment of Overlords in the San Jin and the Reforms of Shangyang can be considered the biggest change of this era right now, with the changes coming fast and furious. Even the 2,000 odd years following this, other than the terrible times China suffered after the Opium War, it's difficult to find another period in history that can be compared to this.

In this period of great changes, the various Dukes of the Spring

and Autumn Period first got rid of feudalism and established the Seven Warring States where the Overlord will hold power. Most importantly, the few areas which has started to expand during the end of the Spring and Autumn Period, like the growth in industry and commerce, expansion of cities, intensification of wars, sudden popularity in new knowledge, liberation in thinking has become even more remarkable during this period.

The most influential thing that appeared during this era is the emergence of huge enterprises.

This emerging transnational social class, because of their abundant financial backing, is able to travel far and wide, gaining experience and knowledge and with their huge social network, their influence on the political arena is incomparable.

The most outstanding one is of course Lu Buwei, collector of rare artifacts and talents. There are others, like his own Grandfather-in-law Master Wu, Guo Zong who made his fortune from the iron smelting business, and Pu Hu, who is now secretly plotting to overthrow Xiao Pan. They are all great businessmen turned politicians who can control the world.

Even Qin Qing, she was able to stay independent while protecting her chastity and gaining the respect and admiration of the Qins because her clan owns a major cinnabar mine and she is of Qin Royalty. Any other ordinary girl, with her beauty, would already have become some rich and powerful man's mistress.

And to handle the competition between war and politics, the scholars and fighters slowly went their own different ways and

everything became professionalized.

Wang Yu and Li Si are two very good examples. If their positions were exchanged it's a guarantee that Qin politics will be in turmoil and the Xiongnu will kill their way to Xianyang soon.

The popularity of professionalism swept through the lands and to the soldiers, the soldiers of the Warring States period is no longer like the soldiers of the Spring-Autumn Period, who are just conscripted farmers made to take up arms.

This resulted in the emergence of associations like Weinan's Warrior Public House, where there are martial artists and military tacticians abound for the employment of Rulers.

Therefore, regardless of external wars or internal conflicts, the level of intensity and complexity is nothing that the past can compare with.

The reason why Xiao Pan is able to unify the 6 states in future is because of his unique background, for he does not have the offensive habits of those heirs who were brought up by women who lived in the palace. That's why he is able to shine and control the world in this great era of constant changes.

But a talent like him is also a rarity in this world, such that after his death, there was no one else who has the ability to suppress the others. That's why the Qin empire ended after the second generation.

While he was deep in thought, they have arrived outside the gates of the General's residence situated at the west of the city.

By now Xiang Shaolong is also craving for another look at Shi Sufang again. The lure of a beauty is indeed extraordinary. Although he knows that she is up to no good, he can't help but want to get close to her.

This is exactly the most formidable part of Pu Hu's plan.

A successful businessman will always know how to guess his buyer's thoughts, and this fact has remained since time memorial.

In the middle of the great hall was a square table and surrounding this square table there were six seats.

Xiang Shaolong prefers such seating arrangements where everyone is seated around one another as it's more conducive and close-knitted for chats.

Du Bi personally invited Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai and Han Jie into the hall while the rest of the guards stayed outside, where they will be welcomed by others.

Du Bi's attitude is extremely warm, a rare change which makes one unable to imagine that his attitude used to be frosty and aloof in the past.

Naturally Xiang Shaolong knows what he's thinking about.

If they are really able to assassinate Xiao Pan, or successful in shifting the blame to Lu Buwei, then they will try to fight for the support of Xiang Shaolong and his men because by that time Cheng Qiao would have become the legal successor.

By then, Wang Chi, Wang Ling etc will have no choice but to support Cheng Qiao.

As for Lao Ai, firstly he is still of value now and secondly, Du Bi holds no regards for him at all. Like Wang Chi, he does not believe he's capable of doing anything great, so he just flattered him together with the group.

Lao Ai is most concerned about whether Shi Sufang will be attending the feast so he asked, "Miss Shi..."

Du Bi interrupted with a laugh, "Lord Interior Minister do not worry, Master Pu has gone to speak with Miss Shi personally. Hai! A woman's heart is indeed unfathomable. Actually she has a good impression of Lord Interior Minister as well, it's just that she's a little vexed that Master Xiang would stand her up so she was just putting on some airs! Lord Interior Minister please do not be offended."

Now that Lao Ai has regained some dignity, his confidence is slightly restored and he's suddenly more relaxed.

Right at this time Pu Hu returned and from a distance away, made a hand signal to show that all has been arranged. Du Bi

hurriedly invited everyone to sit down, leaving the seat between Xiang Shaolong and Lao Ai empty. Obviously that seat is being kept for Shi Sufang.

The pretty maids first served wine and food, followed by beautiful musicians whose music brought life to the gathering. A number of swirling dancers came out, their movements fluid. A pity that Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai and Han Jie were not here for this and thus were not in the mood to enjoy.

After the dance, the dancers and musicians left the hall, leaving only six elegantly dressed beauties to serve wine and all of them were above average in looks.

Other than Lu Buwei, all the other royalty and officials of Xianyang cannot be compared to Du Bi.

Han Jie asked in passing, “What business does Master Pu has in Xianyang?”

Pu Hu laughed, “With Shaolong’s father-in-law around, there’s no place for me here at all.”

Everyone knows that he’s joking and Du Bi said with a laugh, “This old friend of mine, when doing business, is as good as Yi Yin and Lu Shang’s stratagems in governing a country, Sun Wu and Wu Qi’s military tactics and Shang Yang’s reforms. One is so impressed that one is rendered speechless.”

Pu Hu said humbly, “And you call yourself my old friend, trying to flatter me against your conscience. But when it comes to business, there are three whom I respect the most. The first one is Shaolong’s Grandfather-in-law, master Wu. The horses and cattle he raises are so numerous they cannot be counted by per head, but measured by per valley. Secondly is Bai Gui of the state of Wei, who runs the grains and silk-screen industry. In times of famine, it’s easier to borrow grains from him than to take loans from some other states. Thirdly is Yi Dun, the salt in his warehouse is enough to last everyone in this world for a few years. As for Lu Buwei? He’s still not considered up to par yet.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought “Here it comes!”. Pu Hu’s formidable point is his subtlety. Words like these which deliberately demean Lu Buwei were uttered beautifully and convincingly.

Han Jie said with a smile, “But Lu Buwei is indeed someone who knows what to invest in. Once he makes a right bet, he will enjoy the fruits endlessly.”

Everyone knows what he was referring to and all chortled loudly.

Ever since Han Jie stood out that night at Lu Buwei’s feast, he has been keeping a low profile, as if he’s afraid to steal Lao Ai’s thunder. But in reality, his wisdom and air is something that Lao Ai cannot be compared with.

Xiang Shaolong asked nonchalantly, “Isn’t Master Pu an expert in investment as well?”

Pu Hu replied with a wry smile, “Master Xiang please be gracious, do not pour salt into my wound again. This time I’ve really lost badly. If I’d known, I would have learnt from Zhong Sunlong from the state of Qi and become a loan shark instead. If I can just employ someone with half the capabilities of Master Xiang to collect the debts, I can guarantee that money will come rolling in. Then I can avoid the danger of meeting a gambling expert like Ling Yue.”

This time, even Xiang Shaolong can’t help but laugh. The glib tongues of businessmen are really different from others, their expressions are more lively and interesting.

Lao Ai is only concerned about Shi Sufang and asked, “Is Miss Shi not coming?”

Du Bi replied with a smile, “My lord, do not worry. The prettier a woman, the more difficult she is. Even though Miss Shi is staying in my residence, but up until now I’ve only seen her twice. A meal taken at the same table like what’s happening today is the first time for me! And I have the three of you to thank for it!”

Lao Ai, on seeing that a great Qin general like Du Bi is buttering up to him as well, felt privileged and hurriedly held his wine cup up in a toast.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to drink but in fact, not a single drop of wine touched his lips.

Pu Hu exclaimed in surprise, “Does Master Xiang find the wine

not to your liking? I can instruct my men to change it to another type of wine.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “If Master Pu had just been attacked only a few days ago, I’m afraid you’ll behave like me as well and control my drinks.”

Pu Hu was about to reply when Lao Ai’s eyes brightened as he looked straight ahead at the entrance.

Everyone followed his gaze and looked towards the same direction, and including Xiang Shaolong, all of them were instantly dumbfounded.

Shi Sufang, under the accompaniment of two maids, swayed elegantly into the hall.

The more distressing fact is that she looked as if she has just bathed and changed. Her shiny black hair was just bundled up at the top with just a wooden hairpin to secure it. She was without make-up, wearing only a thin, white and short silk top with sleeves so long that it reached the back of her palms, revealing only her slender fingers. On the bottom she was wearing a plain yellow long skirt, so long that it was trailing on the floor. She wore no other adornments but still looked a hundred thousand times better than any other women who may not look as good as her but dressed in finery and make up.

Everyone can’t help but stand up, and can’t help but feel ashamed of themselves.

Shi Sufang's expression was aloof as she moved to Xiang and Lao and sat down between them. Only then did everyone else regain their senses and sat down with her.

Lao Ai brushed off the pretty maid who was coming up to serve her and poured the wine for her personally instead. It seems that once lust took over his soul, he has long forgotten the warning that Xiang Shaolong gave him.

Xiang Shaolong could smell the fresh scent on her body after her bath and can't help but remember the intoxicating time when he first met Ji Yanran after her bath. He was suddenly jolted awake and at the same time saw that while Du Bi is equally head over heels, Pu Hu has been secretly keeping a watch on him. His heart turned icy as he realized that he must not underestimate this flamboyant and experienced businessman.

Man's ambition is never satisfied. Lu Buwei excelled in business and became rich and this exactly represents Pu Hu's mindset, which is why he can ignore a beauty in his hands.

Du Bi has always harbored unhealthy thoughts towards Ji Yanran, so naturally he is unable to resist the shocking and exotic charms of Shi Sufang.

Shi Sufang thanked Lao Ai quietly and slowly turned the crystal clear drink. Not only Lao Ai, all the rest felt as if their souls were being eaten.

Lao Ai had been pining for her arrival but once he was seated beside her, his glib tongue is now suddenly tied and he's at a loss for words.

Shi Sufang offered everyone a toast, then turned towards Xiang Shaolong and asked nonchalantly, "Why is Master Xiang suddenly available again?"

Xiang Shaolong was a little startled by her clear gaze and he lifted his cup with a wry smile as he replied, "I do not wish to give a false answer to Miss Shi's questioning so I can only punish myself with a drink. Would Miss please let me off the hook?"

Pu Hu chortled, "If Miss Shi knows that Master Xiang is risking his life to drink this wine, she'll certainly be touched."

After Xiang Shaolong had a hearty drink, he put his cup down only to catch a glimpse of excitement flash past Shi Sufang's eyes before she averted his eyes. She badgered Pu Hu to clarify his earlier words and after Pu Hu's explanation, Shi Sufang said happily, "It was Sufang who was rude, I'll have a drink with Master Xiang then!"

Saying is one thing, doing is another thing. On seeing that Shi Sufang's attentions are now all on Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai jealously tried to make her drink with him.

Du Bi said with a laugh, "Hold it! Our Miss Shi has a rule, at every feast, she will only drink three cups of wine. Now she has already drunk two, Master Lao must treasure it."

Lao Ai was even more annoyed but he dared not make himself appear loutish so he can only give a dry laugh as he tried to compliment her on her music instead.

Shi Sufang listened to him, showing neither approval nor disapproval but when Lao Ai's flattery became too exaggerated, she just smiled lightly and it was enough to make this wily old lecher start itching but there was nothing he could do to her.

Han Jie's sword skills may be excellent but in this instant, he is of no help at all.

When Lao Ai started talking about how Shi Sufang's dance and song is so excellent that no one since time memorial can compare with, Shi Sufang guffawed and replied, "Lord Lao's compliments are really too kind. Compared to sages of the past, Sufang's song and dance is just decadent performances, only good enough to help sirs relieve some boredom. The music and dance of past sages are significant to the peace and stability of a country, and has been marked by Confucius as one of the Six Arts. It is not something that a woman like me can be compared with."

Lao Ai's knowledge in this area is limited and he can only smile along in consternation, unable to continue the conversation further.

In this area, Xiang Shaolong is even more ignorant than Lao Ai and he was secretly surprised, having the slight feeling that Shi Sufang's certainly is not of simple background.

Shi Sufang asked calmly, “Has anyone heard of this story? After the death of King Wen of Chu, he left behind a beautiful wife. Master Yuan wanted to seduce her but as he had no access to her, he built a guest house next to her imperial abode. Everyday he’ll arrange for extraordinary dance performances, hoping to lure her out. One day, she finally came out and Master Yuan thought that his lure had worked.”

Once she came to this point, she spoke no further, leaving a cliffhanger behind.

Her speech was fluent and lively, with pauses at all the right moment. Even Xiang Shaolong was engrossed in her story, much less for Lao Ai.

But this beauty has a unique style and extremely prickly, not someone who gets along easily at all. In front of her, it’s very easy for one to feel inferior.

Du Bi said with a sigh, “Of course the widow of King Wen was not tempted, I’m afraid Master Yuan has been snubbed.”

Du Bi can’t help but try to show off a little in the face of a beauty so that he can get into her good books.

The only thing that can be said has been said by Du Bi and there’s no chance for Lao Ai to interject or agree.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed. Lao Ai is completely under this beauty's control now and now if she tries to show attention to him, it will mean that she is only interested in him and that will certainly incur Lao Ai's jealousy, thus spoiling the good 'honeymoon' period he is having with Lao Ai.

Han Jie said with a smile, "Miss, please have mercy on us and tell us the ending of the story!"

Shi Sufang's clear and alluring eyes swept past the crowd as she continued gently, "The lady cried, 'My late husband's intention of holding dances was to prepare for battle. Now Master is not using it to deal with our enemies but instead using it on those who are not yet dead, isn't that strange!' On hearing that, Master Yuan was so ashamed that he immediately brought 600 war carriages and attacked the state of Zheng."

Everyone was stunned. Her story is subtly hinting that her own songs and dance are just decadent pleasures, not worthy enough for the admiration of others. The hidden meaning is profound and yet filled with a twinge of sadness, making one immediately change his impression of her. It's very difficult to just imagine her now as an ordinary courtesan with outstanding musical capabilities.

Pu Hu laughed loudly and his laughter took away some of the awkwardness in the air. He said, "Miss Shi's wisdom is indeed a refreshing change from the current fad, I am much enlightened."

Shi Sufang's pretty eyes turned towards Xiang Shaolong as she asked offhandedly, "I wonder what topic all of you were discussing

before I arrived?”

Xiang Shaolong was still slowly savoring Shi Sufang’s story, thinking about the hidden meaning behind this tale that this unfathomable beauty has spun. He was jolted awake on hearing her and can’t help but scratch his head and said, “Hei! I think it’s something about businesses!”

Everyone see his bewildered expression and chortled.

Shi Sufang covered her mouth and smiled, her behavior genteel as she said, “Then this topic must have arisen because of Master Pu.”

Lao Ai was intensely jealous on seeing this and interrupted, “Miss’s predictions are absolutely correct.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting. Once Shi Sufang appeared, she has gained control of the whole event. People like Lao Ai who is usually so glib and always good for an argument can now only try to interject a few words in between her conversations whereas he himself is at a loss for words. This is the first time he’s met a woman like that.

Du Bi added with a smile, “Boss Pu mentioned that there are three businessmen he admires the most, namely Master Wu, Bai Gui and Yi Dun. I wonder which three men would Miss Shi admire the most?”

Shi Sufang covered her mouth as she smiled, “With so many talents here, how can it be my turn to express my thoughts? Why don’t we ask Lord Lao to start first!”

Lao Ai was staring at her so intently that for a moment he had no idea what Du Bi and her was talking about and was awkwardly dumbfounded.

On seeing his lord in trouble, Han Jie immediately tried to help by saying, “Why don’t I start the ball rolling. The person I am most impressed with is Sun Wu*. Not only did he leave behind an extremely exceptional book of military strategies, he also managed, with just a little trick and only a few thousand Wu soldiers, to infiltrate and defeat the Chu army, who had more than ten times the number of soldiers and went straight to the Capital. Indeed no one else before, or even after him, has been able to accomplish anything close.”

*Sun Wu – also known as Sun Tzu who wrote the Book of War

Xiang Shaolong can’t help but quietly recite these famous words, “Ahead, I see no one else before me; Behind, I see no one else after me; Contemplating the vastness of the world; I can’t help but weep out of loneliness and sadness.” * He secretly thought that only those who have personally experienced the battles of this era will understand how impressive that battle of Sun Wu is.

* Poem from Tang Dynasty by Chen Zi’ang.

Du Bi agreed, “Ha! Lord Han have said exactly the words in my

mind. The person I'm most impressed with in my life is Sun Wu as well."

Shi Sufang's clear eyes gazed at Lao Ai and he hurriedly added, "Sun Wu may be the best expert in military tactic, but ultimately he has to answer to some lord or ruler. The person I am most impressed with is Duke Wen of Jin, who maintained internal security and repelled external forces to build a great kingdom. His accomplishments are greatly above those of Qi Huan."

Shi Sufang replied with no particular preference, "So Lord Ai is one with great ambitions."

Pu Hu and Du Bi exchanged looks, obviously like Xiang Shaolong, they could hear the subtle sarcasm that Shi Sufang was making regarding Lao Ai's wish to become the ruler.

Lao Ai thought that Shi Sufang was complimenting him and became smug.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling a little vexed. There're about six people in this feast but each harbors their own intentions and there's not an inkling of sincerity or joy in this gathering at all. Not only do they not share the same interest in topics, the discussion seems to be quite disjointed as well. He can't help but exclaim, "I am the exact opposite from Lord Lao, I have no ambitions at all. There are so many people who have impressed me that I find it very difficult to choose just one. All right! It's Miss Shi's turn now."

Pu Hu interrupted with a smile, “The person I am most impressed with is Lord Xiang, so unconstrained that others have no way of guessing. No wonder even Guan Zhongxie had to admit defeat when faced with your battle-weary sword.”

Lao Ai’s expression changed slightly. Although he knows very well that Pu Hu is just trying to flatter Xiang and belittling himself, it’s a fact that Xiang Shaolong has many surprises indeed. In no way at all is he disadvantaged because of Shi Sufang’s excellent way with words, unlike himself who seemed to be always caught in a dilemma. It’s really difficult not to feel any ounce of jealousy at all.

Han Jie interrupted, “I wonder who is the famed ruler or general who has Miss Shi’s admiration?”

Everyone was interested in finding out Shi Sufang’s answer.

A light fog seems to cloud Shi Sufang’s bright eyes as she quietly sighed, “A great teacher will surely live in a place surrounded by thorns, a year of suffering will definitely ensue after a great army. In a battle for land, men are killed in the wild. In a battle for cities, men are killed in the city. Behind every famed ruler and general, is the suffering of the people, so how can there be anyone who impresses Sufang.”

This time even Du Bi was at a loss for words.

Instead it was Xiang Shaolong who had momentarily forgotten the hidden enmity of all those present who exclaimed in surprise,

“Pity on the bones which lie by the River Wuding, were once lovers in the dreams of their young wives. * As the saying goes, behind every great success is the sacrifice of thousands. War has always brought honor to only a handful of people. I really did not expect Miss to feel the same way. Hey! Why are all of you looking at me so strangely?”

*Poem by Chen Tao – Dreams of the Departed

When he uttered the first two verses, Shi Sufang has already turned to look at him in surprise, even Pu Hu and the rest were taken aback.

Only then did Xiang Shaolong realize that he has spoken too quickly and again plagiarized the famous words of ‘forbearers’.

His understanding of poetry may be limited, but those that he knows are the most popular and most brilliant verses.

Han Jie furrowed his brows, “Pity on the bones which lie by the River Wuding, were once lovers in the dreams of their young wives. These two verses aptly describe the cruelty of war, but I wonder in which state is River Wuding in?”

*River Wuding is in Inner Mongolia. Wuding’s literal translation can also mean uncertain.

Xiang Shaolong avoided Shi Shufang’s extremely round and animated eyes as he blushed in reply, “That can be any river, that’s

why it's called Uncertain River.”

Du Bi took a close look at him before he said with a sigh, “No wonder Learned Lady Ji fell for Lord Xiang. Behind every great success is the sacrifice of thousands, but since time memorial, wars have never stopped. It's either you'll kill me or I'll kill you, there's nothing anyone can do.”

Lao Ai, on seeing that Xiang Shaolong has managed to surprise Shi Sufang, was feeling greatly discouraged and a feeling of jealousy aroused. He changed the topic, “Miss Shi still has not told us who the person who will command your compliance is.”

Shi Sufang slowly took her eyes away from Xiang Shaolong and glanced at Lao Ai before settling her gaze on the pillar on top of the roof before saying forlornly, “There is this person in the state of Chu. It was said that the King of Chu is aware of his intelligence and sent some men to employ him as the Premier. He then asked the emissary, ‘I heard the King of Chu has a divine turtle which has been dead for more than 3,000 years and the King of Chu kept it in a cloth tube. Would this turtle prefer to be dead and his bones be kept as a treasure? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail around in mud?’. The emissary replied, ‘Of course it'd rather be alive and dragging its tail around in mud.’. That person then said, ‘Go! I want to drag my tail around in mud.’”

All of them looked at one another in bewilderment as they wonder why she is suddenly telling another story now.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking rapidly, wondering which famed forbearer will have such a story where he's so dispassionate about

fame and fortune. He can only hate himself for his limited knowledge, as he is only aware of a few Confucianists and Mohists whose name that every one knows. Suddenly a thought went past his head as he slapped the table and exclaimed, “So Miss is most impressed with Zhuang Zhou*, who is adept at using metaphors to illustrate his points, no wonder you love telling stories so much.”

* Ancient philosopher more commonly known as Zhuang Zi (Master Zhuang)

Only now did the rest of the people think of Zhuang Zhou and instantly looked at Xiang Shaolong in a new light.

Shi Sufang’s eyes gleamed excitedly as she looked at him intently in surprise.

This is the difference between the modern and ancient world.

In this era, bamboo books are manually written so circulation is not widespread and only a handful of people have the privilege of having books. Unlike the 21st century, where people can not only easily obtain any form of publications, there are also electronic books. Compared to this ancient era where knowledge is difficult to come by, the difference is as wide as heaven and earth.

Shi Sufang asked in surprise, “So Lord Xiang has some knowledge of Zhuang Zhou. I’ve been looking around but have yet to find anyone who has such outstanding views like him. He is the only one who truly understands the meaning of life. Not taking into consideration the difference between life and death, birth and

demise, success and failure, right and wrong, praise and blame, breaking away from the bounds of the world, the ties of emotions, regarding oneself as being as one with the universe. There's no more differentiating between 'me' or 'others'."

This time it was Xiang Shaolong and the rest of the group's turn to be amazed. From her understanding of Zhuang Zi, they can now tell how overwhelming is this beauty's intelligence.

Han Jie asked with great respect, "May I be so bold as to ask where Miss is from originally?"

Shi Sufang's eyes revealed endless pain as she said gently, "The citizen of a doomed country, there's no need to mention it further."

Lao Ai, who came with only thoughts of lust, now has all his evil thoughts erased as he was touched to the core.

Shi Sufang suddenly stood up, took two steps back and bowed, "Although I still owe everyone a cup of wine, but I can only make it up to all of you another day. Sufang only wants to go to a quiet place now to mull over some questions. Everyone, please help yourselves."

Pu Hu was about to speak up and ask her to stay but stopped himself, his expressions complex as well.

As Xiang Shaolong gazed at her perfect silhouette, he secretly

thought that in terms of intellect and beauty, this lady is comparable with Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, but obviously not as lucky as them.

He made up his mind that no matter what happens, he will no longer contact her because he now has genuine respect for her and cannot bear to hurt her just because they are on opposing camps.

Although she has successfully aroused Lao Ai's jealousy towards him, there is nothing he can do now.

Lao Ai can deal with him whatever way he wants.

Book 19 Chapter 9 – I Concede

Even after his return to the Wu Residence, Xiang Shaolong will still randomly think about this strange lady Shi Sufang.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Zhao Da were in discussion with Ji Yanran. Everyone looked somber.

On seeing that her husband is so obedient that he actually came back before the first watch, Ji Yanran smiled and said, “We were just discussing how we can find the assassination organization that was sent to assassinate Lord Zhengchu. It’s really too dangerous if we allow them to strike.”

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, “The problem is, we cannot publicize this matter. We can only do it secretly, the less people to know about it, the better. Otherwise, Guoxin’s identity will be exposed.”

Jing Jun gave a cold snort, “I don’t trust Guoxin at all.”

Ji Yanran pursed her lips into a smile and said, “We won’t trust Guoxin easily as well but we have to give him a chance to prove his own words!”

Xiang Shaolong sat down next to Jing Jun and said with a laugh, “This is called abandoning the dark for the light, turning over a new leaf, correcting a mistake. Xiaojun, you have to remember that forgiveness requires even more courage and love than hatred.”

Naturally all of them have never heard such a phrase or such logic and they were all stunned.

Ji Yanran asked happily, “My lord husband seems to be in a good mood tonight. Is it because you’ve gotten Shi Sufang’s favor again?”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Shi Sufang. He sighed, “Shi Sufang can only be described as being a rare lady. I think she has absolutely no interest in relationships between men and women at all. What she likes is Zhuang Zhou, she’s disdainful about her own singing skills. She has an intense and unique way of looking at things. Lao Ai ended up like a mouse pulling a turtle*, not knowing where to begin and getting snubbed whereas I kept a respectful distance. End of report, is the talented lady satisfied?”

*Mouse pulling a turtle – A Chinese idiom, meaning an impossible task

As soon as he said the phrase ‘mouse pulling a turtle’, Ji Yanran laughed so hard that she couldn’t catch her breath. Jing Jun and the rest were all smiling but by now, they are all used to Xiang Shaolong’s endless new and interesting phrases.

Wu Guo sighed, “Who can be more eloquent than Master Xiang? Luckily I have been Master Xiang’s follower for a long time and picked up some of his speech. That’s how I managed to woo Xiao Weiwei successfully, and did not disappoint Master Jing.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that Jing Jun had been supporting Wu Guo's pursue of Zhou Wei. He turned towards Zhao Da and asked, "Are you and your brothers doing well in Xianyang?"

Zhao Da revealed a look of gratitude as he nodded his head, "We've never had such glorious days before. As soon as we reveal Master Xiang's name, even those from Zhongfu Residence have to give us some measure of respect. Madam Fang also allowed us to choose the pretty girls to start our families. Hai, Lady left us too soon" Once he spoke of Zhao Ya, his eyes reddened.

Teng Yi was afraid of bringing up Xiang Shaolong's sad past again and changed the topic, "We've decided to transfer a batch of men back to Xianyang, to be in charge of searching for this group of extremely dangerous warriors. We've also informed Lord Changwen, asking him to report this matter immediately to the Crown Prince. It's the Spring Festival the day after tomorrow, I'm afraid our enemies will make use of the Spring Festival Ceremony to strike when the Crown Prince leaves the Palace. According to custom, the route to River Wei has already been decided and it cannot be changed. If the assassins hide themselves amongst the welcoming crowd along the paths, it'll be very difficult to spot them."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly shuddered as he remembered how many times he had protected politically important persons in the 21st century. He can be considered an expert in anti-terrorism so won't he be able to put to useful practice what he has learnt for this situation? Everyone saw his strange expression and were all looking at him, stunned, under the impression that he had thought of something shocking.

Xiang Shaolong waved his hand offhandedly as he said with excitement, "I'll be in charge of security for the Spring Festival this time. After the morning court session tomorrow, Xiaojun will come with me to survey the route to the Spring Festival Ceremony. Let us have a face to face combat with these elite assassins who are from the various countries, each using our own methods and see who is better."

Everyone looked at him in astonishment as Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "The most vicious part of Pu Hu's plan, is that if something happens to the Crown Prince while on his way to the Spring Festival Ceremony, Lord Changwen and I will be punishable by death. He's killing multiple birds with one stone. From what I see, Pu Hu's intellect is definitely on par with Lu Buwei, just that he's a little down on luck. Just like my duel with Guan Zhongxie the last time, he placed his bet on the wrong person!" He stood up and stretched lazily before adding, "This time they're still down on their luck, because they are facing me, Xiang Shaolong."

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong woke up as usual before the cock crows to practice his swordplay before leaving for the Palace. As he was especially early, he made use of the little extra time to look for Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan may be the most hardworking prince in the history of the Qin family as he listened to Li Si's reports while having breakfast so that he can handle the court discussion later.

On seeing that Xiang Shaolong has arrived, Xiao Pan hurriedly

dispensed with ceremony and asked him to take the lower seat as he said with a serious expression, “Pu Hu and Du Bi are indeed audacious, how dare they have ulterior motives towards me. Guoxing was able to redeem his mistake, General please see how he should be rewarded!”

Xiang Shaolong exchanged a look with Li Si, then said with a laugh, “Your subordinate advises Crown Prince to address me as Grand Tutor. If you address me as General, it feels as if I’ll be leading an army into battle any time.”

In the whole of Qin, Xiang Shaolong is the only person who could speak to Xiao Pan like that.

Xiao Pan chortled, “As soon as I see Grand Tutor, all my worries are gone.” He turned towards Li Si and said, “Li Si, can you let Grand Tutor have a look at the new coin we’ll be launching for Black Dragon!”

Li Si happily placed the new coin on Xiang Shaolong’s table.

Xiang Shaolong picked it up for a look. It’s a round coin with a round hole in the middle, and written on it the words half tael, with an abstract looking dragon shape. It’s really a vast difference from the image of money he had in mind.

Li Si returned to his table and said with a sigh, “Learned Lady Ji indeed lives up to her reputation, with her proposal to change the political system. Not only is it practical and feasible, the political and economical reforms are also taken into consideration. The

timeline for implementation is also indicated and the stages of implementation are just right such that the people won't feel forced into it. Please tell Learned Lady that Li Si is in total awe."

Xiao Pan obviously thinks very highly of Li Si as he said with a laugh, "Official Li is too humble. Official Li has given a lot of examples in the whole proposal, and has contributed as much merit as Grand Tutor Ji."

Li Si hurriedly knelt down to give his thanks.

Xiao Pan was silent for a moment before asking Xiang Shaolong, "How is grand Tutor planning to deal with the assassins who are coming to Xianyang this time?"

Xiang Shaolong replied easily, "Don't worry, Crown Prince. The only chance those rebels have to strike is to take us by surprise during the ceremony when your Highness is paying homage to the river god. But now that we're aware of this, the whole situation is reversed. I will work closely with Lord Changwen and crush our enemies' devious plot. I guarantee that not only will no harm come to your Highness, we can also make use of this chance to show those who are involved from the 6 countries our prowess."

Xiao Pan looks up upon him like a deity and he exclaimed joyfully, "With Grand Tutor in charge of this matter, there's nothing for me to worry."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "But your Highness must promise to let me have full control of everything tomorrow, otherwise it'll be

difficult to execute our marvelous plan.”

Xiao Pan chortled, “Then I will be Grand Tutor’s subordinate for one day tomorrow and obey all your instructions.”

Li Si gave a heartfelt smile as he felt the total trust and sincerity between the two of them.

The morning court session started with no major upheaval but once Lu Buwei brought up his intention to split the position of Salt and Iron Official into two positions, a fierce debate immediately ensued.

Xiang Shaolong listened for a long time and could only barely understand the gist of the matter.

It turns out that before Duke Xiao, almost all the trades in Qin were monopolized by the government. But in order to handle the production in these trades, the Qin government set up government agencies to take charge of the different industries. One of the most important posts is that of the Salt and Iron Official as it affects both the common people and the military.

But with the expansion of Qin, a few iron producing centers in the east have slowly fallen into the hands of the Qin people. The duties of the Salt and Iron Official are getting heavier day by day and there are also instances of smuggling salt and iron for personal gains. Besides, salt and iron are basically two entirely unrelated products. Therefore Lu Buwei came up with this suggestion.

The main problem with Lu Buwei's suggestion is that he wanted his own people in charge of Qin's economic and military matters, the two most important lifeline of the empire. Therefore Lord Changpin, Li Si and the rest are trying to delay this until the birth of Black Dragon so that they can make use of the opportunity to take these two positions back.

Naturally it's easier to delay than to object and in the end, there was no determined outcome. Xiao Pan gave the orders for this to be future discussed and the morning court session ended.

Xiang Shaolong returned home and Teng Yi and Jing Jun are already waiting for him to scout the route that Xiao Pan will be taking tomorrow morning.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "How's the situation?"

Teng Yi replied, "Guoxing just reported that Wu Guo had accompanied him to visit the various leaders. According to him, there's not much headway regarding the assassins."

Jing Jun added, "I've discussed it with Lord Changwen. He said we can just find some excuse, for example some guard has stolen items from the palace, then we'll seal the city and search each and every household. Ever since Shang Yang's reforms have been put in place, those who do not report crimes are guilty of the same offense so it should be easy to find any suspicious people. But if these people are hiding in some general or senior officials' residences, it'll be more difficult."

Xiang Shaolong replied, “You must not act rashly. We must pretend that we know nothing at all about this and tell Guoxing not to investigate so that we won’t put them on their guard.”

Teng Yi smiled, “Third Brother seemed very confident about the Crown Prince’s safety tomorrow?”

Xiang Shaolong gave a slight smile and summoned Zhao Da. After giving him instructions to inform Lord Wenchang and Guoxing, he left with Teng Yi and Jing Jun.

They left the city of Xianyang and walked towards River Wei on the official road. Along the way, they only saw endless grassland and knolls. They can’t help but feel energized as they enjoyed the scenery, almost forgetting the purpose of their trip.

The emerald lake, the luscious green grass with rays reflecting off them is simply enchanting.

Once in a while they will see shepherds with their herds with cows, goats or horses on the grassland and such a scene added a sense of life and energy on the land.

Teng Yi pointed to a small hillock which was overgrown with trees and said, “If someone hides up there with a strong bow, he’ll be able to shoot any target traveling on the official road.”

Xiang Shaolong was jolted awake from the mesmerizing scenery and he instructed Jing Jun to note down on his scroll all the

possible locations that the assassins can make use of.

Although it's noon, but when they traveled through a densely forested segment of the road, the morning fog has yet to disperse. The air is moist and vision is little hazy. Teng Yi paled as he said, "From the looks of the weather, there will be heavy fog tomorrow. It's extremely to our disadvantage."

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "I don't think it's entirely to our disadvantage. At least we know our enemies will choose the time when the fog is the heaviest when we are going there to strike and not strike on the return journey. Secondly, the heavy fog is even more favorable to the birth of Black Dragon."

Jing Jun said in awe, "Third Brother is obviously very confident."

Xiang Shaolong asked happily, "My two good brothers, have you every heard of the story of 'Attacking the wrong carriage'?"

Teng and Jing replied concurrently in confusion, "Attacking the wrong carriage?"

Only then did Xiang Shaolong remember that 'Attacking the wrong carriage'* incident happened after Xiao Pan became Emperor Qin, when Zhang Liang and his strongman attacked the wrong carriage with the iron hammer. He hurriedly tried to cover his mistake and said, "That is what will happen tomorrow. As long as the Crown Prince is hiding in another carriage, we can lure our enemies out without worry and annihilate them."

* Note: Zhang Liang's assassination attempt on Emperor Qin during one of his inspection tours. He found a very strong man and forged an extremely heavy hammer for the strongman. During the ambush, Zhang assumed that the most ornately decorated carriage in the middle is Emperor Qin's carriage and the strongman hurled the hammer at the carriage, killing its occupant. However, it turned out that Emperor Qin was not the person in that carriage.

Teng and Jing both exclaimed the ingenuity of the plan. By then they are no longer in the mood to survey the areas along the route and after making some plans, they went to River Wei to meet up with Ji Yanran, who is in charge of masquerading as Black Dragon, before returning to the city together.

By the time they returned to the Wu Residence, it's already dusk.

As soon as they stepped into the main door, Tao Fang informed that Wu Fu had just arrived and waiting for him in the East Hall.

Ji Yanran said in half-seriousness, "Someone is here to fish for news but don't follow him to Drunken Breeze Loft. Don't forget that you have not accompanied us for two nights. If you don't get an early rest, let's see where you'll find the energy to deal with those assassins."

Xiang Shaolong snickered, "Even if I have enough energy, I won't waste it on those women. I already have the whole world. Other than my pretty wives, nothing else in this world will be able to tempt me."

Ji Yanran smiled sweetly and let him go.

When he arrived at the East Hall, he saw that Wu Fu was behaving restlessly and secretly thought it amusing. He went up and said, “Master Wu really should not be here, what if it raises the suspicion of Lao Ai and Lu Buwei’s men?”

Wu Fu had already prepared his speech as he replied humbly, “Master Xiang, do not worry, I will be extremely careful.”

After they sat down, Wu Fu asked quietly, “What was the Crown Prince’s reaction after he found out about that matter?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly amused as he replied calmly, “Of course he was furious, but because of the Empress Dowager, he can only be on his guard secretly until he finds evidence. By then he’ll be able to settle scores with Lao Ai and let’s see how the Empress Dowager can protect him then.”

He paused and added, “The Crown Prince admires your loyalty very much and was considering how he should reward you.”

Wu Fu was ecstatic, “As long as I can be of service to the Crown Prince and Master Xiang, I am satisfied. I’m not concerned about rewards.”

Xiang Shaolong said deliberately, “Otherwise we can create an official post for you to enjoy, but someone else will have to take

care of your Drunkard Wind Loft because no official can ever open a brothel as a sideline. And it won't look good either if made known. Anyway, you've earned more than enough!"

Wu Fu was thrilled as he replied with a wide grin, "That's a minor problem. Master Pu had always wanted to buy over my Drunkard Wind Loft. If the sale is successful, I will give half of the proceeds to you. I know that such a trivial amount is nothing in Master Xiang's eyes but it represents a little token on my part."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this gift is considered quite substantial.

He suddenly had a thought. This Wu Fu is actually trying to cover all bases so that no matter which side gains the upper hand, he can still enjoy advantages.

Once he had this understanding, he realized that this person can be made used of.

Especially when the Black Dragon is about to be born tomorrow, it will certainly shock the kingdom, and the rise of one group will mean the decline of the other. Once Xiao Pan's reputation soars, people like Wu Fu who sees where the wind blows should know who they must side with.

Wu Fu furrowed his brow, "If Master Xiang is interested in that lady from my loft, just a word from you and I'll send her over to serve you. Even if it's Meimei, I'll have a way."

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “You’re not afraid of Lu Buwei?”

Wu Fu sighed, “I’ve no choice even if I’m afraid. Meimei is now using her life to threaten me and she refuses to become Lu Buwei’s concubine. Of course, if I have Meimei’s beauty, I wouldn’t want to marry into Zhongfu Residence as well.”

Xiang Shaolong was very surprised. So Dan Meimei is with Lu Buwei because she fear his power and not because she’s willing. His hatred for her diminished immediately and a sense of pity rose up instead as he asked, “How is Lu Buwei handling this matter?”

Wu Fu laughed, “What can he do? He can only try to pressure and bribe me but poor me is threatened by Lao Ai as well. I’m sandwiched in the middle and have not had a good night’s sleep. Master Xiang, just take a look at me now and you’ll know.”

Xiang Shaolong took a close look at his face and indeed he looked haggard with dark circles under his eyes. He said with a smile, “If you knew this would happen, why do it in the first place? Lu Buwei has no feelings at all yet you helped him trick me. Aren’t you just looking for trouble?”

Wu Fu was stunned at first, then he paled as he stuttered, “I don’t understand what you mean.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Even Mo Ao couldn’t trick me, so how do you think you fare when compared to Mo Ao?”

Wu Fu threw himself to the ground and exclaimed in fear, “Master Xiang have misunderstood me, if I lie...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him, “Please don’t make any life or death vows, otherwise I may really decide to punish you in Heaven’s name just like what you wished for.”

Wu Fu cried out, “Please believe me, I really...”

‘Swish!’ The precious sword that has been through hundreds of battles left its sheath.

Wu Fu was so terrified he scrambled away, cold sweat as large as peas filled his forehead as his face turned deathly pale.

Xiang Shaolong placed the precious sword nonchalantly on the table next to him and said off handedly, “I won’t hide it from you. I have spies with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, so I know everything. If you utter one more word of untruth, I will chop off your head with this sword and parade it at the market square. Of course the offense will be deceiving the ruler.”

Wu Fu was stunned for a moment before he replied dejectedly, “I concede!”

Book 19 Chapter 10 – The Dragon Rises From River Wei

Spring Festival.

Before the sun rose, most of the citizens of Xianyang city have already changed into new clothes, as if it's a market day and headed towards the upstream of River Wei to take part in the grand Spring festivities.

Although the roads were crowded, everything was in an orderly fashion.

Under the orders of Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Guo Yu, 200,000 cavalry were out in full force maintaining order along the way.

All the high posts along the way which can be used for ambush are guarded and security is tight.

If there are assassins, they can only make use of the woods on the sides of the roads as cover in order to execute their assassination attempts.

Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and a group of higher ranked officials went to the Palace to meet up with Xiao Pan before the sun rose. They first paid their respects to the late King at the ancestral shrine before leaving in carriages.

Under the protection of Lord Changwen and a group of elite imperial guards, Xiao Pan went according to plan and did not travel in the grand imperial carriage. Instead he is dressed as one of the imperial guard and set off undercover with the main team.

Inside the imperial carriage was Jing Shan who was pretending to be Xiao Pan. This person's dexterity is comparable to Jing Jun and is really the best person who can deal with sudden changes.

Xiang Shaolong was still worried that something will happen to him and specially reinforced the walls of the horse carriage with steel plates, just like the bullet-proof vehicles of the 21st century.

The huge entourage left the palace gates and traveled along River Wei once they left the city.

The commoners were cheering along both sides of the road as a show of their support and love towards the ruler.

Each of the two teams has about a hundred odd imperial soldiers with ferocious dogs doing a sweep of the heavily forested areas along both sides of the road to prevent the enemy from hiding in the woods to shoot at them.

The Wu family warriors were disguised as common folk and mixed around in the crowd, almost like plain-clothes spies of the 21st century, keeping a look out for suspicious characters in the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong was riding behind the imperial carriage, constantly giving orders to the imperial guards, putting to total use everything he has learnt in the 21st century.

With the imperial guards opening the way, the imperial carriage moved right ahead. Everywhere they went the crowd hurriedly gave way, kneeling in respect.

On both sides of the team of carriages were two rows of imperial guards. The ones on the outer row held long shields while the ones on the inner row were armed with bows and arrows. In terms of defense, it is indeed extremely watertight.

Xiang Shaolong slowed down to more than 10 horse lengths behind and rode together with Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Wenchang etc.

Xiao Pan looked appreciatively at the horsemen on top of the hills on the left of them who were waving the flags signifying safety and said, “Grand Tutor’s plans are indeed an eye opener for me.”

Li Si added with a smile, “Even if the assassin is formidable with 3 heads or 6 arms, in my opinion there is no way he can find a window of opportunity to strike and can only retreat in face of such difficulty.”

Xiang Shaolong looked up. Gazing at the heavy morning fog, he said with a smile, “The enemy must have made careful plans and will surely have ways to deal with sudden changes. If my guess is right, the main attack will come from further ahead. If they can get to the top of the trees, they’ll be able to attack with weapons

such as arrows and stones if we are not prepared. And with the support of the assassins who are working undercover among the crowd and with a clear target, they may be able to succeed after all.”

Xiao Pan, Li Si and Lord Wenchang looked at the top of the trees that is covered in fog and can't help but feel a cold shiver in their hearts.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “Right in front there is a forest and it is the most ideal place for both attacking and escaping. If they want to strike, it would be that place.”

Xiao Pan was thinking all these exciting as his eyes blazed hotly whereas Li Si and Lord Wenchang started feeling nervous, no longer in the mood to joke.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Emperor Qin is Emperor Qin indeed, for his is braver than most men.

He nudged his horse and went after Wang Yu.

The leading troops led the way on the official road to the forest where the rites will be held.

The fog became thicker and anything more than ten steps away cannot be seen clearly.

The entourage has yet to arrive but the common folk can already

hear the music as they hurriedly went down on their knees on both sides of the road and waited for the carriages to drive past.

Amidst the cheers and music, Wang Yu drove into the woods.

The imperial guards have received their instructions earlier and all are on the alert to deal with any sudden events.

Xiang Shaolong was calm instead. His eyes searched out Wu Guo who was in the crowd and exchanged a look with him. He was not surprised if Wu Guo did not find out anything out of the ordinary.

If the enemy doesn't even have a way to disguise themselves, they won't even come.

When a group of experts have made a death wish and decided to assassinate a target, they will become a terrible force to reckon with.

Xiang Shaolong gave out orders to the soldiers surrounding them. Wu Yan and his men spread out a little more, behind Wang Yu. All were on high alert.

The half mile long forest road feels as long as a century.

Much to everyone's surprise, even when they were nearing the edge of the forest and the trees are beginning to thin, there's still no sign of any assassins.

The sound of the River Wei gushing ahead could be heard from up ahead.

Suddenly the road in front opened up and they saw the river gushing. The fog is now just like a thin blanket covering the earth.

Xiang Shaolong was just breathing a sigh of relief when there was a strange and sudden change.

Strange calls were heard from the sides of the road and just as Xiang Shaolong was still wondering what's happening, the imperial guards surrounding the imperial carriage all fell from their horses, followed by the horrible sound of a heavy object crashing towards the carriage at a shocking speed. The driver of the carriage had his head totally severed by some strange, horrible weapon and fell off the carriage. The eight horses which were pulling the carriage all fell in a pool of blood.

The outside walls of the carriage shattered and splintered, the sound shocking.

There was immediate chaos amongst the crowd as everyone tried to escape in all directions. Cries and screams filled the air and it was difficult to differentiate who is the enemy.

Xiang Shaolong roared as he pulled out his precious sword and charged forward.

A few people jumped out from the sides of the road.

With a 'whoosh', one of them used a heavy metal bar to smash the door open. By now the nearest imperial guard to the imperial carriage who's not yet dead or injured is at least ten steps away.

"Argh!" one of the men who tried to dash up the carriage was struck in front with an arrow and fell to the floor.

All the warriors fired their arrows. The attackers were all shot dead but two of them managed to somersault backwards and slipped into the woods, avoiding the arrows.

Xiang Shaolong and his men went to surround the area.

More than a dozen shadows escaped from two sides, running towards River Wei.

Amidst the sounds of hooves and cries, the guards ran after them.

Xiang Shaolong ran up to the side of the smashed carriage door and shouted, "Calm the masses!" Xiang Shaolong took a look inside the carriage.

Only to see Jing Shan extend his deathly pale face as he stuttered, "Luckily there were the steel slabs. Otherwise I'll be dead."

Xiang Shaolong took a better look, and saw more than a dozen

round metal wheels scattered on the ground, their edges thin and sharp as they shone but by now all of them have a broken edge.

He took another look at the 30 odd imperial guards lying in pools of blood around the carriage, all of whom died instantly. The scene was frightening with broken pieces of armor scattered around the road.

Such circular wheels that were thrown with the hands are even more fatal than bows and arrows, such that even armors are of no protection.

Another look at the walls of the carriage. The wood was splintered, revealing the steel plates that had become warped. He can't help but suck in an icy breath.

Two of the circular wheels managed to fly into the carriage and sliced open Jing Shan's armor when they rebounded. Luckily it was only a minor wound.

The entourage stopped.

The frightened masses were gathered to a corner, far away from the crime scene. Wu Guo was in charge over there to check if there are any assassins hiding amongst the masses.

Xiao Pan and the rest came up to Xiang Shaolong and after seeing the horrible aftermath, they were all fearfully astounded.

By now Lord Changwen's men came to report that the assassins jumped into the river and swam across to the opposite bank. They only managed to kill three of them.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse to check on the assassins who were killed. All of them were struck by at least three arrows and died on the spot. There're no further clues that are worth pursuing.

Wan Chi, Wang Lin, Lao Ai, Lu Buwei and the other officials hurriedly rushed forward and on seeing Jing Shan walking out from within the carriage, were all dumbfounded.

Xiao Pan removed his helmet and revealed himself. His expression was icy as he ordered Guan Zhongxie, "Search the city immediately. If there are still assassins inside the city, you can say goodbye to your position as Commander of the City Guards."

His gaze fell upon the corpse filled ground and said sadly, "Give them a grand burial and compensation!" He could not bear to witness any more of this and nudged his horse towards the grounds for the Spring rites.

Although a great assassination tragedy has happened, most of the people are not aware of what happened and the atmosphere is still lively.

When Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and the rest of the officials ascended the platform for the rites, the sound of drums were heard and the tens of thousands of common folk gathered on the bank of

the river all knelt down and chorused, “Long live your Majesty.”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun gave orders to the Calvary as they were left in charge of maintaining order.

Ever since the reforms of Shangyang, amongst the seven states of the warring kingdoms, the people of Qin are the most law-abiding and obedient. Even in such a situation, everything is done in an orderly fashion.

Because of what happened earlier, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were worried that there are still assassins hiding among the crowd so they erected a human barrier, segregating everyone a safe distance away.

The fog thickened again, seemingly frozen on the river and refusing to disperse, which lets one feel that nature can be such a mystery.

Xiang Shaolong who was standing below the platform kept an eye on the expressions of Du Bi and Pu Hu, who were standing on the platform. Although they looked normal, they occasionally let slip small movements which betrayed their uneasiness. He knows that they are feeling lost now that the assassination attempt has failed.

Xiao Pan took over the torch and lighted the kindling in the giant cauldron. The fiery flame shot heavenward as the smoke filled the air, into the fog.

The whole place was solemnly silent.

Xiao Pan opened the ritual script and started reading aloud.

He stood erect, with a solemn air and indeed has the regal bearing of a ruler of the world.

At this point in time Teng Yi came up to Xiang Shaolong and said quietly, “I heard that even Xiaoshan almost lost his life. I didn’t expect the assassins to be so formidable.

Xiang Shaolong was still shaken as he replied, “If the target is me, even I would not be able to survive. Who would have expected that they would have such frightening weapons.”

Teng Yi stared at River Wei, which was covered with a layer of smoke and fog, the opposite bank is now totally indiscernible by now. Teng Yi gave him a nudge and said, “Coming!”

Xiang Shaolong could not see anything at all initially but after his warning, his eyes sought out the surroundings and indeed realized that something seems to be stirring up the river as it bubbled with ferocity.

Those standing near the bank began to realize something strange is happening and they all started pointing in astonishment.

Lu Buwei and the rest, who were on the platform, were all dumbfounded, looking quizzically at the river.

The crowd standing further back all stepped forward to have a closer look.

The voice of Xiao Pan's reading the rites was slowly covered by the shouts of the crowd.

A black, curved dragon's tail emerged about five feet from the water amongst the fog before it smashed back into the water ferociously and water droplets flew up into the air, seemingly clearing the heavy fog.

Xiang and Teng did not expect Ji Yanran to come up with this move. This moving animal, when compared to the 'dead dragon' used during the rehearsal, is as different as heaven and earth. Everyone was shocked.

The crowd on the banks and the leaders and officials on the platform were all shell-shocked. Cries of wonderment rose up.

There are even some who were so frightened that their legs have turned to jelly and they collapsed to the ground.

The imperial guards were still shaken by what happened earlier and they hurriedly surrounded Xiao Pan, some of them even pulling out their weapons.

Xiao Pan stopped them with a shout, "A mystical creature have emerged from the waters, do not act rashly. Anyone who disobeys

will be beheaded.”

Of course Lord Changwen and the rest immediately stopped the guards to avoid another ‘tragedy’ from happening. The river is now calm again.

Tens of thousands of people all held their breath as they stared at the river.

Suddenly there were cries of alarm as deep in the fog, a black dragon head revealed its mystical presence again, creating waves as it bobbed on the water. It took some time before sinking back into the water again.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest shouted in chorus, “The birth of the Black Dragon, Heaven has bestowed a mythical creature upon Great Qin and we have the support of the River God.”

Lord Changping took the lead and knelt down first. The rest of the people followed him and knelt as well. Even Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie and the rest were influenced by the air of excitement and knelt down as well.

For about 5 miles along the riverbank, it was filled with people offering their prayers towards the river.

In the end only Xiao Pan remained standing on the platform alone, lifting his hands up in the air as he faced the river, his stance certainly standing out from the crowd.

As the thousands held their breath, the Black Dragon appeared again.

The gigantic dragon head emerged just a few feet away, directly in front of Xiao Pan before sinking down again. This happened three times. The whole dragon rose out of the water, more than a hundred feet long, its tail constantly slapping on the water. Everyone who saw it was terrified.

The black dragon suddenly let rip an earth shattering roar. Although Xiang Shaolong and the rest knows very well that this is the effect of many men shouting at the same time, they can't help but be impressed with the realistic effect.

Fire suddenly shot out of the black dragon's eyes as its head bobbed three times towards Xiao Pan, as if it is bowing to him before going back into the water.

Wang Chi took the opportunity to shout, "A magical creature has blessed our sovereign, long live our Majesty."

The crowd regained their senses as they cried out in unison, "Long live the Black Dragon, long live our Majesty!" The cheers waved and ebbed like the water on the river, echoing across the valley as thousands of people became excited and the atmosphere became extremely lively.

The black dragon did not appear again. Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, Du Bi, Pu Hu, Lao Ai all looked at one another in

astonishment, not knowing how they should consider this strange and frightening event that just happened right in front of their eyes.

Striking while the iron is hot, everyone was celebrating the fact that the black dragon has blessed their king. On Xiao Pan's way back to the palace, Ji Yanran disguised herself as a messenger and blocked Xiao Pan's path to offer him Zou Yan's 'Complete Book of Five Virtues'.

This dramatic scene of blocking the path to offer a book caused another stir and by now the emotions of the officials and the common people is uncontrollable.

Groups of court officials and generals went to the palace on their own accord to visit Xiao Pan as they pledged their loyalty. Firecrackers can be heard everywhere in Xianyang City.

The people were dancing and singing on the streets as they made their way to the palace to pay their respects.

Taking Xiang Shaolong's suggestion, Xiao Pan opened up the training grounds in the palace to the public and even came out three times to receive the people's adulation. Naturally security was extremely tight as well.

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were caught off guard and although they harbored some suspicions, there was nothing they can do.

The appearance of black dragon is ten times more formidable than ten copies of “Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu”. Xiao Pan’s reputation suddenly soared to the highest point that was previously unheard of.

That afternoon, Wang Wan, Lord Changping, Li Si, Wang Chi, Wang Lin entered the palace to see Xiao Pan to suggest that the Qin imperial family formally use Zou Yan’s ‘Complete Book of Five Virtues’ as the national book and to formally appoint Ji Yanran as the respected ‘Female Tutor’, to be in charge of drafting the change in policies in line with the mystical creature’s ‘new government’.

Even Xiang Shaolong, the engineer of this plan, did not expect that black dragon’s influence will be so formidable that quite a number of officials who were originally on Lu Buwei’s side have now changed their loyalty towards Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan immediately called for a court session and Ji Yanran read out the new policies in court.

During the court session, all the officials looked excited but Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji were in shock.

But under such superstitious and mystical atmosphere, no one dares to openly oppose Xiao Pan who has received spiritual blessings.

The beautiful Learned Lady Ji wore a grand, long black robe embroidered with dark gold thread with a tall headgear. With a

stately expression, she first announced that River Wei will henceforth be known as 'Holy River'. As River Wei is one of the rivers connecting to the Yellow River, in other words, the whole of the Yellow River has now become the Holy River.

Because less water is available during the winter season, the tenth month where winter begins will now become the first month of the year. Followed by the 'Black as Color'*, where colors correspond to the Five Elements and water corresponds to the color black.

*From Elements of Color, in traditional Chinese art and culture, black, red, blue-green, white and yellow are viewed as standard colors. These colors correspond to the five elements of water, fire, wood, metal and earth.

Therefore black is now the main color in dressing, ornaments, pennants etc.

Followed by 'Six as Lead', whereby in the Five Elements, the number six correspond with Water so henceforth the various utensils will use the number six as a benchmark.

For example, official hats should be 6 inches long, carriages should be 6 foot wide and 6 foot equals to one pace.

On seeing this grand event which he single handedly planned unfolding, Xiang Shaolong's whole head was numb with excitement.

No one will be able to understand this event's far and wide influence on the Qin dynasty other than him, and it has left an indestructible mark on the history of China.

After Qin unified China, the empire was divided into 36 commanderies, because 36 is the self multiplication of 6.

Another example is the classification of the numbers of wealthy merchants in the world in Xianyang as '120,000 households' because 120,000 is 6 times 20,000.

The last key political change is to make use of Ji Yanran to announce the execution of the 'Three Lords and Nine Ministers' system which Li Si meticulously planned in order to strengthen Xiao Pan's central power.

It is create disorder in the previous official system Lu Buwei established in the past by abusing his power and to twist the situation where they were previously bound by around.

On the surface it looks as if most of the people can still maintain their own authority and Lao Ai seems to be holding even greater power but in secret, it has become a situation where Lao Ai will keep Lu Buwei in check while Xiao Pan will once again gain tight control of the military and finances.

Lu Buwei is still the Premier, while Lord Changping is now the Grand Commandant instead of the Left Premier and Feng Qie is now the Imperial Secretary. Together they are known as the Three Lords.

The duties of the Three Lords are clearly defined.

The Premier is the head of the administrative officials and reports directly to the ruler and will be given a gold seal and purple ribbon to assist the Qin ruler in political matters of the country.

This is akin to denying Lu Buwei's identity as his 'Uncle' to feign his position as Regent. A premier is not the equivalent of the Ruler, but will have to seek the Ruler's opinion in every matter, thus strengthening the power of the imperial rule.

Lord Changping's role as Grand Commandant is to assist Xiao Pan in taking charge of the whole country's military affairs so that the Qin army will have a unified commander, imperceptibly cutting off the independent rule that men like Meng Ao, Du Bi had been enjoying with the armies under them.

This reform is similar to merging the old positions of Left Premier and Grand Marshal, and also akin to integrating the powers of Xu Xian and Lu Gong into one post. Through Lord Changping, Xiao Pan can directly control the Qin military, the strongest army in the world.

This position is also assigned the gold token and purple ribbon.

The last of the Three Lords, the position of the Imperial Secretary is the brain juice of the super intelligent Li Si who came up with this brilliant plan to reduce Lu Buwei's power.

On the surface, the Imperial Secretary is similar to Li Si's previous position of Chief Clerk, helping Xiao Pan handle all memorials and edicts, just that there's now the added responsibility of keeping an eye on the duties and authority of the officials.

But when Ji Yanran described the detailed responsibilities, she pointed out that whatever affairs that the Premier is handling, the Imperial Secretary has the authority to question but the authority to oversee the Imperial Secretary is something that Lu Buwei as the Premier will not possess.

So it became that the Imperial Secretary will keep the Premier in check, ostensibly and obviously reducing quite a lot of Lu Buwei's influence.

Feng Qie used to be in charge of the judicial system and is a very upright person so no one dares to raise any objection about him taking on this position.

From this one can see how capable Xiao Pan is in using the people under him.

Whereas Lao Ai had a promotion from his position as Interior Minister to the Minister of Ceremony, responsible for state protocols and rituals and the head of the Nine Ministers. Under him were the six assistants: Grand Musician, Leader of Prayers, Judge of Policies, Grand Astrologer, Overseer of Temple and Leader of Rites.

This is a highly ranked position but with no real power, most suitable for someone with Lao Ai's identity as a 'fake eunuch' and this offer gives Zhu Ji due respect so that she will not be offended.

Lao Ai's original position as Interior Minister will be given to his brother Lao Ji.

From Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan understands that this person is a good for nothing, a lecherous bum so he's not worried about him at all.

Besides, the Interior Minister is all along only in charge of the documents and correspondences between the three major armies in the capital and the Palace. Even if he wants to plan some dirty tricks there is nothing he can base it on.

Lord Changwen became the second in command among the Nine Ministers, the Minister of Household, to be in charge of the defense of the whole city. In other words, the Imperial Guards, City Guards and Cavalry are all now under him.

Among the other 7 ministers: Minister of Guards, Minister of Coachman, Minister of Justice, Minister of Guests, Minister of Imperial Clan, Minister of Finance, Minister Steward, the three most important positions are those of the Minister of Justice, Minister of Finance and Minister Steward. They are taken up by Li Si, Wang Wan and Cai Ze respectively.

Li Si and his men gained a promotion of several ranks, in charge

of the whole country's judicial punishment, becoming the country's highest ranked judge. Under him were the Main, Left and Right Supervisors. Lao Ai's keqing* Ling Qi and Mao Jiao became the Left and Right Supervisor respectively.

* keqing - a person from one feudal state serving in the court of another

Minister of Finance is in charge of the whole country's taxes and expenditure.

The Minister Steward takes care of the businesses and economy of the country and is another important post and an important official like Cai Ze is someone that Xiao Pan will have to appease.

As for the wars against others, Wang Chi, Meng Ao, Wang Ling and Wang Jian were appointed as the Four Great Supreme General whereas Xiang Shaolong, An Guxi and Du Bi were appointed as Great Generals and only the seven of them have the authority to lead the army into battles.

This can be considered a conciliated political reform with Xiao Pan gaining the most advantage, followed by Lao Ai. As for Lu Buwei, he can only wallow in self pity.

But because Zhu Ji, Wang Guan and most of the senior officials are now supporting Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei have no choice but to accept it quietly.

The mystical help of Black Dragon which came at an opportune time, together with the act of 'blocking the path to offer a book', has at least knocked Lu Buwei off a few rungs from the extreme power he held. No longer will he be able to do whatever pleases him like in the past.

After Xiao Pan announced the end of the court session, the officials all chorused, 'Long live your Majesty' and then hurriedly rush home so that they can shower and change in time to take part in tonight's feast that will be held in the Palace. And the Winter Commencement day is now considered the New Year for Qin.

Book 19 Chapter 11 – Returning Good For Evil

Xiang Shaolong had wanted to slip away but he was dragged by the recently promoted and over enthusiastic Li Si to see Xiao Pan. Ji Yanran was not as happy as them and went home on her own.

Although this time it cannot be considered a complete victory, but it's a huge change for the better. Want Chi, Wang Ling, Lords Changping and Changwen were all in high spirits as they surrounded Xiang Shaolong, this great mastermind into the inner court to see Xiao Pan.

On seeing everyone arriving, Xiao Pan walked down from his dragon throne, so touched that his eyes turned red from the emotions.

Xiang Shaolong was a bit confounded as he looked at Xiao Pan striding towards him in an imposing manner.

Suddenly he felt as if Xiao Pan is a total stranger, yet at the same time so close that he's like his own son.

The kind of two extreme reactions clashing together gave him an exceptionally strange feeling.

In another few years, Xiao Pan will be crowned as Emperor.

And his relationship with this future Emperor Qin, will have to come to an end.

He has to leave.

Because he does not wish to be drenched in the blood of the soldiers and civilians of the Six States. He is totally weary towards wars.

Xiao Pan's actual age is 19 years old, and he absolutely has the air and commanding presence of a ruler of the times who feels that he is way above all other living things.

He may be half a head shorter than Xiang Shaolong but his shoulders are broad and his limbs muscular with a squarish face and big ears. The most striking is his eyes, when he glanced over at Xiang Shaolong, even he felt a chill in his heart.

In the past, when Xu Xian and Lord Lu found out that he is not Lu Buwei's illegitimate son, they immediately pledged loyalty to him. And now Wang Ling and Wang Chi are devoted to him without any reason at all. Xiao Pan is just that kind of natural born political leader who has the charisma to make others submit to him.

One can imagine that when the time comes for him to be officially crowned as Emperor, he will become even more remarkable.

Xiao Pan came to Xiang Shaolong and grabbed his hands tightly as he exclaimed with joy, “Grand Tutor, we’ve succeeded.”

Li Si and the rest surrounded the two of them and shouted out their congratulations. All of them were beginning to sound a little nonsensical.

All along, in the power struggle between a ruler and his power-holding official, the fight is never completed without some form of bloodshed.

But with this Black Dragon, a stroke of genius, they immediately sliced off more than half of Lu Buwei’s power which he had painstakingly built up over many years and at the same time, possibly crushed the plans that he had been secretly making. To be able to achieve such an outcome without a single soldier or bloodshed, how can one not feel strangely touching.

With the current situation, it is absolutely impossible for anyone to raise a coup. Even the civilians of Xianyang will rise up to support Xiao Pan, not to mention the military which has always been loyal to the royal family.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “I should take a rest too, will your Majesty please grant me the permission.”

Xiao Pan sighed, “Much as I am extremely unwilling to do so, I can only accede to your request. But once anything happens, Grand Tutor must come back to help me.”

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a weight has been lifted off him as he said, “In politics there’s Lord Changping and Li Tingwei and in military there’s the two Supreme Generals. Your Majesty, just do as you deem fit!”

Everyone roared with laughter.

Because Xiang Shaolong is as good as saying, don’t come disturbing me if there’s nothing wrong.

Li Si chided laughingly, “Lord Xiang please do not make fun of me. With Xiang Shaolong, I will always be the same Li Si you met outside the city initially when you came back from Zhao.”

Xiao Pan said, “When does Grand Tutor plan to return to the farm for your temporary leave?” On hearing his emphasis on the two words ‘temporary leave’, all of them revealed a knowing smile.

Instead Xiang Shaolong grabbed Xiao Pan’s hands tightly, so tight that he could feel their flesh and blood merged together as he answered, “After we eliminate Qiu Risheng’s Warrior School and after Xiao Jun’s wedding, I’ll return to the farm and take my temporary leave as you wish. I should still be in Xianyang for another ten odd days. Heh, I want to go home for a shower and change in order to get ready for the feast tonight.”

Xiao Pan let go of Xiang Shaolong’s hands unwillingly as he uttered emotionally, “That I, Ying Zheng, will have this day, is all thanks to Grand Tutor.”

That he, as a ruler of the country, is willing to say such a statement, is enough to move everyone.

Only Xiang Shaolong truly understands the hidden meaning he is conveying.

Who would have expected that the mischievous imp of the past who only knows how to harass palace maids will ultimately become the famous Emperor Qin who will unify the world?

Outside the palace doors, it was filled with people trying to take a look at the ruler and when they saw Xiang Shaolong coming out, cheers erupted immediately.

The sounds of hooves were heard. Guoxing, leading a troop rushed out from the side and saluted him from a distance.

On seeing Guoxing wearing his military uniform, like a changed man with his suave demeanor, Xiang Shaolong remembered the way Jing Jun looked when he wore his official uniform for the first time. He can't help but feel a deeper sense of closeness towards Guoxing.

Guoxing came up to him and accompanied him as he rode towards the Wu residence. He said with a quiet laugh, "I've been waiting outside for quite some time. Earlier when Lao Ai and Lu Buwei came out separately, the crowds all jeered at them and they were so livid their faces were contorted. But when Great General Xiang emerged, you received the loudest cheers."

Seeing little children in their brand new clothes setting off firecrackers and playing catch at the side, Xiang Shaolong has never felt so relaxed before.

Xiao Pan has finally stabilized his throne and in future, he's the only person who will settle scores with others. People like Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will only be fit to become his sparring practice targets.

Guoxing said, "Master Xiang, please trust me. In future I will follow you with absolute loyalty."

On hearing the change in his behavior, Xiang Shaolong showed his magnanimity by saying, "I will be leaving in about 10 odd days and Xiao Jun will take over my position for the time being. Just follow Xiao Jun and work well with him, this is also the best opportunity for you to mend relations with him."

After Guoxing nodded his head in agreement, he lowered his voice and said, "After 5 of those assassins escaped, they all ran to Du Bi's General Residence to hide from the search. From what I understand from Qiu Risheng, they will masquerade themselves as warriors from our Warrior School and attend the feast tonight.

Xiang Shaolong asked in puzzlement, "Did they think they still have a chance at assassination tonight, or do they not know that all who enter the Palace to attend feasts are not allowed to bring weapons?"

Guoxing replied, "Qiu Risheng is not that careless, he just hopes

to make use of those people to regain some prestige of his school.”

Xiang Shaolong said nonchalantly, “Fine, then let me see what this Qiu Risheng looks like tonight. If not because of Lao Ai, I would have torn his school down today.”

On hearing this, Guoxing was petrified and secretly relieved that he has ‘changed his loyalty to the wise ruler’, otherwise he would be one of those who would face utter humiliation.

Guoxing added, “I heard that this morning Dan Meimei attempted suicide by hanging herself but luckily she was saved.”

By now Xiang Shaolong only feels pity and no hate towards Dan Meimei. But it’s really not convenient for him to interfere in this matter so he could only secretly lament that much as he would like to help, his hands are tied.

He can’t stop himself from asking, “Is Dan Meimei’s heart with Lao Ai?”

Guoxing gave a mysterious reply, “I’m afraid she’s the only one who knows. But there has been talk amongst the servants going around Drunken Wind Loft, saying that the person Dan Meimei is really interested in is you, Master Xiang.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled as he exclaimed hoarsely, “That must be a mistake, otherwise why would I not feel anything at all.”

Guoxing bumped his shoulder as he replied, “A woman’s heart is most unfathomable. Or maybe it’s a wrong rumor!” By then they have reached the Wu residence and Guoxing left after saluting.

As soon as Xiang Shaolong thought of his own wonderful and warmhearted family, all thoughts of Dan Meimei were cast to the back of his mind immediately.

As soon as he stepped into the house, his men told him that the famous courtesan Yang Yu from Drunken Wind Loft is here to look for him and currently waiting at the East Hall.

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and he could roughly guess that this visit must be related to the unsuccessful suicide attempt by Dan Meimei and can only secretly heave a sigh.

He is almost of the mind to instruct his men to send Yang Yu away but ultimately he could not harden his heart to do it. After a brief internal struggle, he went to the East Hall.

This beauty was devoid of her makeup and wearing a plain outfit, and looks even more pleasing to the eye than when she was all decked up and heavily made up. Although she’s still incomparable to the previous night’s Shi Sufang, but her delicate beauty can still be considered rare.

Up until now he still cannot decipher the inner workings of this lady of the night’s heart.

Is she forced to harm him because she had to submit to Lu Buwei's power? Or is she really in love with either Guan Zhongxie or Xu Shang, that's why she's willing to aid them in evil.

In an environment full of schemes and nefarious plots, he has learnt not to trust anyone easily.

At the same time he learnt how to use various methods to deal with his enemies, for example Wu Fu and Guoxing.

Yang Yu saw him arrive and left her seat in joy to receive him.

Xiang Shaolong was really worried that she will throw herself into his arms and if the servants see that, they will report to Wu Tingfang and the other ladies. By then there's no way he will be able to defend himself.

That's the thing with the human psychology. If he goes and have fun at Drunken Wind Loft, Learned Lady Ji and the rest can pretend ignorance as long as they don't witness anything but if he were to bring the playthings home, that's another matter altogether.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly bowed and said politely, "Miss Yu, please take a seat."

Yang Yu is an expert in the psychology of men. She smiled sweetly and after giving him an extremely meaningful look, retreated back to her seat. She waited for Xiang Shaolong to sit

down next to her before she raised her brows and said quietly, “Meimei wanted to hang herself this morning. Luckily we have been on the alert to prevent her from committing silly acts so we were able to save her in time. But now there’s a horrible looking scar on her neck, she won’t be able to receive guests for quite some time.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “Miss Yu has come to see me, is it because you think I can be of assistance to her?”

Yang Yu sighed and said, “I know very well that by coming to see Great General Xiang like this, you are already being very kind to me by not chasing me out of your residence. It’s just that Meimei and I are closer than real sisters, the others are afraid of Lu Buwei’s authority and are keeping silent. In the whole of Xianyang City now, Great General is the only one who holds no regard for Lu Buwei at all. Meimei and I are really at our wits end so we can only shamelessly come and seek Lord Xiang’s help.”

Xiang Shaolong asked worriedly, “Wasn’t Meimei always on good terms with Lord Lao? Now that his power has increased greatly, if he is willing to marry Meimei and she doesn’t mind, it should be very difficult for Lu Buwei to raise objections.”

Yang Yu revealed a look of disdain as she said with a snort, “What is Lao Ai, at the very most he is just a toy boy of the Dowager. He can come out and flirt around but a month ago, someone gave him two song courtesans and in the end they were beaten to death by the Dowager’s people. Great General, please tell me who else would have the guts to marry into his residence.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked speechless. He remembered during Lu Buwei's birthday feast, Zhu Ji's defensive looking eyes were full of vicious hatred, her whole demeanor was icy. Zhu Ji has really changed too much.

Ever since Lu Buwei caused the death of King Zhuangxiao, something went wrong in her psychology.

But still, he did not expect her to turn into such a terrible woman.

Yang Yu continued, "Besides Meimei was just putting on a show with him. Initially she was indeed charmed by his suave and handsome exterior but ever since she heard from Bai Lei the atrocious acts he has done in the past, she only developed feelings of detest and none of joy."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that Bai lei must have heard about Lao Ai's atrocities from Han Xie and knowing Han Xie, he'll definitely spare no mercy with his tongue and pepper the stories.

But then again, Lao Ai does deserve it.

Yang Yu's expression suddenly softened as she looked at him with great affection, "Only Master Xiang has the best reputation. Even your enemies can't come out with anything bad you've done. At first we did not understand, but after we've seen how understanding Master Xiang was when we kept offending you, knowing that we were forced into it and even treating us with courtesy, we were secretly very grateful."

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “It’s most difficult trying to be a good person. Honestly, regarding Lu Buwei’s intention to marry Meimei as his concubine, it’s very difficult for me to interfere and besides, there is no reason for me to interfere.”

Yang Yu replied confidently, “But at least there are two ways Master Xiang can help Meimei. The simplest way is of course for Master Xiang to make Meimei your own concubine but I know very well that this request is overboard and it will also result in enmity between Master Xiang and Lord Lao.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “What about the other solution?”

Yang Yu chewed on her lower lip as she said, “Help her escape from Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong asked quizzically, “Helping her leave the country is an easy task for me. I just need to give my instructions and it will be done but the problem is, she is such a beauty that no matter where she goes, there will be people who hanker after her beauty. So isn’t it out of the frying pan and into the fire? If she bumps into bandits or hooligans, her outcome will be worse than anyone can imagine.”

Yang Yu said elatedly, “As long as Master Xiang is agreeable than everything’s fine. Meimei has a royalty from Wei who admires her and has on many occasions sent his men here to beg Meimei to go to Daliang. If Master Xiang were to send men to inform him and ask him to send his people to receive her at the border, then

Meimei's safety will not be a problem."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Who is this royalty?"

Yang Yu whispered, "It was Crown Prince of Wei, who used to be held hostage in Xianyang but later escaped back to Daliang."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly enlightened.

It seems that Dan Meimei is not really in love with him, but if she becomes the Crown Princess, it's much better than to become Lu Buwei's sex object.

Xiang Shaolong knows himself very well, he is not one to harden his heart and refuse to help so he replied with a wry smile, "All right, you'll tell Meimei to feign illness, even Wu Fu is not allowed to see her. When everyone is attending the feast tonight, I'll send men to send her away and travel through the night. On top of that I will send fast horses to inform the Crown prince and Lord Longyang. The only problematic thing is that we have to make it look as if Meimei ran away on her own so that it will not implicate Miss Yu and the others."

Yang Yu threw herself into his arms in joy, her eyes red.

Xiang Shaolong was shaken as he exclaimed, "If you want to thank me, sit down properly quick."

Yang Yu couldn't care less and gave him a big kiss on the lips

before she moved a small distance away, her eyes watery as she choked in tears, “Even if Meimei and I try to repay you till our deaths, it is till not enough to repay Master Xiang’s magnanimity in forgiving us for our past misdeeds.”

Only then is Xiang Shaolong sure that this is not a trap for if it is, Yang Yu must be an award winning actress. Besides, there’s no need for him to be personally involved in this matter so it’ll be impossible if they want to harm him.

After discussing the details for contact with Yang Yu, he asked in passing, “Why aren’t you leaving together with Meimei?”

Yang Yu glanced at him awkwardly, wanting to speak out but stopped herself. Finally she lowered her head, her pretty face blushing. Her behavior was extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened as he exclaimed, “So Miss Yu is in love with Guan Zhongxie.”

Yang Yu shook her head, “How could it be him? That is a cold blooded and heartless person. Every time after he’s had his fun with me, he’d chase me away immediately, saying that he’s not used to sleeping with others. A man like that, only Third Missy Lu would take a liking to him.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Of course he wouldn’t treat Lu Niangrong the same way. I know, it must be that fellow Xu Shang, he is indeed very handsome.”

Yang Yu chewed on her lips without saying anything but her expression was filled with worry and helplessness. Only after a long pause did she say, “It’s the same everywhere I go. If Lu Buwei forces me to become his concubine, I can only submit to my fate. But Meimei is a lot stronger than me. Hai, I’m afraid Master Xiang will not believe me even if I say it but I have no wish to lie to Master Xiang in any matter. Meimei’s suicide attempt is just a farce Meimei and I thought of to delay Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “I’m already very careful but I was still duped by both of you.”

Yang Yu promised, “Now there’s nothing we’re hiding from you. Initially I dare not come and look for Master Xiang at all but Meimei said you’re the only person who can help her and will certainly help her. Because she knows that Master Xiang is a natural born, true and chivalric hero.”

Xiang Shaolong added wryly again, “She’s really accurate in her assessment of this great fool here.”

Yang Yu wiped away her tears and revealed a charming smile, “Meimei said, if Master Xiang doesn’t want her, then just send her away. Hai, which girl in Xianyang city now does not wish to marry into Master Xiang’s family?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought her formidable. If a woman wants to get into the good books of a man, a ‘professional’ like Yang Yu will certainly be very outstanding, so much so that even if one knows that it’s just false flattery, he’ll still feel good hearing it.

At least there are still Guiyan, Lu Niangrong and even Yingying have no wish to marry him, Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong saw that there's not much time left since now he has to arrange for Dan Meimei to escape Xianyang, prepare to attend the feast at the palace tonight and also worried that Ji Yanran and the rest will have some misunderstanding so he hurriedly send Yang Yu off on her way.

After Yang Yu left, the first thing Xiang Shaolong did was to look for Zhao Da because he had once stayed with Zhao Ya in Daliang for a long period of time so he is most familiar with the local situation. He is the most appropriate person to be in charge of this matter.

Dan Meimei is gone just like that. The most unlucky person will be Wu Fu and this can possibly force him to take one step further to ally himself with him and become a useful pawn in Lu Buwei's organization.

Zhao Da thought it would be some dangerous mission and on hearing that it's only to send Dan Meimei to the Wei border, he agreed happily.

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner residence, he thought that Ji Yanran and the rest would have been garbed in finery and waiting to attend the feast. Instead, his wives and maids were having fun with the kids, still dressed in their day to day wear and doesn't look like they're planning to attend the feast at all.

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled, “Aren’t you going to join in the festivities?”

Ji Yanran lay languidly on the cushions and she replied tiredly, “My lord husband seems to have forgotten who had to lift up that dragon tail to slap the river the whole morning, and who was made to stand for hours in court to read the edicts like a punishment. I had thought of going but after my bath I seem to have suddenly lost all my energy. I just want to do nothing at all, and have no energy to think of why my lord husband was chatting half the night away with a lady from Drunken Wind Loft.”

Xiang Shaolong was initially filled with pity, then he was almost filled with fury as he knelt down and kissed her cheek and at the same time asked Wu Tingfang, “What about the rest of you?”

Zhao Zhi pouted her lips, “Since Sister Yanran is not going, would we have the mood to go?” Xiang Shaolong is finally gaining some understanding as he raised his arms in surrender, “God be my witness, I, Xiang Shaolong and Yang Yu had never had any past entanglements, and it’s the same for today. The reason she...”

Ji Yanran suddenly covered his mouth with her hand as she said with a laugh, “Don’t be overly suspicious, we were just making fun of you!”

Wu Tingfang chuckled charmingly, “But it’s true we won’t be attending the feast. The sight of Lu Buwei makes me think of... hai, don’t talk about it.”

Looking at her darkened expression, Xiang Shaolong immediately thought of his lovely Zhao Qian and Chunying, and understood her meaning.

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng came over and helped him up to assist him in his bath.

After he was appropriately dressed, he went to the hall where Teng Yi and Jing Jun were chatting idly with Tao Fang as they waited for him.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Have Zhao Da informed you about Dan Meimei's matter?"

Teng Yi nodded his head, "It's just a small matter. But if it can anger Lu Buwei and cause trouble for Wu Fu, it's a happy task."

Jing Jun sighed, "Dan Meimei is precisely clear about this point, so she's not worried that you will not agree. This woman is indeed very beautiful."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened by his words and immediately his impression of Yang Yu dropped. He is really too ready to look at on the bright side of things.

Tao Li said, "I saw Tu Xian earlier and he asked me if the Black Dragon is Shaolong's idea. I dare not lie to him and Tu Xian wants me to tell you that he is really impressed with you. This marvelous

plan is even better than stabbing Lu Buwei with your sword. Lu Buwei was livid with anger when he went home and guessed that it was us who came up with all this balderdash but there's nothing he could do at all. Tu Xian said with Lu Buwei's character, he may choose to take a risk and told us to be even more careful."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled as he bowed his head in humble acknowledgement. Indeed victory has gone up to his head and he is on cloud nine, and this is very dangerous.

Teng Yi smiled, "Guan Zhongxie arrested a group of people but from what I see they are innocents. He's thinking of using these people as scapegoats but they were taken away by our Minister of Justice so he can't torture a confession out of them. This time even Guan Zhongxie has lost his authority."

Jing Jun complained, "The sight of Guoxing irks me yet Third Brother wants me to teach him the ropes. Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong grabbed his arms and pulled him closer, saying with a serious expression, "A fault confessed is half redressed. Xiao Jun, just be kindhearted this one time and give him a chance!"

Teng Yi stood up and announced, "It's almost time, let us leave for the Palace!"

Xiang Shaolong reminded him, "Remember to bring your Mozi sword. Tonight will be filled with great performances."

Tao Fang was surprised, “How can such things happen? This is the royal feast of Great Qin, without the approval of the ruler, who dares to create trouble?”

Xiang Shaolong tapped the Hundred Battles Sword hanging from his waist and laughed, “We are the ones the ruler gave approval to, to save us the trouble of finding the Warrior School again in future.”

Only then did Teng and Jing understand.

Xiang Shaolong led the way and walked towards the main door as he chortled, “Birth of the Black Dragon. It’s a sign from heaven and also a joyous occasion. We’ll just wish Qiu Risheng an early happy new year.”

Teng, Jing and Tao laughed as they ran after him and stepped out together.

The 18 elite guards and the personal guards of Teng, Jing and Tao were already waiting outside with the horses.

After the four of them mounted their horses, they swept out of the main gates towards the direction of the Palace.

The whole of Xianyang City was covered with night fog and it looked eerily like a ghost city.

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of his impending return to the

relaxing farm, he was in a happier mood.

Ever since Zhao Qian and the rest unfortunately lost their lives in another land, he has not felt so carefree like what he is feeling now, no longer having the feeling that he is being crushed by an invisible burden so heavy that he cannot breath.

end of Book 19

Book 20 Chapter 1 – A Union Of Mutual Benefit

Under the escort of the 18 elite guards, Xiang Shaolong, together with his brothers Teng and Jing, and Tao Fang made their way towards the Palace. Suddenly they could hear hoof beats from the front and in the dark fog a lone rider was racing towards them, with another 10 odd riders chasing after him. It looked as if the long street has become a lane for races.

Teng Yi shouted, “Stop your horses.”

The rider in front has rode into the ring of light cast by the lanterns and they could see he was bleeding all over his body as he shouted, “Great General save me.”

Everyone took a closer look and was shocked to see that it was Guoxing.

Guoxing wanted to rein in his horse but obviously he could not hold up any longer as he fell sideways to the left of the horse.

Just before the warhorse skidded to a stop and Guoxing was about to crash onto the ground, the sound of the bowstring quivering was heard as an arrow was shot out from the hands of one of the riders at the back. It's accuracy was so unbelievable as it entered the back of Guoxing's neck and exited from the front of his neck. By the time Guoxing reached the ground, he is already a lifeless corpse.

Even though Xiang Shaolong's reflexes had always been fast, the scene was enough to make his body go numb.

The 18 elite guards drew their bows in unison and swiftly cocked their arrows.

The group of riders rode up to where Guoxing had fallen and reined in their horses. The leader, Guan Zhongxie was hanging his bow back onto his horse's back as he said loudly, "Commander Xiang have seen it for yourself, Guoxing tried to escape in guilt and your subordinate had no choice but to carry out orders and have him killed."

Xiang Shaolong's whole body went cold and at the same time a storm of fury went up in him. With a 'clang!', he drew out his Hundred Battles Sword and said with a cold snort, "Guan Zhongxie how dare you kill my Deputy Commander right in front of my face?"

Guan Zhongxie's personal guards raised their shields and went in front of him, forming a wall of shields.

Guan Zhongxie replied with a composed smile, "Commander Xiang please do not be mistaken and listen to my explanation. I am under his Majesty's order to arrest the killers who tried to assassinate his Majesty this morning and I found out that the killers were in cahoots with the owner of the Warrior School, Qiu Risheng, who brought them to Xianyang. Now Qiu Risheng and all the killers are arrested and Minister Lu questioned them

personally. That Guoxing resisted arrest and ran away as Commander Xiang can very well see. If I have failed my duty in any way, you can always bring it up to his Majesty, Minister Lu and the Dowager.”

He then added in a shout, “Take away the body!”

For a moment Xiang Shaolong did not know how to react as well as he shouted, “No one’s allowed to touch him!”

Since Guan Zhongxie has gained the upper hand, he just laughed and said, “Commander Xiang has given his orders, would I dare to disobey? Let us leave!”

He slapped his horse and went away.

His men retreated on their horses for ten odd steps before shouting in unison as they turned their horses’ head around and ran after Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest looked at one another, their eyes finally resting on Guoxing’s body, lying in a pool of blood with an arrow in his neck.

Tao Fang sighed, “In the end we still underestimated Lu Buwei. This move is indeed extremely vicious, not only destroying the Warrior School and at the same time cause us and Lao Ai a loss of face. He can also point the finger towards Lao Ai, or even Du Bi and Pu Hu now.”

Teng Yi said seriously, “Maybe Lu Buwei will make use of this opportunity to cause more trouble and deal with Lao Ai and his men.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, “He definitely will not be able to touch Lao Ai. Xiao Jun, send some men to help settle Guoxing’s funeral affair and at the same time protect his family. I will enter the Palace immediately to see his Majesty and discuss how we should handle this matter.”

He nudged his horse’s belly and rode forward, unable to take another look at Guoxing’s gruesome outcome.

All along, although Guan Zhongxie is his enemy, he still felt there are certain similarities between them and there’s an inkling of understanding.

But at this moment, he only wants to tear him in pieces and he won’t feel an ounce of pity at all.

When he reached the main road leading towards the Palace, it was jam packed with humans and carriages. The officials and royalty all behaved as if they had no idea of the bloody exchanges in Xianyang City and were all happily on their way to attend the feast.

When he reached the Palace gates, he met Lord Changwen, who came up to him with a grave expression and said, “His Majesty happens to be looking for Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly remembered something and instantly broke out in sweat as he told Teng Yi, “Xianyang City will definitely be heavily guarded tonight, Zhao Da and Dan Meimei...”

Teng Yi was hugely shaken as he replied, “I understand!” before turning back.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly instructed Lord Wenchang to send a team of Imperial Guards to follow Teng Yi and protect him before he entered the Palace to attend to the summons.

He still can't come to terms with Guoxing's death.

Indeed his head has been clouded by victory, that he didn't even think about how widely spread is Lu Buwei's power in Xianyang City.

With his intelligence, how can he not come to the conclusion that with the assassination attempt on Xiao Pan's life, Du Bi and Pu Hu will certainly become implicated.

Now that Lu Buwei has arrested Qiu Risheng, it's obvious that he wants to deal with Lao Ai.

But he knows very well, or rather he knows from history that before Lao Ai public rebellion, there is nothing Lu Buwei can do to Lao Ai.

Once one makes an enemy out of Lu Buwei, one careless mistake can mean a huge loss.

Once he thought of how Guo Xing had just offered his allegiance and ended up being shot dead by Guan Zhongxie right in front of his eyes, the sense of fury and helplessness really made him feel the impulse to immediately rouse his Wu family's elite warriors and kill their way into Lu's residence.

At this point in time Xiao Pan is in the study talking with his trusted aides Lord Changping, Li Si, Wang Chi and Wang Ling, his expression strangely calm. When he saw him coming, he called out joyously, "Grand Tutor, dispense with ceremony."

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to suppress his tumultuous emotions and sat down below Wang Chi, asking solemnly, "What's the current situation?"

Wang Chi replied, "Guan Zhongxie sprung a surprise attack on the Warrior School earlier, Chang Jie and An Jinliang were killed immediately. Qiu Risheng's right arm was shattered when they beat him with poles and the 200 odd warriors in the school were all arrested. On top of that, they questioned two of the injured assassins and obtained evidence. There's no way Qiu Risheng can deny anything."

Li Si who was sitting opposite added, "Those people have been sent to my place, including Qiu Risheng, who all insisted they were under the orders of Lao Ai. Because the re-opening of the Weinan Warrior School was all due to the support and protection of Lao Ai, it'll be very difficult for Lao Ai to keep himself out of this matter."

Xiao Pan said, “I was looking for Grand Tutor because I want everyone to have a discussion, should we make use of this matter to get rid of Lao Ai?”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood. Although Xiao Pan was forced to accept his marvelous plan of using Lao Ai to curb Lu Buwei, but in face his hatred for Lao Ai is overwhelming because Lao Ai has taken Zhu Ji’s attention away from him.

Xiao Pan would very much like to find a chance to seriously hurt Zhu Ji in order to satiate the anger in his heart. Now that the Black Dragon is born, he is no longer so afraid of Lu Buwei like in the past, that’s why he feels that this idea is extremely tempting.

Once he, Xiang Shaolong, nods his head a little, Xiao Pan will give the orders. And maybe the other person who hates Lao Ai more than Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei will immediately send his men to kill all of Lao Ai’s family and warriors, really castrate him and only hand him to Li Si, the Minister of Justice after beating him to submission.

Zhu Ji herself holds no real power and if Xiao Pan doesn’t stand on her side, Lu Buwei will be able to do whatever he likes.

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh, “Where is Lao Ai now?”

Lord Changwen answered, “He and a huge group of his trusted warriors have hidden themselves at Sweet Spring Palace. The Dowager sent her people here to summon his Majesty twice but

was rejected subtly both times.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize the danger of the situation. Things are happening too fast, Lu Buwei must have known long ago that Qiu Risheng is connected to this matter so he deliberately planned his attack before the start of the feast so that everyone will not be able to react in time.

Everyone’s gaze landed on him, they obviously know Xiao Pan’s intention and they dare not object, neither do they wish to object. So they’re waiting for him, the person who can influence the future Emperor Qin’s decision, to speak up.

In fact, Xiang Shaolong is hard pressed to find a strong reason why he should object.

He saw Xiao Pan’s bright eyes, staring unwaveringly at him, filled with yearning and anticipation.

Ultimately Xiao Pan still treats him different from the others. Even though his authority is growing day by day, in the end he will still steadfastly respect his opinions.

He gave a sigh before he told them that Guan Zhongxie was killed right in front of his eyes.

Everyone’s countenance changed.

Wang Ling cried out with fury, “This is going overboard.”

Xiang Shaolong said calmly, “No one in here will give any sigh of regret over Lao Ai’s death but we must also consider the consequences.”

He then gave Li Si a look.

This can be considered a chance for Li Si to show if he is indeed a true friend.

Currently, besides Xiang Shaolong, the only other person Xiao Pan trusts the most is Li Si. The others fall way behind.

Li Si is an extremely smart person and knows what Xiang Shaolong is thinking of. He nodded his head slightly in affirmation and said, “If we get rid of Lao Ai now, the person most affected would of course be the Dowager. If this were to happen, the Dowager’s power will be shaken and it’ll be difficult for her to interfere in court affairs. Under such circumstances, if Lu Buwei join forces with the senior officials in court, maybe he will really be able to become the Regent. Then the current favorable situation we created with the Black Dragon will go down the drain.”

Wang Chi said solemnly, “We can always propose Shaolong become the Regent in his capacity as the Grand Tutor, especially since Shaolong has already proven his merit by saving his Majesty. Besides, with the birth of the Black Dragon, Wang Guan, Cai Ze and the rest knows who the true ruler is. Even if Lu Buwei wants to twist the situation, I’m afraid there’s nothing much he can do.”

Lord Changwen agreed, “There is no one else more suitable to become the Regent other than Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, “Naturally I am very happy that his Majesty and all of you think so highly of me but since Lu Buwei chose to make things difficult for Lao Ai this time, it must be because he’s worried that we will remove Guan Zhongxie from his post and he may not be able to point the finger at the Dowager. Obviously he has something up his sleeves and his ultimate motive will be to deal with our precious dragon.”

Xiao Pan was silent for a moment before he nodded his head, “Even we know that Qiu Risheng is in cahoots with Du Bi and Pu Hu so there’s no reason for Lu Buwei not to know. But this time his only target is Lao Ai, with no mention of Du Bi and Pu Hu at all. There must be more to this.”

Li Si’s expression changed, “Could it be that Lu Buwei has already reached a secret agreement with Du Bi and Pu Hu to sacrifice Qiu Risheng in order to topple Lao Ai and the Dowager. Then next he’ll just have to... hei!”

Everyone’s expression changed immediately.

Lord Changwen exclaimed hoarsely, “This is definitely not without basis. Because when Pu Hu was on the way back from the religious rite, he was invited by Lu Buwei to share his carriage. Maybe they’ve reached an agreement in the carriage.”

This is politics.

No matter how impossible it seems, but under the sudden change of circumstances, enemies may become collaborators after weighing the pros and cons.

From Lu Buwei's perspective, he is already on opposing ends with Lao Ai and Zhu Ji. The political corporation with Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong as the leader is all the more causing him hate. If he did not have the support of Meng Ao's power, he would have lost his life long ago. But if he collaborates with Cheng Qiao, who cares only for gains, his situation will naturally be very different.

Xiao Pan said with a somber expression, "I had not considered this point."

Wang Ling heaved out a cold breath, "Ever since Black Dragon was born, Lu Buwei and Du Bi were at a loss and in their effort to regain their authority, it's not surprising that they will do this. The problem now is that all of us dislike Lao Ai, so should we take this opportunity to drag him down?"

Everyone's gaze landed on Xiang Shaolong again.

Once again, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel that fate cannot be changed. Lao Ai is fated not to die so early, that's why this thought suddenly sprouted in all their heads.

To Lu Buwei, Cheng Qiao's influence is so much lower than Xiao Pan's, and Du Bi and Pu Hu will never be the match of Wang Chi, Li Si and the rest of their own people. So if Cheng Qiao replaces

Xiao Pan as the ruler of Qin, he can only be a puppet ruler and will never be able to have a mind of his own.

From this it can be seen that he is now utterly disappointed in his 'son' Xiao Pan.

He smiled and said, "What is Lao Ai? Right now our biggest enemy is only Lu Buwei so for now the smartest thing to do is to keep Lao Ai to keep Lu Buwei in check and after that try to get rid of Cheng Qiao and the rest. By then we won't have to worry what Lu Buwei will be capable of doing."

Xiao Pan is still a little worried as he asked with a furrowed brow, "Then how should we deal with Cheng Qiao?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "That's easy. Order him to lead an army to take down the state of Zhao, and his relationship with the Zhao will come to light."

Everyone marveled at the brilliant suggestion.

This is the importance of information. If Xiang Shaolong is not aware of the relationship between Pu Hu and General Peng Ai from Zhao, he won't be able to think of such a marvelous plan.

Xiao Pan was stunned for a moment before he chortled out in laughter, "There's no simpler and more direct way than this, but we must wait for the right time. The Black Dragon has just been born recently, I still need some time to consolidate my power."

After Li Si became the Minister of Justice, his status has changed greatly. He is no longer trying to conceal his abilities as he announced, “Since that is the case, then we should let Lao Ai know very clearly that Lu Buwei wants to destroy him, then he’ll be at greater odds with Lu Buwei.”

Wang Ling said somberly, “But there’s pros and cons to this. We can imagine that after this incident, the Dowager will be clear that Lao Ai’s power is too little and in future will go all out to help him fight for more power.”

Wang Chi snorted, “No matter how hard she fights, he will never be able to become a Great General, so what good use can he be?”

Xiao Pan stood up and the rest hurriedly stood up and bowed.

Xiao Pan said energetically, “I will go and host the Spring Feast immediately. Grand Tutor Xiang can bring a team of Imperial Guards to escort the Dowager and that fake eunuch to the Palace to attend the feast. Just take it that his life is still not the end this time.”

He then gave a cold snort before leaving.

The rest hurried after him.

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of visiting Zhu Ji, he immediately felt a headache coming on.

Who would have expected that situations will suddenly arise. He'll be grateful if his plan of taking a long 'vacation' is not disrupted because of this.

Xiang Shaolong led the 18 Guardsmen and a 50-strong team from Xiao Pan's best Imperial guards and went grandly to the Sweet Spring Palace. A group of warriors dashed out from the side to block their paths.

Xiang Shaolong had already guessed that Guan Zhongxie would order his men to surround Sweet Spring Palace so he unsheathed his Hundred Battles Sword and shouted, "Who dares to stop me, Xiang Shaolong."

The Guardsmen and Imperial guards roared as they brandished their shields, bows and spears and made a formation, protecting Xiang Shaolong right in the middle with their arrows and spears pointing outwards, ready to fly out at any moment.

None of those warriors dare to retaliate as they fled from all sides.

The drawbridge to Sweet Spring Palace was drawn and the gates shut tightly.

Xiang Shaolong and his men went to the little moat protecting the palace and reined in their horses.

Guan Zhongxie led Xu Shang and 50 to 60 warriors and went up to them, the former asking icily, “Haven’t Commander Xiang gone to join in the Spring Feast?”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Guoxing and wished he could kill him with a stab now. He waited until he came near and reined in his horse before saying with a smile, “If I were to throw my flying needles at Official Guan, I wonder how confident will you be at avoiding them?”

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang’s expression paled at the same time, their eyes on his right hand which he deliberately left hanging near the horse’s body. The former managed to force out a smile and say, “Commander Xiang must be joking, death will of course be my only outcome.”

Xiang Shaolong gave a nonchalant reply, “The both of you had better not move rashly, I am not joking. By surrounding Sweet Spring Palace like this, the both of you have already committed the offence of offending the Dowager. If I were to execute the both of you, who would dare to say that I’ve done wrong.”

Xu Shang’s reply was calm and steady, “Great General Xiang is mistaken, we are just under Lu Buwei’s orders to protect her Majesty!”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and said, “So I see, in that case you can retreat immediately, just leave the task of protecting her to me.”

A flash of anger was seen on Guan Zhongxie's features as he lowered his head, "As the Great General commands."

He shouted, "Everyone, retreat!"

He turned his horse's head and galloped away.

Sounds of hooves galloping rose.

In an instant all the warriors were gone.

Xiang Shaolong called out towards the gates of Sweet Spring Palace, "Lord Ai please lower the drawbridge."

Sounds of machinery were heard as the drawbridge lowered.

Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to keep their weapons and led the way, marching grandly into the Palace.

He had just stepped past the gates when Lao Ai, Han Xie, Ling Qi, Lao Si came up to him, all dressed to fight.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse and extended his hand to shake hands with Lao Ai as he said with a laugh, "Lord Lao, please forgive Shaolong for coming late. Is the Dawager alarmed?"

Lao Ai had a look of gratitude as he said quietly, "This matter..."

Book 20 Chapter 2 – Failure Despite Preparations

After Zhu Ji instructed Xiang Shaolong to sit next to her, she stared at the night scene of Xianyang through the curtains of the carriage.

The main street was packed with joyous Qins who were celebrating the Spring festivities and the birth of the Black Dragon.

Houses were decorated and sounds of firecrackers popped continuously, an especially sharp contrast to Zhu Ji's empty and helpless state of mind.

Ever since King Zhuangxiang passed away, Zhu Ji has never truly been happy.

Her whole life was made possible because of Lu Buwei, but is also destroyed because of Lu Buwei.

Maybe even she herself cannot determine the grudges and gratitude she has with Lu Buwei.

Lao Ai may look like he is successful on the surface, but ultimately he's just a pawn being made use of by the various factions.

What's unexpected is that with Zhu Ji's intellect and

formidability, once she's fixated with men, she'd actually become so muddleheaded.

Just as he was secretly lamenting, Zhu Ji's fragrant lips gently asked, "Shaolong! What should I do in future?"

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt as if he has once again stepped into the time machine and has gone back to the days in Handan when he first met Zhu Ji. He was stunned, "Your Majesty..."

Then he's at a loss for words.

Zhu Ji turned her delicate body and stared at him as she said, "Sorry!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Why do you say that?"

Zhu Ji lowered her head and replied piteously, "I myself have no idea what I'm doing. But sometimes, I really wish that someone would kill you."

Xiang Shaolong knows she's referring to her approval of the duel between him and Guan Zhongxie so he sighed and said, "I will never blame your Majesty, no matter what, I will never blame you."

Zhu Ji's delicate body shuddered as she lifted her head to look at him. After a long moment, she suddenly said, "Is that Black Dragon real or a fake, I beg you do not keep it from me."

A sudden fury rose in Xiang Shaolong, knowing that Zhu Ji is still making plans for Lao Ai. He said icily, “Of course it’s real, can such a thing be faked?”

Zhu Ji stared at him morosely for a moment before she turned back to look out the window again, saying with a wry smile, “Shaolong, you’re angry. Sometimes I really wish that you’d hit me or scold me, then I’ll feel a little better.”

She paused and continued, “I know you too well. From the way you answered me just now, I know that is a fake dragon. Such a grand plan, you must be the one who thought of it because no one would be able to pull off such a trick better than you.”

Xiang Shaolong felt heated as a feeling so strange that even he cannot understand rose up in him. He went near to her tiny ear and said gently, “Right now I really feel like giving your Majesty a thorough beating!”

Zhu Ji’s delicate body trembled and with an “Ah!”, turned her body around, a mixed yet ecstatic look shot out from her eyes.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to seal her fragrant lips with a kiss, the carriage stopped suddenly. They have arrived at the Palace.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.

There can never be even a slight change in Fate after all.

When Zhu Ji arrived at the feast, Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and the other officials welcomed her warmly as usual, everyone behaved as if nothing has ever happened.

Pu Hu and Du Bi also attended the feast, their expression serene.

If Qiu Risheng were to have the chance to come here and take a look, he will surely feel that his sacrifice is not worth it at all.

However Xiang Shaolong was in a bad mood over Guoxing's death and when he was seated at Li Si and Lord Changping's table, he asked quietly, "Where is Guan Zhongxie?"

Both of them heard his menacing tone and was shocked. They asked in unison, "What does Shaolong plan to do?"

By now Xiang Shaolong has found Guan Zhongxie, who was seated about five tables below him along the line. He was talking to Lu Niangrong, Xu Shang and Lian Jiao.

Lord Changping tried to lighten the atmosphere and said with a laugh, "Those three talented ladies indeed live up to their reputation. Although their song has ended, it seems that the her alluring voice is still reverberating in my ears."

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and said, "I want to kill Guan Zhongxie!"

The both of them were utterly shocked and left speechless for a moment. Li Si could only utter, “Shaolong please think it over.”

At this point in time Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and a group of senior officials have just finished taking turns to offer a toast to Zhu Ji and were all seated in their respective places. The grand hall, which can seat a thousand odd people quiet down as they waited for Zhu Ji to speak.

Fury raged through Xiang Shaolong as he suddenly stood up.

Everyone’s eyes were immediately attracted to him as they concentrated on him.

Xiang Shaolong stood up with a grand aura and said loudly, “The last time I had a duel with Official Guan, the dual had to be stopped because Official Guan’s sword was broken. I see today that Official Guan is carrying another precious weapon and suddenly my hands are itching for a fight. I hope to have another duel again with Official Guan, to liven the atmosphere up. Would your Majesty and the Dowager please grant me this request.”

The great Hall was suddenly quiet, everyone was taken aback, obviously no one expected Xiang Shaolong would do something like that.

In fact, for the last two duels, Xiang Shaolong was forced into battle. Only this time, because of his anger over Guo Xing’s death, he volunteered for the duel.

Right at this moment, everyone knows that Xiang Shaolong is really furious at Guan Zhongxie and is determined to kill him.

Lu Buwei's expression changed slightly. He gave a cold snort and hurriedly reply before Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji could say anything, "It's a joyous occasion tonight, it's not appropriate to flash weapons around. If Shaolong, because of personal grudges..."

There was a long laugh, which came from Lao Ai. He sniggered, "That's a poor remark from Lord Lu. Was the last duel a day of great sadness for you? Then why were you wholly supporting that duel?"

Lu Buwei's eyes shone brightly as he stared hard at Lao Ai for a moment. He was about to retort when Guan Zhongxie stood up and said, "Commander Xiang have very sharp eyes indeed to be able to tell that my new sword 'Shooting Sun' is a rare treasure from the state of Qi and not easily broken. That's what aroused his interest and if your Majesties and Lord Lu allows, Zhongxie would be most happy to oblige."

Xiao Pan laughed, "That's what a good son of the Great Qin should be like, would the Dowager please grant this request."

Zhu Ji looked intently at Xiang Shaolong for quite sometime before her pretty eyes revealed a look of gratitude as she nodded her head, "Our Great Qin has always protected our country with military finesse, and these two beloved officials have embraced the importance of our Great Qin's military essence. I give my

blessings.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that Zhu Ji has misunderstood him, thinking that he is venting his frustration on Guan Zhongxie because of the humiliation she had suffered. But he couldn't be too bothered about this right now and after thanking her for her approval, he and Guan Zhongxie left their seats to walk towards the center of the hall.

Everyone could feel the atmosphere that is so heavy that it makes one unable to breath.

This is the third time the both of them are dueling.

Both times, Guan Zhongxie was disadvantaged; will he be able to turn the situation around this time?

On a certain level, Xiang Shaolong is indeed taking a risk this time. Or maybe it's better to say that this risk is not worth taking.

The first time Guan Zhongxie could not defeat Xiang Shaolong is because he thought that there's no point for him getting injured over a man whom he thinks won't have long to live. The second time he lost because he was taken aback as he has absolutely no knowledge of the Hundred Battles Swordplay, and yet he could use the excuse of his broken sword to escape with his life with no injuries at all.

This time Guan Zhongxie already has the experience of dealing

with the Hundred Battles Swordplay and he will certainly go all out in this death match to preserve his life. In such a situation, indeed no one knows what will be the outcome.

That's why Li Si advised him to reconsider.

But the Xiang Shaolong at this point in time has totally forgotten about life, death, glory or fame. He could only feel that if he allows Guoxing's murderer to continue roaming freely right in front of his eyes, he will be truly letting down this subordinate who had just pledged his loyalty to him.

In this instant, he has become a true warrior.

Other things are not taken into consideration at all.

Guan Zhongxie is not Lu Buwei. Not a single piece of history or movie has ever said if he will survive this night.

Lu Niangrong who was seated at her table has turned as white as a piece of paper.

No one knows better than her how Xiang Shaolong currently feels about his relentless urge to kill Guan Zhongxie.

Earlier on, Guan Zhongxie was discussing with Xu Shang and Liao Jiao the matter of killing Guoxing right in front of Xiang Shaolong's eyes.

She was already feeling very unsettled then, knowing that Xiang Shaolong will not take this lying down but she did not expect Xiang Shaolong would so angrily challenge Guan Zhongxie into a duel the moment he stepped in.

There's another factor Xiang Shaolong considered, which is Guan Zhongxie's archery skills are too formidable. If there's open warfare in future, once he takes out his strong bow, no one knows who in the opposing army will be able to stay alive. So if he can get rid of him earlier, it would mean saving his own, or even Teng Yi, Jing Jun or one of his men's lives earlier.

This fear that was hidden deeply in his subconscious is enough to make him determined to kill Guan Zhongxie regardless of the price he'll have to pay.

The two of them went together to pay their respects to Xiao Pan, and Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji, who were seated on either side. Then they split up and each holding their weapons, stood a few feet away from each other, facing off the other party coldly. Because of their special status, the two of them were able to carry their weapons although they're in the Palace.

Right until now, no one has made a single noise.

The weapons have not left their sheaths, yet the whole hall became icy with a deadly aura because of everyone's silence and the tense atmosphere before a storm. The pressure seems to increase around the nose and mouth area, making one unable to

breathe smoothly.

Both of them looked as if they're eyeing a prey and after staring at each other for some time, Guan Zhongxie bent his back slightly. The increased aura is enough to make one's mood so tense that one cannot breathe.

A cold look shot past Xiang Shaolong's eyes, but unlike the last time, he did not hold on to his Hundred Battles Blade's sheath, making others wonder why he did not make use of his sheath as well like he did the last time.

They saw him walk a step forward sharply.

Guan Zhongxie's back was bent like a bow, like a ferocious beast who is about to charge. Compared to the last time he faced Xiang Shaolong, his confidence and aura is many times multiplied.

Xiang Shaolong seemed unfazed.

These past few days, he has been awake before dawn to practice his swordplay and felt that his condition has reached this highest peak that he has never achieved ever since he arrived through the time machine.

If he cannot win Guan Zhongxie tonight, he can forget about ever winning him in future.

Of course!

This is purely a feel on his part.

It doesn't affect whether it's truly the case or not.

Right at this time, Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Blade left its sheath, changing into a flash of lightning as it pierced through the air yet giving one a strange feeling of lightness and weightlessness. Compared to the last time, which seemed like a fierce thunderstorm, it is even more indescribable.

Guan Zhongxie was obviously very surprised but of course he can't slowly appreciate its beauty like what the others are doing. He immediately dashed forward to attack, pulling his sword out speedily.

Both their movements were as fast as lightning, such that the audience can't even have a good look.

“Clang!”

Guan Zhongxie staggered back violently three steps.

But the martial arts experts like Han Xie, Xu Shang etc could all tell that it was a deliberate retreat by Guan Zhongxie, using his deft moves and battle skills to nullify and expand Xiang Shaolong's shocking Hundred Battles Swordplay.

So although Guan Zhongxie retreated three steps, he did not reveal any look of defeat.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Guan Zhongxie would make use of this strategy and can't help but be stunned. He was about to continue with his attack when a fierce ray of light flashed past Guan Zhongxie's eyes as his tongue unfurled in a roar and it was like a thunderclap appearing on the ground. He leaped forward as his Shooting Sun Sword counterattacked, first dipping down then flipping up again, aiming at Xiang Shaolong's stomach, making Xiang Shaolong unable to counter this move with his chopping stance.

The thousand odd crowd who witnessed this silently, on seeing Guan Zhongxie's sharp and precise attack, were so shocked that they cannot utter even a single sound.

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort as he moved to the side with his blade moving in waves to block the space where his chest and stomach was.

With a clash, both of them came together and separated, none gaining even an ounce of advantage.

Guan Zhongxie was secretly ecstatic, knowing that he has gained insight on how to counteract Xiang Shaolong's shocking blade skills, which is to avoid head on attacks and instead use feather light and swift moves to deal with his solidity.

So with no hesitation at all, Shooting Sun Sword made use of the

advantage of being the attacker to execute a delicate and intricate move, much like how a weaver girl will weave with her hands and attacked towards Xiang Shaolong like liquid mercury.

Xiang Shaolong looked solemn as he grounded himself, the pain of Guoxing's death welled up in his heart as he forcefully slashed diagonally with his Hundred Battles Blade, forcing Guan Zhongxie to keep a distance from his moving blade.

For a moment the weapons cast shining reflections with strange and mystical moves, making one unable to fathom the movements.

Although Guan Zhongxie tried his best to avoid meeting head on with the blade, it's quite impossible for the blade and sword to not clash.

Even though there are only two men fighting in the arena, the audience all felt as if they are watching a battle between thousands of soldiers and horses, to the extent that they can imagine the distressing image of bodies filling the battlefield and blood flowing like river.

At this point in time Xiang Shaolong only has one thought, which is to kill Guan Zhongxie in the shortest time possible. Everything else to him is unimportant, including his own life.

He does not know how involved is Guan Zhongxie in Lu Buwei's nefarious plots but this person's intellect is not below that of Mo Ao. Otherwise, just based on his bravery and strength, Lu Buwei will never allow Lu Niangrong to marry him.

As long as Guan Zhongxie remains alive, he can forget about living a carefree life. That's why every move he made is to eradicate his enemy, disregarding his own life in order to kill.

The sounds of the weapons meeting resonated through the hall.

Below Xiao Pan, all of them were staring unwaveringly at the ferocious battle between the two great martial artists.

“Clang!”

After an especially thunderous clash, Guan Zhongxie was finally forced to retreat by Xiang Shaolong's attack.

Using the momentum from the attack and advancing when his enemy is retreating, Xiang Shaolong howled as he attacked with his blade. Waves of blade movements preceded his moving body, rolling towards Guan Zhongxie like tumbling waves.

For the first time, Guan Zhongxie feels at a loss.

Initially he was anxious to attack and very confident that he will be able to kill Xiang Shaolong. However, faced with his opponent's strategy of fighting without care for his own life, which may be filled with loopholes but unless he is willing to forgo his own life together with Xiang Shaolong, there is no way he can make use of these loopholes to attack at all.

Others may not understand why Xiang Shaolong is not using his sheath but he is painfully aware that this is where Xiang Shaolong's excellence lay. Because after his defeat the last time, he'll definitely dissect what went wrong and study how he could deal with Xiang Shaolong's strange fighting method of using his blade on the right hand and the sheath on the left hand. And indeed he made some headway. Because it's difficult to concentrate on the timing between using the blade and sheath to move back and forth, it will affect the dexterity in attacking and defending so it made him think of a way to counteract. But this time Xiang Shaolong is not using the sheath at all and this made his well thought out strategy come to a standstill.

But he's also skillful, coming to an immediate decision to retreat first before attacking, to gain back the upper hand so that Xiang Shaolong will not have the chance to execute the frightening prowess of the Hundred Battles Blade. Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong has managed to gain ground of a three feet radius and with his ferocious and forceful attacks, countering his wave after wave of attacks.

Right until he is at the end of his intense attacks and finding it difficult to maintain his advantage, he was finally forced to retreat by Xiang Shaolong.

Exhausted, how could he resist against Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Blade which is coming to him like a frightening tsunami.

An icy, murderous aura followed Xiang Shaolong's precious blade as it rumbled towards him.

That frightening feeling solidified the intense stress that seems to be locking Guan Zhongxie's soul and body in place and for the first time he felt as if he is powerless to resist.

Suddenly, he realizes that Xiang Shaolong has reached the level of epitome of Grandmaster in his swordplay.

Everyone in the hall held their breath, so quiet that one can even hear a pin drop. The countless shadows made by the Hundred Battles Blade seem to merge into one as it slashed towards its enemy.

Guan Zhongxie, now extremely horrified, can no longer tell the changes in Xiang Shaolong's moves.

“Clang!”

The body and the shadow seemed to split up.

Just as Guan Zhongxie was scrambling back, Xiang Shaolong's blade shone dangerously as it attacked again, not giving his opponent a sliver of opportunity to make a comeback.

Everyone on Lu Buwei's side paled.

Lu Nianrong screamed, “Stop!” and she actually dashed out, ignoring the cries of the others to stop her and ran towards the

both of them.

Everyone was utterly astounded.

“Thump, thump thump!”

Xiang Shaolong abruptly flew back.

Guan Zhongxie was almost killed, his long sword flew out from his hand as he staggered backwards and he happened to fall into the arms of Lu Niangrong and the both of them fell to the ground together.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, for although this attack has caused Guan Zhongxie serious injury, it's not enough to take his life. Because he was afraid of accidentally injuring Lu Niangrong, he deliberately made the fatal blow while his opponent still have some strength left in him and thus gave Guan Zhongxie a sliver of opportunity. He only missed taking his life by that little bit.

Blood was seen on both their bodies.

Guan Zhongxie's bloodstain was near his left breast and even his armor was broken. Obviously he barely managed to avoid the blow aimed at his heart. However, he will need at least a few months to recover from his injuries.

Xiang Shaolong's bloodstains were on his left arm and thigh.

Lu Niangrong screamed, “Zhongxie! How are you!”

Guang Zhongxie’s face was deathly pale yet he gritted his teeth and said to Xiang Shaolong, “Zhongxie will remember this lesson, and will never forget this blade blow.”

Lu Buwei jumped out and shouted, “Hurry up and tend to his injuries,”

A sudden fatigue fell over Xiang Shaolong. He did not expect that even when given such an advantageous situation, Lu Niangrong can still accidentally spoil his whole plan. He fear that such a splendid opportunity will be difficult to come by again.

Book 20 Chapter 3 – The Joining Of The 5 States

The next day Xiang Shaolong used the excuse that he have to rest and tend to his injuries to lead his pretty wives and beloved children as well as the 18 warriors back to the farm. Teng Yi personally led troops to escort them and with Xiao Pan and Lord Chang Ping's agreement, Teng Yi will take over the Military Token while Xiang Shaolong is not around. At the same time Wu Guo will take over Guoxing's duties.

If it was in the past, Lu Buwei will certainly object. But now, as long as Xiao Pan has no objections, military appointments are controlled by Lord Changping.

Of course, Lu Buwei still holds actual power as the Premier, it's just that now the line between the different duties are very clearly drawn and if he insists on interfering in certain matters, he'll be overstepping his boundary.

No one will be willing to let go of his own power, that's why Lu Buwei made the last struggle by joining forces with Du Bi and Pu Hu.

Power struggles are still on the rise.

After they rode out of Xianyang City, Ji Yanran urged her horse and came up next to Xiang Shaolong, asking with concern, "They wanted me to ask if Lord Husband's injuries are still causing you pain?"

Teng Yi, who was on the other side commented with a laugh, “Yanran, don’t you wish to find out too?”

Ji Yanran pouted, “Second Brother, you’re making fun of me.”

On seeing her extremely alluring and dainty expression, Xiang Shaolong can’t help but feel energized and he replied with a smile, “It’s just superficial wounds, not worth mentioning.”

Teng Yi looked pensive as he said, “After all of you reach the farm, the most important thing is to be careful and set up defenses. I’m really afraid that Lu Buwei will take the risk to sneak an attack again, or get people to deal with you through Du Bi and Pu Hu.”

Ji Yanran replied, “His majesty and Lord Changping have just finished studying how they can bring to fruition the plans to control the military. Ever since Lu Buwei appeared, he frivolously made use of the previous king’s trust on him to ensure the generals and military no longer report to the ruler, instead gaining control of the imperial seal privately to mobilize the military. If we can get rid of this bad practice, Lu Buwei can forget about mobilizing troops to deal with us. Otherwise, we’ll just have to move our own warriors and mercenaries out!”

Ever since Shang Yang’s reforms in Qin, the rulers have held tight control over the military, using the system of seal, tally and document.

Seal refers to the ruler’s imperial seal. All military orders and

documents, if it's not affixed with the imperial seal, will be rendered useless. But because Xiao Pan has yet to be crowned, his documents will need the Dowager, Zhu Ji's additional seal before it can be considered effective.

Tally refers to the Tiger Tally, made of copper with inscriptions carved on its back. It's in two pieces, to be held by the ruler and the general respectively. It has to be issued by the ruler and checked to ensure its authenticity before one can mobilize troops. But because of Lu Buwei's tyranny and his excuse that he had to build up the empire and deal with the continuous wars, he held on to the tally and refused to return it. Many times he used his own premier seal in place of Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji's imperial seals to mess up and take over the ruler's authority.

Document refers to the travel document that rulers will issue so that troops from far away will be able to travel unhindered through the passes.

The three items: seal, tally and document must all be present in order to be effective. Any mobilization of troops that will amount to more than 50 men must go through this process. But Lu Buwei's authority is higher than his master and since the time of King Zhuangxiang, he has slowly gotten rid of this requirement. Now Xiao Pan has made use of the Black Dragon's reputation and finally managed to right the wrong.

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, "But this is still of not much use against great generals like Meng Ao who have been guarding the borders for decades.

Ji Yanran said with a smile, “This may not have any authority over border generals who already hold the seal, tally and documents but at least we don’t have to worry a huge army will come to attack the farm. On top of that, with Huan Qi’s swift reinforcement troops, I think we can still get some good days ahead!”

Xiang Shaolong chortled happily, “But if Learned Lady Ji wants to use the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin*, you’d better be careful during the journey.”

*A verse from Tang Poet Bai Juyi’s poem, Song of Everlasting Regret, depicting the tragedy between Emperor Xuanzong and Concubine Yang of Tang dynasty

Ji Yanran sighed, “Using the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin. Hai! My husband is so refined that it delights Yanran’s heart.”

Xiang Shaolong’s enthusiasm was stirred as he sang loudly, “Using the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin, this was when she first received the emperor’s favor.” and at the same time urged his horse forward with a slap.

During the next few days, Xiang Shaolong enjoyed a carefree life. After practicing his swordplay everyday, he’ll either tour the area with his beloved wives, maids and child or practice his horseriding and archery skills. When he’s free, he’ll study the military stratagems in the Mohist Addendum or discuss world events with Learned Lady Ji to increase his knowledge in the various areas.

Looking at Bao'er growing up stronger and stronger day by day, that sense of joy and satisfaction is something that nothing else can replace.

His father-in-law Wu Yingyuan was busy keeping in contact with Wu Zhuo, who was outside the farm, and would occasionally leave to purchase supplies.

Tao Fang will personally come to the farm regularly to tell him about the latest news in Xianyang.

During this period he only returned to Xianyang twice, to conduct the grand wedding feast of Jing Jun and Lu Dan'er and to attend the wedding of Yang Duan and Ying Ying.

Time flies as summer left and autumn came. On this day, Wang Ling and Lord Changping suddenly came to the farm to visit him. After not seeing one another for such a long time, it was naturally a joyous reunion.

After dinner, while Wang Ling and Lord Changping were chatting with him in the main hall, the former said solemnly, "The Crown Prince will be 17 years old in a few months, it's time for him to get a Crown Princess. Lu Buwei strongly supports marrying the young princess from the state of Qi and we are strongly opposing."

Xiang Shaolong has already guessed that their sudden long journey to visit him would surely entail some important matter so he asked languidly, "What is the Dowager's opinion on this?"

Lord Changping smiled, "It should be what is Lao Ai's thoughts and opinion on this. Last month, the Dowager suddenly left for Yongdu and before that, she has stopped attending court sessions for more than 10 days. It seems that Lao Ai has become her spokesperson."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly sighing. Of course he knows that Zhu Ji is hiding in Yongdu so that others will not find out she's giving birth to a child of Lao Ai's. He asked quietly, "Did Lao Ai go with her?"

Wang Ling shook his head, "No! He is now in a fierce struggle with Lu Buwei, how can he leave so easily?"

Looking at their expressions, he knew that they are having suspicions about Zhu Ji's sudden departure from Xianyang.

He tested them, "So who do both of you think is suitable to be the Crown Princess?"

Wang Ling replied, "Meixiu, the granddaughter of Wang Chi. She's just turned 15, very pretty, virtuous and knowledgeable. No one else is more suited than her to be the Crown Princess."

Xiang Shaolong agreed, "If that is the case, she is indeed very ideal. But it's best that you make arrangements for the Crown Prince to meet her. If he's happy with the choice, it's easier for us to talk. The only worry now is that the Dowager will disagree."

Lord Changping said, “This is precisely the reason why we’ve come to look for you. We’ve tried to ask the Dowager about this on many occasions, and before the Dowager left the city, she once told the Crown Prince that if she’s not around, Xiang Shaolong can make decisions on her behalf on all matters.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “Really!”

Wang Ling said, “The Crown Prince said it himself. The Dowager even told him that she trusts Shaolong’s eyes and knowledge the most.”

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened. He knows that Lao Ai must have someone else in mind and Zhu Ji can’t twist him around and knowing that if Lao Ai gets his way, her relationship with Xiao Pan will worsen so she’s pushing this problem to him.

In view of the current situation, even Lao Ai would have no choice but to give some face to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong said happily, “Then we’ll proceed with your wishes. Hey, are you going to send me back to Xianyang under escort?”

The both of them smiled on hearing that.

Lord Changping suddenly changed the topic, “Lord Xinling and King Anli died within two days of each other. The Crown Prince

has ascended the throne as King of Wei and the Queen is Dan Meimei.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked, Although he and Lord Xinling were enemies, but he was still saddened on hearing news of his death. Henceforth the lives of Lady Pingyuan and Lord Shaoyuan will surely be difficult.

Wang Ling continued, “Lian Po has indeed escaped back to Chu. Accordingly it was Lord Longyang who let him off, otherwise I’m afraid he’d have become the burial accompaniment of Master Wuji.”

Xiang Shaolong tried his best not to think about things beyond his control and asked, “Has Lu Buwei been up to anything lately?”

Lord Changping sighed, “Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are having minor quarrels every other day and big fights every other week. Meng Ao is leading troops to attack Han and has taken down 15 cities in a row, his reputation is growing rapidly. The Yans and the Zhaos have started fighting again. The Zhaos are using Li Mu as their commander, and how can the Yans be his match. The cities of Wusui and Fangcheng have all been taken by Li Mu. Luckily the King of Zhao was afraid of Li Mu getting stronger and have ordered him to halt his troops, otherwise maybe he’ll have attached the capital of Yan by now.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Price Dan and was feeling perplexed as he asked, “Qi and Yan are not fighting, instead it’s Zhao and Yan fighting. What is going on?”

Wang Ling said, “We’re not sure either, seems like it’s still a fight over land. Ever since the Yans joined Chu to target Qi, they’re now thinking of getting back the land that was taken over by the Zhaos, thus the fights.”

Lord Changping added, “Now Meng Ao is busy making preparations to attack Wei with Lu Buwei’s support. We objected strongly because this matter will sooner or later lead to another joining of the five states. But Meng Ao is away and Lu Buwei strongly argues that if we do not continue with our military efforts, it’ll be difficult for us to maintain our strong advantage and protect the Three Eastern Commandery*. It wasn’t easy for us to argue against him because ever since Han and Wei allied themselves together, they’re indeed tempted to move and are up to no good. Wang Chi is now at the border of Zhao to keep the Zhaos in check.”

*Three Eastern Commandery is in modern day Shannxi

Lord Changping continued, “The Crown Prince once mentioned that he hopes Shaolong will be able to lead the army, to stop Meng Ao’s reputation and power from growing stronger day by day, which will make it even for difficult for us to move Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, “Let’s please settle the matter of the Crown Prince’s marriage! Have Du Bi and Pu Hu been up to anything lately?”

Wang Ling replied, “They’re still trying to expand their power.

Cheng Qian gave the excuse that he has to deal with border security to keep on recruiting soldiers and with the financial backing of Pu Hu, sooner or later there'll be trouble. Now the battles in the east are increasing and no one has the time to bother with them."

Xiang Shaolong signed, "Let's drink! These matters will be settled sooner or later, I'll go back with you to Xianyang tomorrow."

The two of them were ecstatic.

Three months later, Zhu Ji returned to Xianyang from Yongdu and she really accepted Xiang Shaolong's suggestion to disregard Lu Buwei's objections and let Xiao Pan appoint Wang Chi's granddaughter Wang Meixiu as the Crown Princess and at the same time held the wedding.

The next year, Meng Ao, under the support of Wang Qian and Yang Rui, launched major attacks on Wei and took over over 20 cities like Suanzao, Yan, Xu, Yaoren, Yongqiu, Shanyang etc, aside from the Eastern Commandery. This makes one more commandery from the original Three Eastern Commandery.

At the same time the King of Yan sent his able general Ju Xin to attack Zhao but was killed by the Zhao general Pang Nuan.

Just as the Zhaos were about to attack Yan, they heard that the Weis were badly defeated by the Qin army and were so shocked and frightened that they made peace with the Yans.

At this time, the Qis were tempted to move. Pang Nuan saw that the situation was amiss and was worried that he'll be sandwiched between enemies so he took it upon himself to travel to the various states and once again resulted in the coalition of the five states Zhao, Chu, Wei, Yan and Han and launched a major attack in Wei, greatly defeating Meng Ao. Whereas Li Mu, the famed general whose reputation far precedes him had his troops countering Wang Chi so that he was unable to go and give reinforcements. The military updates came so fast and furious that the Qin court was shaken.

After Xiao Pan received the reports he immediately sent men to summon Xiang Shaolong back to Xian Yang and suddenly, Xiang Shaolong's idyllic days which he has enjoyed for quite some time came to an end.

Ji Yanran knows that he won't be able to escape from leading the army this time and insisted on returning to Xianyang with him, hoping to spend a little more time with him.

They've just entered the city gates when they bumped into Guan Zhongxie, who was back on duty after a long period of recuperation.

Although he has lost weight, he is still as energetic as before, his health totally recovered. What is even more rare is that he was still able to smile upon seeing Xiang Shaolong as he said calmly, "I have been ordered to wait here to welcome Grand General, would Grand general please enter the Palace immediately to see his Highness."

Then he lowered his voice and added, “That blade from Grand General has taught me many things which I never knew in the past!”

Xiang Shaolong was very tempted to ask him ‘For example?’, but he ultimately held himself back. After instructing his wives and child to return to the Wu residence, he rode towards the Palace with Guan Zhongxie.

The atmosphere in Xianyang was obviously tense as the passers-by moved hurriedly on their way. Soldiers on patrol and troops moving military supplies could be seen everywhere. The atmosphere feels as if there’s an impending storm.

To the Qins, they have never forgotten the previous defeat under the coalition of the five states previously and now it seems that another defeat is coming so naturally they were all feeling alarmed as they talked about it.

Guan Zhongxie said, “I’ll be marrying Third Missy next month, I’m afraid Grand General would not be able to attend my wedding feast.”

Xiang Shaolong answered with a wry smile, “I hope I’ll be able to come back alive to attend Lord Guan and Third Missy’s wedding feast!”

A sarcastic look flashed past Guan Zhongxie’s eyes as he just smiled without saying anything.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling hateful but there was nothing he can do to him.

Everyone knows that in this face off with the approaching coalition army, the outcome is almost a complete loss and they'll just be defeated. He can start counting his lucky stars if he even manages to keep the enemy at bay. The worst thing is that Meng Ao has just been badly defeated by the coalition army and morale is low, and now he's going to take over the reins. One can imagine the difficulty.

The two of them spoke no further and went straight to the Palace.

Xiao Pan was waiting alone at the study for him.

This future Emperor Qin is 18 years old in name, and he can be formally appointed as King in another three years. He was strong and well built and on seeing Xiang Shaolong coming, left his seat eagerly to clasp his hands tightly. After sending the servants away, he pulled him aside to sit down and said seriously, "Teacher, save me!"

Xiang Shaolong was startled, "It's not that serious!"

Xiao Pan smiled wryly, "The situation is extremely dire. The coalition army was gathered outside Hangu Pass, and has won seven out of seven battles, greatly defeating Meng Ao. Now we've lost Hangu Pass. The worst is Wang He kept losing advantage to Li Mu at the Zhao border and now he's only able to try to defend. If

teacher can't push the coalition army back this time, Great Qin will be in peril!"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt that Xiao Pan has turned into that playful child from the Zhao Palace six years ago and a strong feeling surged in him and very naturally he used a famous quote of Zhuge Liang from [Chu Shi Biao](#), "I will give my all to the country until my dying breath!"

Xiao Pan was taken aback, "Please don't ever mention the word 'die', only Teacher is capable of turning the tides now."

At this point in time, the servant came to announce that the dowager and the various officials have already gathered at the inner courtroom to await his arrival. The two of them hurriedly left the study and went to the inner courtroom.

Besides Zhu Ji, those who were present included Lu Buwei, Feng Qie, Lord Changwen, Wang Ling, Li Si, Wang Guan, Cai Ze, Lord Yunyang (Ying Zuo) and Lord Yiliang (Ying Lou). The latter two in recent years have been governing their own areas and this time they actually came back to Xianyang together so one can image how dangerous the situation is now.

On seeing Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji's beautiful eyes brightened immediately. She's put on a little weight but still very alluring.

When Lu Buwei saw Xiang Shaolong, he looked relieved on the surface but Xiang Shaolong can feel very clearly that he's secretly gloating over his misfortune.

After they paid their respects, Lord Yiliang, Ying Lou reported, “The army strength for the coalition army this time is as follows, Zhao army 80,000, Chu army 150,000, Wei army 120,000, Yan army 50,000, Han army 100,000, which brings it to a total of 500,000. After the defeated Hangu Pass, they have not moved but have set up defenses while waiting for reinforcements and supplies. General Meng has now retreated to about 200 miles away to set up defenses along the river . If he lose the defense again, our enemy will be able to come straight at us and if they use the water route, they will be able to reach Xianyang in 20 days.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize the severity of the situation.

Lord Changping continued, “Now we’re moving our soldiers from all the other areas and have gathered 150,000 and in addition to the 120,000 men in General Meng’s hands, we have a total of 270,000 men. This is only enough to defend but the number is far from being able to fight the enemy back.”

Xiao Pan furrowed his brows, “Is there no other way to gather more men?”

Wang Ling reported, “Our enemy made careful plans. The Zhaos and the Chus will separately counter General Wang and General An so that they will find difficulty in splitting their forces to reinforce us. I’ve thought of all ways and means before I managed to gather this amount of soldiers and many amongst them are actually the old and weak soldiers and new recruits who have yet to complete training.”

On hearing this, Xiang Shaolong took a deep intake of cold breath, secretly thinking, with Meng Ao's defeated army plus this batch of new and old soldiers, is there still a need to fight this battle?

Zhu Ji said, "What's General Xiang's opinion on this situation?"

Xiang Shaolong gave no answer but asked instead, "I wonder if the coalition army has appointed a grand commander?"

Lu Buwei answered gravely, "The information we have on the coalition army is very little and even their military strength is just an estimation on our part. From the situation it should seem that the Zhao general Pang Nuan should be the commander. This person is well versed in military tactics and in fact other than Li Mu, he is Great Qin's greatest threat. On top of that, they've prepared for this for a long time and have also learnt the lesson from their defeat the last time so it'll be impossible for us to use the same trick to force them to retreat again. Everything now will have to depend on Shaolong."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, he suddenly remembered that if this battle is lost, the enemy will surely attack Xianyang. But this event has never happened in history before, so wouldn't it mean that this battle is a sure win. Once he thought of this, his confidence soared.

Ultimately, the person he fears most is Li Mu. As for Pang Nuan, although he has no fear of him, he cannot think too lightly of him as well.

And thinking on a deeper level, since fate has decided that it's impossible that this battle will be lost to a point that Xianyang will be invaded, he can just go all out and do his job.

He came from the Special Task Force and knows a little about military tactics and to use crack troops to counter normal troops. If he follows his usual pattern, maybe there's a slight chance of victory.

Once he thought of this, his heroic spirit rose as he chortled, "I already have a plan, but I wonder who the military commanders of the various states are?"

Everyone saw that he seemed to have changed into another person suddenly and were all feeling surprised.

Xiao Pan answered, "For the Zhaos it's Pang Nuan and Sima Shang, for the Chus it's Wu Zhan, for the Weis it's the up and coming general Sheng Nian, for the Yans and Hans it's Xu Yize and Han Chuang respectively."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Other than Pang Nuan, Sima Shang and Sheng Nian, the rest are all familiar people."

Luckily Lord Longyang is not in there.

In this era, your best friend can at any time become the enemy who will kill you.

Lu Buwei has not recovered from his shock and asked in disbelief, “Shaolong seems confident but you must know that our enemy is strong and even with General Meng’s capabilities, he was defeated in a few continuous battles. Shaolong must not take our enemies lightly.”

Feng Qie added, “This Pang Nuan has been really showing off recently, greatly defeating the Yan army and killing the famed general of Yan, Ju Xin. He’s someone we must not take lightly of.”

Lord Yunyang, Ying Zuo asked, “So what plan does General Xiang really have for defeating our enemy?”

From his tone, he definitely doesn’t seem to believe in Xiang Shaolong.

Actually even people like Lord Changping, Li Si and Wang Ling, who have always had utmost confidence in Xiang Shaolong, were worried for him. The Qins may be invincible, but they’re now terrified by the constant battles with the coalition army.

Xiang Shaolong happened to glance towards Zhu Ji and it so happens that she was staring at him at the same time. Their eyes met and both of them quickly averted their eyes at the same time.

Lao Ai saw all this and his expression immediately became awkward as he interrupted, “Lord Xiang has never really tried leading a formal army into battle. If you’re too careless, I’m afraid the result will be defeat.”

Just listening to the way he talked, calm and full of himself, one immediately knows that his power has increased greatly and his confidence is soaring.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking, when I was training in the 21st century, who knows where you have been reincarnated to so who are you to criticize me. But of course on the surface he pretended to be humble and said, “To defeat the enemy is indeed more difficult than ascending to Heaven, but to force the enemy to retreat is really no problem.”

Everyone was surprised.

Zhu Ji asked, “If we do not defeat the enemy, then how do we make them retreat?”

Xiang Shaolong replied casually, “The key point lies with Tian Dan. Now that the strength of the 5 states are greatly boosted, he will naturally not dare to make rash moves but if the 5 states lose their advantage, he’ll definitely make use of the opportunity to invade Yan and Zhao. By then Yan and Zhao will surely be forced to retreat their soldiers and the coalition army will be disintegrated. Minister Lu is most familiar with this matter, why don’t we let him explain.”

Lu Buwei is aware that he is being subtly sarcastic about Tian Dan being in cahoots with him and was feeling a wave of hatred but he can only pretend to smile and reply, “Shaolong’s words are not without reason.”

Cai Ze said, “General still have not told us the plan to put the coalition army at a disadvantage!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting ‘as if I know’, but on the surface he showed confidence as he replied, “Winning and losing in battle, is not something that can be easily explained with words. Otherwise, Zhao Gua who was so brilliant at military theories won’t end up with the defeat at Changping. But if your Highness will allow me to become the Grand Commander, you must first accede to my three requests, otherwise this battle will be a definite defeat.”

Not waiting for Xiao Pan to speak, Zhu Ji gladly asked, “Shaolong please speak your mind.”

The look of jealousy in Lao Ai’s eyes intensified.

A baddie will always be a baddie. In such a situation where the country should be placed above self, and when Xiang Shaolong is his great benefactor, he is still concerned about his own personal gains.

Xiang Shaolong’s aura boomed as he said seriously, “Firstly is the question of generals and soldiers. I want Teng Yi and Huan Qi to be my Left and Right Deputy Generals and at the same time I want 10,000 and 20,000 elite riders from the Calvary and Reinforcement troops respectively. As for the 150,000 men already gathered, I want to pick out only the good ones and reduce the numbers to 70,000. With this total of 100,000, it’ll be enough to break the

enemy.”

Everyone did not expect that he'll ask to reduce the number of troops and were all taken aback.

Lao Ai was just waiting for the chance to belittle him in front of Zhu Ji so he asked with his brows drawn together, “Our enemy's army is vast, the number of 500,000 we got is just an initial estimation. For all we know they are still increasing their men as we speak and now that Shaolong wants to reduce our troops to 100,000 and even if we add up General Meng's 120,000 men, it's still not even half of our enemy troops. How can this battle be fought?”

Lu Buwei nodded his head, “Minister Lao's words are reasonable, Shaolong you must reconsider.”

A sudden ridiculous thought welled up in Xiang Shaolong's mind. Before his holiday Lu and Lao were fighting constantly with each other and why is it now they seem to suddenly share the same opinions?

Xiao Pan's confidence in Xiang Shaolong is almost to the point of blind loyalty and he said, “The Great general must have his reasons, but can you please explain a little.”

Xiang Shaolong replied unhurriedly, “A good army lies in quality and not quantity. The coalition army may have lots of men but ultimately the various armies are not used to working together and they will certainly face multiple problems in directing and

cooperation. Therefore I plan to focus on this point, to reduce our men to only the elite as not only will it increase our effectiveness, it will also boost our morale. Besides, in military maneuvers what is important is being unpredictable and resorting to tricks to win. If there are too many men, it would mean the quality of the troops will be lowered and I won't be able to manage them effectively and will instead end up in defeat."

Lord Changping and Wang Ling were the first to express their agreement and once these two important military men have nodded their heads, how can the others say anything else.

Li Si asked, "As for General Meng's 120,000 men, will Great General be reorganizing them?"

Xiang Shaolong said with all certainty, "Of course. But I want to inspect their condition personally before I make any decisions."

The confidence Zhu Ji has in Xiang Shaolong is only slightly below that of Xiao Pan and she said with joy, "Shaolong's first request has been approved, I wonder what's your second request?"

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "The second request is General Meng must be summoned back to Xianyang and I must be given total authority to lead this battle, otherwise this battle will surely be a total loss even before we begin the fight."

This time even Wang Ling and Lord Changping turned to look at each other.

It must be explained that even though Meng Ao lost repeatedly but he has never lost to the point of utter destruction and that in itself is considered a feat. Besides, his experience in leading troops far exceeds Xiang Shaolong so with him at the frontline helping, even if Xiang Shaolong loses, at least it won't end up with the enemies coming straight at them. That's why no one dare to give their agreement so readily.

A look of anger appeared on Lu Buwei's face and as he was about to speak, Xiao Pan answered coldly, "Great General's words are reasonable, an army cannot have two commanders. I totally agree."

Lu Buwei hurriedly interjected, "I think it's best to allow General Meng to retreat to the second line of defense as a precaution."

Wang Guan, Lao Ai and Cai Ze all expressed their agreement to this suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong gave a small smile, "From Hangu all the way to Xianyang, it's all the front line, so where's the second line you speak of. Only if you give me free rein to execute tactics that our enemy will never think of will I be able to force them to retreat with less men than them."

Zhu Ji asked, "What exactly does Shaolong have in mind to force them to retreat?"

Xiang Shaolong replied respectfully, "This is where my third request comes in. It's stated in military books that when the

general is fighting outside, they can carry out their plans first without seeking the ruler's permission. So I boldly seek the trust of the Dowager, Crown Prince and Minister Lu to ignore any rumors you may hear. Because in this mission I will appear to lose first before winning, and the situation will be that the enemies be allowed to advance first before losing badly. So at the beginning of the battle, please do not lose hope in me because of a few minor losses. As for my plan to deal with the enemy, please allow me to keep it a secret for now because if the plan is leaked, it will not work."

Xiao Pan slapped the table and sighed, "Great General is indeed an extraordinary man, you've considered all details and aspects of the situation before you even moved your army. I will prepare the rites to pray for your victory two days later. The rise and fall of our Great Qin will be in Great General's hands."

Just these few words and the heavy burden of directing the biggest battle fell on Xiang Shaolong's shoulders.

After the emergency meeting ended, Xiang Shaolong had another small discussion with Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and Lord Changping to discuss the details of the war like food, supplies, reinforcements etc. Only after it was decided that Wu Guo will be in charge of supplies that Xiang Shaolong was able to extricate himself.

He had just left the Palace gates when Lao Ai ran after him from behind and after a round of pleasantries, Lao Ai rode together with him and pretended to be apologetic, "I was just stating the facts earlier, Shaolong please do not take it to heart."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing him but instead said, “Brother Lao, you think too lowly of me. How can this be considered anything?”

Lao Ai sighed, “But there is one matter which I really blame Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “What matter?”

Lao Ai asked with a wry smile, “Why did Shaolong send Meimei to Daliang? At least you should have informed me.”

Xiang Shaolong replied him with an equally wry smile, “Because I was afraid Brother Lao will object. At that time it was obvious Brother Lao will lose to Lu Buwei so instead of benefiting that thief, might as well let Meimei go to where she wants to go. Brother Lao still wants to blame me?”

Lao Ai was silent for a moment before he nodded his head, “I find it difficult to accept Shaolong’s honesty but I have no choice but to accept it. Hai, I really did not expect that now that my power has increased greatly, I cannot have the girl I love instead. Lose one, gain one, it is indeed distressing.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that he’s secretly hinting that he has to live according to Zhu Ji’s whims and fancies and for the first time can understand how he feels.

No matter how despicable Lao Ai is, he is still a human, with his

inner feelings and sincerity.

There are just too many things in life that one is helpless about.

For example the enemies he is facing, many of them are good friends whom he once chatted and drank with.

And the closest among them is none other than Han Chuang.

If he's really forced to kill him, what would his own feelings be?

Book 20 Chapter 4 – Reconnaissance

Satellite

Once he went back to the official residence and found Teng Yi, he asked him to send men to summon Huan Qi back to Xianyang urgently for a discussion.

Unexpectedly Jing Jun had arrived on hearing the news and after knowing that he's not included in the mission, he refused to budge. No matter how Xiang and Teng coaxed or coerced, for example saying the he's just got married and should not go to war, or that they need him in the capital city to lead the cavalry, he refused to listen.

In the end they had to give in and Xiang Shaolong entered the palace again to see Xiao Pan to ask him to appoint Jing Jun as another Deputy General while Lord Changping will look after the cavalry in his absence, with Zhao Da taking over as the temporary Deputy Commander before they could settle this matter.

Next he went to the army camp outside the city to choose his elite soldiers. The old and the weak were all sent home while the new recruits were left with Meng Wu and Meng Tian for training.

Huan Qi hurried back that night and the three brothers, together with Heng Qi and Wu Guo opened up the map and spent the whole night discussing the battle details.

In the morning, all of them took a quick nap before they all set out for their respective tasks.

Xiang Shaolong entered the palace again to have a meeting with Xiao Pan and other than Lord Changping and Lu Buwei, there were also Wang Ling, Lao Ai and the Dowager Zhu Ji.

Although Lu Buwei would very much like to kill Xiang Shaolong, but for his own benefit, he definitely does not want Xiang Shaolong to lose this key battle on which the Qin Empire is hinged on. That's why he portrayed himself to be very cooperative.

Only now did realize how wealthy and strong Qin is, for there're no problems in the supply of food, weapons, horses or carriages at all. They were able to give him whatever amount he asked for.

After the meeting, Lu Buwei, Zhu Ji and Lao Ai left and Xiang Shaolong turned towards Xiao Pan, Lord Changping and Wang Ling and said, "Now the enemy is making quick battles and with the 5 states having a unified goal, their morale is high. If I just go out and fight the enemy like that, defeat is a certainty. The only way is to let the enemy become overconfident, then lure them in and at the same time disrupt their food supplies by moving away all the people in the towns along the way away. Make them lengthen their supply line indefinitely, far away from their base camp, then make use of the dangers in the mountains and forest for our elite soldiers to launch a surprise attack. If we gain the upper hand, we'll chase them down hard but if we can't fight them we can retreat first. This is a good opportunity to destroy their morale and when the time is ripe, we will launch an attack on the enemy and in this battle, we'll have about 90% chance of winning."

The eyes of the three of them brightened at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong said, “Amongst our enemy’s lead generals, most of them are people who knows me well and is aware that I’ve always been courageous and fears no death. Once they hear that I’m leading the army, they’ll certainly think that I’ll go for an immediate and swift battle. I’ll grant them their wishes, and will retreat after a minor loss and pretend to set up camp to hold the defense. By now it’s almost the end of summer and autumn and winter will be arriving soon. Our enemy would not want to miss this chance and will surely launch a massive attack before winter, hoping to at least move slowly closer to Xianyang by taking down the towns and cities on the outskirts. I will set up everything at Zui Cheng and wait for them to attack before winter arrives. If we can just win one battle, they will surely be worried that the snow will pile up on the roads and hence they will be cut off from their supply chain. They will certainly retreat immediately and that is the time for us to give chase.”

Wang Ling sighed, “No wonder before his death, Lu Gong kept praising Shaolong as an intelligent and brave warrior ever since Bai Qi. Just listening to the military tactics that Shaolong has just said and I know that your knowledge in military strategies are as good as your skills with the sword; knowing yourself and your enemy, and a hundred battles fought is a hundred battles won.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, “More easily said than done. The actual implementation will have to be done carefully and there must be no mistakes. Luckily the Grand Commander of the coalition army is not Li Mu, otherwise he’ll definitely not fall for this trick.”

Xiao Pan said with relief and joy, “Even if Grand Tutor is up

against Li Mu, I think both of you are on equal standing. Hai! I can finally have a good sleep tonight.”

Lord Changping added, “Once Shaolong comes back victorious, I will definitely hold a feast of at least 10 tables at Drunken Wind Loft to help you celebrate.”

After a round of chat and laughter, Xiang Shaolong returned to his official residence and was surprised to see Xiang Bao'er playing with his men at the square. His beloved wives and maids have all come back from the farm and even the long absent Zhou Liang was there and on seeing him, immediately knelt down and cried out, “Zhou Liang was lucky that I have not failed your order and have brought the King Eagle back.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, “Where is the King Eagle?”

Zhou Liang stood up, puckered his lips and whistled melodiously.

The sound of the wind being sliced could be heard from above the sky.

Xiang Shaolong was startled and lifted his head up for a look, only to see a grayish-black hunting eagle with a wingspan of about 5 feet soaring down and landing delicately on Zhou Liang's shoulder, its bright and intimidating eyes coldly inspecting the people and things around it.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep gasp and asked, “Doesn't this King

Eagle need a leg chain or have its eyes and head covered by a bag?”

Zhou Liang replied, “Of course not, otherwise how can it be considered the King of eagles. I took a whole year to find it and spent another two years training it day and night before I dared to bring it back to see Master Xiang. I just heard that Master Xiang will be leading troops to Hangu the day after and I am willing to follow you and let King Eagle help Master Xiang spy on the enemy troops. I guarantee it will make great contributions.

Wu Tingfang came up next to Xiang Shaolong while pulling Zhou Wei along with her and said with a smile, “This King Eagle seems to be quite spiritual, like it’s able to communicate with Zhou Liang. No matter where we tried to hide earlier, this super eagle could find us easily. Even when we were hiding in the house, it can look in from outside the window. It was most fun.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that is almost akin to obtaining a reconnaissance satellite, spying on the enemy from high above the sky. He laughed and said, “Since we have the King Eagle helping us, this battle is a sure win.”

Zhou Liang gave a shout and the King Eagle spread its wings and soared towards the sky and in an instant became just a small speck in the sky.

The King Eagle was circling in the clear sky and below it, in the wilderness, is the never ending line of the great army of Qin.

Qin’s military is mainly split into the army and navy, and in

terms of expansion and importance, the latter is always lagging behind the former because of actual demand.

The army is further separated into chariots, cavalry and foot soldiers.

By the time of the Warring States period, the use of chariots has been greatly reduced and weakened as compared to the Spring-Autumn period but in some situations, especially battles on flat ground, there's still a use for them. For example, to charge into the enemy's formation to disrupt their formation or maybe to be turned into mobile barrier to stop the approach of enemy troops.

But Xiang Shaolong is looking at the mostly mountainous terrain from Hangu to Xianyang and on top of that, he's not very familiar with the deployment of chariots so in this mission, he decided not to use them at all. The cavalry and foot soldiers will be the main force.

Ever since Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Sword was forged, Xiao Pan gave orders for it to be replicated in volume and with Uncle Qing personally supervising the workers, they made a batch of thick, long swords. Although it can never be compared to the Hundred Battles Sword which was forged with chrome added in it but the replicates are enough to greatly improve the cutting and slashing ability of the cavalry for when they charge into battles. This is the first time that it will actually be used.

Amongst the 100,000 men going to battle, the cavalry took up about 30,000 and they were from the mounted troops and reinforcement forces and on top of that there were 1,000 elite

family warriors from the Wu family. These are the main attack forces for Xiang Shaolong.

The foot soldiers are split into light infantry and heavy infantry. They are all formal soldiers who underwent strict training in the various counties.

The light infantry will not wear armor and uses weapons like bows and crossbows and in battles they will usually be lined in the first rows specifically to kill enemies from a distance.

The heavy infantry will wear copper armors and uses pole weapons like spears, halberds etc for close combat with the enemy.

In Xiang Shaolong's expeditionary forces, the light infantry takes up 30,000 men and the heavy infantry has 40,000 men.

In this era, the success and failure of a battle, besides the implement of strategies, it's how the commanders can fully make use of the various types of troops to his disposal and the coordination between them.

As for the organization of the troops, they use the Buqu policy, where 5 men makes a fireteam, 50 men makes a platoon and so on, until 5,000 men will make a brigade and 5 brigades will make a corp. So one corp will consist of 25,000 men and Xiang Shaolong's army strength is 4 corps.

According the Qin regulations, the various ranks of generals are

allowed to have their own army and usually will be about 10% of the total army strength, like now Xiang Shaolong will be able to increase his personal army from the current 3,000 to 10,000.

Because of the constant battles, even if Commanding Generals like Meng Ao and Wang Chi return the troops to the imperial court, their own personal army will not be dismissed and their secondary duty will be to protect the safety of the generals. That's why Meng Ao was able to direct his men to attack the farm in the past.

So once one becomes the Commanding General, not only is his status improved, the power he holds will be greatly increased as well.

Xiang Shaolong's military knowledge comes mainly from the 21st century and although he has studied the Mohist military stratagems, he did not stick to the rules and split up the various different military units. He will leave together with Jing Jun, Teng Yi and the cavalry, Heng Qi will follow behind with the infantry and lastly will be Wu Guo leading the field train.

Because he has already decided to lure the enemy in, Heng Qi and Wu Guo's main forces will stay behind once they reach Zuicheng to strengthen the defenses and plant traps. At the same time Heng Qi will train his men to be familiar with the terrain. This will spare them the agony of long travel and they can disperse the people from the nearby villages as well and let them retreat to the safer and bigger cities behind like Gaoling and Zhiyang.

Moving the troops is a very important aspect in wars and luckily

the route to the frontline is the safe official paths within Qin borders. On top of that, they had the Eagle King recce for them so they could travel quickly on the straight and flat roads.

Five days later, Xiang Shaolong's cavalry went pass Zuicheng, with the mountainous regions like Mount Li, Mount Zhu etc on the right, with Mount Hua right ahead of them. The terrain started getting uneven.

In order to preserve his troop's strength and morale, Xiang Shaolong chose to set off early every morning, and set up camp after noon so the soldiers don't find the journey tiring at all.

After traveling east from Zuicheng for another ten days, they finally arrived at Mount Hua.

If they're traveling for leisure, the route along the way is indeed scenic.

Besides with the hot summer now, the green trees seems to be fighting for glory and with the wild flowers in full bloom, the scenery is beautiful.

A pity that no one is in the mood to enjoy them now. On this dangerous mountainous terrain with ravines aplenty, sometimes there're cliffs on one side of the path and on the other side there are deep abyss on the other side with the raging waters from River De rushing below them. They had to walk carefully to avoid making any missteps.

Zhou Liang became Xiang Shaolong's personal follower.

From time to time, the Eagle King will fly back to land on his shoulder and the closeness between man and beast made Xiang Shaolong envious.

Now he finally understands why it's easy for the Qins to attack the six states but for the six states to attack Qin, it's as difficult as ascending Heaven. What Qin has is the dangerous terrain under them, and this time he was able to come up with this trick precisely because of this dangerous terrain.

The five states are actually in the midst of war and are suspicious of each other. But because the threat from Qin is too great, that's why they put aside their own wars for now and joined forces to attack Qin. Such a union will never last for long.

So if he is Pang Nuan, and weather permitting, he will attack Xianyang directly as soon as the opportunity presents itself, so that things will not drag out too long and they end up disintegrating before any fight happens.

So he is not worried that Pang Nuan will not fall for the trick.

After traveling for five days on the mountainous roads, they came to an area where the ground is relatively flat and on the vast plains where flowers bloom, they met Meng Ao and his troops who had been summoned back to the capital.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Meng Ao underwent a simple ceremony to exchange the army tokens and official documents in the commander's tent.

Meng Ao has aged visibly from the last time they saw him, his face lined with harshness, his hair turned from black to white. His behavior was polite yet distant.

He went to great lengths to explain in detail the situation at the frontline and he does not sound optimistic at all.

In the end, he concluded, "That fellow Pang Nuan is indeed the famed military strategist of the east. Now he has set up camp at Hangu, obviously he's waiting for our reinforcements to arrive before he defeat us in one fell swoop, after which he will make a beeline for Xianyang. Now that I see Shaolong only has the cavalry with you, I can tell that you've seen through Pang Nuan's intentions and won't be meeting him head on. I am indeed glad to see this."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed, he's indeed a famed general to be able to see through his own intentions with just one look. He just smiled but gave no reply.

Meng Ao suddenly gave a sigh and asked quietly, "Can I have a few words in private with Shaolong."

Teng Yi and the rest are all understanding people and they hurriedly left the tent.

Meng Ao looked up at the top of the tent, looking like he does not know where to start. After a long pause, he gave another sigh and said, “I, Meng Ao, have never lowered myself down to beg others so I’ve never been well-liked by the Qins. Only when Minister Lu started giving me opportunities did I have the chance to express my abilities and sweep through the battlefields, expanding my troops north and south and establishing a meritorious career.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in agreement, “Everyone have their own experience and stand, this I understand.”

Meng Ao stopped looking upwards and instead turned his eyes to stare deeply at him, “I only have two sons and Shaolong had saved them once. I hope that Shaolong will not abandon them in future, naturally I will give something back in return.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, knowing that Meng Ao has seen through that Meng Wu and Meng Tian has allied themselves with him.

Meng Ao said with a wry smile, “Ultimately Lu Buwei will not win you. This time Pang Nuan will not be able to gain any advantage, but Shaolong must be careful of Li Mu. This person is a rare talent in military affairs, never losing a single battle. Even after what happened at Changping, we still dare not talk lightly of attacking Zhao because of the presence of this person. If Shaolong manage to win this round of battle, his Highness will certainly give you the important task of attacking Zhao. When you meet this person, you have to be extra careful.”

Xiang Shaolong could feel the scalp on his head going numb on

hearing this. Wang Chi had told him this, and now Meng Ao is saying the same thing. Once he returns to Xianyang he must get Xiao Pan to summon Wang Jian back immediately so that he won't have to face this man, who deserves the respect of everyone, in the battlefield.

Meng Ao gave another sigh before he stood up and took his leave.

The next day they broke camp and set off. When they arrived at the connecting hills where the Qin army had retreated about 50 miles back and was holding fortress, Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to set up camp and defenses, cutting off the only route towards the west.

By now the defending general at the front line Cheng Jun heard of their arrival and hurried over to pay respects to his newly appointed superior.

While everyone was standing on a hilltop looking at the situation, Cheng Jun gave his report.

Xiang Shaolong said, "If my estimation is correct, the coalition army will launch a fierce attack once we arrive and try their best to destroy our defenses to break our men's morale. So you must retreat in batches over the next few nights."

Cheng Jun was taken aback, "You mustn't do this, if my troops retreat last, and because of the low morale of the men, no one will be willing to stay behind and wait for death. If our enemy intensifies their attack, we'll disintegrate without even a fight.

Besides, if our enemy catches up swiftly with their cavalry, we run the risk of the entire army being killed.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a laugh, “What General Cheng said is right, but that is precisely what I want them to think, that we are inexperienced and will commit this fatal mistake. The biggest problem is to make a neat retreat without any losses.”

Cheng Jun has yet to recover from his shock when Teng Yi added, “The first batch to retreat will be the injured, sick, old and weak soldiers and at the same time announce to them that reinforcements have arrived. We have to exaggerate the numbers to 300,000 men, with Wang Jian and our Great General Xiang leading the troops. Only then will the men be pacified and won’t result in chaos.”

Cheng Jun was dumbfounded on hearing that.

Even though there will always be deceit in battles, but the ones being deceived are always the enemy. To lie to their own people is indeed a rare instance but he has no choice but to admit that this is a marvelous way of settling the minds of the troops.

Xiang Shaolong is a legendary hero well known in every family in Qin and although he has yet to make meritorious military contributions, he is the idol of the Qin army, his reputation far precedes him. As for Wang Jian, his military accomplishments are aplenty and his fame has spread far and wide. If these two famed great generals have joined forces to lead the reinforcement troops, morale will be greatly boosted.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “General Teng and I will accompany General Cheng and sneak back to camp once night falls to arrange everything. General Cheng and your man can rest for a while and gather your strength so that you can work better later.”

Cheng Jun finally understood and left gladly.

Xiang Shaolong, together with Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Zhou Liang, the 18 warriors and the Wu Family Warriors rode out of camp to analyze the nearby terrain and to see what traps they can set up to stop the enemy’s cavalry from going after their troops when they are retreating.

They only returned to camp at dusk and after dinner, went back with Cheng Jun to the frontline.

Eagle King flew up into the starry sky to spot the scouts sent out by their enemy and actually found 8 different scouts, whom they manage to avoid.

On seeing such a marvelous flying scout, Cheng Jun was extremely impressed and his confidence in Xiang Shaolong increased greatly.

The Qin’s army camp was set up on the top of a hill, facing the road from the west that will lead to Qin and the back of the hill was a vast plain. About 10 odd miles away, campfires were lit up like the starry sky, the whole plain and hills were filled with their enemy’s tents and the sight is indeed numbing.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived, Cheng Jun relayed the information as ordered, that Xiang Shaolong has come first leading the first batch of troops and Great General Wang Jian will be coming soon after. Indeed morale was boosted and everyone were rubbing their hands in glee, getting ready to counterattack.

At this time, Teng Yi and Zhou Liang led a thousand from the Wu family Warriors who are adept with mountainous terrains and night subterfuge to secure the important routes. With the Eagle King's astute eyes, they cleared the area of the enemy scouts who had climbed mountains and crossed forests to get there, to prevent news of them making the troops retreat from leaking.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the hundred odd leaders to his side and after giving them words of encouragement, gave orders for the injured, sick, old and weak to be sent back immediately. Everyone thought that he was showing concern for his subordinates and happily went ahead to carry out his orders.

By dawn, Xiang Shaolong has already sent away close to 3,000 men, leaving only 12,000 able bodied troops to stand guard at the ditches and forts at the frontline.

Cheng Jun accompanied him on his inspection rounds and after going up the highest point to have a close look, the situation on both the enemy and their sides became extremely clear.

He saw that both the enemy and their own people have set up camps on top of the hills and have made use of the what nature has

given in the forests and mountainous terrain to set up effective defenses. Trees were chopped to make barriers to protect against arrows and stones and ditches stretching for miles were dug, and the situation looks like they are all getting ready for a confrontation.

The location that Meng Ao chose to set up camp was very advantageous, with the Yellow River on one side to provide a water barrier and cliffs on the other side where even birds will find difficulty flying in. The terrain for about 5 miles between the river and the cliffs, was filled with lines after lines of barriers and ditches, and on the top of every hill, a solid wooden fortress was built. There were close to a hundred wooden fortresses within sight of each other and in terms of defense, it can be considered flawless. No wonder he could hold the coalition army at bay for three months.

Cheng Jun pointed at the dozen odd ships docked near the enemy camp on the river and said, “That’s Wei’s ships, who will bring in food, supplies, troops etc and amongst them there are a lot of equipment for breaking sieges. It’s extremely disadvantageous to our situation.”

Teng Yi asked, “How many large scale attacks have they launched so far?”

Cheng Jun replied, “Only two large scale attacks at the beginning, but we managed to keep them away after much difficulty. There were heavy casualties on both sides.”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes swept past a vast, dry landscape that was

between them, thinking of the terrible battle that will happen there, and thinking of how his old friends like Han Chuang, Xu Yi etc may very well be on the other side looking at his own side and a mixture of emotions can't help but well up inside.

Teng Yi looked at the endless tents and banners that seems to dot their enemy's camp and heaved a huge sigh, "No wonder General Meng was defeated. Just by looking at our enemy's camp setup, one can tell that the decision maker in our enemy camp is very well versed in military stratagems. Now our enemy's troops are more than five times of ours and if they attack us with fire by day and sneak attacks by night, our defenses will be breached within 10 days. Obviously they are not making any more because they are waiting for our reinforcements to arrive and when we are still tired out from the long journey, they will defeat us in one fell swoop."

As Xiang Shaolong was looking up at Eagle King who was circling up in the sky, Cheng Jun pointed out to him how the troops of the five states were distributed and what their banners look like.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath, cast aside all his troubles and gave his orders, "We should delay no more. The night after we will pretend that the reinforcements have arrived and lure the enemy into attacking us. Put some wood and hay in the camps burn the camp to hinder the enemy's progress before retreating in batches."

Teng and Cheng accepted their orders.

Book 20 Chapter 5 – Luring The Enemy In

The next day Teng Yi went back, leaving Jing Jun to stand guard at the base to arrange matters for the ‘reinforcement troops’.

Xiang Shaolong patrolled the camp as usual and when he was high above surveying the enemy’s camp, he found their inactivity to be almost illogical and queried, “Have they always been like this?”

Cheng Jun replied respectfully, “They only stared becoming this quiet about 10 odd days ago, before that they were constantly sending troops to disrupt us day and night, but it’s usually a small scale attack of 20,000 to 30,000 men.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that something is terribly wrong and suddenly had a thought, “If the enemy has reached the opposite bank, can they make a big detour upstream, and then cross the river again to surround us by the back?”

Cheng Jun replied, “General Meng has long thought of this point and deliberately placed fire beacons along the river. Once the enemy is sighted, the beacons will be lighted immediately. Besides, the River De is wide and its water rapid with tall cliffs on both sides of the bank. There’re no bridges as well so even if our enemy have such intentions, I’m afraid it’ll be extremely difficult to accomplish.”

Xiang Shaolong is still worried and instructed Zhou Liang who was standing on his other side, “Send Eagle King to the opposite

bank to have a look, it'll be better if he can fly a little further.”

Zhou Liang set off gladly to follow up on his order.

Ever since he got Eagle King, Zhou Liang seemed to have changed into another person.

Cheng Jun saw that Xiang Shaolong did not trust his assessment and his expression became a little unnatural.

On seeing that, Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “General Cheng, please do not take this to heart. In war, anything can be changed and we’re never far from these four words ‘unexpected tactics brings victory’. For Pang Nuan to enjoy such reputation, he must be a capable person. That’s why I have to be on the alert against any surprise tactics he may have that we will not expect. If my guess is correct, Pang Nuan must have set up temporary floating bridges with thick ropes upstream of where our scouts will find difficulty in reaching. Once they have crossed the difficult river, they’ll keep the floating bridges and move up behind us and repeat the same thing with the floating bridges and let their army cross the river swiftly. Ha, no wonder they had to wait for our reinforcements to arrive before they attack!”

Cheng Jun was speechless on hearing this and secretly commented to himself that ‘you’re the Great General, of course you can say whatever you like.’

Xiang Shaolong pointed at a dense forest on the right near the hills and continued, “If I’m Pang Nuan, I’ll order men to hide the

chariots and heavy machinery etc in the woods and camouflage them with branches and leaves so when the time comes for them to attack us, the distance needed to move these things will be shortened.”

Cheng Jun replied, “I’ll take note of that.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “Is General Cheng thinking of setting fire to the whole thing?”

Cheng Jun was taken aback, “That dense forest is close to the enemy camp and with ditches and forts everywhere, how can we get near enough to set fire?”

Xiang Shaolong pointed at the tall hills on the left and said, “Climb up that hill and you can throw down the torches, but it is most important to time the use of this tactic correctly. If it’s used when the enemy is attacking, it will cause the greatest effect.”

Cheng Jun was astounded and replied, “I understand now.”

The both of them discussed the various ways they can block the enemy. Because they have to at least make a show of trying to fend off the attack for a few days before pretending to be defeated and retreat, otherwise no one would believe in their act.

Right at this time Zhou Liang returned with Eagle King and said excitedly, “Great General has indeed predicted correctly. From the area that Eagle King has covered while flying, we can know that

our enemy have at least 10,000 men who have snuck up about 15 miles behind us on the opposite bank and getting ready to cross the river for a sneak attack.”

Cheng Jun immediately broke out in sweat and said with shame, “I will immediately tighten defenses around that area.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, “Hold on! Won’t this be as good as telling them that we’ve seen through their secret plan?”

He reached out his hand, intending to touch Eagle King but on seeing it turn around with its beak open and ready to attack, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly retracted his hand in fright.

Zhou Liang said apologetically, “I deliberately trained it not to get close to anyone else, I seek Great General’s forgiveness and understanding.”

Cheng Jun was more anxious about the enemy crossing the river and asked with utmost admiration, “So what should I do? If we allow the enemy to get behind us and cut off our paths, followed by a frontal assault, we’ll be in dire situation.”

Xiang Shaolong did not reply him first but said to Zhou Liang instead, “Brother Zhou will be in charge of taking note of our enemy’s activities on the opposite bank. You can rest during the day but once it’s dark, you have to be extra vigilant.”

Zhou Liang asked excitedly, “So should I go back to the tent with

Eagle King now and nap?”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Exactly!”

After Zhou Liang left, Xiang Shaolong told Cheng Jun, “General Cheng, you don’t have to worry. Just leave it to me to burn the woods and deal with the enemy troops on the opposite bank. You’ll just have to take good care of our base camp and instruct everyone to take turns and rest during the day so that they will have the energy to deal with our enemy at night.”

Drum beats can be heard from the enemy side.

A few hundred war chariots rushed out, followed by thousands of foot soldiers approached them steadily.

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “The enemy has found out that my reinforcements have arrived so now they’re starting their relentless attacks.”

He turned towards Cheng Jun and added, “Now do you understand why I said they can only take turns to rest.”

Cheng Jun replied with total admiration, “I am enlightened.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly finding it comical that he is winning because he has 2000 more years of military knowledge. He just have to randomly choose one or two beautiful tricks from famous ancient wars and he’ll be able to make use of them.

He immediately snuck out of camp with the 18 Warriors and rode along the bank upstream.

Just like what Cheng Jun has said, there were tall fire beacons every 10 miles along the way, each about 50 feet high and at the platform on top there was a wooden beam about 30 feet tall with a horizontal board which can be moved up and down the beam so that the soldiers can climb up to look far away. At the edge of every board there was a large cage stuffed with hay. If they see traces of the enemy, it will give out smoke during the day and fire during the night and with the appropriate signal, inform them of the enemy's numbers and distance.

There's also a huge drum at the top of the platform, made for long distance communication.

But in Xiang Shaolong's perspective as a Special Task Force member, as long as the night is dark with no moon and making use of floating devices, it's not impossible to cross the river and get rid of the signal men atop these beacons. Once he thought of this, he shuddered, already knowing what the enemy is waiting for.

They are waiting for a dark and moonless night, when dark clouds will cover the night sky.

Only under such a situation will they be able to carry out the sudden sneak attack by moving their troops across the river.

Xiang Shaolong came to the where Zhou Liang had pointed out,

about 20 miles upstream and realized that the water is less rapid around this area and there are no dangerous cliffs on either side of the bank, an ideal place to build floating bridges to cross the river.

And it just so happens that there is a beacon there as well. From this it can be seen that when Meng Ao was building these beacons, he did put a lot of effort into it.

By now he knows what he should do and went back to camp.

The war cries of the enemy as well as their own men rang in the frontlines but the soldiers at the camp are all so used to it and those who have been given permission to rest are all sleeping, seemingly immune to the deafening battle drums and cries.

Xiang Shaolong went around on inspection and gave encouragement to the troops. He felt like he's the Minister of Defence who is visiting the hardworking soldiers at the frontline as everyone cheered when he approached and morale was boosted.

In the wars of ancient civilization, the morale of an army can directly influence the success or failure of a battle.

When he returned to his commander's tent, he saw Zhou Liang feeding fresh rabbit meat to Eagle King. As it turned out, he was unable to fall asleep.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Don't worry, as long as the sky remains clear, the enemy will find it difficult to cross the river. So don't be

too tensed.”

Zhou Liang heaved a sigh of relief, “That’s much better.”

Xiang Shaolong fell into a deep sleep once he returned to his tent and dreamt of Ji Yanran, the other ladies and Xiang Bao’er. He also dreamt of Qin Qing, whom he has lost contact for a long time and when he woke up he was hit with a painful wave of yearning.

That night, their enemy intensified their attacks and threw huge rocks with their siege machines and destroyed the Qin’s first line of wooden barriers and filled up the ditches. The Qin army was forced to retreat to their second line of defense about half a mile away and only manage to drive the enemy away when they increased their numbers. There were casualties on both sides but of course the enemy suffered much larger losses as they are the attackers.

The next evening, Jing Jun leading an elite team of 2,000 cavalry arrived in camp and reported that the wounded and sick soldiers who were withdrawn are already on their way towards Zuicheng, and the grand army can come tonight.

Xiang Shaolong told Jing Jun about the enemy’s intention to cross the river. Jing Jun commented, “The sky is red in the morning and night, looking at the sky it’ll definitely rain within these two nights. You can leave this matter to me. The enemy will need at least one night’s work in order to build a floating bridge large enough to cross the river.”

Cheng Jun who was standing by the side asked, “What does General Jing intend to do?”

Jing Jun thought for a moment before replying, “I will withdraw the sentry at the beacons there and if the enemy is bold enough to cross the river, I will wait until they are right in the middle of the river where they cannot retreat or advance and launch a massive attack. We just have to put a few dozen siege engines up there and I’ll make them drink the waters of River De.”

Xiang Shaolong complimented him, “Xiao Jun have indeed improved a lot. You’ll be in total charge of this matter. Just remember that you must bring Zhou Liang with you.”

He then asked Jing Shan in and ordered him, Wu Guang, Wu Da and Dan Quan to prepare torches and to climb the hill to burn the forest once it’s night.

After the various teams of men have set off, Teng Yi’s ‘reinforcement troops’ arrived.

Dotted across the hills were campfires and lights, most of them were lanterns hung up in the air. There were only a few thousand men but it was made to look as if an impressive tens of thousands men were there.

That night, dark clouds indeed covered the sky. The clouds were thick but yet to rain, a most opportune time for sneak attacks.

Xiang Shaolong went up the viewing post at the frontline and saw that their enemy has gathered a large group of chariots, horses and foot soldiers with a few thousand siege engines and were preparing for a massive attack. Instead the dense woods on the left was totally quiet so he can imagine that in the midst of the battle, if a huge group of soldiers were to suddenly charge out from there, they will certainly be able to break through their solid defenses.

War drums were heard and the Wei army led the attack, moving in from the right. The atmosphere suddenly became tense.

On the left near the bank, the Zhao army followed by moving in as well and immediately their morale was greatly boosted.

After working with each other countless times, the coordination of the coalition army is now flawless. No wonder that the Qin army has to take a defeat every time.

The war drums sounded again and close to a thousand chariots rushed out from the middle of the enemy formation, followed by tens of thousands of archers behind them. Because they do not have cumbersome machineries like the siege machine, they were able to overtake the Wei and Zhao armies on both sides in an instant and come straight at them.

The chariots were about ten feet wide with two huge wheels on the sides, pulled along by four handsome horses. It's speed was astounding, giving one the feeling of great power and in an instant they have crossed the flattened ditches, crossed the first line of defense that was destroyed and approaching the rolling hills at the end of the flat grassland.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to give the order to meet the attack head on, the chariots suddenly stopped and the horses were unbridled. The chariots were joined together to form a camp about two miles long.

The strangest thing is that every 30 feet, there will be a space wide enough for three men to pass side by side, making one wonder what is the use of that.

By now the enemy's foot soldiers came up running and after hiding behind the chariots, prepared their crossbows and arrows to prevent the Qins from coming out and counterattacking.

As the chariots were out of the range of the siege machines, Xiang Shaolong had no way of retaliating.

Cheng Jun sighed, "Great General's prediction is correct. Our enemy's move is to block our way in front and if they can really attack us from the back, we'll definitely cannot escape from the fate of being exterminated."

At this point in time they saw another team of vehicles coming up but it's no ordinary chariots but cumbersome supply trains. It advanced at an aching slow pace, even with eight donkeys they were dragging them with much labor so it's obviously those vehicles are filled with things like rocks.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong and Cheng Jun understand that the gaps that the chariots left in between earlier is to let these

rocks vehicles pass to build another layer of base defenses nearer to themselves.

If they were to allow the other party to build up this vehicle base, their second line of defense may very well be breached by tonight.

But because the other party has already prepared chariots and archers for protection, they indeed have a chance to succeed in using vehicles to build up a base camp.

War cries were heard from their two sides, the enemy on their left and right are beginning their attacks.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed the area and according to his estimation, the enemy has at least invested 200,000 men in tonight's attack and their actual force is already more than twice of theirs. If their base camp is breached, they can only just wait to be killed.

On the enemy's side, five different colored banners were hung high up as they organized their formation. He can expect that Han Chuang will be one of them.

Cheng Jun and the other dozen odd generals all turned pale, obviously shell-shocked by their enemy's expertise in military stratagems and their overwhelming manpower.

Xiang Shaolong calculated the time and gave his order, "Call for a batch of 10,000 strong shield soldiers and archers, prepare the

siege machines. When the dense forest on the left side is on fire, leave camp immediately and attack to destroy the enemy's vehicle fortress."

The immediately went to carry out the orders.

War cries were heard again, a team of close to a thousand foot soldiers dashed out from the vehicle fortress and shot out fiery arrows.

The Qin's army camp immediately retaliated by throwing rocks to stop the enemy.

It's an extremely tragic situation. The originally dark sky is now shining a bloody red from all the fires being lighted.

It's the first time that Xiang Shaolong is personally experiencing a large scale attack and defense battle in ancient settings. He could feel his adrenalin rushing and at the same time a sense of sorrow welled up in him. This sort of mixed feelings is something that he cannot really explain.

When the enemy's hundred odd supply trains carting rocks and their siege machines were slowly approaching them, the dense forest on the right suddenly caught fire in a few areas and the fire was quickly spreading.

Just as Xiang Shaolong expected, countless soldiers who were in hiding ran out in alarm from the forest, most of them were riders

who are the most reflexive.

The morale of Cheng Jun and the others were greatly boosted and their confidence in Xiang Shaolong soared as their enemy started panicking.

The war drums of the Qin army started beating as their gates opened and three groups of shield soldiers advanced forward with the archers following behind, launching a counterattack before the enemy's vehicle fortress had a chance to be formed again.

About 10,000 odd cavalry dashed out from the left and right sides simultaneously, charging at and killing the enemy and to disrupt the enemy's two huge army at the sides.

For a moment tens of thousands of men were thrown into the battle, bodies filled the plains and blood flowed like river.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize how brave and elite the Qin army is. On first contact they had dispersed the enemy's frontlines, killing them so mercilessly that they abandoned their vehicles and escaped. The most fatal blow to the enemy is that their transport vehicles and chariots have now become the stumbling blocks to their escape route and now the Qin archers can come nearer behind their vehicle base and launch a long distance attack while the enemy is still in frenzy.

War drums were heard again.

The Qin's archers now rushed out in a swarm to take over the cavalry who are now retreating back to camp, leaving behind a mess of overturned and burning chariots in their wake and totally disintegrating the enemy's first wave of attacks.

Xiang Shaolong knows that because the other party wants to coordinate the attacks with the surprise troops who will be crossing the river to attack, they will not give up the battle so easily now. Their own wooden barriers and forts had been destroyed in many places either by the huge rocks thrown at them or burned by the fiery arrows, so he ordered the main force to retreat to the third line of defense.

By now the dense forest on the right is all covered in a fiery blaze, illuminating the whole battlefield with a reddish glow.

After their enemy retreated, the 50,000 to 60,000 enemy soldiers, under the cover of their various protection vehicles, launched a three pronged attack from the left, middle and right. This is the second wave of attack.

The battle thus continued in such heart-stopping situation.

The injured soldiers were constantly carried off the camp and by the time the second line of defense was almost lost, the sun was up. The enemy was too tired to continue and had to retreat.

Jing Shan and the rest returned safely at this point and Xiang Shaolong finally eased his worry.

Reports later came that Jing Shan had waited until after the enemy have built the floating bridges and were crossing it before launching a massive attack to destroy the floating bridges, causing the enemy to lose close to 10,000 men.

The morale of the Qin army soared immediately on hearing this news.

But Xiang Shaolong knows that they are bound to lose and won't be able to last thru this night and gave the orders for men to be retreated in batches. But he did not forget to put up a show so that the enemy won't see through his plan.

After breakfast, the enemy launched their attacks again. Obviously they are still unaware that the river crossing soldiers had met with mishap.

They braced themselves until dusk and the second line of defense was finally lost. It's now time for the total retreat.

Xiang Shaolong is the last batch to leave. The whole camp was engulfed in flames, even spreading to the nearby hills so that it will make it difficult for the enemy to come after them. Only in such dangerous mountainous terrains can they make use of such methods to block the pursuing soldiers.

The coalition army indeed fell for the trap and ran after them.

Xiang Shaolong set up another second base at the westward roads

and put up defenses there and had another round of fierce fighting with the coalition army for another five days until the main force had safely left the area. He then made a detour around the camp and escaped, planting traps and spikes along the way so that the enemy's cavalry will have difficulty running after them in full speed.

They had a few more skirmishes after that, and pretended to be defeated every time. By the time they retreated until Zuicheng, Xiang Shaolong knows that success is already at hand.

Book 20 Chapter 6 – Battle Of Zuicheng

Huan Qi came about 30 miles out of the city to receive them.

By now, the mounted troops which were originally made up of 10,000 cavalry and 20,000 backups were now left with a little over 20,000 men. From this it can be seen how intensive the battle chase was along the way.

They left the mountainous area and arrived at the wide open plains on the eastern side of Zuicheng where hills surround them on all sides. The Wei River that leads to the Yellow River is about 50 miles north, flowing from the west to the east. Because of the numerous hills, unless one climbs up to a tall spot, one won't be able to see the grand view of the magnificent river flowing.

From Hangu all the way up north here, it's a distance of 300 miles.

Xiang Shaolong rode alongside Huan Qi as the army moved towards Zuicheng. The former saw that the defenses were done up very well, at the top of all the high points there were forts made from stones and said with satisfaction, "Xiao Qi is really capable. Just looking at the formation shown here will be enough to cause disappointment to Pang Nuan."

Huan Qi was overjoyed to be complimented, "Great General is risking your life at the frontline, how can I just hide here and enjoy my luxuries. Now Zuicheng has joined the army that had just retreated and the total force is now about 150,000 and everyone

has been resting to conserve their energy. They are very clear Great General has now arrived to help them defend Zuicheng and are aware that you are luring the enemy westward to tire them out before giving them a painful blow, so now they're all rubbing their hands in anticipation and are willing to lay down their lives for Great General."

Jing Jun who was behind them had always been very close and open with Huan Qi so he chided jokingly, "So Xiao Qi is so crafty to know how to spread rumors. Luckily these rumors have the effect of boosting morale, otherwise we'll certainly have you punished under martial law."

Everyone laughed.

Huan Qi waved at Zhou Liang, who was behind Xiang Shaolong and complimented, "Brother Zhou has made a great contribution this time. Now everyone in camp is addressing you as God of Eagles and once you're around, no one will have to worry about sneak attacks from the enemy."

Zhou Liang mouth split open into a wide smile as he caressed Eagle King who was on his shoulder and said some humbling words.

Amidst their jokes and conversation, they crossed the drawbridge over the river surrounding the city and went into the city.

The scene immediately gave Xiang Shaolong and the rest a huge shock.

The soldiers and civilians in the city have all gathered at the sides of the main street as they cheered wildly. It's as if they have already won the battle and returned in pride but in fact, the actual main battle has not even started.

Three days later, the coalition army's vanguards arrived at the eastern plains of Zuicheng.

Huan Qi made use of the fact that they were still tired from the long travel and their weakness in their unfamiliarity with the terrain to launch continuous attacks at them day and night, burning their camps and supplies. The coalition army was forced to retreat more than 20 miles before they could stabilize themselves but by then they have lose close to 10,000 men and the impact to their morale was especially great.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest made use of this time to rest and recover their strength, practicing their formation all day at Zuicheng.

From the Mohist military stratagems, Xiang and Teng chose the formation that is most suited for their enclosed situation, the 'crab formation', which is to abandon the usual way of concentrating their force in the middle upfront but to use 'Frontal Troops', and to concentrate their force on both sides to attack using 'Secondary Troops'.

Because they are fighting with the city behind them, the 'Frontal Troops' can make use of the siege machines and archers situated

on the high walls to strengthen their defenses so they're not worried that the enemy will make a frontal full force attack.

As for the secondary troops on either sides, they will be made up of mainly the best mounted troops and with their thick blades, are most suitable in missions such as this that requires them to use slash and assault tactics.

The enemy came from the west and along the way there are numerous hills so that cumbersome attack vehicles and siege machines will have to be abandoned along the way, reducing the threat to the Qin army. Currently the only factor advantageous to the coalition army is their sheer numbers.

Now it's slowing going into autumn and if the coalition army cannot take over Zuicheng before the arrival of the harsh winter, they will be stuck in an icy situation or maybe even lose the whole army. That's why Xiang Shaolong is not worried that they will set themselves up for a long siege.

So as long as Xiang Shaolong is willing to leave the city to battle, Pang Nuan will only thank the Heaven and hope for a swift battle.

Ten days later, the coalition army moved closer to Zuicheng once again, slowing moving into the wide plains about 50 miles across outside the city of Zuicheng, setting up tents and camps on the side of the mountainous range and using war chariots to for defensive barriers.

Xiang Shaolong gave orders to cease all attacks on the enemy and

allow them to stabilize themselves.

But the impending arrival of the great battle is looming over both the enemy and their own men, tightening the nerves of everyone.

Another three days later, all the troops of the coalition army arrived. Xiang Shaolong and the rest stood on top of the city wall and looked over and on the surface, their enemy indeed looked energetic without a trace of fatigue at all.

Huan Qi looked more intently and after a while, said with a smile, “If we talk about the quality and training of the generals and soldiers, other than the Zhao army, the other four states in the coalition army are far below our standard. This time, General Meng kept getting defeated is due to the many years of fighting between them and Pang Nuan has already become very familiar with his fighting tactics. Therefore he can easily use various methods to target his weaknesses and hence gain victory.”

He paused and added, “General Wang Jian once said, looking at all the famed generals of the recent generation, only Bai Qi and Li Mu does not have a set formula in all their battles, nor do they follow any rules so others are unable predict their actions. As for the others, there will always be traces to be found. Now, General Wang should include General Xiang into that list as well.”

Xiang Shaolong chided jokingly, “You’re really getting better at boot-licking.”

Everyone joked and laughed together and the atmosphere

relaxed. Teng Yi said, “Although the enemy suffered losses, they still have about 500,000 men left. But I’m not worried about that because all of them still harbor their own intentions and it’s not easy for them to work together. Besides the weather, water and terrain here is not advantageous to southern armies like the Chus. We’ve also blocked their nearby streams with rocks and sand so that it will make lives even more difficult for their tired soldiers. So although they have 500,000 men, we should take into consideration only 200,000 men, which is not far off from our own numbers. However we have solid city walls to protect us and we’re not worried about an extended war. The other party will have to hastily launch attacks to make the best use of time, so it’s needless to point out who will have the better advantage.”

Huan Qi looked far ahead and said, “Messengers are riding towards the left and right from the middle of the enemy camp. Obviously they are going to gather the various leaders to go to the middle army for a discussion. It seems like the enemy is going to launch a full scale attack soon.”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and said nonchalantly, “In my opinion this is just a show put up for us. If I am Pang Nuan and my troops are really strong and energetic with high morale, I will pretend to look tired and listless to lure us out of the city to attack. Now that they are pretending to show how fierce and active they are, it goes to show that they are actually guilty of being afraid that we’ll attack them instead.”

By this point in time Cheng Jun has already regarded Xiang Shaolong as a general from Heaven and agreed with his comment, “It’s also written in military books, ‘Whether the soldiers and horses appear brave will determine my victory or weakness. If the

formation of an army is neat it instead shows that I will not engage in battle'. Great General's views are indeed wise.”

Huan Qi, Teng Yi and Jing Jun's expressions all seemed interested.

Jing Jun immediately requested for permission to engage in battle.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that something will happen to him and ordered Huan Qi to back him up.

An hour later, the city gates opened and both of them, each leading 20,000 foot soldiers and cavalry as well as siege machines crossed over the plains and attacked the enemy formation.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led another force behind, in case they had to cover their retreat.

They fought until dusk, destroying a few enemy camps before coming back to the city.

The next day it was the enemy's turn to approach for battle but the Qin army refused to come out, their only answer is a rain of arrows and the enemy had no choice but to return.

After three days of such tussles with both sides having casualties, on the fourth morning the coalition army finally lost their patience. Using their newly built siege vehicles, battering rams etc

they launched a wide scale attack on the city.

Xiang Shaolong insisted on not moving and waited until the enemy is exhausted and retreating before launching his full force and setting up the prearranged formation outside the city.

Although the coalition army was unwilling to face this battle, they also did not want to miss the opportunity of fighting. Even more so they were afraid of being flushed by the Qin army so they sent all their troops to set up formation on the other side of the plains as well.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi went up a small hill near the middle of the army to survey the enemy's military formation.

By then the sun has risen high up in the sky and the sun's bright rays reflected off the armors and weapons on men on both sides. The glittering lights filled the plains on both sides, filled with the tense atmosphere of an impending battle.

The coalition army's numbers are visibly lesser, only about 400,000 men split into five main formations.

The main force is concentrated in the middle, with foot soldiers forming the main bulk. In front of them are the chariots, behind them the cavalry, forming a front, middle, back formation.

On the left and right sides were swift cavalry.

The foot soldiers in the middle were further separated into nine small groups according to army type. The three at the foremost were the shield soldiers and light infantry while the other six groups were the main attack force consisting of the heavy armored infantry with about 20,000 men in each group holding defense equipment or weapons for long distance attacks like crossbows, spears, swords, shields, barricades, halberds etc. The space each group takes up and the distance between them fits the rule of military formations and they're definitely not a motley crew.

Teng Yi sighed, "It may be Third Brother's first attempt at leading an army but every time you predict things so accurately. Just like right now we're avoiding the enemy's main force in the middle and splitting our heavy infantry on the two sides, that's indeed a very wise move. Now even if Pang Nuan knows that something is wrong, it'll be difficult for him to change his formation. Besides he doesn't even know that all of our cavalry carries a thick blade that's at least half as formidable as Hundred Battles Blade which will guarantee to place our sword wielding enemy at a great disadvantage."

The battle drums of the enemy suddenly rung out and the almost 3,000 chariots gathered at the front gave a shout and started advancing with the infantry coming right behind them.

It seems that Eagle King, which was perched on Zhou Liang's shoulder, could feel the deadly battle atmosphere in the air and started flapping its wings and gave a low squawk.

Xiang Shaolong gave orders to stay put and the battle drums sounded immediately while the signal soldiers informed Huan Qi

and Jing Jun who were on both ends using signal flags.

Just as they were about to approach shooting distance, the first two rows of the 3,000 chariots which was split into six rows suddenly increased speed and rushed forward.

Every chariot, other than the driver and some vehicle personnel, there were also a team of vehicle infantry soldiers, each having their own duties,

The driver will control the vehicle, the vehicle personnel were given weapons like bows, crossbows, spears and halberds. Bows and crossbows will be used while they are still a distance away and spears and halberds will be used in close distance battles. The vehicle infantry will follow the chariots and work closely with the chariot to cover each other in defense and attack to magnify their fatality and defense.

The chariot's driver and vehicle personnel need not walk so they are attired with heavy armor and are not worried about arrows. With the war horses charging, they can really ride roughshod over the battlefield. If they are allowed to break into the formation, the defending troops can forget about maintaining their formations again and if the enemy continues with another wave of attack, they will certainly be doomed.

For a moment shouts and drums were heard on both sides as arrows flew and battle cries filled the air.

The enemy's cavalry on both two sides each sent out about

10,000 men to provide cover for the two sides of the centre attack force.

It's finally the start of the great battle.

Xiang Shaolong waited until the enemy is within shooting distance before ordering the siege engines at the top of the city to be fired.

Huge rocks rained down on the approaching enemy chariots from time to time.

Even as the vehicles overturned and the people fell, there were still close to a hundred chariots still making their way forward.

Xiang Shaolong gave an order and the Qin soldiers at the front line fell back like receding waves, revealing the countless ditches behind which was dug to make the horses fall. The enemy never expected the Qin army to have such a trick and immediately the chariots overturned and the people fell off, giving the Qins the opportunity to finish them off.

Arrows rained down from above the city walls and the foot soldiers who have lost the protection of the chariots all fell to the ground. The scene was so horrible that Xiang Shaolong could not bear watching it but there was nothing he could do.

In war, it's death for either you or me. There's no place for compassion at all.

By now the enemy's cavalry on the two sides have arrived.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the signal soldier to send out the flag signals and their own cavalry charged out from the left and right, each of them holding a broadsword and sliced their way through the sword wielding enemy cavalry, turning them into a mess as they fell off their horses.

The Qin's cavalry have always been better than the eastern soldiers and now that they have a new weapon that is most suited to be used while on a horse, they are virtually unstoppable.

After Xiang Shaolong's army shattered the enemy's first wave of attack, they began to advance about a hundred steps forward towards the enemy's second wave of attacking chariots and foot soldiers. They arranged their formation again and used catapults and arrows for long distance attacks on the enemy.

By now the enemy's cavalry on both sides have lost terribly and the enemy's center army was worried that they will lose their protection cover on the two sides and end up being attacked on three sides so they hurriedly retreated.

However, chariots may be unstoppable when they are charging forward but they are not very easily turned or maneuvered so now that they are hastily reversing right in the middle of battle, the chariots knocked against one another and there was extreme chaos.

But it's not the fault of the coalition army for who would have thought that the cavalry on the two sides would be so utterly defeated so quickly.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the opportunity has arrived and once again gave orders for a full force attack.

Firsly Huan Qi and Jing Jun's 20,000 odd cavalry on both sides were hot on the tails of the defeated enemy, followed by the 60,000 infantry who were behind the cavalry who charged towards the enemy formation on the two sides.

With a center army made up of 40,000 foot soldiers, 10,000 cavalry and 1,000 Wu family warriors, Xiang Shaolong started the attack on the enemy's center army who were retreating. Their charge left the enemy's corpses everywhere, blood flowed like rivers and the scene was extremely horrifying.

The cavalry on the two sides swiftly broke into the enemy's formation and the coalition army panicked immediately as disruptions washed over them like waves and affected the whole situation.

Pang Nuan knows that something has gone wrong and sounded the drum signals to order the whole army to continue their fight against the enemy but now instead of being actively aggressive they have now become passive participants.

When the coalition army finally looked as if they are successfully keeping the Qin army away, Xiang Shaolong and a thousand Wu

family warriors came charging out like tigers falling upon a flock of sheep, absolutely destroying the most formidable center army of the coalition army.

By now it goes without saying that the coalition army has lost and even if Sun Wu were to come back to life or if Bai Qi is here, they will not be able to overturn this outcome. After just an hour, the Chu army started by retreating and this move caused the coalition army to break down and the situation was chaotic.

The coalition army all abandoned their machinery and armor to escape, no longer having the energy to fight back at all.

The Qin army went after them for about 20 odd miles, killing about 80,000 of them and captured about 20,000 men.

Never has the coalition army been defeated so badly in their united effort to attack Qin.

That night, Xiang Shaolong set up camp in the mountains, planning to get a good rest before running after the enemy again the next day so that they can regain whatever land they had lost.

Suddenly his men came to report that they have captured the enemy's Great General.

Xiang Shaolong did not even have time to wear his armor properly and dashed out of the tent to take a look. He was shocked to see a bloody and dirty looking Han Chuang being escorted

dejectedly towards the tent. He saw Xiang Shaolong and said with a wry smile, “Brother Xiang, just give me an easy way out.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled and shouted, “Untie him immediately!”

His men all treated him with the respect due to a deity and on hearing that, cut off the ropes immediately.

After Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to clean and treat Han Chuang’s wounds, he invited him into the tent for a meal.

Han Chang laughed bitterly, “The story of Shaolong’s battle will be spread all across the land and your reputation will be on par if not better than Bai Qi. I concede defeat.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “We each work for different masters, this battle is something beyond all our control. Brother Han may sleep here tonight and you can ride back to your country tomorrow morning.”

Han Chuang was taken aback, “Shaolong, it’s a great crime to release an enemy general without permission, how can I not feel bad about it?”

Xiang Shaolong replied in all earnestly, “I can’t be bothered with this now. I will return your retainers to you as well. Brother Han, you must leave Qin’s borders as soon as possible. With the current situation, we have no choice but to pursue while we’re at an

advantage.”

Han Chuang by nature is someone who's afraid to die and now that he's had this chance to live, he was overcome with tears of gratitude, “If I have to leave, I might as well go tonight. Ai! Shaolong is a true friend indeed.”

That night Shaolong sent Han Chuang and close to a thousand of his personal retainers away. The next morning, he sent the prisoners of war to Zuicheng and at the same time pursued the retreating enemy as well.

Although Pang Nuan tried to reassemble the coalition army along the way, but because of the low morale and lack of weapons and grains, they were forced to retreat in less than three days. Xiang Shaolong charged in and once again took control of Hangu Pass, totally destroying the dream of the five states to eliminate Qin.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the rebuilding of the pass and strengthen Hangu Pass's defense ability. After winter, Xiao Pan sent an envoy with an imperial edict that he and Zhu Ji ordered, promoting Xiang Shaolong as Commander-General while the other officials were promoted by another rank. Huan Qi and Cheng Jun were both promoted to Great General while Teng and Jing were promoted to the rank of General. Zhou Liang was promoted to become Deputy General. The others were also rewarded according to the contributions they made. The soldiers were given three times of their pay and at that moment everyone was overjoyed.

Other than Cheng Jun who had to stay behind to guard Hangu Pass, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were summoned back to

Xianyang to take over their new posts.

This battle has made Xiang Shaolong famous far and wide, his reputation is now above Wang Jian and Meng Ao and is now regarded together with Wang Jian as Western Qin's two newest and bravest generals.

Book 20 Chapter 7 – Victorious Return

Xiang Shaolong and the rest went up the ships which Xiao Pan sent to them and followed the river back to Xianyang, avoiding the arduous journey of a long road travel.

On the ships that came there were Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, Zhou Wei and Lu Dan'er, which was a pleasant surprise for Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo and Jing Jun.

Wu Tingfang, the perfect mother who loves her son more than her own life did not come along because she wants to stay at home with Xiang Bao'er. Naturally the Tian sisters will have to stay behind as well.

All of them happily updated one another of the events that had happened.

During dinner at the dining area of the ship, Xiang Shaolong asked about Qin Qing and Ji Yanran's expression became gloomy as she said, "Lady Huayang just passed away last month and Sister Qing wrote a letter back to say that she wants to observe a mourning period of one year for Lady Huayang and at the same time take care of the family business. She won't be able to return to Xianyang for the time being."

Dan'er, who was being all lovey-dovey with Jing Jun and whispering to him, said smugly, "Third Brother have yet to thank me. This time if not for me who kept pestering his Highness such that he cannot reject, how can you possibly be hugging Learned

Lady Ji on your left and Sister Zhi on your right?”

Everyone saw that although she is already a wife, but she still retains the innocence of a young girl and they all smiled.

Zhou Wei said with a sigh, “Ever since all of you left for war, not only us, but the whole of Xianyang was really worried. The people on the streets all lost their smile, afraid that the coalition army will arrive at our gates. Only when the reports came, the whole city erupted in joy and everyone rushed out to the streets, dancing and singing all night long and constantly cheering his Highness and Master Xiang’s names. They believed that the Black Dragon has protected them, that’s why we have such a miraculous outcome to the war.”

Everyone was proud and touched at the same time.

Lu Dan’er’s focus suddenly turned towards Huan Qi and with the air of an elder sister, commanded, “Xiao Qi, on your return to Xianyang this time, you should settle down and start a family. I’ll make arrangements on this matter, you just have to listen to my instructions.”

Wu Guo chortled, “If you listen to Lady Jing’s suggestion, won’t that be a blind marriage?”

Immediately everyone in the hall roared out in laughter.

As Lu Dan’er was staring angrily at Wu Guo, Ji Yanran said, “We

heard that once Lu Buwei received news of your great victory, he lost his appetite for three days. Three days before we left to come here, he led his people and went to his new house at Donggun. But we suspect he has another ulterior motive, maybe he's gone to see people like Cheng Qiao and Du Bi."

Teng Yi asked, "How's Lu Buwei's relationship with Lao Ai now?"

Lu Dan'er fought to reply, "There's nothing much between the two of them, they even appeared close during Guan Zhongxie and Lu Nianrong's wedding, talking and laughing. But the people under them were having a good time fighting one another. Now the city guards are obviously split into two factions, on one side is Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang and on the other side is Han Xie. And Xu Shang and Han Xie are fighting over Drunken Wind Loft's Yang Yu, arguing all the time."

She turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, "Lord Changping instructed me to inform all of you first that he will be arranging another celebratory feast for all of you at Drunken Wind Loft."

Huan Qi was concerned about the reinforcement troops he singlehandedly trained and started asking about the Meng brothers and little Wang Bi's situation.

Zhao Zhi said, "His Highness has promoted Xiao Bi to General and sent him to Dongjiang to support Wang. That Li Mu is really formidable, all of his battles are swift. If not for Commander General Wang who is there to hold the fort, I'm afraid we'd have lost the four counties in the east."

Teng Yi asked about Meng Ao and Ji Yanran sighed, “He fell sick shortly after he was summoned back to Xianyang. That heartless man Lu Buwei was very cold towards him. Now Lu Buwei is fully supporting Guan Zhongxie, Xu Shang, Zhao Pu and Lian Jiao. Recently he sent Guan Zhongxie and Zhao Pu to attack Han and I heard they even manage to take over a city.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that this is a big headache. After all Lu Buwei does hold power in his hands and now that he is in cahoots with Cheng Qiao and the rest, he’ll be even more difficult to deal with. Guan Zhongxie is well versed in both scholarly and martial pursuits, if he turns into another Meng Ao and start to rebel at a later date, there will be even greater trouble.

Everyone chatted for a while longer before returning to their own bunks to rest.

The two ladies happily helped Xiang Shaolong shower and change and when lying on the bed, Ji Yanran said softly, “The dowager went to Yongdu again, accompanying her was Lao Ai and Mao Jiao, can Husband guess what is happening?”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “She’s expecting again?”

This is her second pregnancy with Lao Ai.

Ji Yanran nodded her head silently when Zhao Zhi plaster herself behind him from the back and said with emotion, “Xiang-lang! We missed you so badly!”

Learned Lady Ji who was in front of him blushed immediately as she gave him a coy look.

What followed after, is of course what everyone knows will happen.

When Xiang Shaolong and the rest were disembarking at the jetty outside Xianyang, the musicians started playing a welcome tune. Xiao Pan, Lord Changping and the other court officials have already been waiting a long time on shore.

On the way back to the Palace, the people filled the streets, cheering and letting off fireworks. Lanterns and banners were hung up in every household and the atmosphere was lively, filled with the Qin people's gratitude and enthusiasm.

The Crown Prince and Xiang Shaolong's name was constantly being chanted.

Under Xiao Pan's lead, all of them went to the temple first to offer their prayers to the ancestors and late rulers of the Qin royal family and at the same time mourn for the warriors who perished in the war. After that, it was announced that a state feast will be held that night where the three armies will be given their rewards.

After that, Xiao Pan had a meeting with Xiang Shaolong at the inner court and with them were Xiao Pan's three other trusted aides, Wang Ling, Li Si and Lord Changping.

By this time, Xiao Pan is 19 years old in name, but in actual fact he is 21 years old. He's already an adult.

Although he is half a head shorter than Xiang Shaolong, but compared to the average person he is already considered well built. Besides, he has wide brows and a solid back, full of self confidence, his eyes deep with unfathomable knowledge. The power and influence that is befitting a ruler can indeed convince one to put down their lives for him.

He was just sitting casually but his imposing aura is enough to make one have the urge to rush forward and throw themselves at his feet.

After everyone congratulated Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan said happily, "So do you prefer me to address you as Grand Tutor or Commander General?"

Everyone roared in laughter.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a laugh, "I think Grand Tutor still sounds much better."

Xiao Pan shook his head and sighed, "Victorious but not proud. I'm afraid Grand Tutor is the only person like this in Great Qin. Grand Tutor's battle have solidified Great Qin's foundation to unify the world and have helped me regained my reputation greatly. Now no one will dare to talk behind my back and said that I've been treating Grand Tutor too well."

Lord Changping smiled, “Lu Buwei has long been making a fuss over his Highness’s treatment of Han Chuang but his Highness just replied that ‘there’s no such thing’ and it’s enough to hold off Lu Buwei’s arguments. If anyone asks about it in future, Shaolong can use the same famous words as an answer.”

A warm feeling welled up in Xiang Shaolong’s heart.

Xiao Pan said, “This is just a small matter. Even if Han Chuang is released, how capable is he of doing anything substantial. This goes to show that Grand Tutor is not a heartless person like that Lu Buwei. But if you do manage to capture Li Mu in future, Grand Tutor must never release him.”

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of the possibility that he will meet the most respected and most fearsome Li Mu on the battlefield, his heart sank.

Wang Ling understands his feelings and said with a smile, “But for now such a situation will not arise. Right now Li Mu is moving his troops to attack Qi. Not only has he fought back the Qi troops who were trying to make use of the opportunity to take over the Zhao people’s land, he has also taken down Rao’an which belongs to Qi which gave his King some relief. Li Mu is indeed formidable. As long as this person remains, he will become our greatest obstacle in moving easy.”

Li Si said, “This time Shaolong has executed his prowess. Even is Sun Wu is resurrected, he won’t be able to win this battle as swiftly

and beautifully.”

After Xiang Shaolong expressed some humility, he had a thought and said, “Now that your Highness’s power and influence has grown so greatly, it’s time to summon Wang Jian back.”

Lord Changping said, “That is indeed his Highness’s intention, that’s why he is planning to send the two brothers Meng Wu and Meng Tian to Wei for war. Once they have the experience, they can take over Wang Jian. But if we act rashly on this matter, this important position which will hold great power over the border soldiers may end up in the hands of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai’s men.”

Xiao Pan lowered his voice, “Meng Ao is very seriously ill now. When I visited him some days ago, he was full of praise for Grand Tutor so it seems that he is indeed sorry.”

Xiang Shaolong told them about how Meng Ao had asked him to take care of the Meng brothers.

Xiao Pan got excited, “Once the Dowager returns, I want to appoint Grand Tutor as Marquis. No matter what, Grand Tutor’s position cannot be any lower than Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that there are others around and it’s inconvenient to raise his objections so he just accepted without much enthusiasm.

In another three years Xiao Pan will be crowned as King. His only

hope is that before that day arrives, if he need not to face Li Mu on the battlefield, this is enough to thank the Heavens.

Xiang Shaolong saw that there's another 6 hours before the state feast begins and after he managed to extricate himself, he went back to the Wu residence.

His welcoming neighbors filled the outside of the Wu residence and as soon as he stepped through the main door, firecrackers were lighted in the square and the whole atmosphere was celebratory.

Wu Yingyuan lead the family out personally to welcome him. He rushed forward to grab Xiang Shaolong's hands and said with emotion, "Our Wu family has finally come out with a famous general whose reputation will shake the earth, I'm so happy that I don't know what to say."

Xiang Bao'er covered his ears and ran into his arms.

After that Wu Tingfang and the Tian sisters also rushed towards him with tears and smiles.

Xiang Shaolong pacified them and hugging his wives and beloved son, went into the house. They first paid respects to the Wu family ancestors, showered and changed before going back to the main hall again to receive the congratulatory wishes from their clansmen.

Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, Shan Lan, Lu Dan'er and the rest all

changed into exquisite gowns to come out and play hosts to friends and family.

Teng Yi, Huan, Zhao Da and the rest have all returned and this added to the atmosphere of joy in the air.

Zhou Liang made great contributions thanks to the Eagle King so now his status in the Wu family is vastly different. The Eagle King also became the main focus of attention, even more than Xiang Shaolong as the children all gathered around it, pointing and expressing their admiration.

Wu Tingfang clung herself to Xiang Shaolong and behaved coquettishly. Although this pretty wife of his is more than 20 years old, but her looks and behavior is still as lively as when they just met when she was a young girl.

Xiang Shaolong found a chance to discuss with Teng Yi, “I plan to suggest to his Highness that I want to resign from the position of Cavalry Commander, so 2nd Brother will have to take care of them in future.”

Teng Yi replied with a laugh, “Third Brother should know very well that I am not interested in a career at all. In my opinion, why don’t we let Xiao Jun take over, with Wu Guo and Zhao Da supporting him. We can try to promote two more people at the same time.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Then make it Zhou Liang and Wu Yan! The other guards can be rearranged to join the cavalry, they need

not follow us back to the farm and live a boring life.”

Teng Yi nodded his head in agreement and thus the matter was settled.

By this time Wu Yingyuan had walked over and pulled both of them aside to say, “I just came back from the borders last month. Your sworn brother Wang Jian is indeed a brave general with both wits and courage that even the Xiongnus are not his match at all.”

He paused and added, “The Xiongnus have always been running roughshod at the northern borders. Their men, women, old and young are all good at horse riding and archery, vicious and brave. They come and go like the wind and can take hardship. How would they to expect that they’ll first be defeated by Li Mu and after that suffer another defeat under your fourth brother. Wu Zhuo is now building a mountainous city around Lake Baikal and the nearby tribes who had often suffered under the Xiongnus have now come forward to seek protection. It’s best if we can send a thousand of our family warriors over to strengthen our hold, then we can have more confidence to expand.”

Xiang and Teng kept on nodding their agreement and both looked extremely eager about the idea.

Only when one is in his own country and home can one really feel the freedom and happiness.

That night at the Palace, Xiao Pan hosted the celebratory feast and all the citizens in the city were given food and wine.

To Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong's victory in battle felt like his own victory in battle so he was especially satisfied and happy.

Naturally Xiang Shaolong became the focus of the feast as wine cups keep getting topped up. Halfway through the feast he was already so dead drunk that he didn't even know how he managed to leave the place. When he woke up the next day, he realized he was sleeping on the future Emperor Qin's dragon bed. It turned out it was Xiao Pan who insisted on giving him such treatment.

Ji Yanran and the rest all stayed in the Palace as well, waiting for him to wake up.

When Xiao Pan returned, he had lunch with Xiang Shaolong at the rest and it feels like a close family enjoying bonding time together.

Xiang Shaolong brought up the suggestion of letting Jing Jun become the Cavalry Commander with Wu Guo, Zhou Liang and Zhao Da as the Deputy Commander and Xiao Pan agreed immediately, saying with a smile, "It's just a mere Cavalry Commander position, and really should not be under Commander General's portfolio as well."

Xiang Shaolong again took the chance to bring up the issue of him returning to the farm to spend some relaxing time. Although Xiao Pan was not very willing, he still agreed.

After the meal, Xiang Shaolong went back to the Wu residence

with his wives and son and after a nap, woke up feeling refreshed.

Ji Yanran with his pretty wives and the Tian sisters were sitting on the mat chatting away, talking about Xiang Bao'er's funny antics. The happy atmosphere was enough to melt his heart, giving him a sense of warmth and sweetness.

Compared to the cruelty of war, this is indeed a loving heaven.

The ladies saw that he has woken up and hurriedly helped him up.

Ji Yanran whispered quietly in his ears, "Housekeeper Tu asked to meet you at the usual place at dusk and Lord Changping have booked a courtyard at Drunken Wind Loft tonight and invited you to the feast. Hai! Doesn't Lord Changping know that after your return, you've yet to have time to stay at home and accompany your wives and children?"

Wu Tingfang, who was at the side, pouted, "If you don't come back tonight, Fang'er will not go up the bed to sleep."

Xiang Shaolong almost had to make a vow that he will come back early before the two ladies were happy again.

A long parting is even more meaningful than a new marriage so when the Tian sisters helped him bath, Xiang Shaolong pulled Wu Tingfang and the rest all into the bath and consoled his wives and

concubines with action.

He played with Xiang Bao'er for a little before leaving 'incognito' to meet Tu Xian.

After they met at the secret place, Tu Xian made some small talk before going into the main topic, "Shaolong has managed to show off your prowess and defeated the coalition army and at the same time disrupted Lu Buwei's plans. Now that Meng Ao is seriously ill, he'll have no choice but to change his tactics. Now not only is he in cahoots with Du Bi and the rest, he's also trying to pull Lao Ai to his side and still trying to struggle against imminent death."

He paused and added, "That old thief has totally lost faith with his Highness, knowing that the day his Highness is crowned King will be the day of his defeat so he'll definitely make a final fight before that day and rebel. We must be on the alert against this."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Now that his Highness's power is growing day by day, Lao Ai won't believe him so easily. What tricks can that Lu thief still be up to?"

Tu Xian sighed, "If there are benefits, there will be collaborations and the problem is that Lao Ai wants to rebel. You must know that Lao Ai is after all an evil and unrepentant hooligan, a scoundrel at heart. Although he has Zhu Ji's favor but in the eyes of the Qins, he's just a lucky servant who manages to jump ranks and don the outfit of a eunuch official. Other than Lu Buwei, who has an ulterior motive, who else would be willing to support him. Under such circumstances, it's not impossible that the two of them will once again collude with each other. Of course their relationship

will not last and I think the day that the rebellion is successful will be the day they fall apart.”

Xiang Shaolong asked worriedly, “Will Zhu Ji really just sit and watch while Lao Ai topple her own son?”

Tu Xian signed, “Zhu Ji has already sunken in too deeply, besides Lao Ai is especially skilful in handling women. And Zhu Ji’s craving for a moment of fun has accidentally resulted in Lao Ai’s growth to power, enough for him to form his own cohort. After Shaolong went to war, Lao Ai interfered in all matters big and small in his capacity as leader of the court officials, to the extent of addressing himself as ‘Foster Father’ so one can see his true intentions.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “Foster Father? To think that he could think of that. First it was Lu Buwei, then it’s Lao Ai. Don’t they ever think that by riding on the head of the ruler, they might attract death?”

Tu Xian signed, “How many people can be like Shaolong who will retreat once mission is accomplished and avoiding the outcome of being a ‘dead rabbit or cooked dog’*. I heard from Mister Tao that the day His Highness is crowned King will be the day all of you will retire to the north. I wonder if you’d be willing to let my clan follow behind you as well?”

* dead rabbit or cooked dog – a Chinese idiom referring to the King of Yue during the Warring States Period. King of Yue is a person whom one can only share hardship with, but never fortune and glory. When he was fighting against Wu, he was very good with his men and formed deep friendship but once they won the

war, his attitude changed and those who helped him risk being put to death for minor matters.

Xiang Shaolong replied solemnly, “To be able to ride side by side with you on the great plains of the north would be something that I will absolutely wish for.”

Tu Xian was so touched that he reached out and grabbed his hands, unable to speak at the moment.

Xiang Shaolong asked about Lu Buwei’s situation and Tu Xian replied, “I almost forgot one thing. Two swordsmen from the state of Qi came recently, they are both disciples of Jixia Academy’s Sword Sage, Cao Qiudao. One of them is called Ren Qianli and the other is Fang Yong. They seldom show themselves and are very secretive. If my guess is correct, they must be skilled fighters sent to Xianyang by Tian Dan under Lu Buwei’s request in case there is a need to assassinate Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, “If that is the case, why would they let Brother Tu find out about their identities?”

Tu Xian chortled, “That’s because I have a lot of spies and links, and they overheard the private conversation between them and Xu Shang, and with the facts I was able to guess that Tian Dan is behind this. Now the person Lu and Tian hates most is Shaolong so even if benefits is not a consideration in killing Shaolong, it will at least give them a sense of joy in getting rid of you.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “You think there’re not enough people

who want me dead? Oh right, is that Xu Shang fighting with Han Jie over Yang Yu? Isn't that almost like their version of a continuation of Lu's fight over Meimei?"

Tu Xian gave a cold snort, "What's there to fight over, Lu Buwei have already given strict orders to Xu Shang not to fight with Han Jie, that's how I found out that Lu Buwei intends to collude with Lao Ai. Humph! Ever since that lad became an official, he's getting more and more conceited. Any verbal disagreements and he'll start hitting proper and because he has the backing of Lao Ai, even his Highness can't do anything to him. But now Han Jie have lost interest in Yang Yu because a new beauty, who is even prettier than Dan Meimei have arrived at Drunken Wind Loft. This lady can indeed evoke pity from anyone who sees her and she has insisted that she will only sell her craft but not her body so which man would not want to have a taste of her."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, "There's such a thing as selling only the craft but not the body? Who can protect her?"

Tu Xiang replied, "Just based on her name Feng Fei from 'Dainty Swallow' alone is enough to ensure her chastity. But she came at a very coincidental time, just three days before Shaolong came back to Xianyang. Now she's already creating a big stir amongst the officials and royalty and everyone is making a beeline for Drunken Wind Loft now."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Is Brother Tu hinting that she's here to deal with me?"

Tu Xian sighed, "Feng Fei is the best of the three famed

courtesans and very respected amongst the royalty in the various states. She used to be a Princess from Song but for some reason ended up as a courtesan. Rightfully speaking, no one should be able to make her do anything but it doesn't hurt to be on the alert so Shaolong better be careful. Now Shaolong is the man most wanted dead among the 6 states."

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "The problem is I'll be going to Drunken Wind Loft tonight and hopefully my bunch of friends have not picked her to accompany me."

Tu Xian said with a smile, "If she's willing to drink with you, then Shaolong should be even more careful because ever since she arrived in Xianyang, she has not agreed to drink with anyone yet."

Xiang Shaolong laughed ironically before he sighed, "Beauties just have that kind of mesmerizing power. We men obviously know that they are up to no good but no matter what, we'll always be able to find some good points about them and forget that maybe behind their exterior beauty is an evil heart."

Tu Xian said with a smile, "You'll understand once you see Feng Fei. She definitely is a stunner who possesses both interior and exterior beauty as well as intelligence. Maybe because of the different stands, she will become a manipulative enemy. Luckily Shaolong has always been able to resist beauties so no matter what ulterior motive Feng Fei has, she will not be able to execute them."

After chatting a little longer, the both of them parted.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly have the urge to visit the critically ill Meng Ao but because he had to attend Lord Changping's banquet, he had no choice but to leave this visit until the next day.

Book 20 Chapter 8 – Dainty Beauty

When Xiang Shaolong and his 18 guards arrived at Drunken Wind Loft, Wu Fu came out personally to welcome him and after inviting him into the side hall and asking the servants to leave, he knelt down and kow tow.

Xiang Shaolong is long used to his flunky ways so he stood proudly and asked with exasperation, “Please dispense with ceremony, what are you up to this time?”

Wu Fu stood up in shock and said respectfully, “I wouldn’t dare to use trickery in front of Commander General. This time I have important news to report to you.”

Xiang Shaolong sat down and said, “Sit down and talk!”

Wu Fu sat down and after looking left and right, as if afraid there’s someone in the side halls, he lowered his voice and said, “Lu Buwei is plotting to kill you and Wang Jian.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Of course he’s thinking about it, but whether he succeeds or not is another matter.”

Wu Fu said tactfully, “It was only after a long period of eavesdropping that I managed to string together all the bits of information and found out about their nefarious plot!”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the metal pipes he used to

eavesdrop and asked doubtfully, “Why is Lu Buwei still coming here since Dan Meimei has already become the Empress of Wei?”

Wu Fu said, “That’s what you are unaware of. Half a year ago I spent a fortune in Chu to buy over a great beauty from Yue called Bai Yaya and Lu Buwei is very much enchanted with her so he comes to Drunken Wind Loft regularly. Now Yaya has taken over Meimei’s position to become the head of the four beauties. Hai! Meimei’s departure almost cost me my life, but of course! I would never dare to blame Master Xiang, I do deserve the punishment.”

Xiang Shaolong said with exasperation, “Stop beating around the bush, come straight to the point!”

Wu fu lowered his voice and came closer, “First they are going to deal with General Wang. Because General Wang is battling at the Zhao border, there are many areas which he will need to rely on the support of Du Bi and Cheng Qiao and Lu Buwei is going to make use of Du Bi to sabotage General Wang when he is fighting against Li Mu. The outcome should be expected.”

As Xiang Shaolong is not aware of the situation over that side and so have never expected such a possibility, he paled and asked, “Isn’t Li Mu fighting against the Qi?”

Wu Fu commented, “That could be an evil plan to lure General Wang deeper into the Zhao border!”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, “Why didn’t you reveal such an important piece of news earlier, even if I’m not in Xianyang, you

can always tell Lord Changping!”

Wu Fu said apologetically, “Well, I only heard bits and pieces of information so I can’t be very sure. Until the day before, Yang Yu told me that Xu Shang was boasting to her that you are going to be very short-lived that my thoughts start to clear up. Xu Shang was saying that your victory in battle this time have planted the seed to your demise in future. Yang Yu was puzzled and asked him further but he only said that no matter how formidable you are, you will not be able to win Li Mu, and he did not elaborate further. That’s why I thought that only if they cause the death of Wang Chi, will you need to meet Li Mu on the battlefield in such a short period of time, that’s why...”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly stood up, “Go and tell Lord Changping that I will be there late.”

He then left hurriedly and went to the Palace to seek an audience with Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was having fun playing chess with his beloved concubine Wang Meixiu when he saw him arriving in such haste and knew that something urgent has happened. He immediately summoned to meet him in the inner hall.

After Xiang Shaolong expressed Wu Fu’s deduction, Xiao Pan’s expression changed, “This is indeed an extremely vicious plan. It’s obvious that as long as Cheng Qiao is not eliminated, my position will always be shaky.”

Xiao Pan then summoned his guard and gave instructions for him to send out a messenger with a swift horse to Shangchuan and warn Wang Chi to be on his alert.

After this matter is settled, the future Emperor Qin said seriously, “If anything untoward happens to Great General Wang, we’ll deal with Cheng Qiao and Du Bi immediately and get rid of these thorns in my flesh. By that time I’ll want to see how Lu Buwei ends up.”

He then smiled and said quietly, “The Crown Princess is expecting!”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong suddenly realize that he has indeed grown up, and congratulated him from the bottom of his heart.

Xiao Pan said worriedly, “Given the opportunity that Lu Buwei and the Dowager are both not in Xianyang, it’s best to give the child a good name first so they won’t have the chance to change it. What suggestion does Tutor have?”

Xiang Shaolong blurted out, “Then it must be Fu Su.”

Xiao Pan looked at him in shock for a few moments and just when Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing himself, this future Emperor Qin nodded his head, “This is quite a unique name. But I’ll need a name for a girl as well, so no matter if it’s a boy or girl, there’s already a name.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief, “I only thought of a boy’s name, seems that this must be a baby boy so there’s no need to think of another girl’s name.”

Xiao Pan silently mumbled the name Fu Su a few times and said happily, “If it’s really a son, then let’s call him Fu Su!”

Xiang Shaolong felt a little awkward, knowing that he has influenced history with his own knowledge of history. He took the opportunity to take his leave and by the time he rushed to Drunken Wind Loft, he’s already more than an hour late.

Besides Lord Changping and his brother, Li Si, Huan Qi, Jing Jun, Wang Ling, Wu Guo, Zhou Liang etc, he did not expect to see Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Ying Ao and Ying Lou as well and obviously these people have leaned towards Xiao Pan’s political faction. Teng Yi came only for a while because he wanted to spend time with his wife and child.

Yang Yu, Gui Yan and Bai Lei were all there with the prettier ladies of Drunken Wind Loft, providing one to one service, with each lady attending to a person and the atmosphere was lively.

Xiang Shaolong was given the seat at the head of the table and the Yue beauty Bai Yaya have been waiting a long time for him to arrive. This lady was dressed in Chu garb, about 18 years old and indeed very pretty, comparable to Dan Meimei. Not only is she refined but most enchantingly, she is very gentle, her pretty eyes filled with intense feelings. Her voice is sweet and soft and indeed she is a rare treasure. No wonder Wu Fu can use her to handle Lu Buwei, who had suffered the loss of Dan Meimei.

But when he thought of how ultimately, her fate may end up to become Lu Buwei's concubine, he felt sad.

Before Xiang Shaolong could even warm his seat, he was made to drink 3 cups of wine as punishment and raised his arms in surrender, "If I go on drinking, I'm afraid I'll have to be carried out immediately. Everyone, please have mercy on me and let me off this time!"

Wang Wan laughed, "Last night Lord Xiang only collapsed after drinking more than 20 cups, so tonight you must at least drink another 7 cups before we forgive you for coming late."

Just as they were arguing, Bai Yaya smiled delicately and said, "Then let Yaya drink a few cups of punishment wine in Great General's place."

Everyone shouted their agreement.

Cai Ze said with a smile, "But this punishment wine must first go into Great General's mouth first before our Yaya can drink on his behalf.

There was another uproar of agreement.

Bai Yaya whined as she fell into Xiang Shaolong's arms, her pretty eyes half-closed and her sweet face blushing, like a little bird leaning towards him.

Although Xiang Shaolong has long gotten used to such lascivious styles in this Warring States Period but because this youthful beauty is so hot and fresh, he felt excited and making use of his slightly intoxicated stage and the cheers of everyone, he enjoyed her fragrant lips thoroughly.

Only then did they let him off.

Ying Ao said with a smile, “I heard that after Pang Nuan lost in the war, the other states in the coalition army all berated him for being careless and stretching himself too far and lost this great opportunity to defeat us Qins and now his reputation is in tatters. Seems that it will be quite impossible for them to come together again.”

Ying Lou added, “After the defeat, everyone is trying to push the blame to others. At the battle of Zuicheng this time, the ones who left the earliest were the Chus, so now they’ve become the target of blame for the others and everyone is very unhappy. The five states will be on bad terms for quite some time.”

Li Si clapped his hands, “Tonight we will only speak of enjoyment and not business. The Dainty Swallow Dance which was prepared for Shaolong should be able to start now!”

Lord Changping made an eye signal at Wu Fu, who was seated at the end of the table and the latter hurriedly left to make arrangements.

Jing Jun said with a laugh, “Just by seeing how our Lord Minister of Justice is even more nervous than Third Brother, we know how attractive Feng Fei can be!”

Everyone expressed their agreement and Li Si, who seldom steps into such places of entertainment, became extremely embarrassed.

Xiang Shaolong was totally relaxed as he enjoyed the feeling of camaraderie among them.

Bai Yaya leaned closer and whispered in his ears, “Master Xiang did not harbor grudges and helped Miss Meimei become her Queen of Wei, all the sisters in Drunken Wind Loft are extremely grateful.”

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice to ask, “So won’t whole city learn of this matter.”

Bai Yaya said with a smile, “This is called good news travel far! Now Master Xiang just have to crook your fingers and everyone will come running to help Master Xiang spend the night!”

Of course Xiang Shaolong did not believe her because at least Guiyan alone hates him to the core.

Bai Yaya looked at him coquettishly and asked shyly, “I wonder if Yaya would be able to receive Master Xiang’s attention?”

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was entirely bewitching and the

fatal point is that she is so graceful that he can't help but feel a surge of lust and said quietly, "Not tonight, let me see when!" Bai Yaya breathed out softly into his ear as she nibbled his lobes and said, "Daytime is fine as well, then Master Xiang's wives won't find out."

Xiang Shaolong thought of his dedicated wives at home and immediately awoke from the haze. He was about to tactfully reject her when Wu Fu came in with a look of helplessness, attracting everyone's attention.

Lord Changping knows that something has gone wrong and asked, "Is the beauty blaming us for being late?"

Wu Fu replied bitterly, "Seems like that's the case. Miss Fei have returned to her quarters to sleep and no matter what good words I say, it's of no use."

Strangely not only is everyone not feeling that she's throwing airs, but they think that what she has done is very reasonable indeed.

Lord Changwen smiled, "Shaolong's the one who caused all this trouble and offended our dainty beauty. I suggest that Shaolong should go apologize and pacify her back here."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "What?"

For some reason Li Si was especially excited and he actually

agreed, “The dainty beauty will be going to Wei the day after, Shaolong you better go quick and think of a way.”

Huan Qi asked in surprise, “Are you people actually here to congratulate Great General Xiang or to see the dainty beauty?”

Lord Changping and the rest all roared out in laughter. The situation was chaotic but very interested as well.

Xiang Shaolong’s curiosity was piqued and he reluctantly stood up and sighed, “I will try my best but if I get thrown back here, all of you must not blame me.”

Amidst thunderous applause, Xiang Shaolong followed Wu Fu out but he had only taken a few steps when Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Lord Wenchang ran out after him, saying that they want to see what happens from the door.

Xiang Shaolong was influenced by the playful atmosphere and gathered up the valor he had when he was fighting and creating trouble during the 21st century and led the three of them, with Wu Fu leading the way, towards the buildings at the back.

In a quiet corner at the back yard of Drunken Wind Loft, next to the pond there was a small wooden cottage, looking very antique and exquisite with the fragrance of flowers surrounding it.

Wu Fu said, “That’s where Feng Fei lives. Her personal maid is very fierce, she was the one who kept me out earlier.”

Jing Jun was taken aback, “Doesn’t she know you’re the boss? How dare she be so rude to you.”

Wu Fu replied, “She’s specially invited by the Crown Princess to perform at the Dowager’s birthday feast, would I dare to offend them?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand what’s happening and he was slightly less worried. He gave a dry cough and said, “Watch me!”

He had just taken a step when Lord Wenchang pulled him back with a reminder, “I heard that Feng Fei is as light as a swallow, and she is quite skilled so Great General better not let her kick you into the pond.”

The three of them laughed over his misfortune at the same time, their attitude extremely irritating.

Xiang Shaolong cursed silently, swept Lord Wenchang aside and walked towards the cottage with his chest puffed up.

The wooden door opened easily as he pushed but the lower level of the cottage was quiet with no one around. Xiang Shaolong took a look around and saw the stairs leading up to the second level so he took a deep breath to steady his nerves before going up the stairs.

The wooden steps creaked under his feet and the sound can indeed make one nervous.

A clear, crisp voice came from above, “Who’s that?”

Xiang Shaolong did not answer deliberately and when he reached the second level, a handsome looking young boy lifted the curtain to the room and walked right into him.

Both of them were equally shocked.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect himself to knock into a pretty boy instead of a pretty maid, while the other party did not expect a strange man to find his way upstairs.

Xiang Shaolong took a quick glance inside but because the door curtains were dense and heavy, naturally he could not see anything at all.

The thought of it is quite funny.

In the short span of two years, he had met with three famed courtesans and at least one of them tried to take his life. And then they left.

The Spring-Autumn Warring States period is indeed a unique, splendid and very uninhibited era. Even though everyone is constantly at war but amidst the partings and reunions, the Qi people can go to Wei, the Wei people can enter Qin, the Yan people

comes down south while the Chu people went up north, selling their skills in exchange for fame and fortune or traveling and expounding their studies and theories. Everyone is fighting for a chance to shine, like thousands of flowers blooming at the same time.

A world famous courtesan like Feng Fei has superseded the fights amongst the states. No matter where she goes, she is well respected and can throw tantrums whenever she likes, put on airs whenever she likes. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, it'll really be very difficult to imagine.

The Three Famed Courtesans came one after another to Xianyang and this goes to show that Xianyang has become one of the center of the arts in the world and that's what attracted them here because of various reasons.

Just as he was pondering, the handsome young boy shouted angrily, "Who are you, how dare you barge into a lady's private chambers?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that 'he' is guarding outside the door with such hostility so he replied with a slight smile, "I am Xiang Shaolong and I've come especially to seek forgiveness with Miss Feng."

There was no response from inside at all.

Xiang Shaolong had expected her to put on airs so he was not embarrassed. He took two steps towards the pretty boy and was

almost face to face with her.

The pretty boy's nose and forehead creased at the same time, as if afraid that Xiang Shaolong would have body odor but he did not scold him at all, for example, scolding him for being rude. The pretty face looks almost displeased but not yet, and is extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong's heart lurched and he said quietly, "If young lady would make way, I'll go in to see Miss Feng but if young lady disallows, I have no choice but to leave immediately."

He deliberately lifted his voice so that Feng Fei who is inside can hear everything clearly.

The pretty kid is obviously not Xiang Shaolong's match and was totally at a loss, not knowing how to deal with him.

A gentle, sweet lady's voice rang out from within the room, "Little Sister, please let Lord Xiang come in for a talk!"

The pretty kid called out in acknowledgement and lowered her head as she stood aside, giving him access to the room.

Xiang Shaolong gave a smile in reply before stepping over the ledge and lifting the curtains into the room.

He did not expect the hall inside to be even wider and bigger than the outer hall. There were windows on three sides and on the left,

a bamboo curtain segregated the living quarters where the bed is placed.

Feng Fei was seated on the floor, leaning on a soft pillow with a long table in front of her with a five-stringed zither on it. She looked as if she's elegant, rapturous and warmly comfortable.

The leader of the Three Famed Courtesans lifted her melon-seed shaped face and looked towards him, her jewel like bright eyes matched with her fair and pinkish skin exuding an attractive aura which seems to come from within her made Xiang Shaolong's eyes brighten.

But what is most attractive about her is her air of heartrending gracefulness, which anyone would take pity on upon seeing her. This made him think of Li Yanyan who is far away within the Chu borders.

Any man who shows concern and protection of ladies will not bear to hurt her.

Just by sitting there casually, she has already displayed the most attractive and alluring pose a woman can make to perfection. Her dainty and striking body makes one have the urge to press her down with one's body, no wonder even Tu Xian is extremely interested in her as well.

Her ability to enchant men is indeed better than Shi Sufang and Lan Gongnuan.

Just as the two of them were measuring up each other, the little girl outside who was disguised as a boy called out, “Missy! Do you want tea or wine?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, “It’s all right, I’m here especially to apologize to Miss and wouldn’t dare to disturb your tranquility.”

Feng Fei guffawed, “Tranquility? Living in a mundane world, how can there be tranquility? Lord Xiang, please take a seat. Lass, prepare tea for our guest.”

When Xiang Shaolong sat down, he suppressed the urge to give her the once over and just looked straight ahead. Just as he was about to speak, Feng Fei asked gently, “It’s not like Lord Xiang’s style to come and apologize, I wonder if you were coerced or did you come willingly?”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “It’s the first time I met Miss, but why do you seem so knowledgeable about me?”

Feng Fei smiled and replied slowly, “Xiang Shaolong is the most talked about person amongst the powerful circles in all six states, I’ve heard so many things about you. Besides, before I came to Qin I’ve heard of Lady Meimei of Wei speak of you, so of course I should have an impression of you!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Miss Feng deliberately refused to perform this time, is it because.... Hai! Is it because...”

Feng Fei seemed very interested as she encouraged him, “Why are you hesitating? Just speak your mind.”

Xiang Shaolong said wryly, “I wanted to ask if this is a deliberate trick by Miss to make me come here to see you but I’m afraid my frankness will shock you, that’s why I was hesitating. You must find this a joke.”

Feng Fei let out a tinkling laughter, her mesmerizing eyes glanced at him as she lifted her slender left hand and lowered her head to look at the shiny and exquisite silver ring at her little finger, saying gently, “Lord Xiang’s guess is correct but I’m afraid you did not expect that Feng Fei is up to no good this time. This silver ring is made by a talented smith from Wei and can shoot out poisoned needles, injecting poisoned liquid into a person’s body. If it’s shot at the right position, the person shot will die very swiftly of poison.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “If that’s the case, why is Miss Feng telling me that?”

Feng Fei took off the ring nonchalantly and threw it down on the ground and said tenderly, “Because I’ve changed my mind! Until I came to Qin and saw Ying Zheng did I understand why all these talented people like Shang Yang, Gongsun Yan, Zhang Yi, Gan Mao, Lou Huan, Fan Wei, Cai Ze, Li Si, Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong were willing to work under the Qin royalty. Even though Zhao has Li Mu and Lian Po but they still lost battle after battle and Lord Xinling have to end up committing suicide by drinking poisoned wine. The Hans are idling in their own state, the Yans think too highly of themselves, the Qis are just all talk while the

Chus are engrossed in enjoyment. The 6 eastern states have lost their power so why should I become the bad guy in vain and end up losing my life as well?”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to say something so intellectual and shook his head and sighed, “Miss Feng is indeed a rare lady. But I still do not understand why Miss Feng is so frank. If you do not disclose this, no one would know about this matter.”

Feng Fei said happily, “You silly, because I’ve taken a liking to you! That’s why I’m reminding you. Now Lord Xiang is the person that all the eastern 6 states would like to kill the most. So you must not trust anyone, including those friends whom you have once helped in the past.”

Xiang Shaolong looked at her in shock, unable to speak for now.

Feng Fei covered her mouth and laughed, “Please do not misunderstand, taken a liking to you does not equal to giving you my heart. It’s just that I feel that you’re truly a hero who deserves your good reputation and it’ll be very difficult for me to forget you in future. That’s all.”

Xiang Shaolong immediately heaved a sigh of relief, yet at the same time felt a little dejected. This Feng Fei is even more unfathomable than Shi Sufang.

Feng Fei looked outside the window and said gently, “It’s late! Unless Lord Xiang wants me to accompany you to bed, otherwise I will have to go into dreamland and search for the beautiful dream

that I cannot find in real life. I'll be leaving Qin early tomorrow morning."

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to blurt out and ask her to stay so that he will not miss this opportunity that he may regret for the rest of his life but when he thought of his dutiful wives at home, he had no choice but to stand up and take his leave.

Li Si will have to be disappointed tonight.

He had just walked down the stairs when Jing Jun rushed in and said, "Meng Ao has passed away!"

Book 20 Chapter 9 – Delicate Trap

After Meng Ao's funeral, Jing Jun was officially promoted to become the Commander of the Cavalry. As he had married into the Lu family, all the important officials in the military gave their utmost support on Lord Lu's account.

Wu Guo, Zhao Da and Zhou Liang became his deputies so now the cavalry is now a unit totally under the Crown Prince's control, unlike the city troops who are under the control of the two factions headed by Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, fighting against each other.

Of course, if Lu and Lao works together, it'll be another matter altogether.

Because of Xiao Pan's acknowledgement of their abilities, the 18 Warriors became the leaders of his personal guards so their status are greatly raised too.

Huan Qi is still in charge of training the reinforcement troops while Meng Wu and Meng Tian will immediately lead troops to attack Wei once they have settled their father's funeral arrangements to take revenge against the Weis for joining the coalition army.

Basically, Qin is still using the same strategy of attacking the nearby states while maintaining good relations with the states further away, which is to pacify Chu, Qi and Yan and only lead troops against the other 3 states.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to take a break and went back to the farm with Teng Yi's family as well. He practices his swordplay, archery and riding skills daily, and will tour around the scenic places when idle, living a carefree life playing with his son.

Spring left and summer came. On this day he returned to the courtyard and received a letter that Qin Qing sent a messenger to deliver.

It turns out that this pretty lady have decided on a return date, and will come back to Xianyang early autumn. Although she did not mention a word about her feelings in the letter, but her fiery love can be felt without the use of words and from this it shows how refined this beauty is, which makes a boor like Xiang Shaolong love and respect her even more.

Tao Fang regularly brings news to the farm as well.

Lu Buwei returned to Xianyang, and after that went to Bashu again, something which no one can seem to understand.

Lao Ai and the Dowager Zhu Ji has returned to Xianyang. Lao Ai's attitude is even more conceited now, not even taking into regard Lord Changping, Wang Ling and the rest of the senior officials. He'll bring up Zhu Ji's name in every matter and Xiao Pan had no choice but to tolerate him bitterly.

Guan Zhongxie won a few battles in Han and was promoted to Great General, slowly taking over Meng Ao's position.

But of course his reputation and power is still far beneath.

Meng Wu and his brother had a few swift battles in Wei, taking down Zhaoge and their reputation increased, becoming the new stars of the next generation of generals.

The thing that Xiang Shaolong was most worried about is that Wang He has indeed fallen into a trap. He took the opportunity when Li Mu moved his troops to attack Qi to sent his men to attack the Zhaos. Xiang Shaolong can only hope that the messenger Xiao Pan sent out can give the warning to Wang He in time, otherwise he'll be sandwiched by enemies and his situation will be extremely dangerous.

Just as he was worrying about all these, bad news came at the end of May. Wang He was bitterly defeated by Li Mu and died in battle. Wang Bi and Yang Rui led the remaining defeated troops back to Shangchuan.

The thing that Xiang Shaolong most wanted to avoid has finally happened.

Lu Buwei's nefarious plot has once again succeeded.

And Xiang Shaolong's happy and carefree life will soon come to an end.

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the palace in Xianyang on swift horses, he could feel a cloud of gloom over the place.

Ever since Lord Xinling led the coalition army outside Handan 16 years ago and greatly defeated the Qin army, the Qins have never experienced a situation whereby a great general with the status of Wang He would actually die in battle. The enormity of the setback this time really cannot be calculated.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived at the library, Wang Ling, Li Si, Lord Changping, Lao Ai, Wang Guan, Cai Ze and the other senior officials were already outside the door waiting for Xiao Pan to summon them.

Wang Ling's eyes were red and he looked as if he has aged in years. For the first time Xiang Shaolong could clearly feel that he is getting on in age, something that he has never felt before in the past and this made him very uncomfortable.

He came towards Xiang Shaolong and said quietly, "His Highness refused to see us, he only said to wait until you come. I think you'd better go in and see him first before summoning us in!"

Lao Ai was obviously eavesdropping at the side and said in pique, "This is the time where everyone should have a good discussion. How can his Highness lock himself up, let me go in together with Shaolong."

A look of ire was seen on everyone's face.

Xiang Shaolong patted Lao Ai and said somberly, "Let me go in first and find out what's happening on everyone's behalf! His

Highness is feeling exactly what we are feeling right now, so everyone should sympathize.”

No matter how imperious Lao Ai is, he will not dare to offend Xiang Shaolong for now so he gave up the idea and said, “We will wait here then! But the Dowager should be here soon as well.”

Xiang Shaolong was disgusted to hear him bringing out Zhu Ji’s name in less than a few sentences and went into the library.

Xiao Pan was looking out the window with his back to the door, not moving at all.

Before Xiang Shaolong could speak, Xiao Pan said calmly, “Our men got there a step too late, and the fiend’s nefarious plan succeeded.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect that not only is Xiao Pan not showing any sign of sadness at all, he is even calmer than normal and was struck speechless at that moment.

Xiao Pan turned around and said with a slight smile, “I’ve just given orders for Cheng Qiao and Du Bi to lead an army and attack immediately. You can tell them later when you go out that I am suddenly taken ill because of my distraught over Wang Chi’s death. That Lao Ai will certainly send Mao Jiao here on pretense of treating my illness to check if it’s true. We can then make use of Mao Jiao’s mouth to trick Lao Ai.”

Xiang Shaolong asked in shock, “Is Lu Buwei and Lao Ai really collaborating?”

This is something that has never been mentioned in history books!

Xiao Pan said with a frosty smile, “The Dowager wants me to appoint Lao Ai as the Marquis of Changxin, to be on the same status as Lu Buwei and Lu Buwei did not raise objections at all. So what do you think has happened?”

He paused and added, “Time and again I’ve wanted to summon Wang Jian back but Lu Buwei and Lao Ai joined forces to stop me. Without the Dowager’s permission, there’s nothing that I, as the ruler, is allowed to do. Now our troops are all tied up fighting in the other 3 states. Other than the three main armies in Xianyang, we’re only left with the reinforcement troops and the total manpower is only about 120,000 men, totally powerless to mount a military expedition against Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. So I can only feign illness to lure them here to attack and let Teacher take care of them. Other than this, there’s really no other way.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “Your Highness have indeed grown up.”

Xiao Pan looked heavenward and sighed, “Ever since Mother was killed, circumstances forced me to do all these. There will be no mercy or reason to speak of.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed together with him and left the library. When everyone started surrounding him, Xiang Shaolong

exclaimed, “His Highness has taken ill!”

Xiao Pan’s ‘illness’ lasted three whole months and the morning court sessions was handled by Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong and Huan Qi stepped up on the conscription efforts and increased the numbers of the reinforcement troops to 50,000 men and spent their days training the soldiers outside the city. They also imagined the route that Cheng Qiao would take and strengthened the defenses and communication along the route.

By the time the snow melted, news have arrived that once Cheng Qiao heard that his ‘elder brother’ was taken seriously ill, not only did he disobey orders to attack Shangtang but tried to strike a deal with the Zhaos, asking Du Bi to gather 150,000 men to quietly avoid the cities along the way and go straight at Xianyang.

Cheng Qiao’s rebel troops took the boats and arrived at the north of Xianyang first before sneaking their way to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong has been keeping a close watch on their activities and transferred 20,000 cavalry in the night, together with 50,000 reinforcement troops and set up a trap at an ideal, prearranged location for Cheng Qiao’s army.

On top of that he let out fake information that Xianyang’s troops have gone to Zuicheng for military practice.

Therefore when news of Cheng Qiao’s army approaching

emerged, the whole of Xianyang was alarmed.

At this time Xiao Pan really needs to lie down in bed and only a few trusted aides like Lord Changping, Li Si etc knows what is truly happening.

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji were obviously at a loss. This obviously means that they are not aware that Cheng Qiao and Du Bi will raise an army and rebel openly.

Lu Buwei is still hiding at Bashu, so that others will not know what he is up to but no matter what, it won't be anything good.

The chaos in Xianyang will naturally be relayed to Cheng Qiao and Du Bi by spies so that it will make them belittle their opponents and grow careless.

It's difficult to blame them, who would have guessed that the future Emperor Qin would know 4 months ago that they will rebel?

Dealing with a veteran general like Du Bi, it's impossible to set up an ambush anywhere. Because he'll certainly have vanguards to ensure that the roads ahead are safe before the main military force will follow behind.

But Xiang Shaolong also has his own brilliant strategy.

He split his army into half, with Huan Qi and Jing Jun leading

20,000 men and hiding at a secret location outside Xianyang city.

He and Teng Yi will lead the remaining 50,000 elite troops and hide somewhere far away in a dense forest, away from the route that Cheng Qiao's army will take and quietly wait for their prey to arrive.

The weather is good this day. Cheng Qiao's vanguards arrived about 100 miles north of Xianyang city and because they heard news that the defending troops won't be leaving the gates to meet the enemy but will only try to defend the city to their deaths, Cheng Qiao and Du Bi did not especially fortify their defenses.

At this point in time Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were amongst some bushes about 5 miles away at the top of the hill, looking at the enemy troops snaking through the valleys magnificently.

Teng Yi said with a laugh, "If Lu Buwei knows that Cheng Qiao is now rallying his forces to attack under the excuse of 'Eliminating Lu and Lao to save his Imperial Brother', he'll definitely be so incensed that he'll vomit blood and die."

Xiang Shaolong took a careful look at the magnificent and tidy forces with the brightly polished armor and banners fluttering in the wind. He shook his head and said, "I think Lu Buwei has already guessed that Cheng Qiao is immature. That's why he is deliberately making use of Cheng Qiao's hands to eliminate his Highness and us, and to get rid of Lao Ai and the Dowager. Then he can summon the two big armies led by Guan Zhongxie and the Meng brothers and get rid of Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. By then he can take the throne for himself."

Teng Yi guffawed, “Third Brother really knows this conniving thief well but when it comes to trickery, other than Third Brother, no one else is his match.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “But this time it’s more accurate to say that Lu Buwei is not his Highness’s match.”

Teng Yi sighed, “He’s finally grown up.”

At this time Zhou Liang came with Eagle King to report that the enemy’s backup force is finally passing by.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the time has come and on his command, all the riders moved out and making use of the cover of the dense forest, flowed closely on the tail of the enemy troops.

Their plan is very precise. When the enemy is resting and starting to build the fire to cook, this will be the time for them to surround them.

Cheng Qiao’s main force indeed was not worried about the enemy attacking and actually set up camp at a hill where the official road to Xianyang goes past. On both sides, there were tall and dense trees and the tents of 50,000 men filled up the entire hill.

Before they have a chance to place a scout at the tallest point, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi’s 50,000 elite troops have already

arrived silently through the forest.

Xiang Shaolong is after all someone who has undergone strict military training and knows that in such a situation, there is no place for mercy at all. He hardened his heart and gave orders to eliminate all enemies and while there's still a little light from the setting sun, thoroughly surrounded the enemy's 50,000 men and waited for the chance to attack.

As the eastern sky started to turn bright, the enemy soldiers started to wake up and move around. They were talking and joking loudly as they prepared to cook breakfast.

Xiang Shaolong gave the command and the drums started beating as 50,000 elite cavalry charged out of the dense forest and launched a full force attack.

This has turned into a massacre where the enemy had no chance to retaliate at all.

The enemy soldiers threw down their rice bowls and did not even have time to get their horses before trying to escape on their own.

After a few charges, the backup enemy force has totally disintegrated as all of them are running around on barefoot trying to save their own lives.

The defeat of the backup troops immediately impacted on the nearly 90,000 main force. They were about to turn back and give

support when Huan Qi and Jing Jun, each leading 10,000 elite cavalry sandwiched them from the left and right. Cheng Qiao's army was being attacked from the front and back and they were totally flabbergasted.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi came upon them forcefully from the back and with just a single charge, Cheng Qiao's army was immediately thrown into a crazy and chaotic situation.

Cheng Qiao and Du Bi have now become public enemy, as thousands of soldiers surrounded them.

Xiang Shaolong, holding his Hundred Battles Blade, led the way as he charged into the enemy's formation and personally killed Du Bi. At the same time he followed Xiao Pan's orders and dealt with Cheng Qiao on the spot, getting rid of this source of trouble.

In this battle, only about 10,000 odd of Xiang Shaolong's men were injured or dead and can be considered an extremely outstanding battle outcome.

About 40,000 of Cheng Qiao's rebel soldiers were killed while the remaining 80,000 who did not manage to escape all surrendered.

Xiang Shaolong waited until the next morning before ordering his men to send the report to Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was ecstatic as he personally led his men to come and commend the army.

That night he stayed in Xiang Shaolong's Commander's tent.

After dinner, Xiao Pan was in a good mood and climbed up with everyone to the high point to admire the magnificent and mysterious scenery of the wilderness under the moonlight.

This future Emperor Qin was especially elated and asked with a laugh, "Who will help me exterminate Pu Hu's faction?"

As soon as Xiang Shaolong heard the word 'exterminate', he thought of Shan Rou who is far away in Qi, his heart shuddered and he dared not reply at all.

Jing Jun, Teng Yi and Huan Qi regarded Xiang Shaolong as their leader and since he did not say anything, they maintained their silence as well.

Wang Ling took a step forward and answered with a cold snort, "Leave this matter to me then!"

Everyone, including Xiao Pan, was taken aback.

Because of his grief over Wang He's death, Wang Ling's health has been extremely bad and just the torturous journey of following the army may prove too strenuous for him.

Besides, Pu Hu's remaining power is still very considerable and

he will never sit still and be captured. On top of that, he is very close to the Zhaos, so this matter may look very easy on the surface but in fact it's very difficult.

Wang Ling have not led an army for many years and now he is asking for permission to go is prove of his determination to avenge Wang He.

Xiao Pan greatly regretted his words but now that Wang Ling has made the request, if he rejects it will mean that he finds him too old for such a task and that, to a Qin, is the greatest humiliation.

Xiao Pan had no choice but pretend to be elated and said, "Then I will appoint Great General Wang as the Commander with General Huan Qi as the Deputy Commander. Both of you will leave as soon as possible."

Wang Ling and Huan Qi hurriedly knelt down to receive the imperial edict.

Xiao Pan said solemnly, "The success or failure of this battle will depend on speed, and catch Pu Hu totally unaware. Otherwise if we allow him to stay safely behind Dunliu City, and with the Zhaos backing him up, this matter will prove extremely difficult."

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

More and more, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel this future Emperor Qin's superior talent and stratagem. And he is better than

him in the way that he cares only about the outcome and will never be concerned about feelings or loyalty. Only a hard-hearted person like this will be able to become the world's most fearsome leader in this warring states era.

They returned to the tent and Xiao Pan looked for Xiang Shaolong for a private discussion.

Xiao Pan said with a wry smile, "I'm very worried about Wang Ling, afraid that he won't be able to survive the hardship of a military campaign."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he feeling a little peeved that he had not volunteered first and replied with a sigh, "What do you want me to do?"

Xiao Pan sighed, "I can blame anyone, but I will never dare to blame Teacher. Before I rode here, I did think of the idea of eliminating Lu and Lao's factions totally once I return to the capital. When Lu Buwei comes back, he will be executed immediately right outside the city gates and get it over and done with. Does Teacher think this plan is workable?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "This is a dangerous move. Firstly we have no excuse to do this, and Lu and Lao's factions are too big and strong. Just their family warriors added up makes up almost 20,000 men and there's absolutely a lot of people to get rid of. Besides Guan Zhongxie is still outside with his army and the city troops are under their command. On top of that we have that problematic Pu Hu. Our military power in Xianyang will be even more stretched out. Your Highness, you must reconsider."

Xiao Pan was vexed, “I know as well that this is not the best time, but do I have to wait until after the coronation before I can strike? Now I find that waiting another two more days is already too long a wait, not to mention another two years.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Those who wants to achieve big things must learn tolerance. If Lu Buwei hears any rumors on this, with his influence and tricks, maybe he will be able to encourage Bashu to rebel and that is certainly not a good thing for Great Qin. Besides, he should already be well prepared by now, so that he can fight for the throne with Cheng Qiao once Cheng Qiao’s uprising is successful. If we choose this time to strike, Qin will be thrown into chaos.”

Xiao Pan nodded his head in agreement and said after a moment’s silence, “How can we summon Wang Jian back?”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “It’ll be just before your Highness’s coronation ceremony! By then your Highness will soon have absolute power and no one will dare question your orders. By then, you can just give a secret imperial edict and this matter will be accomplished.”

An icy cold light flashed past Xiao Pan’s eyes as he said, “We’ll do just that. I want those conniving thieves to be caught unaware when Wang Jian returns and by then I’ll make sure they get their comeuppance.”

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before he suddenly said

in a low voice, “Xiao Pan! I want you to promise Xiang Shaolong one thing.”

Xiao Pan’s body trembled. Ever since they came to Qin, this is the first time that Xiang Shaolong called him Xiao Pan, and addressed himself as Xiang Shaolong.

His eyes filled with deep feelings, Xiao Pan nodded his head, “Teacher, please speak, Xiao Pan is listening.”

Xiang Shaolong said solemnly, “No matter what happens in future, you must treat the Dowager kindly.”

Xiao Pan was stunned for a moment. He lowered his head and pondered over this for a while before replying emphatically, “Xiao Pan will never dare disobey Teacher’s orders. But this will only be limited to Imperial Mother, all others will not be included.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is determined to kill the two children that Zhu Ji had borne for Lao Ai. He also knows that it’s very difficult for him to interfere in such matters so he can only answer with a wry smile, “All right, your Highness!”

Xiao Pan came closer, his hands clasped Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders and pulled him in for an embrace, and cried out frantically, “Teacher! Please do not leave Xiao Pan! Don’t you want to witness for yourself how Xiao Pan will unify the world and establish the best dynasty that has never been seen in centuries past?”

Xiang Shaolong turned his arms and held him tightly, saying sadly, “Teacher will have to leave and you have to destroy all written mention about me as well so that I will not leave a trace in history. This is fate. Even if I don’t tell you to do all these, you will ultimately do so anyway.”

Xiao Pan was taken aback and moved back a little, looking at him morosely, “How can this happen, I will never do that, no one should forget about Teacher’s great and meritorious contributions.”

Xiang Shaolong calmed down and grabbing his broad shoulders, he exclaimed, “Ever since I first saw you at the Zhao Palace, I’ve always regarded you as my son. Seeing you grow up and becoming an adult, even turning into the most powerful leader in the world, the contentment I feel in my heart is really indescribable. But precisely because of this relation, I will have to leave you. On one hand it’s because I have fulfilled my promise to your mother, to groom her son into a talent. On the other hand I want to pursue my own life and dreams. Only after I leave will you be able to totally cut off all the relationships in your past and go freely to pursue your own dreams, do you understand? We must never have this discussion again in future.”

For a moment, Xiao Pan’s eyes reddened, like a child totally in awe with his father as he laid his head on his broad chest and spoke no further.

Book 20 Chapter 10 – Heartfelt Words

Three days later, Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong and the rest returned to the capital.

The Dowager, with Lao Ai, led all the court officials out to welcome them.

Looking at their expressions, Zhu Ji's joy is one that comes from the heart while Lao Ai's smiling face looked quite strained.

Lao Ai is not an idiot, in fact he's a very cunning and despicable man. Naturally he knows that he's an outcast among the Crown Prince's political group.

The day that the Crown Prince gets coroneted will be the day the Dowager Zhu Ji loses her governing power, and it will be the time where he will lose all authority.

Xiang Shaolong has once again stabilized Xianyang. He is the most able leader in the military, helping Xiao Pan strengthen his hold on his throne. Once he gets rid of Pu Hu, what is left is only Lu and Lao's factions.

But over the last 10 years, Lu Buwei has been concentrating on growing his supporting faction and privately using people for his own ends so his influence is something that should not be belittled.

Xianyang may be the capital city but it still needs the support of

the surrounding counties in many areas.

The local militia at the capital reports to the Chief Commandant. The Magistrate only takes care of administrative matters while the Chief Commandant is in charge of military affairs. Theoretically the military should be under the sole control of the ruler and sometimes the ruler will give orders to mobilize the troops. As for military supplies and conscription, each family will be taxed according to headcount in the family and all men, once they have reached a certain age will have to be conscripted into the army for two years; one year as active servicemen and another year as garrison soldiers to guard the borders, and they are called the Standing Army.

On top of that there are professional soldiers, who have become the main force of Great Qin.

Lu Buwei took the opportunity when repairing the Zhengguo Canal to obtain the authority to mobilize the local standing armies and this has helped him strengthen his power and control in local areas. This situation where Lu Buwei had absolute control was only broken after the birth of the Black Dragon and Xiao Pan's establishment of the Three Lords and Nine Ministers system.

But Lu Buwei has already established his own local bases during the early years. So if there is a rebellion, he'll be even more difficult to deal with compared to Cheng Qiao or Lao Ai.

So he's not worried about Cheng Qiao succeeding in usurping the throne at all, because by then he can rally his troops using the excuse of crushing the rebel forces.

But even in his wildest dreams would he never imagine that he is up against the rarest and ultimate ruler in all of China's history, the most formidable Emperor Qin.

After their return to Xianyang, it is customary to pray to the ancestors first followed by a feast.

The next morning, after the court session, Zhu Ji summoned Xiang Shaolong to Sweet Spring Palace.

Xiang Shaolong had no other choice but to brace himself to see Zhu Ji.

This powerful Dowager whose reputation is declining day by day in Qin received him at the side hall in the inner palace. After she dismissed the maids, Zhu Ji said with a solemn expression, "The Marquis of Changxin, Lao Ai, said that he was totally not involved at all in this mission to quell the rebels. Even I, as the Dowager, was kept in the dark. What is this all about? It made us all worry for nothing."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking to himself who don't she go and ask her own son instead of interrogating him.

But of course he won't say it out loud. Instead he answered respectfully, "The administrative and military matters are kept separate, it's quite normal that the Marquis of Changxin won't know of this matter."

Zhu Ji stared at him, displeased, “Then why is the Chief Commandant not aware of this as well? Han Xie didn’t even know you’ve gone out of the city into battle and so he was unable to coordinate with you at all.”

After Guan Zhongxie left for the military expedition, Han Xie was promoted as the Commander with Xu Shang as his deputy.

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, “We could emerge victorious this time because of the four words ‘take them by surprise’, and in order to become legendary troops, we must have various tricks to confuse the enemy and let the enemy obtain wrong information. As our enemy has a lot of ears and eyes in the capital, we have to use extreme methods and I hope your Majesty will understand.”

Zhu Ji was quiet for a moment before saying with a sad sigh, “Please don’t use such pretentious words on me? Zheng’er and you can hide it from everyone else but how can you lie to me? If both of you did not want the Marquis of Changxin to find out, I will not tell him.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Zhu Ji to suddenly talk to him with such a tone of voice and attitude and the old feelings he kept hidden deeply welled up as he sighed and said, “The Crown Prince us growing day by day, he’s no longer the child of the past. Now he is most concerned about how to govern the country well and unify the world. Any obstacle on this path of his will be cleared by him sooner or later. This is the road that all rulers must go through as they mature and this is something very clearly stated in history.”

Zhu Ji's pretty face suddenly paled as she asked in alarm, "Shaolong, what do you mean by those words, is Zheng'er going to deal with me?"

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is having a guilty conscience because she has bore two bastards for Lao Ai and answered with a wry smile, "Of course his Highness won't be so unfilial towards your Majesty, but to other people, there's no need for him to be filial at all. Regardless of foster father or fake father, they're all the same."

Zhu Ji looked at him at a loss, and lowered her head to ask, "Tell Zhu Ji, will Xiang Shaolong deal with her?"

A surge of feelings welled in Xiang Shaolong as he said with certainty, "Even if someone puts a sword at my neck, I will never harm the Dowager."

Zhu Ji asked quietly, "What about the Marquis of Changxin?"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback for a moment before he answered in a tone that even he himself found to be sarcastic, "If he is loyal towards the Dowager and the Crown Prince, I can guarantee that nothing will happen to him."

Of course fate would not end up like that.

The rebellion of Lao Ai is the last internal struggle just before Emperor Qin's coronation and Lu Buwei will be implicated because

of this and return to the north defeated.

Suddenly, he knows that he has become an important person who can affect the political scene in the Qin empire, that's why Zhu Ji had to lower herself to ask this question and to seek his opinion.

And he has become the only person that Xiao Pan will totally trust.

Even when he released Han Chuang, Xiao Pan did not take it to heart. If it was someone else, he would have ended up being removed from his post or dragged out to be executed.

Zhu Ji's body trembled slightly as she raised her head, seemingly going to speak but stopping herself.

Xiang Shaolong said gently, "Is there anything else that your Majesty wants to ask me?"

Zhu Ji exclaimed piteously, "Tell me, what I should do?"

Xiang Shaolong understood the meaning behind those words, which is to say that she has lost control over Lao Ai and is not feeling guilt-ridden.

After all, Xiao Pan is her 'son' and although their relationship has been deteriorating, she has not come to the extent whereby she will deliberately harm her son with her lover.

And all Lao Ai wants is to retain his power.

But anyone would know this is impossible. When Xiao Pan holds absolute power, Lao Ai's only outcome is to fade out.

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a while, knowing that if he does not take this opportunity to speak his mind, he'll never have the chance in future. As to whether Zhu Ji is willing to listen to his advice, that's her problem.

He stood up and moved to the front of Zhu Ji's table and knelt down on one knee, looking at her well maintained, dewy and beautiful face, saying frankly, "If your Majesty is willing to listen to my advice, return power to his Highness earlier and bring the Minister of Ceremony with you to live in Yongdu for good. That way, the conflict between your Majesty and his Highness will be dissolved."

Zhu Ji's delicate body trembled again as she cried out softly, "Shaolong, I..."

Footsteps were heard from behind.

The both of them turned around to look in surprise, only to see Lao Ai barging in, his eyes fury with jealousy as he stared angrily at both of them.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.

Fate makes fun of men. In the end, there's still nothing he can do to change the situation.

When he returned to the Wu residence, the angry and venomous look in Lao Ai's eyes still haunts his mind.

Rome was not built in a day. So Lao Ai's jealousy towards him is not something that just started today.

He's the kind of person who thinks that all the women in the world should rightfully fall in love with him, someone who only takes but never gives. Compared to him, Lu Buwei's tactics are indeed a lot more brilliant.

On a certain level, Xiao Pan can still reluctantly accept Lu Buwei as a foster father but he will never acknowledge Lao Ai as his fake father.

Just based on this point alone, Lao Ai has already planted the seed of his own demise.

History has long proven that all those rulers who founded a dynasty are definitely vicious and without mercy. Xiao Pan, the Emperor of Qin, is the best of them all.

When he killed Zhao Mu with his own hands, his eyes were shining brightly as he reported to Xiang Shaolong. At that time, he could already identify Xiao Pan's bravery and he was just a 15 year

old boy then.

This time, he set up a trap to kill Cheng Qiao and Du Bi and at the same time ordered his men to get rid of Pu Hu. From this, his attention to details and his merciless nature can be seen.

Of course, this is also due to his background and the incidents that had befallen him.

Just as his mind was wandering with all these information, he had already arrived at the Wu family's gates with his bodyguards.

A horse carriage was parked at the square and a few of Qin Qing's family warriors were idly chatting with the Wu family's guards. When they saw him coming, they paid their respects.

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic as he jumped down his horse and shouted, "Is Grand Tutor Qin back."

One of them replied, "She just arrived this morning."

A fiery ball of love welled in Xiang Shaolong's heart as he ran into the house. When he got to the grand hall, the beauty that he has been thinking of day and night, dressed in a simple gown, was chatting happily with Ji Yanran and the other ladies, including Shan Lan, Zhou Wei and the children. On seeing Xiang Shaolong, Qin Qing's pretty eyes brightened immediately with an indescribable fire as her delicate body trembled lightly but her expression remained calm. Obviously she was trying to control

herself. Wu Tingfang said with a laugh, “Sister Qing pines for one of us, so she came back earlier.”

Qin Qing’s pretty face blushed immediately as she gave Wu Tingfang an angry stare, her expression extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his urge to gather her into his arms as he came between her and Zhao Zhi and said with a laugh, “Grand Tutor Qin has lost weight, but looks even more alluring now.” Qin Qing replied happily, “Qin Qing may not be in Xianyang but Great General’s reputation still rings loudly like thunder. What luck that my return this time coincides with Great General’s victorious homecoming as well.”

Shan Lan said with a laugh, “Both of you can stop pretending. It’s all our own people here, must you behave so politely towards each other.”

Ji Yanran helped Qin Qing out of the situation by changing the topic and telling Xiang Shaolong, “Sister Qing said that Lu Buwei went to her hometown. He was trying his utmost to get into the good books of the major local clans. What is most shameless is that the suggestion to reduce taxes came from Li Si but he boasted that it was his idea.”

Zhou Wei added, “What’s even more irritating is that he came on many occasions to bother Sister Qing and Sister Qing was so alarmed that she had to move somewhere else to stay.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, “Because he made a wrong

calculation, thinking that Cheng Qiao would be able to get rid of us so there's no more need for him to control himself."

He went nearer to Qin Qing and said, "We'll return to the farm tomorrow, is Grand Tutor Qin willing to dawdle around like this for the rest of your life?"

Qin Qing blushed right to her ears and pouted, "Your official posts are getting bigger and bigger but you're getting naughtier. I'm not talking to you, I still have to go and see the Dowager and the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong grabbed her small shoulders without any hesitation and whispered in her ears, "I don't care where Grand Tutor Qin is going now, but Grand Tutor must come back here tonight to spend the night."

Wu Tingfang was listening intently to their conversation and on hearing his words, said with a smile, "Sister Qing has already agreed, but she's going to chat with us sisters through the night instead. Hee hee, sorry about that, Great General."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, "That's even more ideal."

The ladies all reprimanded him with a laugh.

By this time, Xiang Shaolong has cast all thoughts of Zhu Ji, Lao Ai and all the fights with his enemies behind him.

At this moment, life is good. His mind flew to the thoughts of the open plains and he remembered the wide open grassland that he once went to in the 21st century while undergoing training. Blue skies, white clouds, green grass as lush as carpets spans the entire horizon, the lakes look like clear mirrors adorning the landscape with the rivers interjecting one another with the smell of clean grass filled the air. If he can spend the rest of this weird and wonderful life in peace with his wives and beloved children in this farm surrounded by nature, with no need to bother about mundane fights for power and war, how wonderful would life be?

The next day, he returned to the farm with his own and Teng Yi's families, and of course Qin Qing was with them. The both of them were pining for each other after being separated for so long and now is no longer bothered about how others sees them.

Ten days later, Wang Ling and Huan Qi gathered an army of 100,000 men to attack Tunliu and Pu Hu, under the pretext of avenging Cheng Qiao abandoned Qin and allied with Zhao. Wang Bi and Yang Duanhe were beaten back by Li Mu on numerous occasions and they changed their tactics to be on the defensive and managed to stabilize the various eastern commanderies and their situation was extremely dangerous. At the same time, King Heng Hui of Han died of illness and the Crown Prince ascended the throne. Han Chuang has always been on good terms with the Crown Price so he now became the Premier, becoming the most influential man in Han. Lord Longyang's power in Wei greatly increased as well and the two states relied on each other, working hand in hand to repel Qin, suppressing the eastern advancement of the two armies led by Guan Zhongxie and the Meng brothers.

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are leading

carefree lives at the farm. There's still about two more years to go before Xiao Pan's coronation. But during this period of time, which is not so far away in the future, no one can guess what changes will happen in the meantime.

On this day, Lord Wenchang and Li Si came together to the farm to visit them. Naturally all of them were happy to see one another again.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led the both of them on a leisurely horse ride at dusk when Lord Wenchang commented, "Lu Buwei just came back, his relationship with Lao Ai is noticeably better and they will occasionally go and have drinks together at Drunken Wind Loft. He even let Lao Ai have Bai Yaya."

Li Si said icily, "In my opinion he's trying to repeat the devious trick he used on Cheng Qiao, which is to incite Lao Ai to rebel. Maybe he even hinted openly that he will support the bastard son he had with the Dowager to ascend the throne, then get rid of Lao Ai after that and make himself king. As Lu Buwei is still very powerful on the ground, it's possible that this is something he can accomplish."

Lord Changping added, "But there's one thing which is quite strange. After Shaolong left, the Dowager went to speak with the Crown Prince and offered to hand over part of her authority and after that will live in seclusion in Yongdu. Lao Ai is now making frequent trips between Yongdu and Xianyang but some important decisions or deployment of people still needs the Dowager's agreement before it can proceed."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly relieved that at least Zhu Ji is willing to listen to his advice, resulting in improved relations between her and Xiao Pan.

Teng Yi asked, “Is there any news from Mao Jiao’s side?”

Lord Changping replied with a cold snort, “He said Lao Ai is at Yong Du cultivating talents. There’s something that all of you are unaware, Ling Qi has become Yongdu’s castellan. The Grand Temple is situated at Yongdu, so it’s under Lao Ai’s jurisdiction. It can be effectively considered that Yongdu is now under his control.”

Xiang Shaolong already knew long ago that Lao Ai will certainly try to gather resources first, otherwise he won’t be able to start a rebellion.

Teng Yi asked about Wang Ling and Huan Qi’s battle situation.

Li Si replied with a sigh, “His Highness is still worried. Pu Hu’s has retreated back to Tunliu and is staying behind the walls, refusing to come out. There’s nothing Great General Wang can do to him for now. What’s most worrying is that winter is fast approaching and it’s a time that will benefit the defenders and not the besiegers. Besides, there’s also the existence of Li Mu, he’s an uncertain factor.”

Lord Changping sighed, “I don’t know if it’s intentional on Lu Buwei’s part, using the excuse that the building of the Zhengguo Canal will be completed soon and he redeployed a large number of

men locally to build the canal, with the result that we now don't have many soldiers to deploy. We were just vexing over this matter."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel a sense of guilt. If he had agreed to Xiao Pan's request to lead the army against Tunliu that day, Wang Ling won't have to make such a torturous journey in his old age.

A pity that this has already become an unalterable fact.

A feeling of misfortune welled up in his heart.

Book 20 Chapter 11 – Devising Strategies

A month after Lord Changping and Li Si's visit to the farm, Xiang Shaolong's feeling of misfortune was proven correct.

Li Mu's elite troops suddenly arrived and greatly defeated the Qin army outside Tunliu. Wang Ling and Huan Qi retreated in haste about a hundred miles northwest of Tunliu, to Changzi City situated at the end of Lushui, having lost close to 30,000 men.

Wang Ling was filled with worry and anger and on top of that was overly exhausted. Two days after they arrived at Changzi City, he died of illness.

Of the four Great Generals who were around when the Black Dragon was born, only Wang Jian is left. Meng Ao, Wang Chi and Wang Ling all passed away within two years and this is an extremely heavy blow to the Qins.

Now, the only famous generals left in Qin are Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian.

The rest like Huan Qi, Meng Wu, Meng Tian, Yang Rui, Guan Zhongxie etc, have not reached the stage where they can hold the fort on their own.

For now, Qin's grand plan of invading towards the east has temporarily come to a standstill.

If not for Xiang Shaolong who had defeated the coalition army and suppressed the uprising led by Cheng Qiao and Du Bi, maybe the Qin royalty would have to learn from the Chus and move away to avoid further trouble.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were summoned back to Xianyang. As they do not want their wives and children to take the arduous journey back, they advised them to stay behind at the farm.

Ji Yanran and the rest are already used to them leaving their homes to go on military expeditions but as their opponent this time is the trickiest and most famous general of this era, Li Mu, the ladies had to keep nagging and warning them before they allowed them to leave for Xianyang.

As usual, Xiang Shaolong went straight to the palace to see Xiao Pan while Teng Yi went to see their fifth brother Jing Jun, whom they have not met for a long time.

Xiao Pan met him alone in the palace and his expression was somber. When he saw him, he said, "This time, Wang Ling's death is caused by Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Really?"

Xiao Pan placed his hands on the table, the frosty glance that flashed past his eyes was enough to make even Xiang Shaolong's heart run cold. This future Emperor Qin gave a cold snort, "I've already considered the possibility of the Zhao's helping in the siege of Tunliu long ago and have given orders to Guan Zhongxie

to attack the Zhaos and keep Li Mu engaged. However Lu Buwei made unreasonable objections and with the support of Lao Ai, there were numerous delays which eventually resulted in the defeat of Tunliu. I will certainly settle this score clearly with them in future.”

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, “Are they in a position to interfere in these matters?”

Xiao Pan answered angrily, “Of course not. I can only hate myself for once promising the Dowager that if for any redeployment of troops amounting to more than 100,000 men, I will need her seal of approval. According to Mai Jiao, Lao Ai deliberately ordered his men to delay the documents that I sent to the Dowager, so that it only reached her hands 10 days later. These documents were delayed for another 2 weeks on the way back. By that time, things have already happened what whatever military advantage we may have is already affected. After that, I tried to pursue this matter but the Dowager kept protecting Lao Ai. Great General Wang has died a meaningless death.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “So the Dowager listened to my advice and moved to Yongdu, but ended up with such side effects.”

Xiao Pan shook his head, “This is not your fault. The problem lies with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. As long as these two are still around, we can forget about unifying the world. Ever since time memorial, one will have to govern internal affairs well before expanding outwards. Now that our internal strife are abound, how can we take over the 6 states and accomplish the grandest achievement of

all times.” He paused and added, “Now our opponent is Lu Mu and it seems that we are defeated at every battle. As long as this person is not removed, we can forget about attacking Handan.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Is the power in Zhao now still in the hands of the Dowager Han Jing?”

Xiao Pan replied, “The current King of Zhao is even worse than King Xiaocheng. He’s constantly engaged in wine and women and he’s overly suspicious and prone to jealousy as well. Humph, no one knows him better than me. One day he will die in the hands of a woman and this day is not far away. No matter how smart and formidable Han Jing is, she is still a woman and only knows how to pine over Guo Kai and let this scumbag take over the court proceedings and interfere in military matters. If not for that, Li Mu may very well have fought his way here long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “Weren’t there rumors that Pang Nuan is Han Jing’s gigolo?”

Xiao Pan is especially hateful of the Zhaos and said with disdain, “Han Jing is a **** who breaks all the rules of the palace so it’s nothing strange if she has found a few more men.”

He sighed and added, “I’m really unwilling to let Teacher lead an army to Tunliu but there’s really no one else more suitable. And this is what Lu Buwei and Lao Ai really hope for.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled, “Your Highness, why do you say that?”

It seems that Xiao Pan dared not face him. He walked towards the window and looked at the snowy imperial garden outside and said slowly with his back to him, “Because I understand the relationship between Teacher and Li Mu. So unless Teacher promise me that you will not harbor any personal feelings, otherwise I will not allow Teacher to lead the army no matter what happens. Because Li Mu is not the likes of Pang Nuan or Han Chuang, if Teacher feels even a tiny inkling of sympathy, you will certainly be defeated.”

Xiang Shaolong was so taken aback that he was at a loss for words.

Just like how well he understands Xiao Pan, Xiao Pan is totally familiar with his thoughts as well.

The person that he really does not want to meet on the battlefield is Li Mu and this mind-set of his is enough to make it difficult for him to extend his full prowess.

But the fact is laid out right in front of him, he will have to commit to a battle of life and death with Li Mu.

Otherwise not only will Huan Qi perish, even Wang Bi and Yang Duanhe may end up in Li Mu’s hands together with the eastern commandery.

Will he be able to defeat Li Mu? This is something that even Wang Jian has no confidence in.

Xiao Pan's breathing became heavier.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth and answered firmly, "Fine. I, Xiang Shaolong, will meet Li Mu and see who's best on the battlefield. No matter who survives or dies, just take it as an outcome befitting a warrior."

Xiao Pan spun around and exclaimed happily, "These words that Teacher has uttered are enough to set my mind at ease."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "How many troops can your Highness offer me?"

Xiao Pan's mood improved as he thought over it, "No matter what, Teacher will have to wait until spring before you can leave. Lu Buwei has recently been deliberately mobilizing large numbers of soldiers to build the Zhengguo Canal so there's not a lot of men left available. Luckily Teacher only needs elite warriors, hmm..."

Xiang Shaolong's brows furrowed on hearing this.

Li Mu's Zhao soldiers are the most famous in the east and he has 20,000 cavalry under him. Even the Xiong Nus, who are adept in archery and horse riding, have to admit defeat. His own Wu family elite warriors are now down to only 2,000 men and in such a situation, it's not an easy task to win Li Mu.

Xiao Pan made some calculations and said with certainty, "I can

give Teacher 20,000 foot soldiers. They are all able-bodied soldiers and Teacher can take your pick on who to appoint as the Deputy General. On top of Huan Qi's troops at Changzi City, the total force will amount to 120,000 and it should be enough to face off Li Mu's estimated force of 100,000 men."

The both of them discussed a little further before Xiao Pan summoned Lord Changping and after arrangements were made, Xiang Shaolong left together with lord Changping.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but ask, "Is the building of the Zhengguo Canal really hindering us that much?"

Lord Changping sighed, "The Zhengguo Canal is indeed using up a lot of our men and resources but the main problem is that Lu Buwei is trying to resist the central government using the local forces, using another method to gain control of our great Qin's military affairs. Especially now that he and Lao Ai are making use of each other, such that on many instances the Dowager had to stand on their side. There's really nothing his Highness can do, like the death of Wang Ling is really uncalled for."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Wang He and Wang Ling and all the old hatred and new enmity welled up in him.

In another two years, he will be able to exact revenge with his own hands.

Lord Changping walked out with him and said quietly, "Mao Jiao sent news that under Lu Buwei's covert support, Lao Ai is now

secretly organizing a gang of supporters, even the Dowager is kept in the dark.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “What kind of supporters?”

Lord Changping replied, “It’s an extremely secret organization and those who join all have to make a deadly vow that they will remain loyal only to Lao Ai. After that Lao Ai will try to place them in various military positions so that when the time comes for a rebellion in future, they will be able to help him.” He paused and continued, “According to his Highness’s prediction, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei’s scheme will take place during his coronation ceremony because according to the rites, his Highness must travel to the Grand Temple in Yongdu for the coronation. Lao Ai will be able to make arrangements for the ceremony in his capacity as Minister of Rites and because Yongdu are full of their men, it’ll be a lot easier for them to rebel there than in Xianyang. But we’ve already guessed that this is their plan, so naturally we will not let them succeed.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “They have already started on their scheme. First it’s Wang He, then it’s Wang Ling. If not for the fact that Huan Qi is an outstanding general, he may have met with mishap as well. Lu Buwei is a master at scheming after all. He can get rid of us one by one without even bloodying his own sword and now it’s finally my turn.”

Lord Changping was taken aback, “Shaolong, don’t say such inauspicious words. Now, besides Shaolong and Wang Jian, there’s no one else in Great Qin who can be a match against Li Mu. Shaolong you must gather your faith and accomplish another great

deed for his Highness.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Li Mu and said honestly, “I’ll try my best.”

Lord Changping suggested, “Why don’t we go and look for Li Si to discuss this?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and took his leave to go to the Cavalry Official Department.

After Teng Yi and Jing Jun heard his updates, Teng Yi said, “His Highness is right, there is no place for personal feelings on the battlefield. Because it’s not a problem involving only two people, but it involves the lives of thousands of soldiers and their wives and children, as well as the fate and pride of a country.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled, “I really didn’t spare that much thought to it.”

Teng Yi was silent for a moment before saying in all seriousness, “I do have a suggestion, which is to immediately select a troop of elite soldiers and gather them at the farm to give them intense training like what we did with our elite warriors. Our family warriors like Jing Shan, Wu Yan etc will be the military leaders and each leader will have 5,000 men under him. In that way, we can mobilize them as easily as moving our arms and we will be able to strike most effectively in battle.”

Xiang Shaolong was energized as he remembered the training methods for the elite troops in the 21st century and happily agreed.

For the next 10 days, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi stayed in the Cavalry Official Department in the capital to personally select 45,000 men from the reinforcement troops, cavalry, city guards and imperial guards. They were split into 9 sections with Jing Shan and the 18 Warriors as the Officers and Deputy Officers and 2 sections will form an army. Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Zhao Da will be the Commanders of the 3 armies while he will personally lead the remaining 2,000 Wu family elite warriors as the Grand Commander with Teng Yi as his deputy. Naturally Zhou Liang will become the leader of the scouting team.

Most of the people were with Xiang Shaolong in his two previous battles and once they heard that he is leading the army, their morale were greatly boosted and they were willing to lay down their lives for this mission.

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were surprisingly cooperative because naturally they were hoping that he would go earlier and die faster so he can never return to Xianyang again.

Therefore Xiang Shaolong sought Xiao Pan's permission to move the entire army to the farm and making use of the various facilities, trained the soldiers day and night, hoping to make use of these 3 bitter winter months before spring arrives to cultivate another massive army of elite soldiers.

On this day, because of the heavy snow, the soldiers were all staying in the farm. Xiang Shaolong was having dinner with his

wives and son when Learned Lady Ji commented, “Ultimately, warfare is about the art of trickery. Therefore the best leader will first strategize to hinder the enemy’s plans, next will be the battle on the field and finally to besiege a walled city. So we must pretend to be unable to attack even if we can, and make the enemy believe that we are far away when we are not*. Sun Tzu even openly said that nothing is too deceitful in war. Now Yanran has seen how dear husband is training the troops and indeed your methods are refreshing and startling. Especially the way you hide how the battle is fought, nothing on earth can indeed compare to it. But I wonder if dear husband have thought of a strategy to defeat the enemy.”

* From Sun Tzu’s Art of War

Qin Qing added gently and affectionately, “Yanran’s questions are not pointless, Pu Hu’s influence is very strong at the eastern commandery and he has made many repairs and modifications to Tunliu before. The city walls are high and the rivers wide. Now he won’t be afraid of us attacking him because he’ll be able to wait it out and counter out active attacks with passiveness. Now even Wang Ling and Huan Qi, who are well versed in the art of war and had the command of Great Qin’s elite soldiers ended up being defeated and had to retreat so it goes to show that Pu Hu is not someone like Zhao Gua and there won’t be a loss like that of Changping. On top of that, Li Mu is eyeing us from the sideline. Shaolong you must not just use brute force.”

On hearing this, Xiang Shaolong can feel himself sweating. The battle strategy this time will have to attack a strong and walled city and at the same time deal with Li Mu’s sudden attacks. It’s wishful thinking if one thinks that one can win using the normal rules of

engagement. The biggest problem now is that Huan Qi is now leading a newly defeated army and he himself does not have enough troops and it's impossible to split up and handle two different battles at the same time. Besides, Pu Hu has always been unfathomable and Li Mu is an extremely experienced talent in mobilizing troops. The outcome of this battle can almost be known without even fighting it.

Wu Tingfang suggested a plan, "Can we send someone to infiltrate inside the city of Tunliu first?"

Ji Yanran replied, "How would the enemy not be on alert against such a trick. Besides Tunliu belonged to the Zhaos and it'll be even more difficult for the Qins to infiltrate."

Xiang Shaolong searched his brains for memories of examples besieging cities from the last thousand years since 'ancient time' to now. He almost fried his brains thinking and couldn't think of any brilliant plan at that moment so he gave up.

After dinner, Xiang Shaolong lied down on the mat with his head resting on Wu Tingfang's soft thighs and started thinking again.

Ji Yanran and the rest dare not disturb his train of thought and accompanied him quietly by the side.

The Tian sisters accompanied Xiang Bao'er back to bed.

The fireplaces in the four corners were all burning so they do not

feel the cold frost outside at all.

Xiang Shaolong thought of the Mohist Addendum, which stated these words ‘the way to attack a city is to surround it on four sides but to leave a corner open to indicate an escape route to lure the enemy into breaking out’. But obviously this is not suited to be used at Tunliu City. Because with Li Mu at the side, he is in no way able to block the entire city.

Basically, it takes only four steps to attack a city, namely to cross the river, attack the city gates and walls, climb over the walls and lastly the battle in the streets and alleys.

But as their enemy has the protection of a moat and they are at a higher location, which is advantageous to them and on top of that, they can easily switch from a defensive position to an offensive one at any time and suddenly launch an attack. So if they follow the normal rules of engagement, their losses will be momentous. If he is Li Mu, he will make use of the time when the Qin army is exhausted to lead an attack. By then, if his army is not wiped out, he’ll have to thank Heavens for it.

So how can he change this situation where they can only act in response?

Too bad Pu Hu does not like wooden horse, otherwise he can reenact what happened in the west during the Trojan War.

Suddenly he had an idea and he sat up in joy and shouted, “I’ve got it.”

The map was spread open on the mat. Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the rest were all concentrating on it but they still have no idea what tricks Xiang Shaolong have up his sleeve.

Xiang Shaolong pointed at a big city inside the Zhao border named Zhongmou and said, “This city is an important place in the Zhao’s northern border and the Zhao Capital is 120 miles north of here while Tunliu is 130 miles northwest of here. Therefore the distance to any of these two places from Zhongmou is roughly the same. But to the east of Zhongmou there is an official road leading to Handan and it’ll only take 3 days on a swift horse to reach Handan. If we can take down this city, what do you think will be the reaction of the Zhao King?”

Teng Yi banged the table in admiration, “Of course he’ll be terrified that we’ll attack his capital. We’re all well aware of Guo Kai’s standard.”

Qin Qing furrowed her brows, “Zhongmou is situated along the borders of Zhao and Wei and have always been tightly guarded. How can it be so easily taken down by you? Besides, at the north of Handan there’s another long wall spanning about a hundred miles protecting the capital. The Zhao army has been stationed there for a long time and if your 40,000 odd men were to infiltrate them, it’ll really be very dangerous.”

Ji Yanran said with a smile, “Lord Husband will definitely have another brilliant plan, Sister Qing please listen on carefully.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled at Qin Qing and replied, “Please listen to your husband’s explanation.” Qin Qing saw that he was addressing himself as her husband and was felt both embarrassed and happy at the same time, and she stared at him in reproach.

Xiang Shaolong said, “This time we’re going all out regardless of the consequences. Now Guan Zhongxie is deploying troops to the city of Xuanshi in Han and it’s only 80 miles away from Tunliu and about a hundred odd miles to Zhongmou. We might as well get a secret edict from his Highness to go to Xuanshi and take away Guan Zhongxie’s military command, taking over his 130,000 men for our own use. That way our forces will be boosted and the best thing is the Zhaos will still think that we will be coming up from the south to Changzi city to meet up with Huan Qi before going on to invade Tunliu. Therefore they will surely concentrate their forces at Shangdang to better deal with us.”

Jing Jun said viciously, “Best is we can get rid of Guan Zhongxie at the same time.”

Qin Qing commented, “Won’t that be the same as forcing Lu Buwei to rebel immediately, don’t forget Guan Zhongxie is his beloved son-in-law.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Once we reach Xuanshi, we will split our forces in two, one obvious and one secret to move in so that the Zhaos will think that we are going to Changzi city but in fact we will be crossing the river towards Zhongmou. We’ll catch them unawares and our Wu family’s elite warriors will climb over the city walls in the middle of the night. As long as we can seize control of one of the city gates, we’ll be able to take over Zhongmou.”

Teng Yi nodded his head, “Best is if we can smuggle someone into Handan first and create some rumors to make the people panic. Then the Zhaos will have to summon Li Mu back to protect the Capital and Tunliu won’t be that impossible to obtain.”

Ji Yanran exclaimed excitedly, “At the same time we have to ask Xiao Bi and Duan He to lead their armies and make a major counter attack to engage Pang Nuan and Sima Shang’s two armies. By then Li Mu’s summons to leave Tunliu will become a surety.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “The most difficult part of this matter is how can we move the troops so far, crossing the river from Xuanshi towards Zhongmou without letting our enemy find out. Otherwise it’ll just end up as another long drawn siege attack.”

Ji Yanran studied the map and replied, “You can pretend to be going towards Changzi City first and split up your troops once you reach the southern shore of River Lu. From here to Zhongmou, it’s all wilderness. As long as the troops move rapidly, even if someone sees them, there won’t be enough time for them to inform the city guards of Zhongmou, so the number of men cannot be too big. Also, the light cavalry must go first with their light packs, followed by the foot soldiers. Zhou Liang’s Eagle King can be put to the greatest use in such situations.”

At this point in time, everyone was filled with confidence, almost wishing that they can attack Zhongmou immediately.

Teng Yi said, “If we can send 50,000 men to Changzi City to meet

up with Huan Qi, our army size will reach almost 120,000 but to take down Tunliu, it's not something that can be accomplished within one or two months. I'm worried that by that time the Zhaos would have figured out our actual force and send troops to attack. With enemies in front and behind us, our situation is still bleary."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Pu Hu is still a merchant at heart, he's just relying on the Zhaos. He only had the guts to rebel because being caught will mean his entire clan getting exterminated. The soldiers in the city are all a motley crew gathered hurriedly so as long as we successfully spread rumors to make them panic and deliberately give them an escape route, I guarantee that Tunliu will fall without a battle and no one will put up a real fight."

Zhao Zhi said, "Their first fear is of course that the Zhaos will abandon them, but what can we use to scare them after that?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "It's simple, make use of the strategy of villages surrounding a city. Take over all the villages nearby, move the villagers away and make sure Tunliu lose their supply of food and grains. Set up camp outside the city of Tunliu and build various equipments for besieging a city. Make it look as if we're planning a long haul siege and I guarantee that in less than two weeks, Pu Hu will try to think of a way to slip away."

Jing Jun said with a smirk, "If he doesn't slip away, we'll just launch a damn attack."

Wu Tingfang chided, "Xiao Jun, can you mind your words?" Qin Qing saw that everyone's gaze was on her so she shrugged her dainty shoulders and said, "I've gotten used to it long ago!"

Everyone smiled.

Xiang Shaolong continued, “We’ll have to think about the whole plan in more detail and then send someone to inform Xiao Qi, Xiao Bi and Duan He immediately. This matter must be kept absolutely secret, otherwise it won’t work if word gets out.”

By now, although it’s very late into the night, how were Xiang Shaolong and his two brothers able to sleep. After the ladies went to bed, they continued their discussion all the way until dawn before they went on their separate ways to carry out their tasks.

Book 20 Chapter 12 – False Alarm

After having a confirmed plan of action, Xiang Shaolong and the rest changed their training methods and split the army into two groups. 20,000 cavalry were specially trained in undercover and camouflage warfare.

Xiang Shaolong used what he has learnt in the 21st century on this group of cavalry.

In a twinkling of an eye, winter is ending and spring is approaching. Xiao Pan came to send off the troops personally in a ceremony and Xiang Shaolong left for another military expedition once again.

The army traveled in ships downstream, landing at Wusui and walked towards the northeast straight towards Xuanshi City where Guan Zhongxie is at.

Guan Zhongxie, Lian Jiao, Zhao Pu led their army out of the city to welcome them. Of course they appeared extremely polite on the surface, giving them the respect due to a superior.

Xiang Shaolong asked Wu Guo, Jing Jun and the rest to set up camp outside the city and in order not to incur Guan Zhongxie's suspicions, he only led Teng Yi and a thousand personal guards into the city. Only after they reached the Commander's Residence did they take out Xiao Pan's imperial edict to order Guan Zhongxie to hand over his military token immediately and to return to the Capital to continue his duties.

After Guan Zhongxie read the imperial edict, his countenance changed, “What’s the meaning of this, why are there no orders from Premier Lu? And the Dowager’s imperial seal is missing from this edict.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and commented, “Why is General Guan so nervous, his Highness is just being concerned that Lord Guan has been working so hard and stationed outside the pass for the whole year, that’s why he’s allowing General Guan to return to Xianyang for a short holiday. It’s just a simple matter of changing of guards, is there a need to trouble Lord Lu and the Dowager on this?”

At this time Teng Yi saw Lian Jiao moving backwards and hurriedly gave out a command, their accompanying personal guards immediately took out their crossbows and took control of the situation. There’s no way Guan Zhongxie will expect Xiang Shaolong to have such a move. He saw him smiling icily with his hand on the sheath of Hundred Battles Blade and knows that one wrong word would mean immediate decapitation. He raised his hand to stop his men from making senseless retaliation and his countenance changed to a pleasant smile as he said, “Great General has reprimanded me well. In fact I was really hoping to go back and see Niangrong too.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “We cannot go against a ruler’s orders, I am just following instructions. It’s great that General Guan is willing to cooperate.”

He’s not worried that Guan Zhongxie will disobey, unless he

wants to rebel immediately. Otherwise this is the only outcome available.

The next day, Xiang Shaolong, on the pretext of sending them off, ordered Jing Jun to ensure that Guan Zhongxie and his 2,000 personal guards were escorted to Wusui and to make sure that they board the ship before he returns to Xuanshi.

By this time Xiang Shaolong has completed the redeployment of Guan's army and the cavalry was increased to 50,000 men, the light infantry had 50,000 men and the heavy artillery forces had 80,000 men and their strength was immediately boosted.

They trained for another month in Xuanshi before they left Xuanshi and traveled along the river up north towards Changzi City.

They traveled slowly but steadily, making sure that the soldiers get ample rest and maintain their energy at a full level.

When they reached the southern bank of the River Lu, the 180,000-strong army stopped and waited for night to fall.

Huan Qi hurried over on hearing the news and when they met, everyone was filled with both sadness and happiness as they told one another what happened while they were apart. He left with Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Huan Qi, Zhou Liang, Wu Guo, Zhao Da and the rest to the Commander's Residence to hold a meeting.

Huan Qi first reported the situation at Tunliu and analyzed, “Inside Tunliu, there are only about a thousand odd men who are old subordinates of Du Bi and Chang Qiao, the rest are Pu Hu’s family warriors and local rebels who were from Zhao. The situation is a little similar to the peasants rebellion which happened a few years ago in the east, they are full of valor but no actual capability. But the biggest problem is Li Mu’s 100,000 strong Zhao army stationed at Lu City within the Zhao border 40 miles of Tunliu. They can respond immediately if called for and not only are they a source of support for Tunliu, we also dare not attack Tunliu without reservations.” When he spoke of Li Mu, his expression revealed an underlying fear.

Teng Yi signed and asked, “How did you lose that battle?”

Huan Qi replied painfully, “The way Li Mu fights a battle is like performing a magic trick. Great General and I were already keeping a real close eye on the movements within the Zhao border and planted our scouts far and wide. We did not expect that just after we received the alarm, Li Mu’s cavalry has already reached our camp and it was a bright and starry night. Li Mu ordered his men to take over the highlands first and burned the camp with fire arrows. The Tunliu rebel forces took the opportunity to charge out as well, drumming the signal for attack. We could not even last until dawn and were utterly defeated. I led a group of 10,000 men and tried out best to fend off the pursuers, otherwise the number of our casualties will be even higher.”

On hearing that, everyone felt a cold chill.

Huan Qi continued agitatedly, “After Great general Wang passed

away, I led our very demoralized troops to attack Lu City twice but we were forced back by Li Mu. His strategies are ever changing, his soldiers brave and their training excellent. No wonder his fame can spread so far and wide.”

Jing Jun commented, “It doesn’t matter how formidable Li Mu is, it’s no use if there’s a excellent general but no good ruler. Have Xiao Qi sent anyone to check the situation over at Zhongmou?”

Huan Qi’s spirit was lifted as he took out a rolled up map and opened it on the table, saying, “I took advantage of the heavy snow to order my men to scout on the enemy’s situation so I’m sure the enemy knows nothing at all. Zhongmou is the Zhao’s most important military base outside of Chang City and it originally belonged to the Weis. It only landed in Zhao hands four years ago, so that they have another vital point outside out Chang City, that’s why it’s very heavily regarded.”

After everyone had some discussion, he continued, “There are two groups of Zhao army permanently stationed outside the city, about 10,000 men or so at the north and south to cover each other. Their initial use should be to deal with the Weis. Inside the city there are about 20,000 men guarding it and for a city of Zhao, such numbers are very rare. If anything happens, the soldiers inside the city can come out to provide reinforcements. That’s why in the many attempts by the Weis to attack the Zhaos, they have been unable to take over Zhongmou, this important city.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “That’s why we must surprise them in this battle and take them unawares. Otherwise this batter will be a certain defeat.”

Huan Qi said, “The Zhaos have built a hundred odd beacon stations on higher grounds outside the city and there are sentries there day and night. If a huge army were to advance, they will find out even if it’s at night. It’s very difficult to go under their radar.”

Jing Jun tapped his chest and assured them, “Let me be in charge of this. I guarantee that not a single one of those beacons will be able to sound any alarm.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Tonight, our 40,000 strong elite cavalry will be split into 4 teams and set off in batches after dark. Jing Jun will lead 10,000 as vanguards to clear the beacons. The other 140,000 men will stay here for three more days before they are split up into two teams of 70,000 men each with one team going towards Changzi and the other towards Zhongmou. The day that Li Mu returns to the capital will be the time that Xiao Qi strikes. Remember to make it look as if it’s going to be a drawn out battle, you must not take the risk to attack the city otherwise Li Mu will advance even though he may look like he’s retreating and a replay of the battle that night will happen. Then this loss will be totally not worth it.”

Huan Qi was taken aback as he replied, “No wonder both the previous Great Generals were so full of praise for Great General Xiang before their deaths. I have not thought of this point at all and when you mentioned it, the thought of it made me break out into a cold sweat immediately.”

Wu Guo said with a smile, “It’s time to eat.” Everyone were laughing and jibing one another. As they left the tent, Xiang

Shaolong said to Huan Qi, “After you take over Tunliu, immediately start works on repairing and building up defenses. We will pretend to be defeated by Chang City, situated on the border separating Zhao and Wei before suddenly retreating so that the Zhaos will find it difficult to pursue us.”

Huan Qi was high spirited and totally impressed as he nodded his head.

That night, once it's dark, Zhou Liang released Eagle King. After making sure that there are no hidden enemy scouts, Jing Jun's team consisting of the Wu family's elite warriors set off first and in a short while, the four teams of men set off one after another, traveling slowly on horseback.

By the morning of the third day, the army have reached the dense forest 40 miles away from Zhongmou and set up sentries around them. They waited for night to fall.

Zhongmou City is situated in the middle of the plain, with high and thick city walls. It's indeed a tough and important stronghold for the military. The trees outside the city were cut down so it's really not easy to approach without being seen.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi observed the area for a long time and they both felt discouraged, but couldn't think of any good ideas at all.

All of them dare not start fires for cooking so they survived on dried rations.

By dusk, there was a sudden strong wind and rain started pouring.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest exclaimed that even Heaven is helping them as they set off immediately.

Wu Guo and Zhou Liang each led an army to attack the Zhao camp outside the city.

Jing Jun led a thousand We family fighters, crossed the moat and climbed over the walls into the city.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi's main force of 20,000 men went towards the hiding point nearest to the city to get ready for the city gates to open so that they can charge in.

The rain was getting heavier with the occasional thunder and lightning. Visibility was low and the thunders also covered the sounds of the horses hooves totally.

Jing Jun's thousand-strong elite troops tied up their warhorses outside the city and took more than two hours to cross the moat and begin climbing up the walls.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were waiting with palpitating hearts because if the enemy were to discover them now, no one in Jing Jun's team will survive.

The lanterns on top of the city walls were dimmed by the heavy rain.

Just as they were nervously waiting, the city gates facing the west opened and the drawbridge was lowered.

Xiang and Teng were ecstatic as they gave the order and the whole army swarmed out. The thundering hooves of 20,000 warhorses shattered the sweet dreams of the city guards in Zhongmou, but everything is too late by now.

Wu Guo and Zhou Liang's armies launched a simultaneous attack on the two Zhao army camps outside the city.

Battle cries and screams shook the earth inside and outside the city.

Although the thunderstorm has stopped, the battle has become even fiercer.

The army charged into the city, scaring the people into shutting their doors tight and half of the city guards removing their armors and abandoning their posts as they hid in residential houses to preserve their lives. The rest opened up the city gates and ran for their lives.

They've totally lost their will to retaliate.

By dawn, this most important and strategic city for the Kingdom

of Zhao in the north has fallen into Xiang Shaolong's hands.

For the next 10 days, Zhao Da, leading more than 10,000 foot soldiers gradually arrived, bringing with them a large number of siege machinery, supplies and food. They also established the supply route from Xuanshi City to here.

Xiang Shaolong gave strict orders not to harass the civilians and to treat the surrendered soldiers with courtesy, using the approach of assuring the civilians.

Teng Yi set up base camps outside the city, started on building up defenses and cut off the official roads that connect between Zhao and Wei, making it look as if they are preparing for a massive attack on the Zhao Capital, Handan.

A month later, the Zhaos came twice to attack but were fought off on both attempts.

The Weis were on the alert. Their forces were on strict patrol along the border but as the Qin army has control of a sturdy city, the Weis only kept a close monitor.

No one dares to harbor any disparaging thoughts towards this famous Qin general, Xiang Shaolong.

On this day, Wu Ji came from Changzi city to see Xiang Shaolong and brought with him important news. According to the reports from their spies in Handan, Guo Kai is indeed petrified and trying

to persuade the Zhao King and Dowager to summon Li Mu back to protect the palace in the capital.

But after the King of Zhao gave the orders, Li Mu actually rejected them.

Xiang and Teng were secretly in awe, knowing that Li Mu has seen through their ploy.

After some discussion, the two of them decided to launch a massive attack at Fanwu.

Once all arrangements were made, Xiang Shaolong activated the 80,000 strong army ten days later and traveled up to Fanwu via the official roads. They set up camp and formations outside the city walls of the Zhaos and launched attacks on the city walls day and night. The Zhaos came out of the city to attack the camp a few times but each time the Qin army was able to find out about the attacks first and defeat them utterly.

After attacking for 18 days, they finally broke down a section of the city wall but they were fought off by the enemy. Both sides suffered heavy casualties.

But Xiang Shaolong and the rest know that their mission is accomplished for this time they need not worry that the King of Zhao won't summon Li Mu back to guard Fanwu. The truth is, with their current numbers, they do not have the capability to attack Handan at all.

The Zhaos only took one day to repair the wall.

Xiang Shaolong retreated his soldiers and did not attack so as to let their warriors have a chance to catch their breath. The dead were cremated on the spot while the injured soldiers were sent back to Zhongmou.

By this time, Xiang Shaolong is already numb to all the deaths on the battlefield, otherwise he'll never be able to become the Grand Commander of this Qin army.

Xiao Pan is right. There is no place for compassion on the battlefield.

Everyone is just a pawn on the chessboard, it's common to eat others or be eaten.

But the things that are within his control, he has already done them. For example caring for his subordinates, treating surrendered troops and civilians kindly etc. He wonders if the Zhaos are petrified of all the fights and they've stopped coming out of the city to retaliate and the two armies fell into a stalemate.

Huan Qi followed Xiang Shaolong's instructions and put on a huge act about sending in reinforcements constantly to increase the Zhao people's sense of fear.

As they entered the second month of summer, Li Mu finally succumbed to the King of Zhao's orders and returned to Handan.

Xiang Shaolong immediately gave orders to fortify their defenses and get ready to deal with Li Mu's retaliation.

The thing that he had most wanted to avoid is finally right in front of his eyes.

On this day, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun were doing the routine patrolling along the five miles long stockade when Jing Jun said with a smile, "Even if Li Mu has three heads and six arms, he'll find it difficult to take down our camp. At the most, it'll be a draw." Teng Yi asked, "Are there any movement on the Wei side?"

Jing Jun replied, "Wu Guo is taking care of the Weis, but if we have not taken down Zhongmou, we would have been fought off long ago."

That night, Xiang Shaolong had a nightmare. He dreamt that Li Mu came to attack the camp and everywhere within the camp, is filled with his famous cavalry and all the tents were burning at the same time. Xiang Shaolong rushed out of the tent and wanted to call out for Teng Yi and Jing Jun but no sound came out. He wanted to pull out his blade but his Hundred Battles Blade was missing and he woke up in shock. Only to realize that the sky is still dark but he was drenched in cold sweat and panting hard.

Xiang Shaolong had an intense thought of his beloved wives, maids and child at home and had the urge to cast everything aside and return to Xianyang immediately.

Once his nerves were settled, he wrapped a cloak around him and walked out the tent.

The personal guards who were on night duty hurriedly followed after him.

His commander's tent is situated at a higher ground. As he looked around, he saw that beneath the stars, there were tiny dots of firelight that seems to stretch endlessly towards the horizon.

The city that belonged to the Zhaos five miles away was fully lighted and looked utterly impressive.

Xiang Shaolong thought of the time when he left Handan to go to Daliang, he'd actually passed by this place and was shown around the city walls. He's forgotten the name of the city guard in charge of showing him around but he did not expect that on this day so many years later, he'll be the one in charge of attacking the same city walls.

The uncertainty of life cannot be summed up more accurately than this.

He then thought about his two beloved that he had once escorted, Zhao Qian and Zhao Ya, who has since died one after the other and can't help but feel a his heart breaking. He almost felt like crying out loud to ease the pain in his heart.

The night breeze blew at him, blowing away the tightness in his

chest and only then did he feel slightly better.

Looking at the city walls far ahead, he remembered the ancient city of Handan just a distance away from behind those walls and a mixture of feelings welled up in him.

The scariest thing about wars is the unpredictable factor.

Just like now, he has absolutely no idea what is happening right now behind those walls that spans hundreds of miles.

He can only guess.

Or do an evaluation.

To know oneself and know one's enemy, it's indeed not so easily achieved.

Where exactly is Li Mu right now? They were once bosom buddies but now they finally have to become mortal enemies on the battlefield and what exactly are they doing all these for? Only when the day started getting bright that Xiang Shaolong composed himself and went back to the tent to rest.

That's how the days were spent.

A month later, the messenger came with the news that Pu Hu has finally abandoned Tunliu and was ambushed and captured by

Huan Qi's hidden troops when he was escaping towards the Zhao borders and escorted back to Xianyang.

Strangely, there has been no activity from Li Mu up to this point in time.

Xiang and Teng were not too alarmed, for if Li Mu has been ordered to protect Handan, naturally he won't be coming to Fanwu.

Since their goal has been accomplished, the two of them had a discussion and decided to retract their troops and they will do it that very night.

As usual, they left behind empty camps but with lanterns burning. As soon as it got dark, they retreated back to Zhongmou in batches. Xiang Shaolong and Zhou Liang were the last to leave because with Eagle King's sharp eyes, they're not afraid that the enemy will come up behind them.

Jing Jun left first with 2,000 Wu family warriors, followed by Teng Yi's army.

Xiang Shaolong waited until about 10pm before he led the remaining 20,000 men and snuck away.

In a short while, the whole army has arrived on the official roads towards south, rapidly moving towards Zhongmou.

The bright moon is hanging in the sky to the left of them, casting a dim shadow on their right.

Xiang Shaolong rode alongside Zhou Liang in the middle of the army.

Zhou Liang commented with a sigh, “We were able to take down Tunliu this time all thanks to the wondrous plan of Great General. Even Li Mu has been fallen for your plan.”

Xiang Shaolong replied, “Li Mu did not fall for my plan, it’s the King of Zhao who fell for my plan.”

Zhou Liang said with a smile, “In war, only success or failure matters, no one cares how the victory is achieved but everyone will talk about how one is defeated.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, “Your words sound very correct.”

Zhou Liang looked up into the sky and said, “It’ll be dawn in another hour and by then we’ll be able to travel at full speed. Once we reach Zhongmou, we’ll be able to advance or retreat at will without any worries at all. Besides, even if our enemy surround the city, we still have Huan Qi’s army as reinforcements.”

Xiang Shaolong immediately felt relaxed, feeling a little as if he has achieved the goals of this mission.

Hopefully this will be the last battle and the only thing to look forward to in future will be the arrival of Xiao Pan's coronation ceremony.

The familiar sound of Eagle King flapping his wings was heard from the sky.

All the soldiers lifted their heads to look.

Looking at its behavior, they know that there's no pursuing army.

Zhou Liang pursed his lips and whistled, ordering him to come down to rest.

However, Eagle King suddenly cried out and circled twice over their heads before soaring into the sky again, suddenly flying towards the woods on their right.

Zhou Liang's expression changed immediately as he focused on Eagle King's actions.

Xiang Shaolong felt that something is greatly amiss and looked over as well.

Eagle King kept flying in circles under the bright moonlight, its flight pattern strange and indecipherable.

Zhou Liang exclaimed in alarm, “That is impossible. It seems that there’s a huge troop of our enemy rushing here from the left at a very fast speed.”

In an instant, Xiang Shaolong understood what is happening. Li Mu’s cavalry is coming.

Maybe their horses have their hooves covered in cloths so there wasn’t any sound at all.

This famous general who indeed lives up to his reputation has already deduced Xiang Shaolong’s strategy long ago.

Although he was forced to give up Tunliu, he is unwilling to let them off. He has been staying put for the last two months to make Xiang Shaolong and the rest mistakenly think that he is stationed at Handan. In fact, he has been here long ago and have set up an ambush, just waiting for the moment of their retreat.

Xiang Shaolong is now following the fatal footsteps of Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. The only advantage he has is that because of Eagle King, he is one step ahead in fining out the enemy’s approach.

If he were to escape immediately, the result will be not much different from Cheng Qiao’s army’s defeat. This means to say that before the whole army can arrive at Zhongmou, they would have been eliminated by Li Mu.

If he faces the battle head on, then at least Jing Jun and Teng Yi

can reach Zhongmou safely.

Xiang Shaolong hesitated no further and gave orders for the army to retreat to the dense forest towards the right and do their best to block the enemy.

Before they could even complete their formation, tens of thousands of Zhao soldiers charged out towards the official path from the left of the dense forest, charging towards them.

Arrows flew towards their enemies like locusts. The enemy's cavalry fell down row by row but before they could notch the second arrow, suddenly the enemy is right in front of them.

Xiang Shaolong roared his orders as he pulled out Hundred Battles Blade and led his men in the charge.

In a short moment, the whole 10 miles stretch of the official path is filled with battle cries and screams.

Just as the 20,000 Qin soldiers were fending off the enemy, there was a sudden chaos near the Zhao border. Another group of enemy seemed to charge out of nowhere and cut off Xiang Shaolong's reinforcements into two parts.

Xiang Shaolong, with Zhou Liang and 2,000 personal guards fought off the enemy's wave after wave of attacks with their lives.

Crackling sounds were suddenly heard from the woods behind

them as the fire burned, cutting off the Qin army's retreat route to the west. Xiang Shaolong knows that it's unavoidable, so he put aside everything else and cut down 10 odd enemy soldiers and killed his way right into the depths of the enemy's formation.

end of Book 20

Book 21 Chapter 1 – Escaping Dragon From The Battlefield

Just as Xiang Shaolong got rid one batch of enemies, a scream came from his side. He turned around in shock only to see Zhou Liang falling over his horse, with a long spear piercing through his armor from the back and exiting to the front. Obviously the enemy who threw that spear was very strong.

He let out an earth shattering roar and was about to rein his horse to kill his way back but his followers on either side of him tugged at his reins hard, pulling him along as they escaped.

One of the enemy generals, leading a group of soldiers ran after them and shouted, “Xiang Shaolong, where can you run!”

Xiang Shaolong took a look at the surroundings only to see that only less than a hundred of his personal guards are left and the forests around them are all burning bright. He has no idea how many more enemies are out there.

Now that the enemy has caught onto him, it’ll be difficult for him to avoid them in this situation. Just as he was about to turn back and avenge Zhou Liang right before he died, there was a shrill screech as Eagle King swooped down from the sky, right into the face of that Zhao general, its sharp beaks pecking at that general’s eyes madly.

The Zhao general let out a frightening scream as he abandoned the spear that he was about to throw and grabbed Eagle King with

his hands and both bird and human fell off the horse.

Because their general has met with misfortune, the pursuing army was sudden thrown into sudden chaos.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the Zhao general and Eagle King is as good as dead and felt that this opportunity should not be missed as he urged his horse to give chase.

He has just gone out about seven to eight feet when about a dozen Zhao soldiers came up from the left and right, raising their spears as they yelled and stabbed madly at their horses.

His personal guards on the left and right fell, becoming the target of massacre for the enemy.

At this point in time, Strong Wind executed its extraordinary ability and could actually suddenly pick up speed and dash out of the encirclement. Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt that he is all alone.

Hot blood coursed through Xiang Shaolong's veins as murderous thoughts welled up in him. He killed his way past the dozen odd Zhao soldiers who were charging from the left.

Luckily in this dense forest, arrows are of not much use. Otherwise he won't even have the chance to fight before he's taken down by arrows.

Cries and screams surrounded him, the atmosphere was extremely bleak.

From behind a clump of trees, Xiang Shaolong leaned on one side of Strong Wind as he charged into the enemy formation, waving his blade and slashing towards the opposing soldiers.

His target is the one right in front holding the torch and illuminating the path. Hundred Battles Blade slashed diagonally at that person's shoulder and fresh blood spewed immediately as he fell off his horse.

The torch fell to the grass and immediately started burning.

As the enemy were still screaming, Xiang Shaolong's strength seems to increase as he charged into their midst and waved his blade as he chopped and slashed.

The enemy hurriedly pulled out their swords to block him but did not expect their long swords to immediately break into halves as Hundred Battle Blade sliced through with an icy sheen. The Zhao soldiers fell. Xiang Shaolong dispersed the enemy and naturally killed his way towards where the light is the weakest.

By now the enemy has gained an overwhelming advantage. Although there are still skirmishes around him, it can no longer change the situation at hand.

A feeling of fatigue welled up in Xiang Shaolong.

Witnessing the death of Zhou Liang and so many of his men, he had the thought that he will not live alone. He gritted his teeth, turned his horse around as he ran back towards where the battle cries are the loudest. In a short instant he is out of the woods into the open plains.

Amidst the scattered trees, a group of a few hundred Qin soldiers were right in front, surrounded by thousands of enemy and fighting to their last breath.

Fury welled up in Xiang Shaolong as the murderous intent magnified again and he decided to go all the way out, slashing anyone in his way. The enemies who met him only ended up dead in an instant.

The Qin army saw that their Commander has returned and their morale was greatly boosted. Following in his bravado, they actually managed to fight their way out of the enemy's encirclement and ran towards a small hill up ahead.

Just as war cries were rising behind them, the small hill up ahead were suddenly lit with hundreds of torches.

Countless Zhao soldiers swarmed down from the top of the hill, each of them carrying weapons for long distance fighting, which are precisely the weapons that are the bane to cavalry like Xiang Shaolong and his men.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, knowing that Li Mu has covered

all bases in his plan and have set up one obstacle after another in the woods long ago with the sole goal of apprehending and killing him.

By this time anyone would know that it is over for them and without waiting for his orders, half of his men started escaping towards the two sides.

Xiang Shaolong could not stop them in time but knows in his heart that the enemy is deliberately forcing them to run towards the south.

Suddenly, he knows very clearly that as long as they can charge their way up to the top of the hill, there'll be a chance where they can escape into the hilly terrain and extricate themselves from danger.

By now there are only 50 odd men by his side. He immediately shouted, "If you want to live then come with me!"

He kept Hundred Battles Blade back into its sheath on his back and pulled out the flying needles around his waist as he clasped the horse with his thighs and charged, both his hands continuously throwing out needles. The enemy soldiers all fell to the ground as they were hit by the needles.

Amidst the chaos, Xiang Shaolong had thrown out close to a hundred flying needles, until both his arms were numb. By then he had used up all his needles and behind him corpses filled the ground, a distressing sight.

By now only about a dozen odd men were with him but they have successfully gone up the top of the hill.

Hundreds of enemy soldiers were attacking them madly like preying wolves and tigers.

Once again Xiang Shaolong took out Hundred Battles Blade.

By now his body was filled with a dozen odd large and small bleeding wounds but he could not feel any pain at all.

As he waved his precious blade, screams were heard and the corpses of his enemy on the field filled the ground.

Without even looking, Xiang Shaolong slashed behind him and killed another enemy who was coming up on him from the back.

In front of him, a person ran up on foot with a spear and aimed it straight at Strong Wind's neck.

Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to throw his precious blade and aimed it instead at that person's chest and pin him to the ground.

He felt a sudden heart-rending pain behind his shoulder blade, something had struck him.

Xiang Shaolong was in so much pain he collapsed on the back of his horse and his guards risked their lives to charge their way to him and cover him.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking to himself that this is the end.

In that instant, he thought of his beloved wives and concubines far away in Xianyang, and also thought of Lady Ni, Zhao Ya, Zhao Qian and countless people and incidents.

Just at this moment of life and death, he could feel Strong Wind dodging left and right as it kept increasing its speed and ran.

The battle cries were gradually getting fainter behind him.

Darkness was surrounding him.

He held Strong Wind's neck in a death grip, feeling as one with his horse. His consciousness gradually faded and he finally lost all senses.

He regained consciousness slowly and suddenly woke up in shock, only to feel his entire body racked with pain and felt extreme thirst.

He can't help but groan and open his eyes.

The autumn sun hung in the middle of the empty sky.

For a brief moment, not only does Xiang Shaolong have no idea where he is, he's also not sure what had actually happened.

He sat up with much difficulty and was shocked to see Strong Wind collapsed on its side a few feet away, its neck twisted in an unnatural position, its nose and mouth filled with foamy fluids which had solidified.

Xiang Shaolong felt his whole body shaking as he finally remembered what happened last night before he fainted.

Strong Wind had carried him and escaped from the battlefield and sacrificed its own life in order to save his.

Ever since Ji Yanran gave him the horse, he has spent more time with Strong Wind than with any of his beloved ladies.

Its loyalty to him has never changed and reduced at all.

Xiang Shaolong can no longer control his emotions as he hugged Strong Wind's body and cried manly tears!

He has lost.

Lost to the most famous general of that era, Li Mu.

That's not because he has planned poorly, but because Li Mu is

too smart.

Now his only hope is that he has successfully hindered Li Mu from catching up with the troops led by Teng and Jing before they can reach Zhongmou, otherwise their decoy troops that was meant to look like they're attacking Handan will be totally wiped out.

Luckily this time around the person in charge is the mature and stable Teng Yi who is capable of handling any situation.

If it was Jing Jun, he'll definitely turn back to save them and it would be akin to suicide.

It's a miracle that he's able to survive this time.

He can imagine that Li Mu will certainly dispatch his men to search for his whereabouts.

Once he thought of this, Xiang Shaolong felt a surge of instinct to survive. He first checked his injuries and can't help but thank Uncle Qing for making, and Qin Qing for sewing this armor for him. Although he was struck by a few arrows and hit by swords many times, there were only three spots which split open and he only suffered superficial injuries, with the wound behind his shoulder blades to be the deepest. The other injuries were all on his arms and limbs and were all superficial injuries which will not hinder his movement.

He removed his bag from Strong Wind's body and took out the

clothes inside. He beared with the pain as he peeled off his armor and clothes which had stuck to his flesh and dried blood. He tore off pieces of cloth and bandaged his wounds. After changing into the daily wear that warriors usually wear and securing the climbing equipment around his waist, his mood turned a little for the better.

After emptying the clean water in the bottle that Strong Wind was carrying, he took off the precious sword 'Blood Wave' that was tied around the reins and remembered that this is a famous sword that was once given to him by Li Mu. Conflicting feelings surged up in him unexpectedly.

By now it is getting dark. He had wanted to spend some effort to bury Strong Wind, or at least cover him with some soil but he could hear hooves-beat coming from somewhere far away. He had no choice but to bow respectfully at Strong Wind's body to express his thanks before starting on his escape with feelings of devastation and extreme sadness.

He is extremely familiar with traveling in the wilderness. Initially, whenever he ascends to a high point, he'll be able to see the torches of his pursuers.

They are like the grim reaper, entangling him in such a way that he is unable to determine what is the correct direction to Zhongmou.

By dawn, although he has temporarily thrown off his pursuers, he was totally lost and could only run towards the mountain cliffs.

When he was sitting down and resting at a dense forest at the top of a hill, his whole body felt as if it's falling apart. Not only is his mind in turmoil, his body is extremely exhausted.

Blood was oozing out of many of his wounds and the pain was unbearable. The feeling of utter defeat is enough to make anyone despair.

If not for the fact that he had undergone strict special task force training in the past, he surely will not be able to pull himself together at this point in time.

But he knows that this moment is the most important point in the route of escape.

Because it's easy for the enemy to find out where Strong Wind had collapsed and died, so they'll definitely make use of the opportunity that he is on foot and unable to travel far to push on the search for him. If he were to fall asleep now, he may end up in the hands of the enemy by the time he wakes up.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, gathered his spirits and after a short recovery of his energy, meditated according to the Mohist meditation method.

In a short while, he was calm and his whole body relaxed and during that time his energy was recovered swiftly. After about an hour of such meditation, he jumped up and used his strong sense of willpower to overcome the exhaustion his body is feeling and

continued on his flight for life.

He deliberately picked routes at the cliffs where beasts and men will find difficult to cover and used his climbing gear to move along. This is surely a move that his enemies will never expect. Otherwise if he were to choose to travel on flat open wilderness, how can he ever outrun horses on four legs.

Once it's dark, he rested next to a waterfall, his whole body in so much pain that he can't even move his fingers.

In a short instant he was fast asleep and by the time he woke up the sun was gradually rising.

His ears first heard the swooshing of the waterfall, mixed with the sounds made by insects and birds. The scene around him was serene. Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes and sat up only to see the waterfall on his left coming down from the cliff high above in a silvery cascade, the lake next to him foaming with white bubbles as the water crashed down on its surface, crashing back to the side of the cliff again in tight circles. The scene was magnificent.

He looked at his surroundings again to see countless mountains surrounding the area with trees growing wildly.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but be impressed and wondered why had he not noticed that the scenery here is so special yesterday?

Inspired by the surroundings where opportunities for survival

abound, he felt a strong surge of drive and vowed to live to return to the people who love and care for him.

In the past, when he lost contact with Tao Fang at the Zhao border after they ran into horse thieves, there was a period of time where he was roaming around in the wilderness. So now he is of course familiar with it and is able to pick wild vegetables to curb his hunger.

He thought that he may be the first human to ever step foot in this desolate wilderness and a sense of satisfaction welled up in him.

The place where Li Mu ambushed him is around the borders of Zhao and Wei, north of the city walls of the state of Zhao, so it's a higher possibility that he is right now within the borders of Wei. Once he ascends the peak nearby and can have a further look, he would be able to find the easily identifiable Yellow River or maybe the route he took in the past when he went to Wei from Zhao. From there he will be able to determine his plan to return to Zhongmou.

Once he thought of this, his spirits lifted and once he decided on the highest mountain peak nearby, he gritted his teeth and climbed his way up.

He can't help but be thankful that he had been practicing martial arts every day for the past few years, otherwise by now he won't have the stamina to go on further.

But when he saw the wild eagles circling around the top of the mountains, he can't help but be reminded of Zhou Liang who died in the battle and the loyal Eagle King who died for its owner and he could feel hot tears brimming in his eyes.

Are humans naturally selfish creatures? For various gains, they will rally around the excuse of protecting the country and the people and keep on killing one another. What's the point of all these?

What is most hateful is that he is part of such killing wars.

In a war, there's no one who can truly win. Even the victorious will have to pay a terrible price to win.

Such an outcome has been laid down in stone since time memorial and no one can change it but wars are still continuing without a stop.

Even if under a unified power, power struggles and murders have never really stopped.

Before dusk, he has ascended one of the peaks and the great land lay before his eyes.

He was immediately stunned by what he saw.

The remaining light from the setting sun cast a sad yet beautiful glow upon the vast land below as it stretched into the horizon.

Behind it there were grand mountains and cliffs, looking dangerous yet magnificent.

Although he could see a river winding along the valley, he is certain that it is not the Yellow River.

Far away towards the left he could vaguely make out terraced fields on a hilly slope. As it is now autumn, the harvesting period, the golden fields look especially outstanding when framed against the lush green wilderness.

Behind the hill, smoke was rising from chimneys, and it looks as if there could be a small village of sorts over there.

Xiang Shaolong was hesitant. He was sure he's never been to this place and the only way now is to ask for directions along the way but that may also reveal his whereabouts.

That night, he slept among the crevices of a huge stone and the next morning he tried to look for a route down the mountain. Only then did he understand why there is a saying, 'going up the mountain is easier than coming down the mountain'.

After much difficulty, he finally managed to arrive at the foot of the mountain after noon.

He has finally decided to go to that village and have a look and traveled towards there through the night. By now his clothes are

tattered and torn in many places and he has not shaven for days. He looked absolutely like a destitute vagabond.

Although he is on the run, but amidst the wilderness, looking at the rivers and streams with the vibrant yellow and red colors of the autumn forests, the scene is extremely beautiful. The scenic route also helped to elevate his feelings of loneliness.

From the top of the mountain, those chimney smokes looked very near but after walking for half a day, there was still no sight of the village.

Before the sky got dark, he plucked some wild vegetables to stave his hunger and spent the night next to a small lake.

He slept until the middle of the night when suddenly there were sounds of dogs barking and human voices.

Xiang Shaolong woke up in shock and knew that something is amiss. He hurriedly broke off a hollow reed nearby and hid amongst the weeds in the lake, breathing thru the reed.

He had just hidden himself when a team of a hundred odd men came right to the edge of the lake with hunting dogs.

The dogs were frantically sniffing the area where he was sleeping.

He heard someone say, "Xiang Shaolong must have been here

and ran away when he heard the dogs barking. If we can capture him this time, just the reward alone is enough for us to spend for the rest of our lives.”

Xiang Shaolong heard the Han accent in their speech and was stunned. Now he knows that when Strong Wind ran, he actually brought him within the Han border so if he just continue traveling towards the West, he'll reach the Qin borders sooner or later.

But then he thought about it again. Since the Hans are certain he is within their borders, they'll naturally barricade the paths leading towards Qin so if he travel Westward, he'll just be falling right into their trap.

The only way now is to hide until the danger is gone, until the enemy relaxes their guard before trying to find a way to return to the Qin border.

At this point in time, someone came right up to the edge of the lake shining a torch, reflecting the surface of the lake into a sea of red.

One of the men laughed, “If you were him, won't you try to run away quickly?”

Someone else answered, “But the dogs keep barking, maybe he's still hiding nearby. Why don't we release the dogs and let them run after him, won't that save us much effort?”

Such a suggestion was immediately met with agreement by everyone else.

The ropes were loosened and five to six hunting dogs shot towards the forest next to the lake like arrows, followed by the sounds of a fight between a howling wolf and the barking dogs, the sound gradually getting fainter.

Only now did the pursuing soldiers realize that they have been misled, the hounds were running after a nearby wolf and not Xiang Shaolong. They all ran shouting after the dogs.

Xiang Shaolong climbed up back to shore, all wet and knows that he has now become the number one war criminal which the six states have all put a bounty on. Unless he returns to Qin, otherwise no matter how big the world is, there won't be a place for him. He dare not stop and gave up the thought of going towards the village to ask for directions. He turned around and went towards the east, going further and further away from Qin.

That night, he escaped back to the mountainous regions and started climbing cliffs and mountains again. Luckily most of the state of Han is filled with mountainous terrain, otherwise his enemies would have caught up with him long ago.

Now that he knows that he is in the state of Han, he took a closer look at his surroundings and could slowly make out some recognizable mountains and rivers. He was ecstatic and traveled towards the Jing family village, the place where Jing Jun was born.

Three days later, the familiar scene of the Jing family village appeared before his eyes.

By now he is skinny beyond recognition and weak but he is finally relieved and could no longer hold on as he collapsed into a dead faint.

Book 21 Chapter 2 – Risky Moves

When Xiang Shaolong work up, he realized he's lying on a wooden bed in a village hut. Medication was applied to the wounds on his body and he's changed into clean clothes. Such a feeling of comfort is really indescribable.

The village lady who was waiting by his bed saw him wake up and ran out in shock to call the others.

In a short while, the village leader Jing Nian and a few village elders came. They all treated him with the respect due to a deity. After listening to him relate what happened, Jing Nian said, "We did send out our men to find information. The soldiers are still searching for Master Xiang. We heard that if Master Xiang is captured, there is a reward of a hundred pieces of gold so they are all trying their best.

Xiang Shaolong sat up, eating the food on the bed and asking at the same time, "Does the whole village know that I am here?"

Jing Nian replied, "We won't be so careless, a person's heart is unfathomable. Luckily the person who found Master Xiang unconscious outside our village is my son, so only the few of us know about Master Xiang."

Another elder Jing Xiong added, "Master Xiang, just rest assured and stay here to tend to your injuries. Once the matter dies down a little, we'll assign men to send you back to Qin."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, “To return to Qin from here is even more difficult than ascending heaven. Also, I can’t stay here for long or I will bring you catastrophe.”

Jing Xiong said, “In that case our whole clan might as well accompany Master Xiang back to Qin.” All the elders nodded their head vigorously in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong said, “Of course I will welcome all of you to Qin, but now is not the right time. It’ll have to wait until I return to Qin, that’s the only way to ensure nothing will happen.”

Another elder asked, “Then what should we do now?”

Xiang Shaolong thought hard for a while before answering, “I’ll have to trouble you to send out someone who is agile and totally trustworthy to go to Zhongmou and inform Teng Yi and Jing Jun that I am safe but can only go back after a period of time. Tell them to lead the army well and wait patiently.”

Jing Xiong said, “That is easy, our villagers frequently go to Zhongmou to pick herbs. Not only are they familiar with the route, they are also friendly with the people there so they definitely won’t raise any suspicion.”

Xiang Shaolong was relieved of one issue and said, “The soldiers will search their way here sooner or later. There are a lot of talents amongst the people after me. You can use my clothes and items to create an illusion that I have ran somewhere else. This will buy us another two to three days and I can take this time to recover and

start my escape.”

After some discussion, Jing Xiong and the elders all left the room.

Xiang Shaolong fell into a deep sleep and by the time he woke up it was the middle of the night and all was quiet except for the howling wind outside and the barking dogs. He can't help but feel his emotions go on a roller coaster ride.

The first time he came to this place, it was the middle of winter and with him at that time was the royal Zhao Princess, Zhao Qian. They spent a loving night in each other's arms then but how can they predict that their destiny will end with Zhao Qian's horrible death.

He can't help but feel a deep hatred for Lu Buwei welling up inside him.

He screamed in his heart: No matter what! I, Xiang Shaolong must return to Xianyang alive and witness Xiao Pan's ascension to the throne and Lu Buwei's horrible end.

When day broke, Jing Nian came with news that will make him glad.

Turns out that although his 2,000 strong army was totally exterminated, but their sacrifice was worth it, for it allowed the main bulk of the Qin army to return to Zhongmou safely. Right

now Li Mu's army is surrounding and attacking Zhongmou but there are news that he has suffered quite a lot of casualties as well.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved. They had predicted that the Zhaos will launch a counter-attack at Zhongmou so they've already stocked up on grains and fortified the city walls. Besides, with Huan Qi's army to support them, even if the enemy is Li Mu, he'll not find it easy to reclaim Zhongmou.

With Li Mu's intelligence, the only way for him ultimately is to retreat back to Changcheng.

Jing Nian added, "I sent someone to Zhongmou yesterday, so there won't be any problem with this issue. Hai!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that something is on his mind and said with a smile, "You're elderly, please speak your mind."

Jing Nian said, "Master Xiang is right. Another troop of soldiers went to the Shang family village 50 miles from here yesterday and they were searching and snatching things, even injuring a few of their people. The Shang family village saw that there were a lot of soldiers so they dare not make any comments although they were furious."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed and asked, "How long will it take to travel from there to here?"

Jing Nian said, "At least 2 days. Master Xiang can wait until

tomorrow morning before you leave.”

He paused and added, “It seems that the Han Wang’an have sent out a team of people from Nanzheng of Ducheng who are expert in tracking in the wilderness to search for Master Xiang. Some of our people came back from Nanzheng and said that the two states of Zhao and Han already have secret meetings to discuss how to capture you.”

He took out a map from his sleeve and passed it to Xiang Shaolong, saying, “I drew this map personally over the last two days. It may be a little rough but I daresay that it’s generally correct.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. He got dressed and came down the bed, feeling more than half of his energy coming back. If he have another day’s rest, he’ll have higher confidence that he will be able to escape.

The two of them sat down at the corner of a table and opened up the map to study it.

Jing Nian pointed at a cross in the middle of the map and said, “This is our Jing family village. On the upper right corner at the northeast, about a hundred miles away is the Capital of Han, Nanzheng. Another 200 miles northeast from there, that’s the Capital of the state of Wei, Daliang.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “I’ll burn this map immediately after I’m done seeing it. Otherwise if someone else gets a hand on this map,

they'll know that you have been protecting me.”

Jing Nian's expression changed slightly, for this is a point that he had never considered.

After Xiang Shaolong let Jing Nian explain in detail the river and mountain terrain drawn on the map, he kept the map and said, “It's best that even Grandpa Nian doesn't know my escape route, then you won't be able to accidentally reveal anything and incur other people's suspicions.”

Jing Nian nodded his head gladly.

Xiang Shaolong made the best use of time to rest and when he woke up, he memorized the map. After much thought and deliberation, he finally decided to take the risky route and go towards the Wei border before returning to the State of Zhao where he is most familiar with. After that he will travel west towards Tunliu and meet up with Huan Qi and he'll be able to accomplish his grand plan of thousand miles escape.

Once he's sure that he has remembered all the details on the map, he burned it.

After dinner, Xiang Shaolong decided to travel while it's dark. Jing Nian has already prepared rations, water, clothes and also collected a small amount of money for him as well.

Most interestingly, Jing Xiong gave him a rabbit in a bamboo

cage and explained, “This is a simple way to deal with the hounds. As hunting dogs are very sensitive to a rabbit’s scent, their scent can cover the scent emitted from a human body. If the hunting dogs sniff out the rabbit and come after you, just release the rabbit and let it lure the hunting dogs into a wild chase.”

Jing Nian added, “We’ve discussed, after Master Xiang leaves, we’ll abandon the village and move to the middle of the mountains to avoid trouble. Regarding Xiao Jun’s move to the State of Qin, some news have more or less leaked out. Since the officials have gone to the Shang family village, maybe they’ll find out about this so even if Master Xiang has never been here, they may still vent their anger on us.”

Xiang Shaolong felt apologetic and asked, “When do you plan to leave?”

Jing Nian replied, “We will delay no further. Once Master Xiang leaves we’ll pack up immediately and move.”

After bidding one another farewells, Xiang Shaolong carried the possible scapegoat, the rabbit and once again started on his escape journey.

Xiang Shaolong rode on the healthy horse that Jing Nian gave him and traveled a distance towards Daliang in the northeast. As he did not want the horse to be over exhausted, he stopped to let the horse rest.

He can still make out the lights and lanterns in the Jing family

village a distant away.

This horse is very intuitive as it just breathed quietly on the plains, not making any whinnying sounds at all.

He plans to spend 3 days with this horse.

Once they pass the flat plains, he will go into the mountainous area on foot. That would be much safer.

Honestly, he does not believe that anyone will be able to follow him in a mountainous area.

But if not for the Jing family village offering him refuge and a chance to take a break as well as getting food, horse, bows and arrows and some necessities, the Hans may very well have caught up with him by now.

After all there is a limit to one's endurance.

He can't help but feel positive as he thought of the scene when he's finally reunited with Teng, Jing and the rest, until his safe return to Xianyang to be welcomed by his beloved wife, maids and son.

Suddenly he could hear hoofbeats coming from the front.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed as he flew up his horse and galloped

up to the top of a nearby hill so that he can take a good look at the situation.

About 5 miles away, what looks like a fire dragon that was made up of torches was snaking its way here, their destination must likely to be the Jing family village.

Xiang Shaolong's limbs went cold immediately.

Jing Nian's concern is not for nothing, the enemy has indeed gotten news from the Shang family village and knows that someone from the Jing family village has gone to Xianyang.

In this era there's not a lot of people with the family name Jing and it'll be easy to guess their way to Jing Jun and Jing Shan. Otherwise why would the enemy rush there in the night?

If Xiang Shaolong is a selfish person, he will run away with no hesitation at this very moment, the further he can run the better. But how can he escape by himself.

Just as he was feeling at a loss, he suddenly had an idea. He got hold of an opportunity and galloped towards a dense forest that the enemy must pass through to go to the Jing family village and took out his fire starter to start fire on several spots.

If it's spring or summer, this plan would not have worked. But now the wind is blowing and the atmosphere is dry. The light from the stars illuminated the plains and in a short while the fire spread

and thick smoke rushed up to the sky.

Not only can this fire prevent the enemy from moving forward, it can also convey a most powerful message to the people at the Jing family village and urge them to leave faster.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that they won't run after him so he deliberately made the horse ran loudly and swiftly on the plains towards the northeast.

He'd rather lose his own life than to let anyone in the Jing family village come to any harm.

By the time it's dawn the next day, Xiang Shaolong is still riding on the endless plains but he has already slowed down.

This time, he deliberately revealed his whereabouts to lure the enemy to ran after him so that they will have no time to deal with the people in Jing family village. If his opponent has expert trackers, this plan of his will be a very dangerous one.

From time to time he will come across rivers or streams in his way. Such pretty scenery which during normal circumstances is a feast to the eyes, have not become his obstacles instead.

Luckily right until now there's no sight of the pursuing enemy. If such a situation continues, he will be able to safely reach the unpopulated mountainous areas at the Han and Wei border.

The Weis will never expect that instead of going west towards Qin, he'd actually travel east towards the Han border so they certainly won't put up their guards there. By then he'll be able to travel back to Tunliu via the Han border.

The horse is foaming at the mouth by now and Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to stop and stand guard at a high area to let the horse graze and drink at a small stream below the slope.

He has no appetite for food at all but to preserve his energy, he had no choice but to force himself to swallow two mouthfuls of dried meat.

The taste is actually not too bad.

These past few years, there were very little occasions for him to be roaming in the wilderness alone and he can't help but think about his strange time travel encounter.

In a blink of an eye, it's been seven years.

During these years, even those closest to him like Ji Yanran, Teng Yi etc does not know his secret. He can only keep this piece of earth shattering secret that he is actually from the 21st century deep in his heart.

As for Xiao Pan's secret, there's still Teng Yi and Wu Tingfang who knows.

He is very clear on what Xiao Pan's fate will be, because Xiao Pan will become Emperor Qin, the one who built and unified China.

But he is totally unclear about his own fate.

Even the question of returning to Xianyang alive is an unknown right at this moment.

Just as he was pondering, he could hear hoof beats coming from afar again.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and looking over, his countenance changed immediately.

He saw that near the woods about two miles away, about 50 odd healthy horses were galloping at full speed but only half of the horses have riders while the others were without saddles.

From the way that the horses can run so neatly and swiftly behind the main group without being leashed, he knows that, not only are these horses quality horses but also well trained warhorses.

After so many years of experience, he has learnt how to differentiate people by their riding skills.

These 27 riders could still weave left and right effortlessly in such mountainous and unfamiliar terrain, he knew that they are all first rated riders.

The worst thing is that his riding and archery skills are still his weakest. On such flat terrain and with them having back up horses to switch to, if they manage to catch up with him, he won't even have the chance to retaliate. The enemy can catch up with him so quickly, so they must be expert trackers. Maybe these are the ones that Jing Nian heard, the experts under specific orders by Han Wang'an to arrest him.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed his surroundings, gritted his teeth and dashed down the slope. He jumped onto the horse's back and quietly muttered 'Sorry, horse', as he urged the horse to gallop around the small hill and run for his life.

His destination is the dense forest at the end of the flat plains. If he can make his way there, he'll be able to make use of the surroundings there to have a life and death battle with the enemy. He will not sit there and be killed and sully the reputation of the best special task force warrior of the 21st century.

Xiang Shaolong removed his gear from the horse and used a cloth to tie two heavy stones which is about his weight and hung it on the horse's saddle. After that he used a sharp knife and pierced into the horse's buttock.

The horse screamed and galloped into the dense forest with the stones on it.

By now the pursuing enemy is about half a mile away. If not for the fact that Xiang Shaolong stepped into the stream and traveled

about half a mile along it so that the enemy will not be able to find his footsteps, they may already have caught up with him.

But since the enemy can still follow him, it means that they obviously have very outstanding trackers among them.

He dare not hesitate and hurriedly carried his luggage and ran deep into the forest.

After walking for a while, he could hear hoof beats passing him from behind and quickly fading away.

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief as he sped up and ran towards a tall hill in the forest.

Even if he came upon vines or roots blocking his way, he dare not use his sword to cut them away for fear of leaving traces behind.

He has gone for about a hundred odd feet when he could hear the hoof beats hurriedly returning from the way they left, straight towards his position.

Xiang Shaolong calmed down instead at this time.

As a member of the special task force, it is a requirement and an iron rule that one must keep calm in the face of impending danger.

He quietly analyzed the situation and thought that since the

enemy could tell that it's a trap, he is sure that they are not only relying on hoof prints to pursue him. Just as he was feeling perplexed, he heard barking coming nearer and nearer and from the sound of it, there's only one dog.

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened and was feeling ecstatic instead of shocked. He hid himself among some thick bushes, squatted down and removed the bamboo cage with the rabbit from his back and waited patiently.

By now the sky is slowly getting darker. Xiang Shaolong took out his dagger and peeped through the leaves, totally concentrating on the movements outside.

The dog barks stopped only to hear hasty footsteps coming nearer as the enemies abandoned their horses to go on foot.

In a short while, more than ten odd black shadows that were spread out came slowly towards him from about 30 feet away, with one of them holding on to a leash with a small dog at the other end, barking madly as it strained towards his hiding place.

Xiang Shaolong quietly opened the cage.

The rabbit was already trembling in fear when it heard the barks earlier and now that it saw an escape route, it shot out like an arrow and ran off towards the left.

That dog was indeed instantly alert and turned towards that

direction, barking and running madly.

The person holding the leash shouted, “Hurry! Spot is running towards that direction!”

The enemy all ran after it.

Once Xiang Shaolong has made sure that all the enemy has retreated, he jumped up and followed after them, quietly thinking to himself, ‘Don’t blame me for being ruthless but in such a situation, there’s no place for mercy at all.’

Book 21 Chapter 3 – Surrounded By Enemies

Grasping Bloodwave, Xiang Shaolong overtook an enemy soldier who was lagging behind the rest. He reached from behind to cover his enemy's mouth while Blood Wave pierced the enemy's neck from the side. The enemy only struggled a moment before taking his last breath. Xiang Shaolong handily took over his crossbow and bolts. The rest of the enemies ahead were focused on the path the pursuing dog had gone. The day had also darkened to the point where it was difficult to spot the path, hence the enemies were oblivious to the God of Death pressing from the rear. When Xiang Shaolong had used the same tactic to dispatch the next enemy soldier, the rest of the enemies had halted at a grass patch. A ten-feet high pile of rocks was blocking the path. Apparently, the rabbit was hiding in there somewhere, compelling the dog to pounce and howl continuously. One person shouted "Light the torches!" At this moment, Xiang Shaolong had already used the cover of the trees to sneak up on one of the men, dragged him aside and murdered him while seizing the crossbow in his hand.

Five torches ignited, dyeing the jungle blood-red. All around, ancient trees reached to the sky. As the tall trees cut-off the sunlight all year round, only a few creepers managed to grow on the ground. The only exception was a ten feet wide clump of shrubbery, presenting an obvious target. The remaining twenty four enemies had their crossbows tensed and ready to fire. The leader of the enemies shouted towards the shrubbery: "Xiang Shaolong, you can forget about escaping this time. Come out obediently, else we will burn you till you have no remains left." The dog had been recalled by its master with a low shout and had stopped barking. It had even lain down submissively, extremely obedient.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed the situation and saw that the men were standing close to each other and were illuminated by the torches. It would be difficult to repeat his ploy of attacking from behind. Taking advantage of the crackling from the torches, he took out his climbing hook and shot it over a branch on the tree beside him. Naturally the rabbit in the undergrowth did not respond to the man's shout. However those men appeared unwilling to set fire to the brush for fear of causing collateral damage [I don't actually understand this...]. After abusing him for a while more, one of the men took a look around and exclaimed in surprise: "Yi! Where is Dian Cheng?" Xiang Shaolong emerged from behind the tree and replied "I am here!". As everyone turned towards him in shock, the crossbows in his left and right arms emitted their terrifying twang. Two of the men carrying torches were pierced in the chest and fell. Their torches also fell to the ground.

When the enemies finally returned fire, Xiang Shaolong had dodged behind the large tree and climbed up with his apparatus. As he was hidden amidst the thick leaves and branches, the rest of the men thought he was still taking cover behind the tree. They spread out and surrounded the tree. The fallen torches had started two bush fires which spread rapidly, creating a lot of thick smoke. Xiang Shaolong first retrieved his hook and then shot it towards the branches of another large tree about twenty feet away. Securing the hook, he then surveyed the situation from his vantage point, awaiting the enemies' response.

Coughing sounds emanated and the dog whimpered. Four of the men were compelled forward by the fire and smoke, and were about to dash towards Xiang Shaolong's original hiding place behind the tree when Xiang Shaolong fired the crossbows in his hands. Two enemies collapsed immediately.

The bushfire had now increased greatly with thick smoke everywhere, obscuring Xiang Shaolong's line of sight. After shooting down another enemy, he hurriedly traversed to the other tree in the air using the already secured hook. The enemies had now reached the tree he was originally at under the cover of smoke, only to discover that there was no one there. Meanwhile, three more enemies had been shot down by him. Of the twenty seven enemies originally, nine had been felled by his guerrilla tactics. The remaining men had also been frightened into scattering and hiding, and no longer had their former fighting spirit.

Xiang Shaolong had achieved his objective and traversed to an even further tree before nimbly rappelling back to ground. He ran towards the direction where the enemies' horses' hoof sounds had previously stopped. Slightly more than an hour later, he finally exited the woods. Close to fifty war horses were tied up just outside the woods. It was already midnight and the moon was high in the sky, filling the land with a mysterious atmosphere. After selecting a strong horse, he cut the ropes on the rest and lashed them all together. He then lightly poked one of the horse's thigh with Blood Wave. The horse neighed in pain and ran off together with the rest of the horses shoving and pulling. Xiang Shaolong hopped on the remaining horse, but it was a while before he was able to control the horse and ride away freely.

Three days later, while crossing a prairie, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly ditched his horse and crossed the Wei-Han border. His mood was now greatly improved, feeling as if he were on a sight-seeing tour. Between the Wei capitol Daliang and the Han capitol Nanheng lay Zhongmu, which was at present only 100 miles North of where he was. Xiang Shaolong had to exert a large

amount of his self-control before he could suppress his strong urge to head straight to the refuge in Zhongmu. That would of-course be most unwise and reckless.

The weather had gradually turned cold. Fortunately, Jing Nian had prepared Winter clothing for him, allowing him to avoid suffering in the cold. He walked for five days before reaching the outskirts of Lianshan district. The rising sun emerged in the East. Sunshine sprinkled over the ridges and plains, finishing the grass and trees in yellow, presenting a scene of boundless vitality. Nearby was a lake. As the cold wind blew over, the water rippled and the reflection of the trees danced in a delightfully colourful pattern, causing Xiang Shaolong to be even more carefree and relaxed, forgetting his situation as a fugitive.

Lush primeval forests and dense undergrowth, endless wild meadows and marshland surrounding a lake resembling a large mirror, truly a wonderful scenery. Many tents were pitched on the meadow beside the lake. Large numbers of horses and sheep were also leisurely grazing on the grassland. The atmosphere was harmonious and peaceful. Xiang Shaolong watched for a long time before collecting his thoughts, and headed towards Daliang. He naturally wouldn't walk right into a trap by heading for Daliang directly, but intended to reach the outskirts of Daliang before using the previous route he had taken from Zhao to Daliang to enter the Zhao border. Even though he had to go in a big circle, it was the safest route he could think of.

Two hours later, he was on a prairie deep within the Wei border. He recalled on the night of the ambush, Ji Feng must have borne him close to three hundred miles in escape, from his location then, to the Zhao-Wei border and then to the mountain range near the

Jing family village before collapsing in exhaustion. Presently, he could be said to be in familiar ground.

After walking Northeast for another six hours, he heard hoof beats ahead. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly hid himself. A moment later, a close to twenty strong squad of Wei soldiers galloped into view. They ascended a nearby hill, raised camp and posted sentries. Xiang Shaolong felt his scalp numb, his heart exclaiming in dismay. The Wei people must have received news that he was alive and had possibly escaped here.

The fact was, whether he headed to Zhongmu or Daliang, it would be open plains all the way. The Weis would certainly be familiar with their own territory and would only need to post sentries on all the high points. If he was even slightly careless, his route would be revealed and it would be difficult for him to avoid the consequences of capture. The enemy had evidently just started their operations. Once the sentry post had been established, they would certainly start a blanket search of the entire area. With fast horses and hunting dogs searching for him, he could forget about escaping with his life. Most vexing was the fact that there were several large rivers on his path to Daliang. The Weis would only need to post sentries along the river, then he would not have the confidence to sneak across even at night. Pondering this, he nonetheless knew he had to forge ahead. The alternative was to return to the mountains, which was not an option. At the moment, the danger would not be any less returning to the Han border or heading South to Chu territory. The question was whether he should steel himself and dash North to Zhongmu. He could then regroup with Teng Yi and Jing Jun in a matter of days. This thought was now even more enticing than before, but he also knew that that was the most dangerous of all routes.

Xiang Shaolong continued this internal struggle on where to proceed until the sun set in the West. In the end, he resolved to explore the route to Zhongmu. Only if he could not find a way past the blockade would he head East towards Daliang, following his original plan to return to Qin via Zhao. Having made the decision, he felt more relaxed. He took another hour to bypass the enemy's sentry post before continuing North towards Zhongmu.

Before reaching Zhongmu, he needed to pass by another Wei city "Jiao Cheng". Naturally he would not think of entering the city. He had to be extra careful to avoid being discovered by the city's defenders. Relying on his Special Forces training, he covered thirty miles before daybreak, running until his legs ached. In the end, he hid in a patch of dense jungle to rest. Not letting down his guard, he exerted more effort to climb up a large tree and concealing himself in its thick foliage before lying down on a branch and closing his eyes to rest. This tree was taller than others and was at the edge of the forest grove. From it, he could survey the surrounding plains as well as the main road to Jiao Cheng. He was soon fast asleep.

An indefinite time later, he was awakened by the sound of horses and men. Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes and started in shock. Both the insides and outside of the jungle were filled with Wei soldiers. Even a conservative estimate numbered them at about a thousand. They were making a thorough search of the area. He was immediately covered in cold sweat, realising that being overly exhausted, he was not aroused until the enemy was directly below him. In fact, if he had not been sleeping in a groove formed by three branches, he might have fallen to the ground in his stupor. He did not dare move even his fingers and toes [I think in English this translates to "did not move a hair"]. Only after the Wei soldiers had passed by did he dare to peek his head out to survey the

situation.

Two teams of cavalry rode past on the official road outside the jungle grove. Further out, there was a hill with even more horses and men. The commanders of this search appeared to be there. Looking at the scale of the search, he knew that the Wei King whom he had formerly benefited had spared no effort in his command to capture or kill Xiang Shaolong. This contingent of more than two thousand soldiers were likely from Jiao Cheng's garrison, and were likely only a portion of the entire search party. With such strength in numbers and the Wei people's home ground advantage, he realised he would be unable to advance even an inch.

He couldn't help feeling a tinge of regret. If he had not impatiently reached for Zhongmu but had detoured to Daliang instead, he would not be in his present danger. Right now, it seemed the safest option would be to return to the mountainous Wei-Han border. He could then hide there for ten days to half a month while the tempest died down. It would then be much easier to get to wherever he wanted to go.

At this moment, the sound of dogs barking rang out in the forest. Xiang Shaolong's tensed, awaiting his fate. At present, the large number of people present had muddled the scents so he was not afraid of being discovered by the hounds' acute noses. However, if he was escaping alone in the dead of the night, it would be difficult for him to escape the hounds' attention. Seeing the enemy's troop disposition, how would he dare to continue towards Jiao Cheng? Once the patrolling soldiers had left, he would change his direction from North to East towards the South of Daliang.

Staking his all and after avoiding endless waves of pursuing soldiers, Xiang Shaolong finally arrived at the West bank of the famous river "Jia Lu He". Looking across, both sides were tranquil and undisturbed, nary a person in sight. But he was also certain that there were concealed sentries in the jungle overlooking the river. He scrutinised carefully, spotting a place where more than ten enemies could conceal themselves. He then ascended a tree and hid himself patiently, waiting for nightfall.

He quickly fell asleep from his exhaustion. When he awoke, the entire landscape had turned into beautiful white wonderland. His face and upper body were covered with light snow, but he did not feel cold. The first snowfall had finally arrived. Xiang Shaolong brushed off the powdery snow on his body and looked somberly at the continuing snowfall. Snow storms were good for concealing hiding places, but terrible for flight. If he jumped into the water now and emerged from the river wet, he would freeze to death. Moreover, once the snowfall stopped, the footprints he left behind would make it impossible for him to evade the pursuing enemies.

At the moment, he only had three choices:

The first was to chop wood and construct a raft to ford the great river. However this would be time consuming and prone to incidents and dangerous, unless he could be sure that the enemies' sentries were not nearby. Else once he alerted the enemy, he would not even have the chance to defend himself.

The second option was to follow the bank upriver. From Jing Nian's map, the source of this river was a mountainous region Southwest of Zhongmu. Nonetheless, once he rounded the river,

he would be near the Southern corner of Zhongmu, which would be extremely dangerous. Moreover, if he then wanted to carry on to Daliang, the route would be 500 miles longer than what he originally planned, totally not worth it.

The final option was to head downriver. Even though this would bring him further and further from Daliang, it would allow him to escape the danger zone relatively easily. If he could reach the peaceful areas where several large rivers converged, he could even look for an opportunity to cross the river on a boat. More, he could divert even further South to the Chu border. Then even if he was captured by the Chus, he might even be released by Li Yan Yan or Li Yuan privately on account of their former affections.

Once he made his decision, he hurriedly got on the move and followed the river South. He walked until daybreak before the snow finally stopped. When Xiang Shaolong turned his head to look, he saw his footprints like a long tail on the virgin snow and silently called out in misery. After he carried on a while more, he realised that if he carried on thus, he would be discovered by the pursuing soldiers sooner or later. With sudden inspiration, he stopped, inspected his surroundings, formulated a plan and hurried towards a nearby forest grove. Entering the forest, he drew Blood Wave and cut down a relatively slender pomegranate tree. He next used his dagger to pare the tree into two five feet long skis. The front foot of the skis were raised slightly. The middle of the skis were also raised slightly, extending front and back, just enough for him to step on it with his booted feet. He next drilled four small holes in the wood, cut his hooks into two and used them to secure his boots to the skis through the holes. The most clever was the groove at the bottom of the skis from front to back, emulating modern skis.

At dusk, this first pair of skis in China was finally realised. As a Special Force soldier, Xiang Shaolong had received expert skiing training. Proceeding thus was as easy as ABC to him. After completing the skis, he also fashioned some ski poles. The top was wider and the bottom narrowed to a point. Three inches above the sharpened point, he lashed a horizontal stick, serving as "snow disks" [I think he's referring to the discs at the bottom of ski poles that prevent them from sinking in too deep. Huang Yi must be a fan of skiing to think of this detail =)].

When everything was complete, it was already late at night. Cutting and paring the hard as iron pomegranate tree had cost him a lot of energy, so he rested a while before making his next move. He hung the skis and ski poles on his back and ran to the riverbank on foot. Although it was difficult to make each step, his mood was greatly improved from before. By daybreak, he had covered about three miles, arriving at the banks of the great river. He deliberately climbed down the banks, leaving distinct footprints before doubling back by stepping into the footprints, climbing back up the bank. Next, he put on his skis, and secured them. He gave a shout and began his miraculous feat of skiing.

He utilised the undulating landscape, increasing his speed, unhurried but quick, rounded a large circle and returned to the forest grove. He then hid himself on top of a taller than average tree and waited. His spirit was immeasurably stimulated, and required a long time before he was able to calm himself down and close his eyes to get some sleep.

Roused by noise, Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes to look, and was shocked out of his wits. The entire landscape was covered with Wei cavalry, at least a thousand strong. They were following his

distinct footprints towards the forest grove. He saw them pass through the forest grove towards the riverbank, to where his footprints ended before suddenly halting to confer. Soon, the Wei soldiers dismounted and rapidly cut wood to build rafts, and endless hum of activity. At this moment, Snow started falling again, more heavily than the previous snowfall. Waves of snow clumps started falling from the ash grey sky, sometimes slowly, sometimes flurriedly. By midday, all hoofprints and footprints prior to the snowfall had been obscured.

Xiang Shaolong silently thanked the heavens for their assistance. This way, once the enemy had forded the river and failed to find his footprints, they could only spread out to comb the area, getting further and further away from him in their pursuit. Originally detrimental to him, the snowfall had become his protective charm. As he was celebrating in his heart, barking sounds started in the distance. A hundred plus strong contingent of Wei foot soldiers with hunting dogs was coming along the river.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realised that this team was part of the cavalry regiment that had constructed rafts and crossed the river. The cavalry had rushed ahead because they had seen his footprints and also because of the impending snowfall, hence the canine contingent had lagged behind by two hours. He couldn't help exclaiming at his close shave. If it had been the canine contingent that had arrived first earlier, his brilliant plan might not have succeeded. But now, the heavy snowfall had covered his scent!

It was dusk before the entire Wei regiment crossed the river. Xiang Shaolong patiently waited for another two hours before climbing down the tree. Taking advantage of the dark night, high winds and snow-filled sky, he took up his ski poles, and like a bird

over a boundless snowscape, he flew towards the Jia Lu river. With this apparatus to "fly over" the snowy landscape, he decided to risk a bit of danger and edged towards Zhongmu. From his first escape until now, this was the first time he felt any hope for the future.

Book 21 Chapter 4 – Illicit Relations In A Secret Room

Xiang Shaolong lay in the underbrush observing the enemy's barracks. In just two days, he had covered what would have taken an ordinary person ten days, reaching a Zhao encampment approximately ten miles from Zhongmu. He was initially confident of sneaking past the enemy's defensive perimeter, but upon seeing the situation, this unfulfilled dream burst like foam bubbles in sunshine. Most aggravating was the fact that Li Mu had cut down all the trees in the area that might have offered him cover. He had also dug long trenches in the plains where Xiang Shaolong was and posted guards on all passageways. Even if he could somehow cross the trenches, he still had to surmount three layers of fences before he could reach the barracks. And then he had to sneak past ten miles of barracks and finally through a stretch of plains outside Zhongmu that was completely devoid of cover.

Looking at Li Mu's arrangements, he must be preventing anyone from approaching Zhongmu. Xiang Shaolong was like a delirious half-starved kitten seeing a fish but was unable to consume it. The agony was beyond description. His only gratification was that while Li Mu had put a water-tight seal around Zhongmu, he was still unable to breach Zhongmu's sturdy walls. He was most familiar with Zhongmu's capabilities. Defending Zhongmu for even a year would not be a difficult thing.

At the moment, he had only two choices. The first was to follow his original plan to get to Daliang and then to the Zhao border before reuniting with Huan Qi at Tunliu. The other option was to go round Zhongmu, sneak past the Zhao soldier's frontier defence and then back to Qin. The latter option was of course much more

dangerous. With Li Mu's meticulous planning, he is sure to have outposts preventing Qin soldiers from rendering assistance from the East. If he did not have his skis, this option was akin to walking into a trap. But at this point, it was not without a chance of success. Just as this desire was burning in his heart, the sound of horses and dogs came from the Southwest. Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. He let go of this enticing thought and headed towards Daliang.

He reached the outskirts of the Wei capital of Daliang at dusk the next day. Having returned to the scene of his previous exploits, he thought about the late Prince Xinling Wei Wuji and could not help his conflicting emotions. At this point he had already exhausted his dried rations and was both hungry and tired. Yet Daliang's defences had obviously been strengthened. All the high points were staffed with sentries. Most despairing for him were the few large rivers and man-made ditches obstructing the road towards Daliang.

Observing the area, he realised that he had to cross the rivers to reach Daliang before crossing the ditches on the other side of capital in order to get to the Zhao border. It would also be best for him to stock up on foodstuff on the way as the bitter cold made it impossible to gather wild fruits to allay his hunger as he had been doing. At present, his greatest advantage was that the Wei people were still unaware that he had arrived at the vicinity of Daliang. It was therefore not impossible to traverse Daliang before rushing to the Zhao border.

After the decision was made, he hid his equipment such as the ski board and crossbow at a certain place and marked a symbol. Then he climbed up onto a big tree, swept away the snow and huddled in

between the branches to wait for dawn.

At midnight, snow fell heavily and he felt frozen and trembled in the cold. Despite suffering from cold and hunger, the only thing he could do was to be patient. As he was being attacked, he was always escaping capture using his wits and strong determination and therefore had no time to think. However, as he settled down, he was plagued by stray thoughts.

Thoughts about the man who was sent by Jing Nian and whether this man managed to reach Teng Yi with his news. Thoughts about those wives in Xianyang, what how they would react to his news. These thoughts felt like tonnes of pressure on his mind, and he was unable to relax.

The painful borne by the body is far less than the pressure felt in the heart.

Suddenly he felt the chill and lost consciousness. When he woke, he felt the pain throughout his entire body and realised that he had fallen off the tree in the night, and his body was covered by snow. The winter sun had risen and the soft sunlight entered the forest. He tried to get up and felt the heat on his face and a weakened mental state. He realised that he had fallen sick at this critical moment! Xiang Shaolong felt extremely weak both mentally and physically, but he knew that if he didn't continue the journey before nightfall, he would not live to see tomorrow's dawn.

By thinking about his wives to distract the weakness, he tried his hardest to stand. Every step that he stumbled, he would get back up to try to reach the edge of forest. When he barely got to edge,

his strength gave out and he fell back down unconscious.

After a long period, he was woken by the sound of cart wheels scraping against the ground. He opened his eyes and saw a convoy of carts moving along the road to Daliang. Sunlight had already faded and dark clouds gathered overhead to signal another incoming snowstorm.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this very moment would be about life or death. Trying to avoid attention, he snuck into the convoy and climbed onto one of the carts, falling onto soft wheat.

Then he lost consciousness.

A voice woke Xiang Shaolong. Although he still suffered from hot and cold, tiredness, and a leaden head. He still felt better than before. But his throat burnt and he desperately needed some water or tea.

Xiang Shaolong lifted up the tent of the cart. The only thing he saw in the endless white snow, besides the road, were some houses. It felt like he had arrived in the city of Daliang after a nightmare.

The cart moved slowly and headed off in another direction. At that moment, Xiang Shaolong could not decide whether it was better alight here or not, and as he hesitated, the cart turned into a street and entered into the yard of a residence.

Xiang Shaolong gathered his remaining strength and willpower

and waited for the right moment. The cart stopped in front of a warehouse. Sunlight had been extinguished, and thus the workers were not going to offload the cart immediately. Instead, they just parked the cart and left.

Xiang Shaolong thanked his lucky stars. After for a while, he used his remaining strength to crawl out from the cart, and fell onto the show.

Lying on the ground, he refreshed his mind to observe the circumstances. He saw that the warehouses were dark but that the front lawn was lighted. He observed that the residence should belong to one of the Wei's nobles as it was surrounded by high walls.

He laid in a rectangular open lawn and there was nothing other than the carts. On side of the lawn was a stable while the other side consisted of the slave quarters.

The sound of dogs barking from somewhere in the front lawn startled Xiang Shaolong. In this era, noble residences always rear dogs so that when the noble is sleeping, the dogs would patrol the lawn.

There is no way for Xiang Shaolong to climb out from the wall in his current condition and the only thing he can do is to find a hiding place and wait for tomorrow.

With strength that appeared from nowhere, he got up and to find a warehouse to lay in. At the same time he feels that he is

recovering, and his spirit is restored.

When he got in front of a warehouse, he found that it is locked up securely and that he can't enter.

On impulse, he checked every door and manages to find an unlocked door at the last try. He feels joy and enters.

As the door closes and shuts out the light from the front lawn, a hot body hugs him suddenly. She says, "I did not expect you to come. Didn't Mistress command you to drive a cart for her? Why are you back this early?"

Xiang Shaolong grumbled inwardly. He had inadvertently bumped into an illicit relation between slaves. He was out of words to explain but the infatuated lady encircled her arms around his neck and kissed him softly.

It would be disrespectful to decline so Xiang Shaolong took it in his stride.

The lady left his lips trembling and said, "You are not Shǐlíng. You are Liú Jié. You can't cheat me."

Xiang Shaolong replied vaguely afraid that she would raise her voice. He moved forward and hugged the lady and kissed her cherry lips.

The lady's alluring passion, her moral struggle, and amorousness

created a reaction within him. Perhaps it was the excitement of sexual desire that caused Xiang Shaolong to feel better from his illness, for he did not feel the cold unlike previously.

The most exciting thing he feels that the seductive event is that he does not even know the appearance of the other party; from touch he can feel that she is voluptuous, and sexually experienced.

Xiang Shaolong strength is in his resistance against temptation of womanly wiles. But he is not a modest in rites. Now that he is turned on by desire, he is unable to stop. Moreover, if he does not satisfy her, he has to subdue or kill her. Upon weighing the importance of the 2 decisions, the former is better and it may deceive. [Someone help me improve this passage please]

His hands are searching on her body to incite sexual passion. The lady starts breathing heavily and her body becomes soft and hot. If there is a light, it would reveal her burning cheeks. His searching fingers finds that her coat is surprisingly thick and her smooth thighs are plentiful. He realizes that she is a very young and estimates her age not older than 20.

Her reaction is like burning fire while her body reacts to his hugs and fondles, and she can't stop groping his back. A groan is released from deep inside her lips and anyone knows what she desires for.

The fact that she knows that he is not the one who is waiting for but is still reacting freely, therefore her mind is expansive on sexual relationship. Thus Xiang Shaolong does not feel any responsibility.

This thought causes him to relax and enjoy the sexual amorousness.

Suddenly, she detaches from him and leads him by the hand into darkness. Without the heat from her burning body, he is feeling cold and weak again. He forced a smile, never expecting that a lady can be a panacea to his illness.

They stop and fall onto some wheat. There is a quilt on the wheat, since she was sneaking here more than once, she was well prepared.

Laying on a comfortable “bed”, Xiang Shaolong never wants to get up again.

The lady stands up and takes off her clothes like a sex-starved person. She throws herself on Xiang Shaolong with a smooth, warm and hot body. When she starts to strip him, Xiang Shaolong finds that he is reacting passionately.

Xiang Shaolong smiles bitterly, he is poor but still addicted to sex.

“You such are despicable person, usually looking at me with your desire.” The lady whispers on his ear. “I don’t know what you paid ShiLing for this that he lets you come and humiliate me. Hurry up!”

Xiang Shaolong turns and presses tightly to her. The lady says “Do you like me?” He mumbles, and concentrates on the joy of sexual relationship.

Debauchery descends onto the warehouse.

Xiang Shaolong worked hard for a while, his strength could not cater for this, so the lady takes the lead. After a while, she is spent and lays on his body. Xiang Shaolong hugs her tightly and says “I am not Liu Jie!”

She trembles. “Who are you?”

He has a planned answer. “I am Chen Wu, a worker that followed from the cart team. I want to see the situation of the warehouse but I met you. Thank God, I am so lucky. What is your name?”

The lady hesitated, and then she laughs out loud and says, “You dead man! Treated me like this! I am Qiu Lin and I am the maid of Young Master. Sigh! You! But you are better than Young Master and Shi Ling and even Liu Jie is not as good as you.”

Xiang Shaolong feels free for this and asks, “Would you please bring me some food and drink? But don’t let anyone know!”

Qiu Lin sits up and whispers with her hand lingering on his chest, “OK! If someone knows this, I am dead too!” And she dresses up and leaves.

Xiang Shaolong wears his clothes and falls sleep because of the exertion.

After a while, he is woken by Qiu Lin. She lights on a oil lamp, looking at him speechless. Xiang Shaolong sits up, and looking on her too.

Qiu Lin's beauty cannot compare his wives, but she is still good-looking. The most attractive thing is that she has a dainty, cute, delicate and attractive body. That is why Shi Ling is addicted to her. This girl is bewitching in all aspects.

Qiu Lin fondles on his bearded cheek and whispers, "I've never seen such a dominant and handsome guy like you! You are just a little bit thin."

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and said, "What sort of good food have you brought?"

Qiu Lin opened up the bundle, took out a pot of tea and a dozen steamed buns.

Xiang Shaolong watched with dripping saliva and devoured them right away. Qiu Lin asked, "What are the hooks on your belt used for?"

Xiang Shaolong made something up, "It is used for moving goods."

Qiu Lin, who clearly wasn't one that would think deeply into things, did not doubt him and asked, "Wouldn't Boss Xie, who was in charge of transporting the grain, blame you for slipping away like this?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "I told him I was looking for friends, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Qiu Lin jested lewdly, "Looking for friends? More like looking for girls, and I just happened to be the girl."

Watching her flirted shamelessly with him, Xiang Shaolong in a flush of hot blood and almost wanted to pull her over and have another roll in the hay. At the same time, he also rejoiced in his heart. Who could have expected that his earlier activity had caused him to break out in a sweat and resulted in his physical condition taking a turn for the better?

Qiu Lin cast a glance at Xiang Shaolong and showed a hint of resentment, "In the future, I would cast aside name and status, and only wish to be with you!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "You wouldn't be able to help yourself even if you wished otherwise." By asking seemingly casual questions, Xiang Shaolong skilfully extracted information from her on his surroundings. He found that the mansion belonged to a minister of the Wei and the state of affairs in the household.

Qiu Lin sighed, "Young Master is coming back, I have to leave you

Xiang Shaolong brought her in his embrace and softly said, "When can you return?"

Qiu Lin was in a confused state of emotion, "It depends on the situation, how can I tell?"

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong said, "For Sister Qiu Lin, there is nothing that I, Chen Wu would not do. If there are no mishaps, I'll just wait for you here. Sister Qiu will come here when she can, but it is important to bring some food and drink. If possible, some clothes too."

Qiu Lin was in a fit of passion and paid no mind to anything else; she rained kisses on his face, constantly nodding.

Xiang Shaolong was still afraid she would ask others of him, and after reminding her not to do so, let her leave. Using the lighting from this temporary comfort zone, Xiang Shaolong shifted to a concealed corner of the warehouse, laid down and rested. The warehouse was full of firewood, which was an indispensable necessity in the winter.

For a time, he could take a breather. Not only he had a girl for company, he was also in no danger of being captured by Wei's troops. He only needed to build up his health before leaving in the night by using hook and rope to climb over the wall.

However, there are limits to one's physical endurance. If he was to travel in this freezing cold weather, he could at most last a few

days. As Zhao is to the north of Wei, the weather there would be even more severe. Previously when he was anxious to return Zhongmu, he made the wrong decision to turn north instead of south. If he had gone south, he would have reached Chu and would not be trapped in this situation where he could neither advance or retreat. It was indeed an unwise decision. With those thoughts on his mind, he soon fell asleep.

On the second day, although there were people coming in to take out bundles of firewood, they had no clue to his presence.

Before dusk, Qiu Lin brought some food, and said apologetically, "Wu Lang (young man or husband), please make do with it! Young Master's clothes don't fit you too well; there are not many men as tall as you."

Xiang Shaolong, however was totally satisfied, after sharing a moment of tenderness, let her go. Physically, he had more or less recovered and was silently thinking that this wasn't a suitable place to stay for too long.

Before the vicious dogs were set loose, he climbed over the wall onto the street. With the howling snow, there were not many people. The few people on the streets were also hurrying along and paying little attention. Xiang Shaolong used a piece of rag torn off the thin quilt to cover his head and face and headed toward the north gate.

When walls were in sight, he was however shocked to discover that the walls were covered with thick ice and extremely slippery. It would be impossible to climb over even in the best possible

conditions. Xiang Shaolong was, however unwilling to give up immediately. He found a suitable length of wall, and tried a dozen times but failed to set the hook over the wall. At this point, he had no choice but to admit defeat, while gaining an understanding why there were so few sieges in the winter.

By this time, returning to the warehouse would be a problem due to the roaming dogs. Therefore he had no choice but to find a side lane and huddled up for the night before making his way cautiously towards the gates at dawn.

The snow stopped at midnight and the sun rose from the horizon at dawn. Xiang Shaolong was walking down the street, with the feeling of being totally naked. He had always been proud of the body, but now it was his biggest burden. He had specifically chosen the side streets to avoid eyes and ears, where he came to an open space where a group of children was playing with the shuttlecock.

One of the children caught sight of him, and his face changed colour, and shouted, "Here's the bandit!!"

The other children saw him and scattered off in fear. Xiang Shaolong sighed bitterly in his heart, "Do I look like a bandit?" Suddenly, he understood where his problem lied.

Book 21 Chapter 5 – Held Back In Reserve

Xiang Shaolong could no longer worry about exposing his identity and hurried towards the north gate.

If his guess was not off, the reason why those kids would call him a “bandit” was that they had seen his wanted poster somewhere and recognised his face.

Now that he was known as a public enemy in Wei and if those kids that had seen him went home and told their parents. The alarm would be raised in the whole of Daliang in no time at all.

So if he missed the opportunity to escape now, he wouldn't be able to do so at some later time even if he had grown wings.

At this junction, he no longer had the time to blame his own negligence. Fortunately, dark clouds started to form and cover the sun. As the gate grew in sight, snowflakes were dancing in the sky, providing him with a little cover.

When he reached a position where he could clearly observe the gate, he hid behind a big tree by the roadside, waiting for an opportunity to break out of the city.

The gate was staffed by around thirty guards who inspected both people and carts going in and out of the city in a routine manner and did not seem to be particularly cautious or strict.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved and looked for an opportunity. If he managed to chance upon the sort of mule team that he entered the city in with, he would easily get away.

Despite waiting for nearly an hour, there were no carts traveling out of the city, even traders were scarce. During this freezing cold season, it was certainly not suitable to go on a journey and the absence of travellers was to be expected.

Around this time, the sound of hurried hooves could be heard and a large group of over 100 Wei cavalry came galloping at full speed towards the gate and swiftly dismounted. They seem to be preparing themselves to face a fierce and imminent enemy.

In the midst of the wind and snow, Xiang Shaolong faintly heard someone mentioning his name.

His heart sank.

The scenario that he hoped to avoid most had just happened.

The Weis knew he was in the city before he could get away.

The snow was getting heavier and heavier.

After he bought some small tools from a blacksmith shop, Xiang Shaolong snuck back into the warehouse and hid himself. He inserted a small but extremely sharp saw plus two fine iron rods into his hollowed-out soles and glued back the bottom layer.

Unless his soles were stripped off, otherwise no one would expect anything unusual. At this moment, he did not know exactly how these would be put into use, so they were just preventive measures.

After some time, Qiu Lin came back again.

Xiang Shaolong remained in hiding, hardening his heart to ignore her call.

After Qiu Lin left disappointedly, he waited patiently till dusk before leaving the warehouse and returning to snow-filled streets.

The Wei troops were constantly patrolling the streets, check points were again setup at road junctions to question passerbys.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the Weis had embarked on a rigorous and thorough search, so he used the rope hook to mount over house by house. Only with great difficulty did he reach the Wei imperial district.

Thinking of the fact that the locust tree is still around but the people are no more, he can't help but felt dejected.

He wondered if Lady Ping Yuan is well and safe when he was suddenly startled out of his reminiscing by the sound of galloping horses.

Xiang Shaolong quickly steadied his mood, and under the cover of darkness, moved toward the living area of the ministers in the

palace.

Because all the residents here were rich and respectable, no soldiers come to patrol and search.

Xiang Shaolong, using his the special task force skills, ran in a zigzag manner, suddenly stopping and running, alternating between slow and fast.

At last, he stopped in front of a magnificent mansion house.

This inscription above the door read 'Lord Long Yang's Residence'.

After letting out a deep sigh, Xiang Shaolong followed the wall towards the direction of the building.

Arriving at the inner courtyard, he slipped on top of the wall. Only after confirming that there were no guard dogs on the prowl did he land on the ground.

He was in no hurry to find Lord Longyang. After inspecting the surroundings, he selected a large tree and shot out his grappling hook, pulling himself on top of the building.

Only after stabilizing his footing did he place Bloodwave, his dagger, and his other tools in a branched crook of the tree.

Returning to the ground, he snuck past several buildings at a go before arriving at the garden at the innermost residence.

Due to the blizzard, everyone in the residence had secreted themselves inside the building, making it extremely convenient for him to move about.

Passing by the garden, he trod upon a stone path, crossed a stone bridge, and arrived in front of a tall building.

Seeing that the building was three stories high and was located directly in the middle of the inner courtyard, he knew that he had arrived at Lord Longyang's residence.

By now, night had fallen. But lamplight shone out from the windows of the three-storied building, and an indistinct voice could be faintly heard as well.

Xiang Shaolong stealthily stepped on top of one of the windows and quietly looked inside the building.

Inside was a large hall. Two servant boys were seated at either side of the doorway, yawning widely.

Seeing this, he knew that Lord Longyang had yet to return. That was why those two poor boys had to force their eyelids open as they tiredly awaited their master's return.

Lord Longyang naturally must have heard the news that Xiang

Shaolong had arrived in Daliang. Perhaps at this very moment, he was in the palace discussing this matter with He Liangping.

Xiang Shaolong thought quietly for a period of time, then firmly made up his mind. Climbing back outside, he climbed to the highest level of the residence, then pushed the window open and entered the room. He had entered what he believed to be the private bedroom of Lord Longyang.

The way the room was decorated was very feminine. A slender, sloping recliner bed could be seen. It was covered in perfume, filling the room with the sweet scent of spring.

Under the light of the lamp affixed to the nearest window, the room appeared graceful and elegant. One shelf was filled with all sorts of little curios and toys, but only a single precious sword had been hung on the wall, demonstrating the martial energy of the room's master.

Xiang Shaolong, paying no mind to proprieties, laid down on the bed and immediately fell asleep.

After some period of time, the sound of footsteps startled him into wakefulness.

Xiang Shaolong immediately sat up, his rapt gaze instantly focusing on the slowly opening door.

Lord Longyang walked into the room, his feet moving slowly, as

though encumbered by a thousand-pound heavy pair of shackles.
“You two, go to bed!”

The two servants acknowledged the order and left.

Lord Longyang mournfully walked in, letting out a sad sigh.

Xiang Shaolong whispered, “High Lord!”

Lord Longyang’s ‘elegant form’ trembled as he turned to stare, astonished, into his bedroom.

Xiang Shaolong pushed aside the veil covering the bed. With a low laugh, he said, “High Lord, how have you been?”

Lord Longyang’s face ‘bloomed like a flower’, “Shaolong! You really came!”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly made a shushing gesture with his hands. In a quiet voice, he said, “Don’t startle anyone here.”

Only now did Lord Longyang come to his senses. Distressed, he said, “Shaolong, why did you come to Daliang, much less reveal your presence? Now the King has ordered a regiment of twenty thousand crack troops to enter the city and search for your whereabouts.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled. “Your King seems to have forgotten that

he is King, and also wed his beloved Empress, thanks solely to the efforts of I, Xiang Shaolong!”

An incomparably complex look flashed by Lord Longyang’s ‘elegant eyes’. Forcing out a laugh, he said, “In order to protect and preserve all that he now possesses, the King would be willing to sacrifice his own parents, much less you.”

Letting out another sigh, he said, “Shaolong, you are too formidable! You defeated us so often that we are now afraid of you. Now, all of the Six Kingdoms know that so long as Xiang Shaolong exists, it will be very difficult for us to protect our countries. Under the spectre of our countries being ruined and our families perishing, what would you do, Shaolong, if you were in our positions?”

Xiang Shaolong looked deeply into his eyes. Calmly, he asked, “And what about you, Lord Longyang?”

Lord Longyang trembled slightly. His head lowering, he said, “Even if I risk my life, I shall treat Shaolong as I always have.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “High Lord, you have not disappointed me! It can be said that right now, in Daliang, I am friendless and without allies. Only you, High Lord, have the power to secretly, mysteriously deliver me from this city.”

Lord Longyang said, “Where do you want to go?”

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a long moment then replied, “I want to go to the Kingdom of Zhao. I am much more familiar with that region, and it’s much easier to return to Qin from there. Hah! Do you have anything to eat or drink, by the way?”

Lord Longyang said, “That’s not a problem. I’ll order my servants to prepare some food. I’ll just say that I’m hungry.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Don’t startle anyone. Some water and some pastries will be enough.”

Lord Longyang said, “Can it be that you don’t even trust me anymore?”

Xiang Shaolong apologetically said, “That’s not what I meant. But it’s always best to be careful. Is there anyone else here?”

Lord Longyang replied, “Only two serving boys. They should be asleep on the second floor. Wait here a while. I’ll go downstairs to pick up some pastries for you.” Pushing the door open, he left.

Xiang Shaolong saw that as he left the room, his hands trembled slightly. In his heart, Xiang Shaolong sighed. He knew that he had probably made a mistake by coming here tonight.

Without the assistance of Lord Longyang, he couldn’t come up with any other ideas as to how he could leave Daliang.

And now, he had to worry about Lord Longyang dispatching

people to apprehend him. Fortunately, he had already prepared for this eventuality and had prepared an escape path.

His heart aching, he pushed the window open and once more clambered down. When he arrived at the bottom floor, Lord Longyang also had just arrived at the lowest floor.

Sneaking a peek into the window, he saw Lord Longyang, tears silently streaming down his face, retrieve a bottle from some hidden location and scatter some sort of powder from inside the bottle onto the tea kettle.

Seeing the actions of this 'friend' of his, Xiang Shaolong's hands and feet grew cold. He deeply regretted this visit.

But he didn't have any other choices, aside from seeking out Lord Longyang. And even now, in his heart, he didn't feel the slightest bit of reproach towards Lord Longyang for betraying him.

After seeing this, Xiang Shaolong returned to Lord Longyang's bedroom on the third floor, pretending to have been sitting there quietly the entire time, waiting for Lord Longyang's return.

Having wiped his tears dry, Lord Longyang entered, holding the tray of delicacies and the tea kettle which he had scattered the powder into.

As the two sat down, Xiang Shaolong ravenously wolfed down all of the food, then suddenly pretended to have heard something. In

a low voice, he said, “I think someone is coming!”

Frowning, Lord Longyang said, “How could anyone be coming?”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Just now, I thought I heard someone outside. Go take a look and see if I was mistaken.”

Lord Longyang didn’t suspect a thing. Rising, he strode towards the window and looked outside.

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to grab the kettle of tea and poured all of it out onto the floor near his feet, then put it back.

Lord Longyang looked in all directions but naturally saw nothing at all. Returning to the table, he sat down and said, “There’s no one there.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed. “Nowadays I’m filled with suspicion. Even when I hear the wind blow and the grass sway, it feels as though I am being pursued by soldiers.” After speaking, he grabbed the kettle of tea and pretended to drink it all in one go.

A look of utter sadness appeared in Lord Longyang’s eyes, and he didn’t speak.

Xiang Shaolong patted himself on the stomach. “What’s the situation with Li Mu’s counterattack on Zhongmou?”

Lord Longyang laughed bitterly. “You should know better than me. Aside from you, who can take down Zhongmou in a single strike as though it were naught but flipping one’s hand around? I also heard that, in his attempt to capture you, Li Mu also suffered the loss of a regiment of men. For now, with it snowing so heavily, it’ll be difficult for the Qin reinforcements to come. Once the spring comes and the flowers bloom, the Qin reinforcements will come and Li Mu will be forced to retreat.”

Xiang Shaolong felt relieved. Rubbing his forehead, he said with ‘surprise’, “I don’t know if it’s because I’ve been too exhausted, but I’m starting to feel woozy and sleepy.”

In a low voice, Lord Longyang said, “Then go to sleep for a while! In the morning, I’ll come up with something to send you out of the city.”

Xiang Shaolong, acting as though walking was very difficult for him, allowed himself to be escorted by Lord Longyang to the pallet.

Yawning twice, he pretended to have passed away.

After Lord Longyang called his name twice, he leaned over Xiang Shaolong’s body and wept bitterly for a while. Sighing, he said, “Shaolong, please don’t blame me. For the sake of Great Wei, I have no choice but to do what I do.”

After Lord Longyang opened the door and left, Xiang Shaolong sprang to his feet and quickly departed.

When he scaled down the wall and landed on the ground, Xiang Shaolong felt an incomparable sense of loneliness and solitude.

Right now, the best place to hide would be, without a doubt, the royal palace. Because the palace was large, well-populated yet strictly restricted, nobody would dare to mount a search inside.

But because the royal palace was surrounded by particularly tall walls and backed by a river, he could only gaze upon it but not enter.

When he thought about the palace, his heart was moved as he suddenly remembered those passageways located underneath the former residence of Prince Xinling, with which he was so familiar.

Although Lord Wuji of Wei had been forcibly pulled into the grave by King Anli as a funeral companion, his mansion remained. If it had a new master, that would be even better. Perhaps the new owner of the mansion didn't know anything about the tunnels underneath.

How could he dare delay? Seizing the opportunity afforded to him by the still-falling snow, he raced towards the not-too-distant manor of Lord Xinling.

If he were Lord Longyang, upon finding himself missing, he definitely wouldn't raise too big of a fuss openly. All he would do would be to hoarsely swallow the entire story and keep it hidden within his belly. Otherwise, the King of Wei might criticize and

penalize him for dereliction of duty in letting Xiang Shaolong escape.

Within an hour, he had arrived at the secret forest located at the north wall of Prince Xinling's mansion and had found that secret tunnel entryway.

He remembered how, in the past, he had carried the beautiful Third Princess Zhao Qian out of this tunnel in their escape. When he thought of her gentle disposition, totally free from the filthy aura that pervaded the court of the Zhao kingdom, a hundred different feelings swelled up in his breast.

Sick at heart and downcast, he felt for the edges of the steel board covering the tunnel and experimentally gave it a tug.

The steel board lifted in his hands.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but stay there, transfixed.

He had just thought of the tunnels and decided to give it a try. He hadn't expected to really be able to pull the steel covering off with a tug.

All tunnels are designed with the intention of being used as an escape route in times of peril. This is why they are all designed to be opened from within, and not from without. What the current state of the exit showed was that someone had fled from this tunnel, but no one had relocked it from the other side. From this,

one could deduce that the mansion most likely had a new master now, one who didn't know of the existence of these tunnels.

Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of exultation. Entering the tunnel, he closed the opening.

From his pocket, he withdrew a flint and struck it to make sparks of flame.

Underneath the flickering light of the flames, the tunnel seemed to stretch off infinitely into the distance.

Remembering how the tunnels were linked together with the copper listening tubes in Lord Xinling's bedroom, Xiang Shaolong walked quietly and slowly on tiptoes in the opposite direction.

This time, he was particularly careful. He noticed that aside from the tunnel leading to the residence where Lord Shaoyuan stayed, there were three other exits as well, naturally going to different residences within the manor. After walking for about a hundred feet, he suddenly had a premonition and looked down.

Two pieces of yellow gold glittered, reflecting the light from his torch.

Xiang Shaolong reached down and plucked them up, placing them in his hands. He suddenly understood.

Previously, when Prince Xinling had been given the poison wine

to drink, he knew that it would be hard for him to avoid this disaster. Thus he had given the order for his beloved concubines and relatives to take his valuables and treasures and flee for their lives via these tunnels, and they did so, slipping out by the hidden forest next to the stone wall.

One could imagine how, in the terror of the moment, as everyone was fleeing for their lives, nobody would even notice if they dropped two pieces of gold.

Right now, Xiang Shaolong was in dire need of money. With these two pieces of gold, his situation naturally had changed drastically. At the very least, he could easily buy a horse to ride.

Placing the gold within his pouch, he continued to move forward until he finally arrived at the wide-open door of what appeared to be a treasury.

Inside was a scene of utter chaos. Not a single bit of gold or jewelry was left behind. Only things such as jade horse carvings, ceremonial cauldrons, and precious weapons remained, enough that in the twenty first century, the collection would be considered a first class collection of antiques.

The four walls of the room all had lamps affixed to them, and there was even a big vase of lamp oil hanging in one corner. Xiang Shaolong felt joy in his heart. Blowing out the flame, he sat down, leaning against a wall, the room now so dark that he couldn't even see his own hand in front of him.

He was, at least for now, in a totally safe spot.

But how would he be able to escape from the capital city of the country of Wei? There were more than two severe months of winter remaining. Would he have to hide in this lightless, sunless hole for more than two months? If he had to go out every day to forage for food, then as the saying goes, 'the more one goes up the often, the more likely one would run into a tiger'. Sooner or later, he would be caught.

But for the moment, he had no free time to think about these troublesome problems.

Only in his dreams, now, could he reunite in song and with drink with his beloved wives and son.

For their sake, he would definitely persevere to the end. He would make sure that he would survive to meet with them again.

Book 21 Chapter 6 – Hard To Move A Single Step

When Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes, all he could see nothing but utter darkness. Although he was unable to differentiate between night and day, his head still felt dizzy and he wanted to continue to sleep.

He had been startled awake by the sound of someone speaking. At first, he felt shock, thinking that someone had discovered him. Then, he saw that the tunnel remained unchanged, with the sound coming from one corner of the secret room. Only then did he understand that the voice was coming from one of the copper tubes.

Since the copper hearing tube could be used to overhear what was being said in the secret room, of course it could be used to overhear what was being said in the room above.

Xiang Shaolong took out one of his few remaining matches, struck it, and lit one of the lamps. The copper tube suddenly appeared in front of him.

It was located next to the entrance, glimmering under the light.

Xiang Shaolong roused his spirit and carefully snuck towards the hearing tube, then pressed his ear against it.

He heard a male voice laugh lecherously, “Your body has become

more and more voluptuous. No wonder his royal highness was so enraptured with you the other day.”

An unwilling female voice replied, “High Lord, if you were to decide to give me to his highness, I would rather go ahead and commit suicide.”

Xiang Shaolong inwardly praised this woman, who deeply understood how men felt. Even though she knew and accepted the fact that she was to be gifted to someone else, she still put on an act of being unwilling to acquiesce.

Indeed, the sound of a gentle, lingering kiss could be heard from upstairs.

The female coquettishly said, “High Lord, didn’t you have a banquet that you needed to attend? Yet you insist on teasing me right now instead.”

As he listened, Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a great sense of shock.

If this was time for a dinner banquet, he must have slept for half a night followed by a full day. He must have slept for at least twenty or so hours. How could he still be so sleepy? For a time, he forgot to eavesdrop on the two above as he pondered this.

He came to the sudden realization that although the tunnel had openings, there still wasn’t much airflow. If he hadn’t been

startled awake, it was very possible that he would have died of asphyxiation in his dreams.

He suddenly heard three words, 'Xiang Shao Long' enter his ears. He hurriedly began to listen again. That high lord said, "The city is in a total state of uproar right now. All banquets, large or small, have been cancelled thanks to that Xiang Shaolong. His highness has ordered that any residence found to be harboring Xiang Shaolong without reporting him will suffer the penalty of having their entire family line exterminated. Hah, there's no corpse worth more money than that of Xiang Shaolong's. The head by itself is worth five hundred taels of gold. Everyone has exhausted themselves searching for this fellow."

The woman said, "In my humble opinion, he must have left the city long ago. Otherwise, how could it be possible that with all of Daliang in such an uproar and searching for him, neither hide nor hair of him can be found?"

Sighing, she added, "This person is so formidable. He comes as he pleases and goes as he wishes. Nobody can stop him."

That high lord sighed along with her. "It was easy enough for him to slip away, but he's caused Lord Fan to be exhausted on his account. Since today he was unable to capture Xiang Shaolong, as the city watch commander, all of the responsibility is now coming crashing down on his head. Just now he came to beg for my help to ask his highness for forgiveness. But right now, the King is filled with rage. I'm not so stupid as to draw trouble to myself."

He added, "Xiang Shaolong really came at the most inopportune

time. He wore me out and forced me to miss Feng Fei's exquisite performance. I hear that tomorrow she will be going to the country of Qi. Who knows when she will be back? Tomorrow I simply must go send her off."

Only then did Xiang Shaolong learn that the head of the Three Famous Courtesans, Feng Fei, was currently in the city of Daliang. His heart was moved, and he had no desire to listen any further. Leaving the treasury room, he snuck out of the tunnel and hid himself near the grove outside of it, so as to breathe some fresh air.

It really was around the sunset time outside. Even a few specks of snow could be seen drifting down.

Right now, the only safe place for him was this tunnel. But if he were to be found again, it would be impossible for him to escape.

Lord Longyang clearly had yet to divulge the fact that they had met, as if he had, that high lord from just then would have mentioned it. But even though this was the case, this wasn't of much help to him.

He thought of Feng Fei again.

This beautiful woman with a unique aura. If she were willing to help, maybe she could bring him out of the city.

But they had only met once and their relationship was very shallow. Would she risk her own life to save him? What was even

more headache-inducing was the fact that he didn't even know where she lived.

Even if he knew, to sneak into her room would be a trivial matter. As he continued to think, his heart grew numb. Just at this moment, the sound of a dog baying came from the inner courtyard.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. He hurriedly dived into the tunnel again. Based on his memory of the above-ground structures, he rushed out of an exit and arrived at a garden within a courtyard house.

Lights were seen coming from the front of the courtyard house only. The other parts of the house were all dark and unlit.

Xiang Shaolong guessed that the vicious dog was still leashed within the inner courtyard and had yet to be released. Relieved, he moved about freely.

Using his grappling hooks and his nimble hands, at a single go he traversed multiple houses. Dodging several servants, he first snuck into the kitchen and procured sufficient provisions for himself along with a kettle of hot tea before sneaking back into the tunnel. After filling his stomach, his fighting spirit became vigorous again.

Neither the tunnel nor Daliang itself was a place that he could stay for long.

But he still had yet to come up with a method to leave the city safely.

When all of the servants and scouts had finished searching the entire city without any success, they would surely guess that he had hidden himself in some secret location.

There was no lack of intelligent men in the nation of Wei. Lord Longyang himself was an extremely perceptive person. Sooner or later, he would think of the secret passages and the listening tubes that passed by the former Lord Xinling's manor and would also come to the conclusion that there might be still-undiscovered passageways in the tunnels. If he were to only occasionally pop out to steal some food or snacks, it shouldn't be a problem, but in the long run, suspicions would still be raised.

After thinking of these two problems, he made up his mind that within two days, he must leave the city. Else, he could forget about leaving ever again.

After making sure that the bedroom above the treasury was empty, he snuck up, opened a chest, and took out a set of winter garments and cloak. Just as he was preparing to leave, the sound of footsteps could be heard coming from outside the room, followed the sound of someone sitting down and faintly laughing.

Xiang Shaolong's heart was moved, and he edged closer to the door. Pulling it slightly open, he snuck a peek outside.

He was absolutely shocked at what he saw.

Three people were seated outside, followed by nearly ten close confidantes. Everyone's face showed signs of worry.

One of them was actually Lord Longyang.

His face was ashen pale, and he seemed to have suddenly aged many years. He looked wane and pallid, and no longer seemed like the 'liquid, gentle beauty' of before.

Of the other two, one was an army general in military regalia, while the other was middle-aged man in a minister's garbs.

The general was the first to speak. "We came to speak with you, Lord Pingqu, regarding our efforts to locate Xiang Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong's heart grew cold. He knew that Lord Longyang must have already deduced that he was hiding here.

Surprised, that Lord Pingqu said, "General Fan, how has your search for Xiang Shaolong ended up here in my residence?"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Xiang Shaolong recognized him as the man who was taking liberties with his concubine the other day.

The reason that they were speaking in the inner rooms rather than in the main room showed that they were afraid of the news

leaking out.

That showed that they had already concluded that he was hiding here.

He suspected that this General Fan, the commander of the city watch of Dalian, had already ordered men to surround the entirety of Lord Xinling's manor.

But he still wasn't concerned, because the exit near the hidden grove was far from Lord Xinling's manor and would definitely not be easy to discover.

Lord Longyang sighed. "General Fan is willing to use his own head as the guarantee that Xiang Shaolong has yet to leave the city. If he is still hiding in the city, the most likely hiding place would be here."

Xiang Shaolong heard him speaking in such a dispirited manner and knew that he felt tormented by the fact that he had to capture his 'old friend'. He couldn't help but sigh along with Lord Longyang.

Lord Pingqu's expression changed. "Impossible. Long ago, I ordered my servants to search every inch of the manor. If he was here, he couldn't have hidden from me, much less the noses of my hounds."

General Fan said, "We have questioned the former subordinates

of Lord Xinling. We verified that in the past, Xiang Shaolong must have used some sort of tunnel-like passageway to escape. But no one knows where the entry point and exit point are.”

Lord Longyang added, “Lord Pingqu, you could go and ask every single person in the manor if they had noticed any food or clothing gone missing. From this, you would be able to determine whether or not Xiang Shaolong is hiding here.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised this move as being formidable. How could he dare to stay behind and listen for any longer? He hurriedly snuck back down again and closed the lid, covered it with the previous woven mattresses, then returned to the tunnels.

And then, without a second thought, he snuck out towards the direction of the hilly grove.

In the midst of the snowy night, he could see soldiers light torches as they moved in the direction that he was hiding. The light of the torches and the howls of the dogs were enough to freeze a man’s blood.

Xiang Shaolong put all of the stolen food in one large parcel, put the parcel on his back, then went on the road he had once taken to escape with Zhao Qian, moving in the direction of the nearby houses.

He looked around as he walked, secretly groaning.

All of the nearby roads had soldiers sealing off the passageways. Even the rooftops all had sentries installed, focusing their attention on any and all activity within Lord Xinling's manor.

Xiang Shaolong felt as though it had become hard for him to take a single step. He fell down within an underbrush next to the road.

But he quickly decided that this wasn't a safe plan either.

A troop of fifty Wei soldiers was headed in his direction. Poking their spears into every bush, they were carrying out an all-encompassing search, as thorough as a flood of mercury.

Xiang Shaolong had no other options. Before the light had reached him, he clambered towards a nearby street and hid underneath the eaves of a roof.

Because this building was a floor lower than all the surrounding buildings, no sentries were set on its roof.

The soldiers passed. Just as he was dithering over whether or not to sneak into the building, the sound of hoof steps could be heard.

A gaudily-decorated carriage was coming from the direction the soldiers had gone towards, with cavalymen escorting it front and behind.

Watching the situation, Xiang Shaolong landed on the ground again. Dodging and hiding behind a nearby tree, he quickly

climbed up onto a particularly thick branch, tightly gripping the ice-covered branch with his hands.

If it weren't for the fact that it was snowing heavily right now, he wouldn't have dared to take this risk.

This could be described as a gamble.

If just a single person amongst those ten plus cavalrymen lifted their heads, they would definitely see him.

But when it was snowing ferociously, everyone would lower their gaze towards the ground instead.

Just as it seemed as though his heart would leap into his mouth, the carriage arrived directly beneath him.

Xiang Shaolong first gently set unwrapped the package on his back, then gently tossed it slightly in front of the top of the carriage. He then gently swung his legs down, resting them on the package, before letting his hands slip as he dropped down.

Because of the cushioning package, he landed on the carriage noiselessly. Just by bending down, he had accomplished something which was nearly impossible under any other situation.

The carriage continued to move forward into this ancient, snow-filled capital, slowly and unhurriedly.

He had no idea as to where the carriage would take him, but he knew that for now, he had escaped a dangerous place.

As they passed one of the gates, not only did the sentries not block the carriage's path, they even saluted respectfully as they allowed it to pass beyond freely.

The status of the person inside the carriage surely was not that of an ordinary person. Otherwise, how could they be so courteous and respectful?

Right now, even he was curious as to what sort of noble person sat inside the carriage below.

The sound of a sigh seemed to drift in from the carriage.

His curiosity aroused, Xiang Shaolong pressed his ear against the carriage. But the accumulated ice and snow froze him so much that he immediately abandoned this idea.

Instead, he turned around and stared around himself.

As he stared, he was struck dumb.

My heavens! It appeared as though the carriage was winding its way through the streets in the direction of the palace.

Escorted by the guards, the carriage passed onto the drawbridge, through the moat, and into the inner palace.

In this era, regardless of size or stature, all palaces were considered forbidden zones.

All kings would exhaust themselves and their resources in making their palace an exceptionally centralized military stronghold, a castle within a castle.

This was designed to prevent invaders from attacking, but also to prevent traitors from rebelling.

Now that Xiang Shaolong had managed to get himself into the royal palace, it would be very difficult for him to leave.

Both startled and exulted, he entered the palace. He continued to lie on top of the carriage, unmoving. He allowed the snow to cover him completely. If it weren't for that, any of the sentries on top of the palace walls would see him right away and he would have nowhere to hide.

But this was precisely what worried him the most.

A huge blizzard like this was very rare. It would be very difficult for him to use this trick again to leave the palace.

Hiding underneath the snow, he pressed his face against his supply package. This could be said to be his sole remaining source

of comfort.

Although he couldn't see anything, he could still hear sounds.

From the sound of the horse steps and the carriage wheels, he surmised that they were in the winding paths within the palace. They should be headed in the direction of the inner palace.

The carriage finally came to a halt. The cavalrymen all dismounted. Footsteps could be heard from all directions, followed by the inner palace maids saying in chorus, "May the Queen live ten thousand years!"

Xiang Shaolong nearly let out a cry of shock. He couldn't resist from lifting his head up slightly and sneaking a peek.

The carriage door swung open.

Underneath the snow, Dan Meimei's familiar, alluring back, dressed in gaudy clothes, wearing a 'phoenix headpiece', appeared in front of his eyes as though stepping out of a dream.

A maid raised an umbrella over her head while offering her elbow for support. They slowly ascended a set of palace steps, followed by the palace maids and the guards in two rows. The sort of dignified aura she now had made it impossible for others to believe that she was a prostitute in Xianyang who was plucked at will by powerful officials.

Watching her back slowly disappear into the distance as she ascended the stairs, Xiang Shaolong felt a hundred emotions in his heart.

Although he knew that Dan Meimei wouldn't betray him, it was very difficult for him to come into contact with beauty who had now become a Queen.

It was too risky. And maybe Dan Meimei would betray him after all, just like Lord Longyang.

The sound of whips being cracked.

Xiang Shaolong continued on this free-of-charge tourist trip.

Right now, the carriage was definitely headed towards the stables. After the four strong horses were unsaddled, the carriage would be sent to the warehouse where all the snow would be brushed off. If he didn't leave before that, his hiding place would be exposed.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was despairing over how he would leave the carriage, the carriage arrived at a place where trees lined both sides of the road.

Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed that heaven was assisting him. He carefully began to rise, readying his package.

At a moment when he saw that the carriage driver was wholly

focused on the road ahead, he stood up.

The snow on his body slid off like sandstone. He reached out and grabbed a vertical branch, immediately escaping this carriage which had taken him out of one dangerous situation but delivered him into another.

Book 21 Chapter 7 – Leisurely Chatting Within The Forbidden Palace

Using his grappling hook and the cover of snow, Xiang Shaolong traversed past two palatial buildings and landed within a grassy knoll located inside a courtyard.

This building was located directly behind the mansion which Dan Meimei had entered earlier. Most likely it was the place where palace servants and maids resided.

He wasn't worried about running into guards or hounds here, as those would only be stationed outside of the royal palace.

All imperial palaces, whether it be the Zhao palace, the Qin palace, or the Chu palace, were unique places, totally segregated from the universe around them.

Unless the King of Wei came to grace Dan Meimei with his presence, he wouldn't run into the King of Wei here either.

Right now, the most important thing was to find a place to hide. Only then could he seek out opportunities to procure food and find a way to escape.

Right now, he felt that the best option available was to hide for ten days or half a month. After the hullabaloo had subsided, he would sneak out the palace.

But just as Lord Longyang said, if he continued to steal food and drinks over a long period of time, sooner or later suspicions would be raised.

The ideal option would of course be to masquerade as a palace servant, but asking him to disguise his much taller and stronger than average body frame into a weak, delicate servant's frame would be nothing more than the ravings of a madman.

Glancing around him, Xiang Shaolong saw that the wind and the snow continued to silently fall down everywhere. But light shone from each and every one of the side rooms.

Earlier, after he had traversed the various mansions, he had already memorized the various buildings like the back of his hand.

These various buildings which surrounded the central palace grounds were themselves surrounded by walls, forming an independent world.

Aside from the sentries stationed on the four surrounding walls, the only guards present were the ones stationed at the entry and exit points. No other security was present.

Dan Meimei naturally would have her own personal guards as well, but they were neither allowed to nor would attempt to enter her dwellings.

So, if he was able to sneak into this beauty's palace, he would be

in the safest of positions.

Right now, he was ensconced with an open air garden. There were gates to the east and the south, but the gates were guarded and tightly shut.

After having determined his path of movement, he made up his mind and once more flipped onto the roof.

Although the rooms of the servants were covered with ice and snow, it wasn't a third as thick as that of the city walls. In addition, the eaves of the rooms had many locations which his grappling hook could attach to. Although it was not easy to move precisely, the difficulty was hardly insurmountable for him.

When he reached the gardens located next to the inner palace, he dropped down.

Based on the architectural standards of this era, most palaces would be constructed in a place with lots of light and with intersecting river systems.

The palace of the King of Wei was basically based on an array of intersecting lines. It could roughly be divided into the front, middle, and rear districts. Arranged in a rectangular shape, it sat with its rear in the north and facing the south. The northern district was divided into fifteen sections, with the King and Queen's imperial residences occupying the primary position in the middle.

The central district was where the ‘Three Courts’ were held.

The ‘Three Courts’ referred to the Large Court, the Outer Court, and the Inner Court. Although the names were different, they basically were places where the monarch and his councilors took care of governmental affairs.

The southern district held the main gate to the palace as well as the headquarters of the local guard force. It was separated from the primary palaces by a series of five gates.

The reason why Xiang Shaolong paid so much attention to the layout of the palace was because he knew that most palaces had secret passages.

This was something which the nobility of this age would definitely install, in order to save their lives and flee as necessary.

Logically, the King of Wei’s palace should also have this sort of underground escape route. If he could find it, he could sneakily and stealthily depart the capital.

Dan Meimei’s personal rooms most likely had this sort of escape route as well. Most likely, there was at least a 90% chance of one.

With the ‘lock opening tools’ hidden within his shoes, and his previous lockpicking experience, the locks of this day and age would absolutely pose no great difficulty to him.

As long as he could find Dan Meimei's personal rooms, he would be able to easily slip away.

He contentedly hid within a cluster of underbrush, focusing on observing the activities of the palace.

Dan Meimei had just returned not too long ago. Naturally, she would first bathe and change her clothes before retiring to her bedroom.

Right now, in the palace, the only place that was lit was the place in front of him. This logically indicated that Dan Meimei hadn't yet gone to sleep.

The blizzard began to weaken, and Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed that this was not a good sign. He decided to first slip into Dan Meimei's personal rooms.

He scurried out of his hiding place and moved beneath the window of what appeared to be a stockroom. After ascertaining that nobody was within, he plucked out the miniature iron crowbar from within his shoes and slid it into the opening within the window, forcing it up.

After leaping into the room, he closed the window.

After accustoming himself to the illumination within the room, he saw rays of light peeking out from behind the door. Moving to the door, he pressed his ear against it to listen.

There was no sound from outside the door. Just as he was about to push the door open, footsteps suddenly could be heard coming from the left.

Xiang Shaolong was startled. He secretly exclaimed, 'How dangerous!' He hurriedly retreated and hid behind a large cabinet.

After the footsteps died away, Xiang Shaolong stepped forward. Pushing the door open, he carefully looked outside.

There was a long hallway outside, with three doors on each side of the hallway. It seemed as though this was where Dan Meimei's personal serving maids resided.

Xiang Shaolong felt that this was a miserably tough situation. If he simply charged out, if he ran into anybody, he would have nowhere to retreat.

But if he refused to take the risk, if Dan Meimei's serving ladies were to tidy the room up or come to the stockroom to retrieve anything, the chances of him running into someone would be even greater.

Grinding his teeth, Xiang Shaolong rushed out.

The inner palace was divided into two sections, with the middle section being an open air garden. Right now, he was located near the rear entrance. The problem right now was that he didn't know

if Dan Meimei's bedroom was located in the front section or the rear section. If he knew, he wouldn't have to blindly fumble about like he was doing right now.

He swiftly arrived at a hallway crossing on the right. Just as he was about to enter the front section, two serving girls appeared headed in his direction, a scant few meters away.

Xiang Shaolong quickly drew back. He pushed open the nearest door and snuck inside without even checking to see if anyone was within.

Before he even had the chance to catch his bearings, the door was pushed open again and the two serving girls entered.

Out of options, Xiang Shaolong was forced to hide behind the opened door. All he could do was pray that they wouldn't decide to close it.

Lamps were lit. Only now did he see that he was hiding within the inner palace's dining room.

The two clearly were here to gather some food for Dan Meimei. Busy retrieving and then utilizing some supplies from the nearby cupboards, they didn't even notice in the slightest the presence of this unwelcomed guest.

One of the serving maids said, "She seems to be in an extremely bad mood. This is the first time I've seen her scold someone so

ferociously.”

The other maid was much less brave. In a low voice, she reprimanded, “Don’t speak inappropriate things. If those vile gossips catch wind of it, it’ll be terrible.”

After a short period of time, the two maids took two trays of tea and snacks and left the room.

Xiang Shaolong leapt out of his hiding spot. He snatched a piece of leftover cake, then, walking on tiptoes, followed the two of them.

Xiang Shaolong used all of his skills, slithering like a snake and scurrying like a rat, moving fast then moving slow. He avoided several passing servants before finally arriving at a main hallway.

The two maids ahead of him entered what appeared to be the inner hallway through a back entrance.

After having found the location of Dan Meimei’s bedroom, he hurriedly flipped on top of the roof. Arriving beneath the eaves, he used his steel tools to push a window open, then hurriedly ducked inside.

He had entered a rectangular shaped side room, gaudily decorated with the floor covered by a thick carpet. His feet felt very comfortable stepping onto it.

Because the stove in the corner had yet to be lit, he felt certain that Dan Meimei would not come to this room.

There was a large door in the southern side of the room. Based on the direction it was in, it most likely led to the inner rooms.

By now, he had attained a thorough grasp of the layout of the palace.

The main entrance gateway towards the north led to the main hall, which was followed by two side rooms to each side of the hall.

And Dan Meimei's bedroom must be located towards the south, next to that open-air garden spot. The two rooms next door must be where her servants stayed.

He pressed his ear against the large door and listened intently.

He could hear some indistinct sounds, but not the sound of anyone speaking.

If he were to go seeking the passageway, this was the best opportunity he would have. Once Dan Meimei returned to her bedroom, he would have missed this golden chance.

Xiang Shaolong once more snuck out of this side room. Soon afterwards, he arrived within Dan Meimei's bedroom.

This was a very spacious room with gaudy furnishings. In one corner, the fireplace was burning brightly, causing the room to be as warm as the spring air. In the middle, there was an enormous embroidered bed that was pressed up against the wall, with thick rugs surrounding it.

The other corner of the room, facing the fireplace, was a large screening wall. Naturally, that is where she would go for relieving herself.

All the other dressing tables were filled with all sorts of necessary cosmetic supplies, ordered neatly and successively.

Xiang Shaolong felt a huge headache coming on. Not only would it be difficult to find a secret tunnel in such a location, the very act of trying would immediately be visible and alert others.

The first thing he would have to do would be to lift up the rugs, and maybe even have to move the couches and other furniture around. That would be the same as moving everything in the room. How could others not help but overhear the sounds?

Even if everyone here was deaf, Dan Meimei might enter the room at any time to go to sleep. How could he have the opportunity to put everything back into its proper order?

The most annoying thing of all was that even if he managed to find the tunnel, there was no way he would be able to rearrange everything above into the proper configuration, to the point where nobody would notice that things had been moved. If anyone

noticed, it would be as good as directly alerting the soldiers of Wei that he had fled from the tunnel.

Just as he was worrying about what to do, the door opened.

Frightened out of his mind, Xiang Shaolong didn't have any opportunity to flee through the window. All he could do was hide behind the screen and squat down. Next to him, just as suspected, was a delicately made chamber pot and a steel night pot. Fortunately, both the pots were clean and empty, and didn't give off any bad odours.

Sneaking a peek, he saw the person who had arrived was, indeed, Dan Meimei, who had now rose to the exalted position of the Queen of Wei. Behind her was a serving girl who looked somewhat familiar. Only after thinking for a moment did he remember that she was one of the maids who had served Dan Meimei at the Drunken Wind Loft.

Dan Meimei's beauty had blossomed even further.

The exquisitely made formal attire set off her beauty, making up for the aura and presence that she formerly was slightly lacking in.

She gently sat down in front of the copper mirror and allowed the serving girl to remove her formal outer-wear.

The servant said softly, "Madame! Don't worry. A good man like Master Xiang has Heaven's blessings upon him. And he is so highly

skilled as well. He surely has a way to escape.”

Hearing his own name, Xiang Shaolong first felt a huge shock, followed by a feeling of gratitude.

He hadn't thought that a lady of the windy, dusty world (ie prostitution) whom he hadn't previously been on excellent relations with would be more loyal towards him than even Lord Longyang, just because he had helped her once, with little cost to himself.

Underneath the light of the lamp, Dan Meimei's face didn't reveal the slightest trace of joy, anger, rage, or grief. She tranquilly said, “What use would worrying be. Xiao Qing, the room is too bright.”

Sighing, Xiao Qing doused the lamps in the room. The light died down, filling the room with a gentle atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong was indecisive, changing his mind again and again. In the end, he gave up his intention of asking Dan Meimei for assistance. He didn't want to risk causing Dan Meimei to lose everything that she now had.

After she fell asleep, he would sneak out and find a place to hide for the night. The next day, he would return and search for the hidden exit.

After having made up his mind, he snuck another peek from behind the screen.

By now, Dan Meimei was only wearing a single, thin, skin-tight shift that exposed every luscious inch of the lithe, voluptuous lines of her form.

Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed to himself, no wonder so many men of worldly experience were wildly infatuated by her. She really was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, blessed through and through by the heavens.

Dan Meimei let out a dispirited sigh, breaking the stillness that seemed to have taken physical form within the room.

Xiao Qing sighed as well. "I'm afraid that his highness won't be coming tonight."

Dan Meimei gently said, "Right now, all he wants is Xiang Shaolong's head. How could he have the energy to come here. It's very late! Go to sleep!"

Bowing, Xiao Qing pushed the door open and left.

Turning around, Dan Meimei walked towards the screen.

Xiang Shaolong's scalp suddenly felt numb. Dan Meimei and him were now standing face to face, and their four eyes met.

Dan Meimei let out a quiet cry of surprise, then hurriedly used

her hand to cover her mouth. A look of shock in her eyes, she stared disbelievingly while shaking her head.

Xiang Shaolong forced out a smile. “Meimei, did I surprise you?”

After stabilizing herself, Dan Meimei stretched out her jade-like hand and grasped his own large hand. She pulled him to the couch.

Moments later, the two of them were firmly ensconced in each other’s arms on the embroidered couch.

After offering him a series of hot kisses, Dan Meimei quietly said, “What sort of help do you need from me? Alas! Master Xiang, your abilities really are simply remarkable. You were even able to sneak in here and find me.”

Xiang Shaolong didn’t originally intend to find her. Somewhat awkwardly, he said, “Meimei, when you went to the screen, were you planning to...heh heh...”

Dan Meimei’s face turned red. Tossing him a glare, she clasped him firmly around his back. As though she were in a dream, she said, “Wonderful. I finally have a chance to go to bed with you.”

Surprised, Xiang Shaolong said, “Meimei, did you really look upon me with favour?”

Embarrassed, Dan Meimei said, “I’m easily attracted to capable men, but I grow bored easily as well. But towards you, for some

reason, it's different. You should know that here and now, there's no reason for me not to speak my mind. Originally, I did hate you. Oh, you horrible man! You never paid me any mind. But I didn't expect that sister Yang Yu was absolutely correct in her assessment of you. You're the sort of man who is cold on the outside but hot inside. Only you were able and willing to help me. I hadn't had the chance to offer you thanks from my own lips!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Hadn't you just thanked me 'with your own lips' just now?"

Fiery colour burning in her jade cheeks, Dan Meimei initiated another scorching kiss, before drawing back. Seeming somewhat forlorn, she said, "Are you not interested in me at all? Why don't you have any reaction?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that she had a huge amount of experience in handling men. He knew that she had already noticed that he wasn't showing the normal, expected biological reaction to her attention, and thus was feeling bad about herself. He apologetically said, "For one, I feel that Meimei is a flower who already has a master, whom I shouldn't violate. But more importantly, right now I am surrounded by danger and am worried about how to escape. That's why it's difficult for me to relax with you and enjoy the pleasure that fish feel when they enter the water."

Dan Meimei was relieved, but then she knit her beautiful eyebrows again. "If you were able to enter, you should have the ability to leave as well, right?"

Laughing bitterly, Xiang Shaolong explained how he had entered

on top of her carriage.

After listening to him, Dan Meimei nipped him, then said, “Since you have come to my door, naturally I will send you out safely as well.”

Enjoying the soft and fragrant feeling of “murmuring quietly in the middle of the night” with this beauty, Xiang Shaolong’s heart seemed to have melted. Sighing, he nipped her little ear. “That’s too dangerous for you, and there are too many unknown variables at play. I definitely won’t let you take that sort of risk.”

Dan Meimei felt a surge of emotion. She sighed, “In the entire world, perhaps only Xiang Shaolong would be so considerate. Xiang Shaolong! Hurry up and think of something. As long as I am capable of doing it, I, Dan Meimei, promise you that I will.”

Xiang Shaolong tightly embraced her. Pressing his face against her beautiful hair, he inhaled her fragrant scent. His entire body went weak. In a soft voice, he said, “Has your King ever told you about any secret escape routes located within your palace?”

Dan Meimei’s slender body trembled. In a lovable voice, she exclaimed, “I almost forgot! There is such a tunnel, and it’s located right in my bedroom.”

But then, she looked unhappy. “But the key to open it lies in the hands of the Chief Custodian. There’s no way for me to open it!”

Elated, Xiang Shaolong said, “That’s even better. Even if someone discovered that I had left through the tunnel, you would

be able to deny everything.”

Surprised, Dan Meimei asked, “You know how to pick locks?”

Xiang Shaolong withdrew slightly from her. Carefully examining her flowery, jade-like countenance that was softened even further by the glow of the lamps, he smiled and nodded. Taking another whiff of her delicate fragrance, he said, “Do you know where the exit to the tunnel is?”

His mood improving, he was starting to succumb to the allure of this comfortable blanket and began to feel a fleshly lust.

Dan Meimei could feel the pressure of him against her side. Her eyes filled with the stirrings of the desire of spring, she gazed at him for a moment before burying herself into his wide chest and saying, “The King said that the tunnel exit is half a li west of the east city gates, at a stable.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that this was wonderful. This would allow him to pick out a fast horse and flee. However, he would still need to exit through the east gates. He suddenly had a thought, and asked her where she had just been.

Dan Meimei tightly embraced him. Her eyes half closed, she murmured, “I went to visit a sister. She’ll be leaving Qi tomorrow. Oh, Xiang Shaolong! You don’t need to go so urgently! Life here in the palace is so regimented and so stifling. A person can die of boredom in here!”

Xiang Shaolong forced out a smile. “Do you regret coming?”

Dan Meimei opened her beautiful eyes. Staring vacantly, she said, “I don’t know! I really don’t know! Just yesterday, I dreamt of the Drunken Wind Loft, and dreamt of playing games with sister Yang Yu in its garden! Oh! How has she been?”

Xiang Shaolong felt a bitter feeling in his heart. He asked, “Does he treat you well?”

Dan Meimei was speechless for a long moment, then said, “I’m not sure either. Ever since he became the King of Wei, he became very ferocious. Even while he is sleeping, in his dreams, he would sometimes call for the execution of some minister or official who had offended him. If it weren’t for the fact that I’m pregnant, perhaps I would beg you to take me with you.”

Xiang Shaolong’s lust immediately cooled to nothingness and he woke up. He told himself that at such a critical juncture, he needed to preserve his strength. He had just suffered a serious illness not too long ago, making it even more inappropriate for himself to be enjoying himself with Dan Meimei right now. Changing the subject, he said, “Was the sister you just visited the leader of the Three Famous Courtesans, Miss Feng Fei?”

Dan Meimei nodded. “Yes! We even discussed you. She esteems you greatly.”

She grew excited. “How about I plead with her to secretly take you outside the city? She is a very capable person!”

Xiang Shaolong abruptly shook his head. “No! I don’t want to implicate any more people. Why is she going to the country of Qi?”

Dan Meimei replied, “It’s for the King of Qi’s 50th birthday. I heard that Shi Sufang and Lan Gongyuan are both planning to go for the celebration. Every country, including even Qin, will be sending representatives to celebrate.”

Xiang Shaolong was growing more and more confused as he listened. Surprised, he said, “Aren’t Yan and Zhao at war with Qi? How did their relations improve so much?”

Dan Meimei shook her head. “I’m not too sure about these sorts of matters either. From what the King said, it seems as though the King of Qi still hasn’t decided who the Crown Prince should be. The choice will implicate Tian Dan’s powerbase, so the King has a decided interest in the question of who the Crown Prince will be.”

Right now, Xiang Shaolong didn’t even have time to take care of himself, much less care about the internal affairs of Qi. In a soft voice, he said, “Dear Meimei! Please tell me where the entrance to the tunnel is!”

Aghast, Dan Meimei said, “Don’t be so quick to leave, alright? I have ways of hiding you here for many days! Wait for the search to die down before leaving. Isn’t that safer?”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her fragrant lips before saying, “No! I need to sneak out now, while the blizzard is still here. Once the snow

disappears, it will be impossible for me to leave.”

Unwilling to part from him, Dan Meimei tightly clasped his waist. She mournfully said, “When I embrace you, it feels like I am embracing all of the things which were important to me in the past. But you are so unwilling to remain behind and want to leave so urgently. Xiang Shaolong! Please don’t be so heartless towards me!”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong felt touched. He knew that Dan Meimei hadn’t really fallen in love with him. What she felt towards him was a complicated mixture of gratitude and memories of the past. With the palace being so stifling, she desperately desired for him to stay behind and accompany her.

But he still felt some degree of empathy for her. He gently sucked on her soft, warm red lips, then gently said, “How could I bear to be heartless towards you? But right now, I have to save my energy, because I have a very difficult road that I must travel.”

Dan Meimei returned his kiss. Her cheeks as scarlet as the setting sun, she said, “Fine, I won’t force you anymore! But you should at least make an expression of good faith, such as caressing my body. That way, in the future, you won’t easily forget about me, Dan Meimei.”

Listening, Xiang Shaolong felt as though his blood was about to boil.

To tell the truth, in a situation like this, where he was embracing

the writhing, naked body of this voluptuous woman filled with the energy of youth, while the gentle, warm smell of the blanket entered his nostrils, if he were to claim that his vessels were not expanding to the point of explosion, he would be lying through his teeth.

He couldn't help but reach out and place his hand on her firm posterior and let his hand roam about.

Dan Meimei immediately began to breathe rapidly. Like an eel, she began to writhe on his lap, her soft body pressing against him, filling Xiang Shaolong with even more fiery lust.

Xiang Shaolong's hands increased their roaming area, sliding from her thighs all the way to her petite face. The ineffable process of his hands sliding up filled both of them with the ecstatic, stimulating feeling of having a tempestuous affair.

Xiang Shaolong was like a fully drawn bow, with no choice but to shoot. Just as he was about to press her down beneath him, Dan Meimei pushed him away. She panted delicately and thinly, "The entrance to the tunnel is beneath the main armoire. There's a trapdoor beneath it. Open that up, and you'll see the locked entrance to the tunnel."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked awake. He felt a sense of gratitude in his heart. He knew that she was afraid of exhausting his strength, which was why she forcibly controlled her own urges.

After sharing a kiss with her that was so scorching, it nearly set

the two of them aflame, he jumped off the couch. Just as he was about to push the armoire aside, he suddenly remembered something. “Are there any other entrances?”

Dan Meimei said, “There are two other entrances in the imperial gardens. Everyone in the palace knows about them.”

Xiang Shaolong gave her a last hug. “That makes it even better. With multiple entrances, even if someone finds out that I left through the tunnel, nobody would suspect you of any complicity.”

After this last, lingering embrace, he finally stepped down into this road which would save his life.

Book 21 Chapter 8 – The Song And Dance Troupe

Without any danger or experiencing anything alarming, Xiang Shaolong exited from the tunnel.

The exit was located at the side of the wall of a large well located inside a horse stable. The exit was located at least seven or eight feet above the surface of the water, and there were footholds leading to the top of the well.

By the time he stuck his head out of the well, the snow had already stopped. Slight hints of light could be seen coming through the sky. A barn was laid out to his right, along with group homes of several stable hands.

This type of stable was very common, both the state owned ones and the privately owned ones. Most of the horses came from the pastures outside of the city, and were purchased by the rich and influential people of the city.

Xiang Shaolong snuck into the barn. He was wondering whether or not he should steal a horse, but also was concerned that his motivations might be too apparent. Suddenly, voices could be heard. Startled, he hurriedly hid in a corner, covering himself with the sweet grass which was fed to the horses.

Two people came.

One person said, “Master Zhang, please rest your mind. My superiors have long since made arrangements for me to provide you with the finest horse we have. Ah! In all of Daliang, is there anyone who doesn’t want to see the world-renowned song and dance of the young lady? For me to be of the slightest assistance to her is a tremendous honour.”

The fellow surnamed Zhang clearly knew how to put on airs. He just let out a bored ‘humph’. Arriving near to where Xiang Shaolong was hidden, he said, “This horse seems good. Its teeth are uniform and white as snow. What sort of horse is it?”

That stable master said, “This is a purebred horse from the deer pastures of the far north. It’s both attractive and hardy. Master Zhang, you have a good eye!”

The fellow surnamed Zhang was silent for a moment, before saying, “Did you find the charioteer I ordered you to locate? This really has been a huge bother to us. A perfectly good employee suddenly became sick and died, forcing me to run about trying to find a replacement.”

The stable master said, “How would I dare to slack off in the slightest in my duties for the young lady and for Master Zhang? I already found someone known as Shen Liang. He previously served as the charioteer for Prince Wuji, and is an expert in martial arts as well. He also looks extremely handsome. For sure, he fulfills Master Zhang’s criteria.”

Continuing, he said in a low voice, “He’s an old friend of mine. Master Zhang, I’m sure you understand. Right now, nobody in

Daliang dares to use the former subordinates of Prince Wuji. Otherwise, for someone of Shen Liang's talents, how could he remain unemployed for over two years?"

The fellow surnamed Zhang coldly snickered. "Where is he?"

The stable master smiled as well. "He didn't know that Master Zhang would come here so early. I expect he's still sleeping. Master Zhang, why don't you first go to the inner hall and have a hot cup of tea. I'll call him up and have him meet you right away."

The fellow surnamed Zhang said, "How do I have the free time to drink tea? First get the horse for me, and I'll pay you right away. Later, summon that fellow to see me. If he's late, don't blame me for not waiting for him. You'd best know that we have other options for our charioteer as well."

This was followed by the sound of the horse being walked over, then the two of them going to another stable.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that heaven was helping him. He hurriedly put on the clothes that he had previously stolen.

These clothes were the most unattractive clothes in Lord Pingqu's chest of clothes. It was very suitable for the likes of a Shen Liang, someone who was the former servant of a fallen noble house.

By the time he had finished hiding his old clothes in a secret

location, the stable master had already left the stable and was headed in the direction of the sleeping rooms. Clearly, he was going to go wake Shen Liang up.

Xiang Shaolong hurried out. Seeing that the fellow surnamed Zhang was staring at four horses, he coughed and bowed all the way to the ground. “Your humble servant, Shen Liang, requests that Master Zhang forgive me for my tardiness.”

Master Zhang didn’t expect him to arrive so quickly. He glanced at him a few times. A look of satisfaction appearing in his eyes, his gaze dropped to ‘Blood Wave’, which hung from Xiang Shaolong’s waist. He calmly said, “My name is Zhang Quan. I’m the manager for Miss Feng. You had previously served as the charioteer for Prince Wuji, so you naturally know all the rules. Five taels of silver a month, and if Miss Feng is satisfied with you, you can work for us permanently.” Zhang Quan was roughly thirty years or so of age, had an intelligent face, but had a very vulgar air to him. Above his lips were two slanting thick mustaches, giving him the appearance of a man who indulged too much in wine and sex.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly agreed.

Zhang Quan said, “We don’t have much time. Let’s go. It’s about to starting snowing again.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked both the heavens and the earth. Picking up his cloak, he took the reins of the horses and walked them out.

The departure of the city was unexpectedly easy.

The most ironical part of it was that the number of people who came to send them off was vast beyond counting. And yet, he, the most wanted criminal in the city, was able to saunter away in their midst.

Before they had reached the city walls, snow once again began to fall. Putting on his cloak and hood, he wrapped a wind-blocking mask around his face, lowering his head to avoid the wind. Combined with the fact that he was wearing very ordinary and appropriate attire, naturally not a single person suspected him. The most miraculous thing of all was that, as he was seated in the position of the charioteer, nobody could tell that he had a massive, powerful physique.

He was originally afraid that Feng Fei would recognize him, but fortunately, he didn't even have the chance to meet her.

To be honest, right now, with his face covered by a beard, even if Feng Fei paid him any mind, she would be hard pressed to easily see through the disguise and recognize him as Xiang Shaolong.

It was actually funny, come to think of it. He didn't want to disturb Dan Meimei, but in the end, it was through her assistance that he left the palace. He wanted even less to involve Feng Fei, with whom he had no relationship at all, but in the end, he had to rely on her to help him charge through this final barrier of the city gates.

This could really be described as coming back from death's door.

He hoped that this time, things would go smoothly and he would easily return to Qin.

Naturally, he didn't want to go to Qi. As soon as he saw an opportunity to do so, he would slip away.

The people of Wei were extremely courteous to Feng Fei. They sent an escort of five hundred light cavalry to accompany them, led by General Ao Xiang.

Feng Fei's song and dance troupe was a strong force of many men, fully filling over ten large vehicles. In all, including the dancers, the musicians, and the serving girls, they numbered more than two hundred. Paying their salary alone was certainly an enormous expenditure. From this, one could tell how heavy Feng Fei's income must be. He couldn't help but begin thinking about that world-class beauty seated in the carriage behind him, and began to think about that day where the two of them quietly murmured touching words to each other in the small manor in Qin.

She was the equivalent of a musical superstar of the 21st century. Only, the people who were given the chance to enjoy her music were only the utmost nobility. Ordinary people would almost never have that sort of good fortune.

After the team of carriages left Daliang, it passed through a major ravine and headed straight north. When it arrived at flowing

water, there were five huge three-sailed ships awaiting them.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong come to understand why they had to leave so early. By now, it was already sundown.

When he saw the cavalry escort also board the boats, he couldn't help but groan silently.

If he was forced all the way to the country of Qi in such a manner, it would be absolutely terrible for him.

Flowing along with the river, it wouldn't take more than four or five days for the boat to arrive at Qi's borders. By then, if he wanted to return to the Zhao border, it would cost him a huge amount of additional effort.

But he didn't have any other options for the moment. Steeling himself, he boarded the ship.

Of the five large ships, the people of Wei occupied three while Feng Fei and her people occupied two.

Compared to the previous days, where he was facing the soldiers of Wei on a daily basis, Xiang Shaolong felt much more at ease.

The boat he was on was the boat on which Feng Fei lived. At this point in time, his status in the song and dance troupe was the lowest of the low. He was assigned to a room in the bottommost deck, a tiny room with just one window which he had to share

with other low-ranked servants. The six of them shared that single room.

Maybe it was because they were jealous of him snatching the prominent position of being Feng Fei's carriage driver, but the others all linked together to shun him. As soon as they entered the room, they would immediately begin to gamble, but they wouldn't invite him to take part.

Xiang Shaolong was more than happy to let the situation remain this way. After dinner, he burrowed onto a sleeping mat in a corner of the room and immediately closed his eyes.

Those people intentionally said mocking words, including words that were designed to denigrate his 'master', Lord Xinling. Xiang Shaolong found their technique of 'pointing at the mulberry tree and insulting the locust tree' (ie, to insult someone by proxy) to be hilarious. He honestly didn't care at all and shortly drifted into a deep sleep.

After sleeping for an unknown period of time, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his upper thigh. Opening his eyes, he saw that it was a charioteer named Gu Ming who had given him a kick.

Furious, Xiang Shaolong sat up and shouted, "What's that for?"

Another charioteer named Fu Yan hugged his knees. With a rascally, gangster-like attitude, he sat leaned against a corner wall and laughed, "Shen Liang, where were you born? Is your last name Zhu (pig)? Otherwise, how could you sleep as deeply as a

slaughtered pig?”

The others roared in laughter as well, their voices filled with contempt and mockery.

There was a person there named Fang Sheng. He was the only one who did not mock Xiang Shaolong. He quietly said, “Don’t mock him. Shen Liang! It’s light now. Come with me.”

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the rage in his heart and followed him out.

Arriving on the deck, he saw that the sky was growing clear. White clouds drifted about on both sides of the horizon. His heart grew calm, and all of the unhappy thoughts from earlier fled to the back of his mind.

All the servants were in line waiting for their first meal of the day. Another group of people were fetching water to wash themselves. It was noisy all around him, giving off a very lively atmosphere.

A rather attractive female servant, accompanied by two strong-looking women, was in the middle of talking to Zhang Quan. Seeing Xiang Shaolong’s majestic physique, a weighing, interested look appeared in her eyes as she thoroughly checked him out.

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely uncomfortable at her searching gaze. Fang Sheng whispered in his ears, “That’s the servant girl of

our Second Mistress, Dong Shuzhen. Her name is Sister Xiaoling. We all call her the 'Little Chili Pepper'. Relying on the favor of the Second Mistress, she loves to show off her authority. If you don't need anything from her, best not to get involved with her."

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong was laughing bitterly. He had always been a person who proudly stood above others. He didn't expect that even amongst the servants, there were differences of rank and seniority.

After washing his face alongside Fang Sheng, it was their turn to get their food. They went to a corner and began to eat and drink.

Fang Sheng said, "Are you still angry about what happened earlier? Honestly, the one they are angry with is Zhang Quan. Gu Ming is a subordinate of the Deputy Manager, Sha Li. The Manager intentionally wanted to dampen their spirits. That's why he hired you, a total newcomer, and gave you this position which everyone else was fighting over. If it weren't for the fact that they fear going too overboard would offend the Manager, you would have even more trouble to bear."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why, despite there being so many people here, he was the one selected to be used. In his heart, he felt very lucky.

Fang Sheng saw him accept this silently. He too stopped speaking.

Xiang Shaolong still felt unhappy in his heart. "Brother Fang,

how long have you been with the Mistress?”

Fang Sheng said, “Three years now.”

Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to ask him detailed questions about Feng Fei, but he felt it would seem inappropriate. He changed the question. “Brother Fang, do you have a family?”

The corner of Fang Sheng’s mouth quirked into a bitter smile. “How can a servant from a vanquished country talk about families or lineages? If it weren’t for the Mistress’s pity, I, Fang Sheng, most likely would’ve frozen to death on some street long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a long moment. Finally, he lowered his head and ate. At the same time, he began to ask Fang Sheng one question after another about the song and dance troupe.

At this time, a solidly built male servant came next to Xiang Shaolong. He coldly said, “Are you Shen Liang?”

Xiang Shaolong remembered his current status. He hurriedly stood up and said, “Elder brother, what instructions do you have for me?”

The strong servant arrogantly said, “My name is Kun Shan. I’m Master Zhang’s deputy. You can just call me Brother Shan. I hear that you know how to use the sword. Let me see your sword!”

Although Xiang Shaolong wasn’t willing, he had no choice, and

could only pull out the sword and offer it.

Who would've thought that Kun Shan's expression would turn ugly. He shouted, "Is your other hand broken?"

Xiang Shaolong almost let him have it with a punch. He could only lift up the sword with both hands and offer it.

Most of the male servants of Feng Fei were outfitted with longswords, and Kun Shan naturally was not an exception. But compared to this precious sword 'Blood Wave', they of course were far inferior.

As soon as Kun Shan saw the sword, his eyes immediately lit up.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was feeling greedy. Not letting the other speak, he immediately said, "This is a precious sword passed down to me by my ancestors. If the sword remains, the man remains. If the sword dies, the man dies as well."

He took the first step to prevent the other from speaking.

A look of utter envy on Kun Shan's face, Kun Shan played with it for a long moment before being willing to return it to Xiang Shaolong. Stiffening his face, he said, "Master Zhang wants to see you. Come with me."

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that even the most senior of officials didn't put on airs like these people did. Laughing bitterly

inside, he followed the man to the uppermost deck.

This vessel was over three hundred feet long. Compared to the largest warships of the Qin, the 'Great Wings', it was nearly twice as long. That's because this ship was only used to carry freight. It didn't need to be nimble, it only had to be stable.

The hull of the ship was slender and merely twenty feet across. Its head and its tail pointed upwards, and two arching masts were installed near the ship's bow, along with another at the aft.

Between these two mast sections was the cabin, which was divided into three layers. The top layer was built on top of the deck, while the bottom layer was built beneath it.

Feng Fei and a group of song and dance courtesans with status naturally would stay on the uppermost, most comfortable cabin. First class managers and serving girls would stay on the second cabin. People like Xiang Shaolong, with the lowest status, would naturally stay in the lowest, nastiest bottom cabin.

When accounting for the sailors, this ship had at least a hundred people on it, making for a uniquely raucous, lively atmosphere.

By this era, water-borne transportation is already very widespread and developed. Sayings such as "Cannot go on for a single day if the oars are neglected" were already in existence. [Translator's note: Referring to countries which are heavily dependent on maritime trade.]

Especially in the southern provinces, so full of rivers and streams, water-borne transportation has long been the primary form of transport. In times of constant warfare, a navy is absolutely essential, and even civilian ships are very popular.

In the past, whenever Xiang Shaolong was in a boat, he ‘proudly sat on top’. This was his first time experiencing the taste of being one of the ‘little people’.

At the moment, Zhang Quan was staring out while leaning against a railing on a terrace. By his side, he had two men who looked like bodyguards. He looked very pretentious.

Xiang Shaolong approached Zhang Quan and saluted him. However, Zhang Quan was indifferent and did not even spare a glance at him. He stood there, enjoying the winter breeze.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. Zhang Quan’s arrogance is undeniable and this arrogant behavior has been picked up by his followers as well.

From his conversation with Fang Sheng, he has acquired a general understanding of the Song and Dance Troupe.

The top hierarchy naturally goes to the Head of the Three Courtesans, Feng Fei.

The next in authority would be twelve other courtesans who are Feng Fei’s regular singing and dancing companions. All twelve

ladies are number one rated beauties. Among the twelve courtesans, Dong Shuzen, who is also known as Second Mistress, helms the group.

Dong Shuzen is able to stand out from the other courtesans because she is the only other courtesan other than Feng Fei who is able to write songs and compose lyrics.

Troupe Manager Zhang Quan and Assistant Manager Sa Li are leaders too in their own capacity. They are responsible for all affairs pertaining to the Troupe. In addition, Sa Li does recruitment for chariot drivers, food supplies and kitchen helpers. In this instance when Zhang Quan personally recruited Feng Fei's chariot driver, he is opening overriding Sa Li's authority and starting a power tussle between them.

Below the courtesans are the talented musicians and serving maids. Due to their proximity to Feng Fei and the twelve courtesans, they do not hold any appointments but wield considerable authority.

The musicians are lead by Conductor Yun Liang, who is a retired courtesan. She conducts training for new courtesans and is held in the highest regard by Feng Fei. Therefore, no one dares to make trouble for her.

Among the serving maids, Feng Fei's personal maid Little Ping'er and Dong Shuzen's personal maid Sister Ling wield the most influence. Xiang Shaolong has met Little Ping'er in Xianyang and the pretty maid he met earlier on the ship is Sister Ling. Due to their mistresses positions, even Manger Zhang Quan has to give in

to the wishes of the two maids.

Since the establishment of the Zhou Clan(?自周室立邦后), music and entertainment are highly regarded, leading to a thriving industry for Song and Dance Troupes such as these. These troupes often tour the different States and even have annual performances. They are wildly popular and welcomed wherever they travel. For superstar troupes such as Feng Fei's, they are treated with the same pleasantries that Lords and Marquises are expected to receive. These dance troupes remain neutral politically and are not affected by the State wars.

After keeping Xiang Shaolong painfully waiting for an extended period, Zhang Quan questioned, "I heard Gu Ming and his guys gave you trouble on several occasions, is it true?"

Not knowing his true intentions, Xiang Shaolong replied, "They are truly not the friendliest people around but I can still take their crap."

Zhang Quan turned around in one swift motion and dissed, "I thought you were a martial arts expert? This kind of trouble should be familiar to you. You were kicked in the butt and yet did not retaliate - what kind of hero are you?"

His two bodyguards and Kun Shan, who was standing behind began to snigger in agreement and to flatter their boss.

Perplexed, Xiang Shaolong explained, "I am concerned that I should not create trouble since I am a newcomer. It may look bad

on Master Zhang (Quan) too. If Master Zhang thinks that it is fine to retaliate, I will know how to act the next time.”

In fact, only Xiang Shaolong knows about his personal dilemma. When things go out of proportion, he may get the attention of Feng Fei and be identified, blowing his cover. However, it will be really ideal if Sa Li can give him the sack instead when he causes trouble and he can leave the troupe at the next landing.

Despite Dan Meimei’s opinion that Feng Fei admires Xiang Shaolong, the human heart is difficult to fathom and no one can indeed tell for sure.

He has finally escaped countless struggles, hardships and his pursuers. There is no way he will risk returning back to his fugitive lifestyle.

Hearing his words, Zhang Quan calmed down.

On his left, the tall bodyguard hinted, “Master Zhang (Quan) considers you worthy and has given you such a good position. You must prove yourself and not make him lose face.”

Since he came to ancient China and began his journey initially with Tao Fang, Xiang Shaolong has spent every day in a power tussle. Understanding the hint, he secretly acknowledged Zhang Quan’s prowess. This is a brilliant plan to reap rewards without sowing.

His employment is done on purpose, inciting anger from Assistant Manager Sa Li's clique. When things go out of hand, Zhang Quan can report to the courtesans that Sa Li is discriminating against newcomers. He can use the opportunity to reprimand Sa Li and magnify his faults.

Sa Li is on the other ship and has no chance to defend himself. This is definitely an invincible blow to Sa Li.

With just a small effort, he can reduce Sa Li's influence and send a message to all the other troupe workers that Zhang Quan is the most capable around.

It is amazing that such a simple employment is mired in a much larger conspiracy, the power grabbing tactics in the Song and Dance Troupe.

The lifespan of a Song and Dance Troupe is limited. When Feng Fei decides to retire or get married, the troupe will have to disband. On the good side, there are generous retrenchment benefits to all the workers when a troupe disbands. According to Fang Sheng, that is his biggest dream - working till disbandment to receive a windfall.

Behind him, Kun Shan interrupted, "Even if someone is killed, as long as you are not the one who started the fight, Master Zhang (Quan) will stand up for you, understand?"

Speechless, Xiang Shaolong nodded his head with resignation.

Zhang Quan's voice became more accommodating and swore, "As long as you are loyal to me, I, Zhang Quan, will not treat you shabbily. Look at your skinny frame and yellow skin. I am sure you have had your fair share of trouble over the past two years. Just do your best! Since you have served Wei Wuji (Prince Xinling) before, you should understand my intentions."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that his appearance has drastically changed since he has been on the run. Besides his new beard, he has slimmed down a lot. Even if he came face to face with Feng Fei or Little Ping'er once again, they could hardly identify him.

During their initial meeting at the loft (Drunken Wind Brothel), the lights are dim and most of their time is spent sitting down and chatting. Given the present circumstances and his new look, it is highly possible to evade their recognition.

With this new thought, he felt his happiness surging.

After Zhang Quan left him, Xiang Shaolong returned to the second deck holding but discovered that Fang Sheng is no longer around. He headed towards the ship's hull to look for him and chanced upon the ship's cabins. He entered a narrow corridor along the cabin doors when someone blocked his way and scolded, "Didn't Manager Zhang tell you about the rules? Workers are not allowed to come to the hull. If you frighten the ladies, you will be in for a good time."

Xiang Shaolong had a shock and looked further ahead. He saw a poutish and yet cute serving maid, staring him down with her

large almond-shaped eyes. Her fierce stare and her arms akimbo reminded him of a tigress.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly apologized and turned back. He retreated back to the ship's lower bunk and fell into a deep sleep.

He woke up to music playing from the upper decks. It must be Feng Fei and the courtesans rehearsing their performances.

The afternoon sun shone in through a small cabin window. He was alone in the bunk.

Xiang Shaolong sat upright with his blanket still snug around him. Leaning against the ship's wall, he was thinking about the lunch service he had missed when Fang Sheng came into the bunk with a bowl of rice that was piled high with green vegetables. Offering him the bowl, he added: "I can tell that you are sleeping very soundly and do not wish to interrupt your sleep. So I prepare a bowl for you especially."

Touched, Xiang Shaolong ate two mouthfuls before enquiring, "Does Brother Fang (Sheng) have any relatives?"

Fang Sheng sat down beside him and was quiet for a few seconds. He then simply announced: "They were all killed in battle!"

From his tone, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew things were much more complicated than what he was sharing.

Fang Sheng has a fine bearing and behaves with a certain class. He could well be the son of a nobleman. When the country is devastated, he was forced to flee for his life and ended up joining Feng Fei's Song and Dance Troupe as a chef.

Fang Sheng continued, "I have no other ambitions. I just want to make some money, find a quiet place to build a house, buy some fields and become a farmer. I will never want to face these crooks ever again."

Xiang Shaolong observed his haggard features and estimated his age to be about the same as his own. However, they bore scars of numerous toils and hardships. In a sudden burst of sympathy, he nearly wanted to present his two gold ingots as a present to Fang Sheng, fulfilling his dream. He quickly suppressed this unwise thought before turning his attention back to his meal.

Fang Sheng suggested, "At sunset, the ship will dock at Gu City and will raise anchor only tomorrow. Why don't we enter the city and find some chicks to entertain ourselves? If Brother Shen (Xiang Shaolong) is broke, I can always lend you the money first."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "I thought you are saving for your house and your farmland?"

Fang Sheng reasoned, "Some money is meant to be saved, some money is meant to be spent. Lowly beings like us must also find joy in life. We are unlike Zhang Quan and other rich men who can go for top courtesans. We must remember to avoid Gu Ming and his gang. I noticed him whispering to his family warriors earlier and overheard your name. They may find trouble with you."

Infuriated, Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort and maintained his silence. He secretly swore to teach them a lesson they will never forget. Otherwise, he will always be at their mercy.

He checked himself for having such foolish thoughts.

If he do not use this golden opportunity to make good his escape, he will be a really big idiot.

Book 21 Chapter 9 – Battle For Power

The sky is still lighted when the ships docked at Gu City pier.

A jubilant Fang Sheng is about to lead Xiang Shaolong into the city for some entertainment when Zhang Quan summoned, “Miss Feng needs the carriage. Prepare it now.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Where is the carriage?”

Zhang Quan is displeased, “Are your eyes only good for looking at butts? Can’t you see the carriage at the pier?”

The words have barely left Xiang Shaolong’s mouth when he knew he is in for a scolding.

The carriage may be transported in the other ship but it has already been driven down to the pier. Xiang Shaolong is overly anxious to escape and wasn’t watching his words.

Fang Sheng secretly nudged him and Xiang Shaolong knowingly followed Fang Sheng down the gangplank, disembarking from the ship.

He was in a state of confusion and out of a sudden, he was viciously pushed from behind. Before he could figure out what is happening, Xiang Shaolong lost his balance and fell forward, knocking heavily into Fang Sheng.

Both men staggered and half roll, half fell down the gangplank onto solid ground. If not for the railings at the side of the gangplank, they could have possibly fallen into the river.

Xiang Shaolong climbed back onto his feet while Fang Sheng is clutching his left with a contorted expression on his face. The pain is causing him to break into cold sweat.

Loud laughter is heard from the ship.

Gu Ming and the other chariot drivers were jeering and laughing at their misfortune. They were accompanied by a short but muscular strongman.

Someone called out, “Shen Liang, I initially thought you are tall and well built, but today I finally realize you are just an empty vessel, a tool without a purpose. Just a small accidental bump from our Brother Wu Xun is good enough to cause you to turn topsy turvy. And I thought you are supposed to be an expert martial arts practitioner.”

Xiang Shaolong recognised the speaker to be Fu Yan, one of Gu Ming’s key confederates. Concurrently, he committed the family warrior Wu Xun’s name to memory.

Zhang Quan appeared at the stern of the ship. He bellowed to Gu Ming and his gang: “What is going on?”

Gu Ming casually replied: “If the two of them don’t even know

how to disembark a ship, it is no issue of mine.”

Following that, his group scampered down to the pier and fled into the distance.

Zhang Quan furiously glimpsed at the mud ridden and disheveled Xiang Shaolong before cursing, “Useless fellow!” He turned around and disappeared.

Xiang Shaolong is genuinely angry now. He silently helped Fang Sheng up. The poor Fang Sheng is groaning, “My leg! I think it is broken!”

How Xiang Shaolong wished he could give chase after Gu Ming and his gang, killing every single one of them to appease his anger. He apologized, “I have caused you misfortune!”

Fang Sheng bitterly smiled, “I guessed they want to injure you and prevent you from driving the carriage. Ai! Looks like our plans for tonight have to be cancelled!”

By now, several other troupe workers have arrived at their position, assisting Xiang Shaolong to move Fang Sheng back on the ship.

Upon reaching the deck, a female voice rang out, “What the hell are you guys up to? How dare you block Miss Feng’s path?”

Xiao Shaolong saw the danger and quickly lowered his head and

bowed. At the same time, he moved Fang Sheng to the side.

He stole a quick peep and saw a veiled Feng Fei standing right in front of him. Beside her is Little Ping'er who is still dressed up as a boy. They are escorted by four other maids and about a dozen family warriors. The courtesan is assessing Xiang Shaolong.

Little Ping'er, who has apparently failed to recognise Xiang Shaolong, was incensed. "What has happened?" she demanded.

Zhang Quan and another man appeared out of nowhere and before he could speak out, the handsome man beside him interjected, "It is just a small accident."

He continued to face Xiang Shaolong and berated, "You are the newcomer right? Useless bum! Shouldn't you be going to your carriage now? Do you expect Head Mistress (Feng Fei) to wait for you instead?"

Hearing his sarcastic scolding, implying that Zhang Quan is incompetent, Zhang Quan's face darkened.

At this moment, Feng Fei's angelic voice sang out from beneath the veil: "Assistant Manager Sa!" Her voice carried some hints of disdain.

Having accomplished his goal, a smug Sa Li kept quiet.

Feng Fei shot a look at Xiang Shaolong and plainly ordered, "Be

more careful next time. Send Fang Sheng back into the room before coming to the carriage.”

Xiang Shaolong was extremely relieved that neither the Mistress nor her maid could pinpoint his real identity.

Watching her descend down the gangplank and supported by her companions, Xiang Shaolong can only force out a miserable sigh.

He can no longer slip off just like that.

Moreover, he felt an obligation to take care of Fang Sheng until he has fully recovered.

This is one of his life guiding principles.

Unknowingly, it began snowing again.

Reflected by the strong rays of the setting sun, the small flakes seemed to dance freely in the air before reluctantly landing on the ground, finishing a short but mesmerizing journey.

Time seems to have slowed down and the land purified with every layer of snow.

Xiang Shaolong directed the horses and began chauffeuring the beauty.

Four family warriors are in front paving a way for the carriage to pass through. Another eight family warriors are following the carriage.

Wei's Assistant Commanding General Ao Xiang brought a dozen of his best soldiers and they flanked the carriage on both sides, showcasing the importance of Feng Fei's stature in the eyes of all the political leaders.

She is akin to a 21st century superstar celebrity with popular hit songs, unlike the typical courtesan who prostitute herself under the guise of entertainment.

Even without the burden of Fang Sheng, Xiang Shaolong will find it challenging to flee under the heavy escort.

Escape is still conceivable but it will raise Ao Xiang's suspicions.

Fortunately, Ao Xiang regarded Xiang Shaolong as Feng Fei's long serving carriage driver and did not have the slightest suspicion about him.

Meanwhile, Xiang Shaolong has no idea where he is and is blindly driving in the direction of the family warriors ahead of him.

With the hoofbeats sounding in the background, the carriage entourage eventually approached a snow-clad city without much incident.

Most of the shops are open for business and judging from the signboards, most of the businesses are involved in carpentry, sewing, fabrics, and embroidery.

Xiang Shaolong may not have any deep understanding of culture and based on his keen observation skills, he can tell that compared to all the cities he has been to, Gu City has a remarkably cultural and retro aura.

In this instant, Ao Xiang rode towards the side of the carriage and lowered his head, striking a conversation with Feng Fei, “In the past, when Jing’s (annihilated state) Han Xuan Zi came to the State of Lu (annihilated state), he came across Chancellor Lu’s secret literature collection. He sighed that ‘All of Zhou’s Literature is in Lu’. Now that Miss (Feng Fei) is back here again, I am sure you must be feeling emotional.”

Xiang Shaolong shuddered. So this was originally the State of Lu, which belongs to the State of Wei now.

Even the great Confucius was born here. It is no wonder why this State has such a strong arts culture.

Feng Fei sighed slowly and in a pained tone, “Yes. It is all because of this incident. If we, the citizens of Lu, are not overly stubborn and traditional, placing too much importance on the conservative ways, we may not be controlled first by Qi (State), then by Wu(State), followed by Yue (Yue was eventually annihilated by Wei, explains Ji Yanran originally in Wei). Although we have the

honour of being named: The Clan of Saints, we are eventually an annihilated State. General Ao is giving us too much credit.”

Xiang Shaolong detected the melancholy in her voice and can feel his own emotions surging. Theoretically, Feng Fei is not a Song Princess but a Lu Princess. Nonetheless, Lu and Song are neighbouring States and she may be connected to both States.

Ao Xiang’s flattery has backfired and after a few awkward exchanges, he resumed his riding position after noticing Feng Fei’s lack of interest in chatting with him.

The entourage traveled along a winding path, deviating gradually from the main road. Consequently, they were headed towards a desolate area west of the City.

Under the illumination of the lanterns, the flying snow and strong wind resembles a scene from never ending dream.

Xiang Shaolong can comprehend the agony of the beauty behind him. When Xiao Pan eventually unites the States, Ao Xiang and everybody else will become citizens of annihilated States. Such a feeling is hard to fathom.

The sunset is beautiful but it only lasts for a fleeting moment.

This can be the autobiography of the Six States right now.

The carriages drove through a sparse forest and halted near a

mausoleum.

Xiang Shaolong finally realized that Feng Fei is here to pay her respects to her ancestors.

Feng Fei and everyone alighted from their carriages. Accompanied by Ao Xiang, they walked towards the mausoleum and disappeared behind the trees.

Xiang Shaolong, the family warriors and the Wei soldiers stayed with the carriages. Momentarily, sounds of crying can be heard.

Upon their return, Little Ping'er and the maids' pretty eyes were all red and swollen. The exception was Feng Fei's as she is hiding behind the veil.

It was deep into the night when everyone boarded the ship.

Everyone including Gu Ming had gone into the city for a wild night of partying. Only an incensed Fang Sheng remained behind.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that his left foot is bandaged clumsily with a few pieces of cloth. He enquired, "How is it?"

Fang Sheng eyes reddened, "If not for my leg injury, I would have fought it out with them."

Xiang Shaolong has been trained in basic bone fixing skills and

opened up the bandages. Feeling the leg bone structures, he heaved a sigh of relief, “It is simply a bone that has been displaced. Come! Bear with it for a while!”

Before Fang Sheng yelled out in pain and his eyes sockets are swelled up with tears, Xiang Shaolong had swiftly fixed the joint dislocation.

Fang Sheng tried taking a couple of steps and is amazed, “Brother Shen, this is miraculous!”

Xiang Shaolong patted the chair beside him and smiled, “Please sit down, I have something to tell Brother Fang.”

Fang Sheng’s mood has greatly improved for the better. Pleased, he sat down and invited, “Brother Shen please speak your mind!”

Xiang Shaolong extracted the two gold ingots from his bosom. Placing them on his open palm, he presented them before Fang Sheng’s eyes.

Feng Sheng’s eyes grew as big as saucers. He let out a loud gasp, “Heavens! This is pure gold.”

Two simple gold ingots are more than sufficient for an ordinary man to live without worries for the rest of his life.

Xiang Shaolong pressed the gold ingots into his hands and whispered, “They are yours now.”

Fang Sheng hesitated for a while and shook his head, “How can I take Brother Shen’s gold?”

Xiang Shaolong lied, “I have several more pieces of gold. They were bestowed to me when Prince Wuji knows that he would be sentenced to death soon. Brother Fang, please accept them and use the excuse of your broken leg to leave this malicious place, fulfilling your dream.”

Holding the gold ingots tightly in his hands, Fang Sheng is curious, “Brother Shen is not lacking in wealth, why did you choose to lead the life of a carriage driver?”

Xiang Shaolong continued his bluff, “Honestly speaking, I am making use of this job to leave Daliang (Wei capital). Ever since the death of Prince Wuji, no one dares to employ his ex-family warriors like us. I am not going to live my life without making my mark somewhere. I am therefore heading to Qi to try my luck.”

Fang Sheng is so touched he began to tear again, “I am beyond gratitude. With this two pieces of gold and my savings over the past two years, I can finally resign from Miss (Feng Fei) tomorrow.”

After some thought, he added, “Why don’t we leave together? Sa Li is awfully narrow-minded and he will never let you off. Zhang Quan is only making use of you and even if you died fighting for him, he will not even feel the least bit of sadness.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "After Brother Fang is gone, I will have no more reservations. Our fall will not be in vain."

Fang Sheng fell into a daze. In this instant, he felt like Xiang Shaolong is much more than who he truly is.

Fang Sheng could not hold back his plans and right that evening, he approached Zhang Quan, asking to leave the troupe because of his leg injury.

Zhang Quan showed no signs of asking him to stay on. On the pretext that he is resigning instead of troupe disbandment, he paid Fang Sheng a few miserable bronze coins and commanded him to leave the ship early next morning.

An upset Fang Sheng confided in Xiang Shaolong about this issue. Originally, he can still be entitled to a generous dismissal fee for his years with the troupe. Needless to say, Zhang Quan has pocketed most of it. Ultimately, he is not overly concerned about this discrepancy because the two gold ingots are enough to satisfy all his needs.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong sent Fang Sheng off the ship. While he was hesitating to leave with him, Gu Ming and his gang happened to return to the ship. Mocking them again for their incompetence, Gu Ming and his gang boarded the ship.

With Wei soldiers swarming all over the pier and Zhang Quan staring at them from the ship, Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to retaliate. He calmly bade farewell to Fang Sheng and returned to

the ship.

The ships began sailing.

Xiang Shaolong can sense his fellow workers and drivers are shying from him as if he is carry a contagious disease. No one wants to converse with him and even Zhang Quan's followers are treating him like trash. He was greatly humoured. Obtaining his breakfast, he hid in a corner of the ship's stern and began eating.

Inside his mind, he was churning ideas on how to create a big hoo-ha, forcing Feng Fei to dismiss him. He can then swagger off to freedom without raising any suspicions.

However, timing is critical to his plans. Ideally, it should happen before the next stop when the ships dock to replenish their food and water supplies. He can then leave the ship both mentally and physically.

In the beginning, Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty over snatching the original Shen Liang's employment. Now, he felt that he was helping him to avoid a calamity instead.

Gu Ming and his collaborators are likely to have been ordered by Sa Li to get rid of himself at all costs.

That Sa Li is rather good looking and could be using this natural advantage to start a relationship with one of the more influential serving maids. With his increase in influence, he could be

conspiring to take over Zhang Quan's job.

Lost in his thoughts, a small pair of shoes suddenly appeared before his eyes.

Xiang Shaolong looked up in panic but his view is blocked by two huge and jutting breasts. In that second, he still has no idea who is this person in front of him. Taken aback, he got on his feet and found out the lady is actually Sister Ling, the attractive serving maid of Second Mistress Dong Shuzen.

Stifling her laughter and after glancing twice at him, Sister Ling coldly hissed, "Are you the trouble maker Shen Liang?"

Xiang Shaolong has already made up his mind to leave the ship and doesn't bother to give her any leeway. Assuming a domineering stance, he joked back, "Sister Ling gives me too much credit. Without any supporters, how much trouble can I create?"

Never in her wildest dreams would Sister Ling expect Xiang Shaolong to be so rebellious and talked back to her. Her expression changed colour instantaneously and she scolded, "How dare you! Do you know who you are speaking to?!"

Folding his arms across his chest, Xiang Shaolong uttered to nobody in particular, "Every nation has its laws. Every household has its rules. However, some principles are ever encompassing. I am a lone ranger whereas other people are forming cliques and gangs. Sister Ling, why don't you judge from your own conscience who has the potential to be the trouble maker around here?"

Sister Ling is dumbfounded. During a debate, she is light years away from Xiang Shaolong who is used to complex court arguments. Her face turned red in anger, she stared at him for a before her arms went into akimbo position. She screeched, “Are you tired of your job?”

Xiang Shaolong leisurely responded, “Isn’t this up to Manager Zhang or Miss Feng?”

Sister Ling is often the one doing the scolding. Now that she has been put down badly by a lowly driver like Xiang Shaolong, she is as mad as a bull and stomped off.

Xiang Shaolong watched as she stomped over to the other side where Gu Ming and his guys were and summoned Gu Mong into the ship’s cabin. Acknowledging that a good show is about to start, Xiang Shaolong smiled to himself. He turned to view the beautiful snow scenery on the both sides of the shore.

He is certain that Sa Li has hooked up with the alluring serving maid Sister Ling. He may even enjoy the support of the Second-in-Command Dong Shuzen to openly challenge Zhang Quan’s authority.

Just as he was pondering which route to travel back to Qin, someone tapped his shoulder.

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and a family warrior entered his view. He is one of those who participated in escorting Feng Fei last

night for her prayers.

The family warrior commanded, “Master Zhang wants to see you!”

Xiang Shaolong noticed that the family warrior dared not look at him straight into his eyes while talking. Easily predicting the situation, he smiled back, “May I know how do I address Brother?”

The man answered, “I am Xu Ran. Come with me!”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his adrenaline rushing and his limbs itching for some action. He followed Xu Ran into the cabins.

Book 21 Chapter 10 – A Shattered Dream

Following Xu Ran, Xiang Shaolong stepped into the cabins and came to a door.

Xu Ran stopped in his tracks and pushed the door inwards. He gestured: “Master Zhang is inside, you can go in on your own!”

Surprisingly, there was no ambush along the corridors. Instead, melodious music can be heard from the upper decks. This is a brilliant situation to trap Xiang Shaolong. Even if he shouted for help, no one can hear him.

Xiang Shaolong grinned and viciously used his own shoulder to smash into Xu Ran’s shoulder.

Caught unaware, Xu Ran called out in shock and stumbled into the cabin.

A black cloth bag swiftly clamped down and enveloped Xu Ran’s head and face. The bag was secured and Xu Ran was dragged deeper into the cabin. Gu Ming, Fu Yan, a few other drivers, Wu Xun and a few family warriors pounced upon Xu Ran, raining merciless, heavy blows on him.

Xiang Shaolong slipped into the cabin and closed the door behind him. Xu Ran is already pitifully writhing on the floor like a freshly cooked shrimp.

These men may be overly excited to carry out their task and did not notice that they were beating the wrong person. Xiang Shaolong and Xu Ran are dressed very differently and have different body builds as well.

Gu Ming was the first to notice that the man standing at the cabin door is Xiang Shaolong and not Xu Ran. Flabbergasted, he pointed dumbly at Xiang Shaolong but no words can come out from his mouth.

By now, everyone realized they have laid their hands on the wrong person.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head slowly and sighed, "Do you know what your mistake is?"

Xiang Shaolong dashed forward and came to the side of the short strongman, Wu Xun, in a flash. Using his momentum, he kneeled Wu Xun in his nether regions.

Back in the 21st century, Xiang Shaolong is an expert when it comes to bar fights. He totally understood the principle - To capture a man, shoot his horse; to nab the thieves, capture the bandit king.

Wu Xun is a strong, well-built and courageous man. Otherwise, he would not possess the strength to push Xiang Shaolong down the gangplank. Therefore, Xiang Shaolong chose to attack him first and attacked his most vulnerable spot as well.

His speed is too incredible and Wu Xun did not have the slightest chance to defend himself.

The next moment, Xiang Shaolong has already slipped in between the two family warriors. Using his two elbows, he strike both men heavily at the side of the rib cages.

These close combat techniques are most applicable while fighting in tight and narrow spaces. It is hard for the opponents to predict his moves and he can easily use the opponents' bodies to shield himself.

Both family warriors cried out in pain and collapsed.

By now, Xiang Shaolong has leapt to the front of Fu Yan. Avoiding a punch to his face, he grabbed Fu Yan's neck with both hands and kneeled him twice below his abdomen.

With another flying kick, he sent another driver soaring through the air. PIAK! The driver hit the ship's wall.

From the upper decks, the music became more lively and high pitched, as if it is cheering Xiang Shaolong.

Out of a sudden, someone grabbed Xiang Shaolong from behind. Releasing Fu Yan and letting him kneel down to the ground, Xiang Shaolong used Judo and flipped the man behind him over his own head, aiming to slam him in the direction of the cabin window.

BANG! The man's spine hit the cabin window frame and the man rolled to the corner of the ship's wall.

Gu Ming and the other two drivers advanced towards Xiang Shaolong. Using hand-grabbing techniques, Xiang Shaolong had a grip on one of the driver's wrist and kicked him twice in his abdomen. The driver bent over in pain.

Tugging the driver with his enormous strength, he managed to cause the stumbling man to crash head on with the other driver. Both drivers collapsed into a tangled heap.

Gu Ming is now facing Xiang Shaolong alone. The two family warriors had managed to get on their feet but were still in a daze.

Gu Ming is mad with fury and anger is glimmering in his eyes. He drew out a dagger from his bosom and launched a piercing attack towards Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Xiang Shaolong faked a movement and avoided the thrust. Using his hand in a chopping attack, he ruthlessly strikes down on his wrist.

Gu Ming's dagger fell to the ground and he stumbled forward. Xiang Shaolong delivered a crushing punch to his back as he fell.

This overbearing driver landed flat on his face and is a pathetic sight to behold.

JIANG! JIANG! The two family warriors have regained their composure and their aggressive spirits have been ignited. Both drew out their swords.

Bloodwave left its sheath as well and turned into a sword storm.

Never in their wildest imagination did they expect Xiang Shaolong to be a godly swordsman. Among cries of panic, their long swords have long left their grasps and their wrists are bleeding.

Xiang Shaolong sheathed his sword and pressed forward, attacking with his iron fists.

Sounds of bones breaking and chilling screams followed. Three punches later, both men can no longer stand up.

As Gu Ming struggled to get up, Xiang Shaolong pressed him against the ship's wall and landed four heavy blows to his abdomen. Gu Ming vomited a mouthful of fresh blood and sat down with his back against the ship's wall. His pain is indescribable.

The cabin door swung open and was continued by Sister Ling's shriek.

Except for Xiang Shaolong, nobody else is able to stand up.

Xiang Shaolong casually clapped his hands and joked, "How are

you, Sister Ling? Aren't you going to report me and get me fired?"

Sister Ling's exquisite face has long been drained of any colour and she is still unable to believe her own eyes. Her lips were shuddering and she is speechless at the same time.

One of the family warriors managed to get on his knees but after puking a mouthful of blood, he fainted back onto the ground.

With his piercing eyes shining a deathly aura, Xiang Shaolong advanced towards Sister Ling.

Sister Ling screamed and fled the scene.

Xiang Shaolong stretched his limbs and believed that it is time for him to leave this ship soon.

Xiang Shaolong is standing confidently in the centre of the spacious main hall of the ship.

Feng Fei is wearing her usual veil. Behind her stood Little Ping'er who is still dressed up as a boy.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong laid his eyes on the second in command of the Song and Dance Troupe, Dong Shuzen. She is sitting beside Feng Fei and standing beside her is Sister Ling, who is still quivering with fear.

Dong Shuzen is around her twenties and extraordinary features lined her face. Her eyes sparkle like Christmas ornaments and are incredibly lively, betraying her intelligence.

The Head Musician Yun Niang (I typo Yun Liang previously) is present too. She is seated on the other side of Feng Fei. Presently in her middle age, she still retains much of her beauty and portrays a sense of maturity that is lacking in all the young lasses. She is as mesmerizing and alluring as the courtesans.

Zhang Quan is seated on the side with a joyful expression.

Sa Li has been summoned from the other ship to participate in this 'court session.' He is seated opposite Zhang Quan and his eyes are filled with hatred. He looked as if he wants to swallow Xiang Shaolong whole.

The two men and three ladies are seated like a fan, converging on the standing Xiang Shaolong.

Kun Shan and the other family warriors lined up two sides of the hall and the entrance of the hall. Although there are more than twenty people of them in the room, there was complete silence, adding to the stifling atmosphere.

Gu Ming, Fu Yan, Wu Xun, Xu Ran and the others have been properly bandaged. Weak and dejectedly looking, they sat on one side of the hall like a bunch of defeated cocks. They look amusing and yet pitiful at the same time.

Dong Shuzen started, “Shen Liang, what is going on? Since you joined our troupe, there have been numerous incidents. Are you aware that our troupe forbids duelling?”

Her voice is sharp, clear and full of energy. Her singing should be delightful to the ears.

Xiang Shaolong swept his gaze over the entire crowd and found everyone has their eyes on him. Only Feng Fei remains unfathomable. He grinned widely and deepened his voice, replying, “If you wish to know what has happened, why don’t you ask Sister Ling instead? She is the mastermind and should know much more than me.”

Sa Li interrupted furiously, “Shen Liang, who do you think you are? How dare you be so disrespectful! Kneel!”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes lit up with iciness. He stared incessantly at Sa Li but maintained his silence.

The family warriors supporting Sa Li began to turn boisterous and unruly.

Feng Fei scolded, “Shut up!” Everyone quietened down.

Pressing his hand on his sword hilt, Xiang Shaolong raised his head and laughed, “I’d rather be killed than to be insulted. A man’s kneel is as valuable as gold. If you want me to kneel to crooks like Sa Li, you might as well take my life first.”

Sa Li stood up immediately and grabbed his sword handle. He grunted, "Then let me take your lowly life."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused, "If you can withstand ten strikes from me, I will kow tow ten times to you."

Sa Li is angry beyond comprehension. His face turned from red to white and red again. However, he dare not draw his sword.

Adding fuel to fire, Zhang Quan egged, "If Assistant Manager Sa possesses excellent sword skills, I, Zhang Quan, will like to witness it."

Yun Niang who has been silent all this while sighed, "You are all noisy and unruly. What is this troupe coming to? How can you solve any issues arguing like this?"

Sa Li took the opportunity to stand down. Boiling with rage, he returned to his seat.

Feng Fei softly decided, "Very good. Now let us understand the whole situation first. Wu Xun, you are the head of the family warriors. Tell me what is going on."

Wu Xun is a simple-minded person and is not good with words. He could not find the words to express himself and his face is beginning to turn red.

Gu Ming intervened, “This matter is started by Shen Liang. We brothers are just enjoying ourselves in the cabin when Shen Liang...”

Little Ping'er called out in interruption, “Miss (Feng Fei) is asking Wu Xun, who are you to speak up?”

A grievous Gu Ming swallowed the rest of his words.

Wu Xun finally found his tongue and replied in an anxious tone, “Yes. Shen Liang barged into our cabin and began beating us up with no rhyme or reason. That is all.”

Zhang Quan dismissed, “How would he know that all of you are hiding in the cabin and enjoying yourself?”

Wu Xun is speechless once again.

Sa Li frantically countered, “Is General Manager trying to protect this criminal? It is obviously Shen Liang is the one attacking and injuring all these men. Looking at his disrespectful bearing, you should know he is the reckless perpetrator.”

Dong Shuzen began to assess Xiang Shaolong. She frowned, “Everyone keep quiet for now.”

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, she questioned, “Shen Liang, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Xiang Shaolong will definitely not offer an explanation. He behaved like he cannot be bothered and shrugged his shoulders, “I have nothing to add. Second Mistress just have to say it and I will leave the troupe, concluding this matter.”

Zhang Quan’s face changed colour, “How can you leave without explaining yourself?”

Xiang Shaolong shot him a cold glare and snorted, “Master Zhang is having ulterior motives in hiring me. Now that I have understood your malicious intentions, I will never allow myself to be used by you. What is the point of staying here?”

Zhang Quan is considerably infuriated that even the green veins on his forehead are protruding. In that moment, his guilty conscience held his tongue.

Sister Ling frostily reprimanded, “You insolent slave, you have injured so many men and there is no way we will let you leave like that!”

Dong Shuzen cut her sentence, “Little Ling, zip it!”

Sister Ling has always enjoyed Dong Shuzen’s affections and is seldom publicly admonished like the present situation. She began to tremble with fear and dared not speak anymore.

Xiang Shaolong is initially humoured and nonchalant, awaiting

the decision to chase him out of the Song and Dance Troupe.

He purposely pushed the decision into Dong Shuzen's authority because he assumed she would shield her own personal serving maid. When he heard her telling off Sister Ling, he began to worry.

The ship's main hall is filled with total quietness except for Zhang Quan and Sa Li's heavy breathing.

Dong Shuzen firstly looked at the amazing soundless Feng Fei and skimmed everyone in the room. Finally laying her eyes on Xiang Shaolong once again, she frowned slightly and lectured, "It is no longer the issue of the fighting but Shen Liang's bad attitude and lack of respect for others."

Pausing a while, she continued, "You are an extraordinary man but we are just a simple Song and Dance troupe, I am afraid we cannot accommodate your talents here, therefore..."

Xiang Shaolong is about to send his thankful prayers to heaven when Feng Fei suddenly spoke up, "Hold it!"

Everybody turned their attention to her in awe.

Xiang Shaolong's mind became agitated. If Feng Fei identified him, his life will turn into hell.

He deliberately changed his voice, posture and with his new appearance, on top of their one and only meeting, by right he

should be able to evade her detection.

Under the scrutiny of every eye in the hall, Feng Fei softly sighed, “Who can imagine that there will be so many issues even in a small troupe such as ours. The fault does not lie with Shen Liang but with the management. I have been very tolerant so far but things are really getting out of hand. I will no longer sit back and do nothing.”

Xiang Shaolong was consoled that his cover is not blown. Concurrently, he knows that things are not going according to his plans. If he is not dismissed, is he going to Qi instead? Zhang Quan, Sa Li and Sister Ling’s face lost colour upon hearing her words.

Dong Shuzen is feeling uneasy too. She can feel Feng Fei’s words are aimed at her as well.

Feng Fei judged, “Shen Liang, you can continue to be my driver with a peace of mind. If anyone were to make trouble for you, you can report to me directly.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned beyond words. He wished he could start crying at the failure of his escape plan.

If he insisted on leaving, doubts will be raised.

Zhang Quan who mistook him for the real Shen Liang now hates him to the core. He may even plot against himself or have misgivings about his identity.

He can only salute and give his thanks.

Feng Fei is now facing Zhang Quan and Sa Li. She gracefully took down her veil, revealed crystal sharp features that can rival Ji Yanran and Qin Qing.

However, her two eyes are frosty and her expression is one of displeasure.

Zhang Quan was terrified and he hastily kneeled down, kowtowing, “I know I am wrong. I know I am wrong!”

Sa Li is still banking on Dong Shuzen’s influence and tried to wriggle his way out. He argued, “Mistress, I wasn’t on this ship when the incident happened...”

Sister Ling shrieked, “How dare you talk back like this?”

An annoyed Dong Shuzen commanded, “Little Ling, kneel! From today onwards, you need not serve me anymore!”

Sister Ling petite frame was shaking uncontrollably. She broke down crying.

Sa Li finally came to his senses and kneeled down too, kowtowing non-stop.

Feng Fei plainly state, “At the next stop, Sa Li you better scram. Go as far as your legs can take you. Otherwise, don’t blame me for being heartless.”

Turning to Zhang Quan, she announced, “Taking into consideration all the years you have been with me, and taking into account you realized your mistake, I will only demote you to Assistant Manager. Yu Niang will now control all the finances. Gu Ming and his partners in crime will all be fined a month’s salary. Anyone who opposes will be fired on the spot.”

Finishing, she ignored Sa Li’s pleas and rose, leaving the hall. Even Dong Shuzen was horrified and kneeling on the ground.

Xiang Shaolong has no choice but to kneel down as well. In his mind, he was contemplating to join Sa Li in ‘going as far as his legs can take him’.

Feng Fei’s astute judgment and insight is something he definitely did not anticipate.

Book 21 Chapter 11 – River Prisoner

After the episode, Xiang Shaolong's status is largely elevated. For a start, he gets to upgrade from his basement bunk to a room in the middle deck. He is now roommates with four other family warriors and no longer face the likes of Gu Ming and the other drivers.

Most importantly, nobody dares to pick on him anymore or even be rude to him verbally. Of course this is not solely based on Feng Fei's warning; it is also due to his assault on Wu Xun and Company.

To a certain extent, he has risen to become the hero of the troupe. Many other colleagues who have been oppressed by Zhang Quan, Sa Li and Sister Ling in the past are now delighted to have Xiang Shaolong vent their frustration.

In the power struggle within the troupe, he is no longer a newcomer but a veteran, a winner. But according to his escape plans, he is the biggest loser.

He is naturally unwilling to be sent to Qi in such a manner but it is suicide to jump into the river and swim away in the middle of winter.

It is still a question if he can successfully slip away at the next landing.

At dinnertime, there is still no one who is courageous enough to strike a conversation with him. Nonetheless, people are beginning

to nod their head to acknowledge him and their body language is friendlier.

Xiang Shaolong relished his peace.

When most of the troupe staff retreated back into their rooms to avoid the cold winter wind, he sat alone on a pile of goods at the ship's tail. He stared blankly at the gorgeous scenery on the two riverbanks under the starry sky.

Three other big ships are following closely behind.

Remembering his lovely wives and son in Xianyang, now further and further away from him, and recalling Zhou Liang and the Eagle King's tragic death, as well as his soldiers dying one by one beside him, his chest swelled up with intense emotions and he nearly wanted to shout his lungs out.

Li Mu taught him the bitterness of defeat in war.

But he does not hate him, nor bear thoughts of revenge.

Li Mu did mention, "If we ever meet on the battlefield, there will be no mercy." Li Mu's words felt fresh in his mind, as if it was only spoken to him yesterday.

Now that he is unaccounted for, will Xiao Pan be miserable or secretly celebrating? At the end of the day, Xiang Shaolong represents Xiao Pan's past.

Without Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can be the Great Qin Shihuang without any reservations.

Xiang Shaolong is having conflicting thoughts.

Xiao Pan is changing every day.

In the history of China, every warrior who assisted his Lord significantly never enjoys a good ending, unless he betrayed his lord to be King.

Therefore, he exercised utmost caution in this aspect. He seldom claimed credit for his achievements but he somehow became a centre of power regardless and exerts notable influence over this future Qin Shihuang.

He knew Xiao Pan since his teens; will he be able to avoid this unfortunate tradition? Deep in his contemplations, a gentle female voice sounded beside his ear, "A penny for your thoughts?"

Xiang Shaolong broke out of his stupor and turned his head around. It is the recently promoted, Lead Musician Yu Niang.

He hurriedly got up and paid his respects.

Yu Niang stepped to his side, shoulder-to-shoulder and sighed, "Are you enjoying the scenery here in loneliness because everyone

else on this ship is terrified of you? First Mistress (Feng Fei) and I saw you from the upper decks and it is she who asked me to speak to you.”

Xiang Shaolong observed at her carefully. This lady should be twenty-seven or twenty eight years old. She maintained her beauty well and her silky skin is comparable to a much younger girl. Her well-defined features are peppered with small signs of aging but she has a more womanly feel. He was mesmerized momentarily. Yun Niang saw him staring at herself and smiled, “Looking at how intoxicated you are earlier, I am sure you enjoy countless days of glory serving Prince Xinling. Out of his three thousand family warriors, being his personal driver is an accomplishment already. Now, no one will belittle you.”

Xiang Shaolong recollected the gratitude and enmity between him and Prince Xinling, his bright eyes revealing signs of melancholy. The usually calm and composed Yun Niang was struck by his expression and her heart is beginning to stir. She can feel herself becoming more and more attracted to this man.

Xiang Shaolong caught Yun Niang averting his own gaze and thought to himself, “Even she is afraid of me?”

He sighed: “To be loved everywhere you go or to be feared everywhere you go, which is a better choice?” Yun Niang discovered she cannot relate to Xiang Shaolong as a plain subordinate anymore and his words have aroused her interests. Pushing back her delicate hair which has been blown out of place by the wind, she replied without thinking: “Needless to say, it is better to be loved.” Her face reddened when she finished speaking.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, “This is the mindset of the young and inexperienced. It will be great to have both but that is impossible. I will choose to be feared; at least that keeps me safe.”

Yun Niang was stunned at his words. A long while later, she confessed, “You thinking is indeed unique but not without reason. Many who have hurt me in the past are people who loved me. Ai. For your level of talent, why are you contented to be a simple driver?” Even she herself could not comprehend why she is discussing intimate matters with a subordinate.

Xiang Shaolong of course does not suffer from any inferiority complex.

To a modern man from the 21st Century, every human being is equal.

In reply to her question, Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed, “Luck comes in cycles.”

Yun Niang will never fully understand his true intentions but after spending some time to grasp the meaning of his words, she was moved, “What an excellent way to describe the factor of luck in our human lives!”

Reluctantly, she bade: “I have to go and report to Miss.”

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to enquire, “Are we docking

soon?”

Yun Niang responded: “Are you thinking of heading to shore to entertain yourself? Not on this stop. We will reach Li Xia tomorrow but will only dock for two hours. Except for those purchasing supplies, nobody else is permitted to leave the ship. I have to go!” Watching her sashay away, Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. Looks like he has to postpone his escape to the stop after the next.

As expected, the ship docked the next day. From the deck, Xiang Shaolong can see the pier swarming with Qi citizens, from commoners to officials. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of Feng Fei and even the City Mayor personally came on board to pay his respects to Feng Fei, giving Xiang Shaolong no chance to slip away.

He is beginning to grow impatient. This ship resembles an open concept water borne prison to him.

The sole consolation is that throughout these days on board, he has fully recovered from all his ordeals. He looks much better than he was when he was still a fugitive. His skin is no longer coarse and yellow and he is no longer all skin and bones.

On the way back to his room, he bumped into Zhang Quan. He gave Zhang Quan a venomous look but Zhang Quan only smiled in return.

He is now quite friendly with the four family warriors and he tried to ask more about the next pier stop.

One of them named Fei Sun laughed, “Brother Shen must be thinking about girls.”

This Fei Sun is of middle build, which means he is shorter than Xiang Shaolong by an entire head. With average looks and an easygoing character, he makes everyone around him feel comfortable. Just turning thirty, he is the eldest among the four family warriors.

Another family warrior named Feng Liang answered, “We will be docking at Di City the day after tomorrow and it will also be the last stop before we reach Lin Zi (capital of Qi). If you guys want to have some fun, this is it. I’ve heard about massive inflation in Lin Zi and we likely cannot afford the fun there.”

Feng Liang is a twenty-year-old lad, tall and muscular. He is only shorter by Xiang Shaolong by a few inches and is the most knowledgeable among the four.

Another family warrior is named Lei Yun’er. Younger by Feng Liang by two or three years, he is born with long limbs and resembles a primate with a shapely body. Due to him hooking up with an influential serving maid, he behaves in a superior manner. Despite treating Xiang Shaolong as a friend, he is still demeaning in some ways.

He snorted in boredom, “Who says you need money to get chicks? Watch how I do it when the time comes.”

Fei Sun and Feng Liang stood up to protest and the three men are having a noisy banter.

Xiang Shaolong remembered himself and his drinking buddies Little Zhang, Man Niu and Xi Pao back in the 21st Century. The atmosphere is similar and he immediately felt a sense of warmth. When men get together and engage in idle chatter, the topics will hardly deviate from women and money.

Di City is his last chance of escape.

If he arrived in Qi's capital Lin Zi, it will be several times more treacherous.

Just based on Tian Dan's subordinates alone, several of them can easily identify him.

The worst circumstance is that as Feng Fei's driver, he will have to drive her to and fro all the residences of the rich and powerful. His fake identity will be easily exposed and the menace that follows will be overwhelming.

He was about to turn in when there was a knock on the door. A serving maid came looking for Xiang Shaolong, announcing that Feng Fei wants to see him.

Xiang Shaolong was caught by surprise. His heart began to beat faster and faster. Why would Feng Fei want to see a lowly driver like him?

The maid leading the way look slightly familiar and Xiang Shaolong instantly remembered that she is the fierce ***** who scolded him on the first boarding day. He asked: “How do I address Elder Sister?”

The maid coldly hissed, “Why do you have so many questions? Why are you so talkative? When you meet Mistress later, you better know what’s good for you. If you infuriate her, you will be having endless trouble in your life.”

From her barrage of words, Xiang Shaolong predicted that she is either on Sister Ling’s side or even a close acquaintance of her, which explains her dissatisfaction with him. He could not be bothered to see eye to eye with her and smiled silently. They ascended to the upper decks.

Feng Fei is without her veil and is sitting serenely in a special seat in the centre of the ship’s hall.

Xiang Shaolong paid his usual respects before sitting down on a floor cushion as gestured by Feng Fei. The cushion is about five feet away from her.

The vicious maid took her leave and only the two of them are left in the hall.

The attraction between males and females is a naturally occurring phenomenon.

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and feasted his eyes on this grand beauty.

Her sitting posture alone is already exceedingly enthralling. Feng Fei is in a long and wide highly quality silk dress than covers her legs and feet. Parts of the dress that went beyond her feet are folded nicely to her left. Although she was sitting down, her back is straight like a pencil, causing her breasts to become more prominent. It was a proud yet elegant pose. Any ordinary man will be tempted to touch her and it must be a heavenly feeling to touch such an extraordinary beauty.

Her hair is tied up into a bun and her expression is peaceful and gentle. Xiang Shaolong finally understood why Tu Xian praised her as ‘A beauty inside and outside.’

Placed beside her is a 5-string zither. The strong wooden smell and the deep wooden colour contrast well with her white dress, embroidered with a yellow phoenix, increasing her attractiveness.

This will be the perfect sitting portrait. It transcends pure beauty and is more like a work of art, a poem.

There is a pot of burning wood in the hall and the occasional cackling sound from the fire, coupled with the sounds of waves hitting the ship, formed a melodious tune.

Even a strong willed man like Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart slowly melting away in from of this enchanting beauty.

It is no surprise why she the head of the Three Courtesans.

No wonder the number of Kings, Marquises, Generals and Lords who succumbed to her looks are immeasurable.

As long as she paid a little bit more attention to anyone is more than enough to send them into ecstasy.

As he was fighting his own agitations, Feng Fei plainly asked, “How did Prince Wuji die?”

Xiang Shaolong raised his sense of awareness, lowered his head and replied in a pained tone, “If Mistress had asked me the same question in Daliang, I will never give an honest answer.”

He continued speaking with great emotion as if he was there to witness the entire scene, “Anli that incompetent King is gravely ill and is about to pass on. Lord Longyang and Crown Prince descended upon our Residence with a large army, delivering a single cup of wine. Prince Xinling summoned us batch by batch to give instructions about his funeral and his will. He then drank that cup of wine. Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he must tell a detailed story or he might arouse the suspicions of this intelligent beauty. Thus, he cooked up the whole fairy tale to avoid her pressing for other facts.

As anticipated, Feng Fei did not show any signs of disbelief. She

lightly sighed and did not speak further.

Thinking at the speed of light, Xiang Shaolong suspected that Feng Fei might be interviewing him now to test her theories.

Nevertheless, he is confident to smoke his way through. Although they had an unplanned encounter with dim lightings and his dressing and posture are now vastly different from before. He has a face full of beard now and is still about 5kg thinner than before. The best cover for him is that Zhang Quan hired him from the official stables of Wei. Of course no one will expect such an incredible turn of events except for Xiang Shaolong.

Feng Fei laid his eyes on his face and softly asked, “Shen Liang, are you really just an ordinary driver for Prince Wuji?”

Xiang Shaolong was slightly taken aback but his quick thinking mind has already produced a story for him. He confessed, “Mistress is indeed sharp. I used to be working for the great Zhao General Lian Po. With General Lian, we left Zhao to depend on Prince Wuji. I became his family warrior and I thought I could make a name for myself. But heaven has other plans for me and I became a destitute in Daliang. After these two upheavals, I harbour no more ambitions. All I wish is to make my fortune, find a rural village and live a simple life until I die.”

Feng Fei was impressed, “Heaven has other plans for me. What an excellent saying. It manages to convey a sense of helplessness and disappointment in it. Brother Shen, your encounters are definitely lamentable, but if it is not too meager for your worldly talents, how would you like to be my troupe General Manager?”

Xiang Shaolong feigned embarrassment and lowered his head, imploring, "Since when do I deserve Mistress to call me Brother? Moreover, I am still a newcomer and don't command the respect of the troupe yet. Mistress, please reconsider your decision."

Feng Fei smiled, "I have toured all the seven states and have met all kinds of people. You are someone who does not succumb to pressure, can hold your ground and exceptionally self-assured. From these I can tell that you are not used to a lowly position. Ai! You reminded me of someone I once met in Xianyang. If not for Zhang Quan vouching for your identity, I would have made a mistake."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked but he pretended to be keenly interested, enquiring: "Do I really resemble your friend?"

Feng Fei scrutinized him carefully and her eyes showed signs of uncertainty. She dreamily replied: "There is a certain resemblance, especially your eyes. But even without Zhang Quan's verification, I also know that you cannot be him. There is news from Zhongmou that he has safely returned. It is amusing how Wei nearly combed every inch of Daliang just to find out that it is a mistake. Of course they cannot find their target!"

Xiang Shaolong was hit by a realization. He is certain that Teng Yi and Jing Jun have received news from Jing village about his whereabouts. They deliberately create a smokescreen; spreading rumours that he is safely back in Zhongmou. This will convince his enemies to give up searching for him. This is a truly brilliant strategy. All they have to do is find Wu Guo or someone with a

similar built as him and with simple disguise make up; he can pass off as Xiang Shaolong when viewed from afar.

The only person who saw him in Daliang is Lord Longyang, who is in a dilemma as well, for if he tells the truth he would also be blamed for letting Xiang Shaolong escape.

Ultimately, Lord Longyang is still loyal to him. He did not contest the rumours and kept quiet, indirectly giving him a lifeline. Regarding the secret palace tunnels, they may still be undiscovered or even when discovered, may not be linked to him, as the idea would seem too far-fetched.

With all these new information entering his brain, Xiang Shaolong can finally smell salvation, the light at the end of the tunnel. Invigorated like a new man, he held back his joy and mentioned instead, “Mistress must be referring to Xiang Shaolong of Qin.”

Feng Fei looked at him emotionally, her eyes betraying her longing for that encounter, but she kept quiet.

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong recognizes that Feng Fei has some feelings for him and is greatly honoured.

Feng Fei gently revealed, “After my visit to Lin Zi, I would have accomplished my dream of touring all the States. I will disband the Song and Dance Troupe, return back to the South and live an ordinary life.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, “So Mistress is intending to retire.”

Feng Fei lightly smiled, “I am not somebody who can sit still in one place. Since I cannot conquer the world through power, I shall influence the world through my music, glorifying the songs and dances left behind by our ancestors. This trip to Lin Zi will be a rather challenging one. Someone has leaked the news that I am going to disband my troupe after visiting Lin Zi. Now everyone is watching my every move. Brother Shen should know what I mean.”

Xiang Shaolong was baffled, “Since this is the case, why doesn’t Mistress abandon this trip? All your problems will be solved, wouldn’t it?”

Feng Fei simply countered, “If I did not cover Lin Zi in my tour, it will be like a missing jig saw puzzle, I will never live it down. Moreover, isn’t life about meeting challenges and not running away from challenges? If I back out now, I will live in regret for the rest of my life.”

Pausing, she added, “Talented men like you are not easily acquired. Why don’t we trade our dreams? When Brother Shen successfully assisted me in leaving Qi safely, and not condemned to be someone’s mistress or concubine, I will reward Brother Shen with twenty ingots of gold, securing your livelihood for life.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a headache coming. Firstly, he himself is unwilling to go to Lin Zi. Even if he somehow made it there, he will do his utmost to stay low profile to avoid detection. As the General Manager of the Song and Dance Troupe, he has to face the likes of

Tian Dan, as well as the dignitaries of Qi on a daily basis. He, too, has to manage the duties of the managing the troupe and prepare counter tactics to protect Feng Fei's Chasity. Taking up this job is as good as offering his neck to the executioner's sword.

Simultaneously, he can understand Feng Fei's predicament.

As long as the Song and Dance Troupe is touring the States, they cannot be violated. But once this protective status is gone, every man will wish to bring this fresh flower home to his bedroom.

These is a unique culture and attitude; provided that Feng Fei keeps the same distance from everyone and maintain her neutrality, she can maintain her individual status. Upon disbandment of the troupe, she becomes available to the public and men will definitely fight over her.

Her considerations are not without reason.

Xiang Shaolong can only bitterly smiled, "Mistress is giving me too much credit."

This is not something he can accomplish by sheer might, but rejecting her will seem inappropriate too. Looks like he has to harden his resolve and help her out.

He was in a dilemma.

Feng Fei soothingly state, "If you are not willing to help me, do

you think Zhang Quan is up to it? At least you are someone who is not easily bribed. I have zero confidence in Zhang Quan's integrity."

She then sighed, "At the end of the day, we are just womenfolk. We need you to handle all those stinky men."

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "If Mistress had keep this disbandment a secret, wouldn't you have avoided all these trouble?"

Revealing a pained expression, Feng Fei lamented, "I intentionally shared this secret with someone close to me and mislead her into thinking that she is not the only one who knows, testing her honesty. Now, we all know the truth and while it did endanger my life, it was worth it."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, "Is it Second Mistress?"

Regaining her calm, Feng Fei nodded, "All along she has been wanting to take over my position; in a world where men call the shots, it is an uphill task for women to stand out in any career. The only exception is the Song and Dance Troupe. She is second in authority after me and will naturally want to get rid of me."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Why don't you just let her take over the Song and Dance Troupe?"

Feng Fei explained, "This is a highly complicated problem. When I first started out, I promised all my followers that upon

disbandment, everyone would receive a generous payout. Ai! We all know an entertainment career is short lived. When we have made enough money to retire, who would want to continue slogging? Therefore, Dong Shuzen has to try to wrest control of the Song and Dance Troupe from me before I disband.”

Lingering, she added, “In actual fact, you have already helped me a lot by giving me a chance to chase Sa Li away. However, Dong Shuzen is now in cahoots with Zhang Quan, Brother Shen should understand my difficulty.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his troubles piling up. He pretended to accept the promotion.

His contradictory situation and suffering is indescribable.

He could not bear having such a gifted, outstanding and gorgeous lady getting into harm’s way and falling into the claws of someone she do not love.

Book 21 Chapter 12 – Meeting A Friend In A Foreign Land

The next morning, Feng Fei assembled everyone from the Song & Dance Troupe, including the courtesans and management staff like Zhang Quan, announcing that she is making an exception and promoting Xiang Shaolong to be the General Manager, and is charged with all matters pertaining to the troupe.

Dong Shuzen and Zhang Quan were astounded but dared not oppose.

The first to congratulate him is Yun Niang, who also whispered into his ear, “You should thank me for your promotion.”

She wants Xiang Shaolong to know that she is Feng Fei’s confidante and is the one secretly encouraging Feng Fei to promote him. Xiang Shaolong doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry instead.

This is also the first time he set his eyes on the other eleven courtesans besides Dong Shuzen. Each and every one of them is a peerless, fascinating beauty, causing him to lose his bearings.

However, most of them are nonchalant about Feng Fei’s promoting Xiang Shaolong and their expressions remained unfazed.

One of the leggy courtesans Zhu Xiuzhen even looked at him with

disdain.

There are a total of one hundred and eighty troupe staff.

Feng Fei is at the top of the hierarchy.

Below her would be the courtesans and musicians, headed by Dong Shuzen and Yun Niang respectively. A staff of serving maids attends to them.

Except for a few men who are musicians, the entire group is made up of females.

The management of the troupe, both internally and externally falls on the shoulders of himself and his assistant Zhang Quan. Family warriors, drivers, male servants and porters all fall within their jurisdiction, forming a government-like organization.

Zhang Quan's supporter Kun Shan leads the family warriors while the drivers are led by Gu Ming.

These two men, in addition to the grudge-bearing Zhang Quan, are enough to give Xiang Shaolong a really big headache.

He could not wait to make his escape this instance, but burdened with this heavy responsibility and Feng Fei's high expectations, he could neither advance nor retreat, and nearly wanted to cry his heart out.

Something good that comes out of it is that Zhang Quan is now deployed to the other ship and Xiang Shaolong has a single cabin all to himself on the second deck. When Yun Niang came knocking, he is mentally prepared to receive certain benefits from her, at a cost.

On the pretext of handing over work to him, Yun Niang entered his room and there is no way Xiang Shaolong can reject her.

After handing over her work to him, a courageous Yun Niang enticingly look straight into his eyes and cooed, “All right, how is Manager Shen going to thank me now?”

Her expression reminds him of Zhu Ji (Qin) and Madam Zhuang (Chu).

For (sexually) experienced and mature women like them, when they take an interest in someone, sex is all that they will pursue and they are very open and direct about it. On one hand is to satisfy a human need, on the other hand, they are more senior and cannot be bothered with the wild fantasies and cumbersome dating process of the young men and young women. They will take the most practical route to satisfy their needs.

From a men’s point of view, Xiang Shaolong will not mind having a friendly match with this sexy lady and is confident of giving her a session she will never forget and wonderful memories to last her lifetime.

Nevertheless, in the present situation and while he is planning to flee, it is not wise to get involved in a relationship.

He knows himself best. When he has made love to a woman, he will certainly be emotionally attached to her. This burden is something he can do without for now.

If he just did her and left, he will absolutely feel guilty about it in the future.

Unless of course, if she is in the flesh trade. That will be a different case altogether.

He found it difficult to reject her on the spot and used a delaying tactic instead. Suppressing his own manly reactions to her advances, he changed the topic and smiled, "I am obviously grateful to you, but I have a question that I hope you can enlighten me!"

Pleased, Yun Niang prompted, "Please go ahead and ask. I will tell you everything I know."

Judging from her body language and tone, it is evident that Xiang Shaolong can do whatever he wants with her. Xiang Shaolong can feel his loins stirring and was about to lose control. Warning himself to behave, he asked in an official manner, "Wherever the Song & Dance Troupe travels to, we will attract all the lustful men. For Miss Feng it is definitely not an issue but when someone wants to woo our courtesans, what should I do?"

Yun Niang gave him a meaningful look and answered, "The scenario you articulated happens rather often but our Courtesans are not prostitutes. If any man wishes to gain her heart, he will have to put in considerable effort. For example, inviting them to banquets, using ways and means to make them happy, and try to see if they will reciprocate. These kinds of arrangements are beyond Mistress's control and unquestionably beyond your league."

Xiang Shaolong is curious, "So are there any courtesans who got married and left the troupe?"

Yun Niang nodded, "Yes there are, but the numbers are limited. What is so good about marrying the rich and powerful? Before they bed you, you are treated like a queen. After they lay you, your value is gone. In addition, you have to become enemies with the other wives and concubines that they married. Staying as a courtesan is much more comfortable. When you have made your fortune and returned to your village in glory, you can marry whoever your heart fancies."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement, "Marrying a rich man is like falling into the sea. For a girl to have such insight is truly brilliant."

Yun Niang's eyes lit up. She praised, "Marrying a rich man is like falling into the sea; what an excellent expression! I must tell Mistress about it. She is writing a song about a pitiful wife. This line can be one of the lyrics."

Xiang Shaolong can only smile bitterly to himself.

Yun Niang became more aroused and moved closer to Xiang Shaolong, where her long dress is touching his kneecap. She divulged, “On this trip to Lin Zi, we are also participating in a competition with two other famous Courtesans, which explains why Mistress is very anxious. She will not want to lose to Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang at Henggong Pavilion and Qixia School respectively.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong know that these two other ladies whom he has encountered before are going to Lin Zi as well.

Qixia School is naturally the headquarters of Qixia Sword Saint, Mister You a.k.a. Cao Quidao. Not recognizing Henggong Pavilion, Xiang Shaolong sought the answer from Yun Niang.

Yun Niang sweetly replied, “Henggong Pavilion, also known as Huan Pavilion, is a grand conference hall in the Qi Palace. When Henggong is in power, he loved to hold lavish banquets there, hosting his officials as well as visiting diplomats. Hence, it became the name of the Pavilion. Courtesans who have never performed at Henggong Pavilion before are not considered prestigious.”

Hearing her explanation, Xiang Shaolong is filled with a yearning to take pay a visit to the place. In this period of the Warring States, Qi is considered one of the bigger states with rich cultures and tradition. Since he is passing by, it will be a pity to give it a miss. However, preserving his life is more critical. He lost the mood to tour the place and reminded himself to stop thinking about it.

Yun Niang leaned onto him and gently commented, “The King of Qi is rather generous, paying us 200 gold ingots for two shows. When we arrive, you must remember to collect this payment from him.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. It is an astronomical amount in these ancient times. He realized the people of Qi are squandering away their nation’s wealth. The same amount of money can pay for a year’s wages for five hundred soldiers.

Yun Niang coaxed, “I have told you everything; you have yet to tell me how you are going to show your thanks.”

Since there is no way he can avoid the situation, Xiang Shaolong decided to cast aside all his reservations. Snaking his hand to hug her thin waist, he was about to pull her into an embrace when the ship suddenly braked to a stop. Moments later, it began sailing at a much slower pace.

Both of them are startled. They will only reach Lin Zi tomorrow. Why did the ship suddenly stop? Ahead of them, shining lanterns can be seen.

Using this distraction, Xiang Shaolong jumped up and went to his window, looking out. It appears that there is a huge ship ahead of them and is intentionally slowing down for their ships to catch up.

By now, Yun Niang has squeezed to his side, her petite frame prostrated on his body, trying to catch a glimpse.

Xiang Shaolong mused, “I wonder who is the owner of that ship?”

Yun Niang scrutinized the flags hoisted at the tail of the new ship. She abruptly shrieked: “Mister Tan is here! He is on board the ship of the Imperial Physician of Han.”

From her exhilarated and glowing expression, Xiang Shaolong believed that this Mister Tan has an unusual relationship with Yun Niang.

Men are really *****s. He initially regarded Yun Niang’s passion as his misfortune and treated her as a platonic friend. Seeing her excited and horny as a ***** in heat, he knew that his ‘love rival’ has appeared, evoking pangs of jealousy. With a sour taste in his mouth, he inquired: “Who is Mister Tan?”

An elated Yun Niang has forgotten all about her plans to seduce Xiang Shaolong. She merrily chirped: “Among the gifted men within Lord Nanliang’s Residence, Mister Tan is the most talented man in terms of poetry and music. He is a trusted confidante of Lord Nanliang as well. He did mention coming to see our performance at Lin Zi and here he is! I must tell Sister Feng (Fei)!” Finishing her sentence, she exited his room in a flash, ignoring Xiang Shaolong completely.

Xiang Shaolong can only look on as the door slammed in his face with a ‘bang!’ In the same instant, he could feel something weird rousing in his mind.

Lord Nanliang's name rang a bell, but whom did he hear it from?

The gap between the two ships is slowly closing.

Feng Fei and her fellow courtesans are all gathered on the deck, enthusiastically awaiting the arrival of Mister Tan. It appears that this poetry and music prodigy holds an important place in their hearts.

Yun Niang is the most fanatical of them all, waving her hands harder than all the courtesans.

Illuminated by the moon and lanterns, several men can be seen on the facing side of the new ship. They are waving energetically in response and the atmosphere is remarkably lively.

Ropes with grappling hooks are tossed over from the other ship. Xiang Shaolong hastily directed the family warriors to hang on to the ropes, pulling the ships even closer together.

The ships slowed down to a snail's pace.

When the ships come close enough for him to look at the faces of the other party, Xiang Shaolong's body shook uncontrollably. He has just seen a friend that he has missed for many years.

When the friend happened to lay his eyes on Xiang Shaolong, he was stunned as well, and his body shook uncontrollably in response.

This friend is none other than Xiao Yuetan.

Xiang Shaolong finally solved the mystery. It was Tu Xian who told him about Lord Nanliang.

Upon reaching Han (State), Xiao Yuetan became Lord Nanliang's family warrior. With his many hidden talents, it is no surprise that he managed to gain the affections of the courtesans.

LONG! The two ships lightly collided and after a series of tremors, are finally lined up side by side.

A gangplank came over from the new ship and lodged onto their ship. Xiao Yuetan was the first up the gangplank and strode over with a few of his followers. He first winked at Xiang Shaolong before laughing happily, coming to Feng Fei. He paid his respects to her, praising, "Since we parted last Spring, it has been a year since we last met. Miss Feng's spellbinding song and dance performance still occupies my thoughts and dreams. To think I can have the fortune to meet you tonight on this river. The Heavens have been really kind to me."

Leading the courtesans in returning the courtesies, Feng Fei smiled, "The meeting in Han was a most memorable event for me as well. A stimulating conversation that went on till night has benefited me tremendously. Since we are lucky enough to run into Mister tonight, we must be a good host and treat Mister Tan and our other guests to a cup of tea in our ship hall."

Xiao Yuetan signaled to his men on his ship to retrieve the ropes and gangplank before leading his followers, together with Feng Fei, into the ship hall.

Xiang Shaolong is craving for a good talk with Xiao Yuetan but he can only suppress this desire for the time being. He felt relieved as well. Witnessing Xiao Yuetan's authority and achievements, he is certain that Xiao Yuetan is doing very well under Lord Nanliang. Otherwise, he would not be able to commandeer a ship to fulfill his date (with Feng Fei), coming all the way to Lin Zi to watch The Three Courtesans Grand Competition.

All the jealousy in his heart has effortlessly vanished and he wondered how many other courtesans as his playboy friend tried aside from Yun Niang. When the two ships are separated, Xiang Shaolong went to the ship's hall, wanting to check out Xiao Yuetan's situation.

At the entrance of the ship's hall, he can see Xiao Yuetan introducing his three followers to Feng Fei. They are all important men working for Lord Nanliang. From their appearances, Xiang Shaolong can tell that they are very knowledgeable.

Feng Fei, Yun Niang and the courtesans are seated on the left while Xiao Yuetan and his men are seated on the right. Yun Niang went to the extent of personally serving tea to the four men and never stopped batting her eyelashes at Xiao Yuetan.

Xiao Yuetan saw him at the door but pretended to ignore him.

Xiang Shaolong was aware that his status is below that of the people in the hall and was contemplating to enter or leave when a maid standing behind Zhu Xiuzhen (courtesan) came over, disparaging him, “This place is none of your concern, please attend to your other matters instead!”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his blood boiling. He cast his view to Zhu Xiuzhen, who did not even care to return his gaze. Contempt, however, is written all over her face. Enraged, he softly grunted to the maid, “Scram!”

The maid panicked and upon seeing the cold rays emanating from Xiang Shaolong’s eyes, her face became drained of colour and she subconsciously took two steps back.

This is precisely why Xiang Shaolong believes that it is better to be feared than to be loved. He strode right into the hall.

Feng Fei noticed him coming and felt awkward due to his inferior status. She introduced with a frown, “Shen Liang is our new General Manger. Come and greet Mister Tan.”

Xiao Yuetan stood up and exchanged greetings with Xiang Shaolong at the same time. He laughed, “Brother Shen has an remarkable appearance. We must get to know each other better.”

The three men escorting Xiao Yuetan are baffled. Xiao Yuetan is a proud character and seldom exhibits such warm gestures to anymore, moreover to lowly manager of a Song & Dance Troupe.

Even the founder of Shi Sufang's Song & Dance Troupe, Boss Jin, Jin Chenjiu has a much lower status compared to Shi Sufang. In the eyes of the rich and powerful, he is just a manservant with some influence. Shi Sufang is one of the other Three Courtesans.

Dong Shuzen, Yun Niang, Zhu Xiuzhen and the rest were equally mystified, unable to comprehend Xiao Yuetan's respectful treatment of Xiang Shaolong.

Only Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan know the underlying reason; and it is becoming quite challenging to conceal their excitement after seeing each other once again after some many years.

Xiao Yuetan invited Xiang Shaolong to sit down beside him and to avoid suspicion, he chatted up Feng Fei instead of him. Their topics hardly deviated from music composition, lyrics writing and poetry.

Xiang Shaolong knows nuts about these subjects and cannot join in the conversation.

Xin Yue, a petite courtesan who is a few notches prettier than Zhu Xiuzhen, commented, "I hear Mister Tan is an avid collector of folk songs and folklore. Among all the State Poems & Songs (Book collection), the Songs of Qi (book) is one of the more exciting. Mister will not leave Qi empty handed on this trip."

Xiao Yuetan's three associates are completely intoxicated with Feng Fei's charm. One of them, Zongsun Heji, a fine-looking scholar chuckled upon hearing her words, "Mister Tan has made

two trips to Qi in the last few years. His collection is long completed!”

Xiang Shaolong knows Xiao Yuetan’s character and that he detests dirty politics. He must have focus his abilities on poetry, music and the art, which unexpectedly turned out to be a good career move for him.

Dong Shuzen is elated, “Mister Tan must share with us what he has learnt.”

With one hand stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan looked exceptionally dashing, reminding Xiang Shaolong of the first time he saw him in Handan (Capital of Zhao).

After so many years, he is likely to be in his forties by now but still maintained a robust and youthful disposition. It is no wonder why Yun Niang is so smitten with him.

After humbly excusing his incompetence (a polite gesture), he smoothly articulates, “Folk songs and folklore naturally embodies the local culture and heritage. Stories of joy and sorrow are common; while the most touching are the works of love and war. A broken man misses his wife; a chaotic country misses its generals. True love exists in every suffering. That is life.”

Yun Niang suggested, “The lyrics in folk songs are the bravest and most direct. The people of Qi reside near the sea and are very open-minded. The Songs of Qi must be highly explicit. Why doesn’t Mister Tan sing us a few lines to broaden our horizons.”

Faced with the pleading of the girls, Xiao Yuetan tapped the table and sang, “鸡既鸣矣, 朝既盈矣, 匪鸡则鸣。苍蝇之声。东方明矣, 朝既昌矣。匪东方则明, 月出之光。虫飞薨 薨, 甘与子 同梦。会且归矣, 无庶予子憎。”

This song describes an emotional scene, where two lovers are meeting in a bedroom on a quiet night. Cursing the rooster, which crows at sunrise, waking them up from the sweet dreams, the lady persuades the gentleman to leave but the gentleman insisted it is the flies buzzing instead. When the lady pointed out that the eastern horizon is lighted, the gentlemen asserted it is moonshine. At her wit's end, the lady swore to continue sleeping with him if it is genuinely the flies buzzing but if he stayed on when he should be leaving, it will invite rumours.

The tune is simple, ordinary and easy to understand. The lyrics are sincere and yet exciting, portraying a real life situation and the descriptions are very lifelike. Sung by Xiao Yuetan's soulful and jazzy voice, everyone present is moved.

Even Xiang Shaolong is captivated by his singing when an angelic voice arose from Feng Fei's mouth, continuing the song and pairing the story, “东方之日兮, 彼姝者子, 在我室兮。在我室兮, 履我即今。东方之月兮, 彼殊者子, 在我闼兮。在我 闼兮, 履我 发兮。”

Her song describes a rendezvous from the gentleman's point of view, singing about a beautiful lady entering his house at sunrise and joining him. Why did she come? Was it a coincidence or was she attracted by my singing, that she joined me on my journey.

This is the very first time Xiang Shaolong is hearing her sing. He finds her voice especially unique and is quite unlike the singing of Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang. Compared to the other courtesans he has heard of in the past, Feng Fei is light years ahead.

Not only is she a great singer, she does not follow the normal singing styles and has a rebellious streak. Her sentimental singing is like floating on water among streamingly colourful rainbows and fluffy clouds, carrying deep, unfathomable emotions. Her voice has a wide variation and she can reach all the different pitches. Merging her breathing into her singing, the lure of her song is limitless. She paints a mind-blowing picture with her lyrics and like a magnet, attracting all her listeners to pay full attention to her singing.

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan and everyone else was cheering madly when she finished.

Xiao Yuetan was not the least upset Feng Fei stole his thunder. He frankly queried, “I have never heard of this song before. I wonder if this is Miss Feng’s latest production?”

Feng Fei humbly replied, “It is indeed my new work. Please pardon my inadequacies.”

Xiao Yuetan and everyone were full of praise.

Seated on the other side of Xiao Yuetan, a strongman Youji sighed, “I have long heard about Miss Feng’s divine singing. Now that I have finally met you and heard your singing, I can die

without regrets.”

Feng Fei modestly responded, “Mister You is giving me too much credit.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why Feng Fei deserves her title of the Head of the Three Courtesans and enjoyed first class treatment from the rich and powerful of every State.

Everyone will appreciate and treasure a talented beauty.

But if she officially retired, it will be a different story altogether.

Compared her brilliance, Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans are like the little stars beside the bright moon.

Xiao Yuetan professes, “The four of us are highly envious of Brother Shen. If you offer your job to the four of us, I can guarantee we will come to blows fighting for it.”

Awaking from his stirrings, Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Mister Tan sure knows how to crack a joke. This is actually the first time I am hearing Mistress sing a song!”

The four men were shocked; but only Xiao Yuetan’s shock is faked.

Yun Niang explained the recent developments to them.

Zongsun Heji used this occasion to test Xiang Shaolong's abilities, "Does Manager Shen have any comments?"

Xiang Shaolong said the first thing that came to his mind, "Such a song belongs to the heaven and not the earth."

This time, even Feng Fei is moved.

Guilt ridden, Xiang Shaolong admitted, "I am just a greenhorn when it comes to music, but Mistress's song has made me lost my bearings."

Youji was amazed, "No wonder Mister Tan has such a good feeling about Brother Shen. Mister Tan is an excellent judge of character. Brother Shen's eloquence is seldom sighted. 'Greenhorn', 'Lost my bearings', these are all very appropriate and well-suited descriptions of the actual situation. Needless to say, the 'Such a song belongs to the heaven and not the earth' is a flawless depiction."

Xiang Shaolong knows it is not good to reveal too much about himself and kept quiet. He dared not face the attention that everyone is suddenly showing in him, especially from Feng Fei.

Dong Shuzen commented, "Mister Tan's earlier piece of Qi Song is immensely compelling. When Kong Qiu visited Qi and listened to a local music performance, he was so absorbed that his food was tasteless for three months and he called it the Perfection of Music."

Xiao Yuetan jested, “When I saw Miss Dong’s 9-movement Dance last year, my food has remained tasteless ever since!”

Everyone had a good laugh. Dong Shuzen is rather pleased, having gained some acknowledgement.

Xiang Shaolong realized that Dong Shuzen is able to become Second in Command of the Song & Dance Troupe is due to her terrific dancing skills.

It was soon midnight and the four men were unwilling to take their leave.

Yun Niang is especially reluctant for Xiao Yuetan to leave. She sighed, “How I wish the ship is bigger, we can spend more time on the cruise and learn more about ancient cum modern music from Mister Tan.”

Youji enthusiastically hinted, “As long as we have a bed to sleep on, we would be more than happy.”

Dong Shuzen suggested, “We cannot subject you to such inconveniences. Nonetheless, we can probably create some additional sleeping quarters if gentlemen can lower your expectations...”

Zongsun Heji and the others were overjoyed and agreed in unison.

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong hinted, “I am staying alone, why don’t ...”

The experienced Xiao Yuetan easily caught the hint and laughed, “Let me share the room with Brother Shen and learn more phrases from him. We can send for our gear tomorrow.”

Back in the room, they blew out the candle and sat down on a corner of the cabin floor, reminiscing about the past.

Deep into the night, Xiao Yuetan has finished listening to Xiang Shaolong’s fugitive encounters. He advised, “When Shaolong leads his army to war, there is no one who did not panic in the eastern states and there is a fear of your prowess everywhere. Even when you are alone without your army, you still create chaos wherever you go. Presently, Han, Zhao and Wei have laid heavy defences and ambushes on your returning path to Qin. It is too risky and not worth it to return to Qin straightaway.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “Any reaction from the people of Chu?”

Xiao Yuetan answered, “Absolutely no reaction from them. A man’s heart is difficult to fathom and traveling through Chu may still not be safe. If you ask me, Shaolong should lie low and avoid the heat. When the three states are fully convinced that you have returned to Zhongmou, I can leisurely escort you back to Qin.”

Pausing, he added, “I will have my confidantes report to Master Tu at Xianyang and he will relay the news to Yanran that you are

safe with me. You can put your mind at ease and stay in Qi for an extended period.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded, “You could recognize me without much difficulty, what about other people?”

Xiao Yuetan examined his face carefully and diagnosed, “You have kept a beard and with your loss in weight, your appearance has been altered significantly. I can recognize you because I caught you staring at me first and I am been worried about you for the past two months. Never forget that I am a master of disguise and with some modifications, for example, trimming your beard, varying your hairstyle and letting you wear a headdress, I can guarantee that even Tian Dan cannot recognise you even if you stand face to face with him. After all, no one is more familiar with your physical features than I.”

Pausing again, he laughed, “If you can learn the art of stuttering from me, there will be no more loopholes left in your disguise. As a manager, you will only interact with Tian Dan’s followers so please do not be overly worried.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his body being rejuvenated, gaining a new lease of life.

Honestly speaking, he cannot bear to part with Feng Fei too. He does not bear any ulterior motives towards her but merely desire to see her in action and at the same time, protecting her and assisting her to leave Qi unmolested.

He wondered, “If you are going to make changes to my appearance, wouldn’t it raise any suspicions within the Song & Dance Troupe?”

Xiao Yuetan coolly assured, “We can make gradual changes to your looks so the change will not be too obvious. They will probably associate the change due to your beard trimmings. Relax! Shaolong should know what I, Xiao Yuetan, is capable of.”

Invigorated, Xiang Shaolong calmly laughed, “I have no doubt about your abilities and in fact, my greatest admiration lies in your skirt-chasing skills.”

Xiao Yuetan gushed, “Are you referring to Yun Niang and (Dong) Shuzen? These two bitches are super horny when the right buttons are pressed. Feel free to try them out for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished, “You even managed to try Dong Shuzen?!”

Xiao Yuetan clarified, “Dong Shuzen has been laid by several men; this is hardly anything new. Her escort fee is the highest among all of them and one night with her will cost you an arm and a leg.”

Xiang Shaolong scowled, “What is the difference between them and hookers?”

Xiao Yuetan enlightened, “Of course there is a difference. You must first win their favour and gain their affections before you can make the deal. The liaising contact used to be that bastard Zhang Quan, and you are now the new contact.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted, “You mean I am now a pimp? A Papa-san (male version of mama-san)?”

Xiao Yuetan is confused, “What is a pimp? What is a papa-san?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled, “Forget about these boring stuff. Who else will be coming to Qi to take part in the festivities?”

Xiao Yuetan coldly laughed, “Lu Buwei is one of them. With him around, you can be sure of trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly had a brainwave. He recalled Dan Meimei mentioning that the Crown Prince of Qi has yet to be chosen.

In this juncture, the twisted hand of fate has miraculously drawn him into another life changing episode.

Isn't Qin at war with the Five States? Why is it possible for Lu Buwei to saunter into Qi in such a carefree manner?

In the same line of thought, the news-less Shan Rou came to his mind.

Will he see her in Lin Zi?

end of Book 21

Book 22 Chapter 01 - History's Mystery

Xiang Shaolong sat cross-legged on the floor, allowing Xiao Yuetan who is kneeling behind him to work on his hair.

This old friend smirked, “I may be proficient in all methods of disguise but the practical application is rather limited. Now that I can put my expertise to good use on you is a rare occasion indeed.”

Pausing, he continued, “I have your hair tied up in a different style and dyed several spots white, making you look several years older.”

Xiang Shaolong is uncomfortable with it, “Does that mean I cannot wash my hair?”

Xiao Yuetan proudly proclaimed, “My personally crafted dye mixture cannot be washed off easily. But to be safe, we can re-dye from time to time.”

He added, “We will reach the waters of Lin Zi in a few days. Your biggest challenge presently is to alter the way you speak. You cannot re-use the speaking manner you used while you were disguised as Dong Horse Fanatic. Let’s train you to stutter and foolproof your disguise.”

Xiang Shaolong confessed, “I will be lying if I say I am not worried. My biggest fear is my enemies recognizing me from my body build.”

Xiao Yuetan burst out laughing, “Qi is originally part of Dongyi Tribe. The tribesmen are taller and have a bigger built than the average person. There may not be many men who are as tall as Shaolong but there is unquestionably a considerable amount. All Shaolong has to do is to act a little hunch-backed and not walk with your head raised and chest puffed. That should prevent people from identifying you through your body build.”

Recalling that the people of Qi are the modern Shandong (China Province) people, famous for their height and build, Xiang Shaolong was relieved.

Xiao Yuetan took a glance at the sky through the cabin window and murmured, “The sky is brightening and we have chatted the entire night but I can only feel myself becoming more and more energized. I haven’t been so happy for a long time. Since Lu Buwei tried to kill us, I...”

Noticing Xiang Shaolong’s solemn expression, he apologized, “I shouldn’t have brought this up. Ai! Thinking about it always gives me insomnia.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded, “The day of Crown Prince Coronation will be the same day Lu Buwei dies a horrible death. This is a fact that nobody can change.”

Xiao Yuetan obviously did not understand the full meaning of his historical prediction. He reminded, “Shaolong must not let your guard down. Lu Buwei has been in power for so long in Qin. He

will not give up without a fight and watch passively as his authority dissipates into thin air.”

He softly confided, “On this trip to Qi, I harboured the possibility of assassinating him to avenge Third Princess (Zhao Qian) and myself. Now that Shaolong is here with me, I am confident that we can succeed.”

Xiang Shaolong is in a difficult position, because it is stated clearly in history books that Lu Buwei died in Qin during Xiao Pan’s coronation. Any attempts to kill him in Lin Zi will surely end up in failure.

He naturally cannot divulge this and suggested instead, “We need to plan this in detail but I am not satisfied for him to die just like that. I want to personally destroy all that he has built and accumulated, piece by piece, as if I am cutting flesh from his body bit by bit. Only then will I be able to placate the hatred in my heart.”

Xiao Yuetan nodded, “I can see where you are coming from. Ha! I’m done. Your resemblance to Xiang Shaolong is getting lesser and lesser! Wait till I get a bronze mirror to show you your new look. While there is still some time left, let’s catch up on some sleep.”

Barely asleep for an hour, Xiang Shaolong was awakened by the sound of the door opening. With the little light shining in the cabin just before sunrise, he peeped and saw Yun Niang slipping in. After she has determined Xiao Yuetan’s bed, she snaked into his blankets. What speedily followed were sounds of Xiao Yuetan’s playful protest, which was again quickly replaced by sounds of

kissing.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. If not for Xiao Yuetan's coming, he will be the one Yun Niang is passionately kissing now.

He realized the importance of one's status in society.

When he used to be high ranking and held in importance, coupled with his good looks, he could effortlessly sweep women off their feet and won the hearts of many beauties.

With his current beggarly looks and lowly manager status, his attractiveness to women has largely declined.

Despite sounds of teasing and flirtation coming from the other bed, his mind is as calm as still water. He soon fell into deep slumber, having a good time with his wives and son in faraway Xianyang.

Incredibly, it was Xiao Yuetan who woke him up instead.

It was well into the day. Xiang Shaolong has been getting plenty of rest on this trip so even with just four short hours of rest; he can still start his day without any signs of tiredness. Witnessing Xiao Yuetan's highly invigorated countenance, he was astounded, "I thought you would still be fast asleep."

Xiao Yuetan awkwardly explained, "This woman is really desperate. Fortunately, the more women I make love to, the more

revitalized I am. The ship is reaching the pier soon. I will send someone to deliver a secret message to Xianyang (City) Master Tu (Xian). Relax! Master and I communicate in a secret code. Even if the message falls into the wrong hands, the enemy will not be able to understand it.”

Climbing out of his warm blankets, Xiang Shaolong cheered, “I have complete trust in your abilities.”

Both men got to work after getting dressed.

Sure enough, the ship docked shortly at the pier. This is Xiang Shaolong’s first time carrying out his duties as the General Manager. Luckily, Feng Fei sent her serving maid Little Ping’er to assist him. Little Ping’er is still dressed as a boy and together; they headed ashore to purchase supplies.

Except for food rations, other items procured included silk cloth and make up ingredients. They were kept busy for more than half a day and finally returned to the ship at sundown.

Throughout the day, Little Ping’er treated Xiang Shaolong in a rude and arrogant manner. Xiang Shaolong is not the least bit upset, as he believes that she is treating him simply as the lowly manager, which he is.

Riding back to the ship on their horses, Little Ping’er who was initially riding ahead slowed down her horse and was now riding beside Xiang Shaolong. She courteously advised, “Mistress (Feng Fei) wants me to remind you that although you have been

promoted to Manager, you must not be complacent and watch your own behavior. Don't follow Zhang Quan or Sa Li's negative example and ruin the good standing of our Song & Dance Troupe."

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted, "Your servant (polite way of saying I) does not comprehend what Sister is referring to."

Little Ping'er pouted her lips and coldly snorted, "You should know what you did. Someone reported seeing Yun Niang enter your room last night. Mister Tan is a man of integrity, a gentleman. This incident certainly has nothing to do with him. Humph! How dare you deny it after you have hooked up with her."

Xiang Shaolong was speechless.

He could not betray Xiao Yuetan and stain his prestigious reputation in the eyes of Feng Fei. He kept quiet and allowed himself to be his sacrificial lamb.

With a face full of scorn, Little Ping'er ignored him and rode ahead of him once again.

After having his dinner, Xiang Shaolong returned to his cabin. Xiao Yuetan was sitting on his bed, focusing on mixing his dye. He updated, "After spending several hours searching, I finally acquired these ingredients. I am planning to darken your facial skin, making you appear more rough and coarse."

Xiang Shaolong sat down beside him and laughed, "Do you know

I just became a scapegoat for you?”

Xiao Yuetan was stunned, “What happened?”

Xiang Shaolong repeated Little Ping'er's accusation word for word.

After a moment's examination, Xiao Yuetan snickered, “That haughty youngster is plain jealous! Shaolong is really charismatic to cause her such anxiety.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned, “Brother Xiao must be joking!”

Xiao Yuetan articulated, “Shaolong is a wise man and I did not expect you to foolishly fall into her cunning trap. Think about it! The weather is freezing nowadays. Everyone will be fast asleep at 4am in the morning; why would there be anyone around and coincidentally seeing Yun Niang entering our room with his or her own eyes. It must be Yun Niang's personal maid who discovered her Mistress (Yun Niang) leaving her bedroom and told the pretty tomboy about it. She must have guessed that Yun Niang has come for you and tested your reaction. She has found out the truth except that she nailed the wrong guy.”

Xiang Shaolong lost his tongue.

Xiao Yuetan guffawed, “Except for Feng Fei, what good standing is there in the Song & Dance Troupe? Do you believe Feng Fei doesn't know about my trysts with Yun Niang? I am a famous

playboy after all. That green-eyed monster Ping'er deliberately used Feng Fei's name to put you down!"

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, "One of these days I am going to give her a taste of her own medicine."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled, "The best medicine is served under the blankets. Use your manhood to conquer her."

Xiang Shaolong exhaled, "I am not in the mood for relationships right now. But I'll definitely make trouble for her to appease my anger. Moreover, I can tell that she detests me."

Xiao Yuetan disagreed, "She will not approach you with that reminder if she is not concerned about you. You are an expert with women yourself and should know that a woman's heart is irrational. The more they seek to irritate you, the more they adore you."

Xiang Shaolong does not want to continue this discussion. Changing the topic, he queried, "Why didn't I see your companions coming back to the ship?"

Xiao Yuetan answered, "Are you referring to Zongsun Heji and the others? I tricked them into going back to my ship, just in case they start becoming suspicious about our close relationship. To be honest, I used the same trick as Little Ping'er, using Feng Fei's name to scare them away."

Looking at each other, both men burst out laughing at the same time.

Xiao Yuetan carefully hid the freshly grounded dye mixture into his luggage chest and clapped his hands, inviting, “Feng Fei is having a rehearsal tonight and has requested me to give her some pointers. Care to come along?”

Xiang Shaolong lay down in his bed, dismissing, “If I don’t see you later tonight, I will know you are in Yun Niang’s room.”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head smilingly and left.

Music was soon heard playing in the upper decks but Xiang Shaolong was doing some deep reflections instead.

After countless trials and tribulations, he eventually still cannot avoid making a trip to Qi. He wondered if the trip will be beneficial for him or is he heading for another disaster

The Warring States are Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei, Han and Qin. Except for the capitals of Yan and Han, he has stepped foot in the others.

On his return trip to Qin, Xiao Yuetan may well take him through the capital of Han. Thus, he probably has no fate with the capital of Yan.

He recalled Prince Dan from Yan as well as all the Lords from other States that he has met before. The last face he envisioned is the ‘pretty face’ of Lord Longyang. Unknowingly, he was losing

the urge to sleep.

The ship will continue sailing tomorrow morning. He wondered if he would meet this 'traitorous' friend in Lin Zi.

In these war-ridden times, everyone is fighting for the country or Lord he is loyal to. Even he is of no exception.

To a certain extent, Xiang Shaolong is loyal to history. He is charting his life to be as accurate to history as he can.

All these events and circumstances have been lined up by the hands of Fate. Xiang Shaolong is basically executing the will of Fate.

Here comes the golden question!

Without him, will History be the same?

Logically, history will be altered. At least there is no way Xiao Pan can become Qin Shihuang without his intervention.

Without Qin Shihuang, China may never be unified.

Such an ambitious man like Qin Shihuang does not often appear in the history of China.

He strongly disputed the fact that Qin can unite China without Qin Shihuang.

To be fair, he is a time traveller who already knew the future. His judgment may be biased.

A simple change can determine victory or defeat.

If Qin does not possess men of talent like Wang Jian, Li Si and even himself, conquering the other Six States will remain a dream and never a reality.

If this is the case, why wasn't Xiang Shaolong a historical figure?

Thinking about this, he broke out into cold sweat.

When he used to ponder about this issue, it was normally envisaged in a fleeting moment.

Currently, he has nobody to distract him and he was bored to tears thus he can contemplate more profoundly about this issue.

He did suggest to Xiao Pan to forget everything about himself (Xiang Shaolong) because he was afraid of something even more horrendous.

When it comes to the day when Xiao Pan thought of this on his own without Xiao Shaolong's suggestion, it would mean the end of

him (Xiang Shaolong).

At the end of the day, the only obstacle to Xiao Pan's ascension to the throne is his Zhao origin.

The intelligent Lu Buwei knows part of the secret and will only get more suspicious when Xiao Pan totally disregarded him as his father.

Thinking back to the occasion when he did a blood test between Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei, proving to (Qin General) Lu Gong & Company that they are not father and son, it was indeed an earth-shattering feat in the eyes of (Master) Tu Xian. The secret is another loophole for Xiao Pan and has to be protected from Lu Buwei at all costs.

Thinking about it, he shook with fear.

Only Zhu Ji and himself know the location of the family who raised Yingzheng (Zhu Ji's son). If Zhu Ji ever shares this information with Lao Ai, Xiao Pan's life will be critically endangered.

Judging from Xiao Pan's character, he will not allow anyone to challenge his authority.

He may not kill himself (Xiang Shaolong).

But what about Zhu Ji?

Knock! Knock!

Knocking was heard on the cabin door.

Xiang Shaolong sat up in surprise. “Who it it?” he demanded.

Creak!

The door swings open.

A serving maid entered his cabin and joyfully greeted, “Hello Manager Shen! Going to bed already?”

Xiang Shaolong recognised her as courtesan Zhu Xiuzhen’s personal maid Little Ning. Just barely yesterday was she trying to chase him out of the ship’s hall and now she is all smiling, friendly and sweet. Puzzled, he questioned, “What can I do for Sister Ning?”

With her small mouth curved in a cute smile, Little Ning sat down beside him and smiled, “I am here to seek your forgiveness. Wow! Manager Shen is really sleeping so early?”

Witnessing her intimate behavior, Xiang Shaolong became wary and officially state, “Doesn’t Sister Ning have to wait on Mistress Zhu Xiuzhen?”

Inching closer, Little Ning flirted, “I am here on Mistress’s orders. Ai! This trip is so lonesome. I wouldn’t mind some company myself.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Why is your Mistress looking for me?”

Little Ning cheekily replied, “Can you please don’t treat me like your enemy? Hee hee! But you look very domineering when you are angry and it is very appealing to me. How I wish I can let you punish me and let you do whatever you want to me.”

Xiang Shaolong is a man after all and could not help but feel aroused. He scrutinized this maid from top to toe.

She is positively below eighteen and her looks are average. Nonetheless, her long lashes, seductive eyes, jutting breasts, slim waist, long legs and her good skin complexion is a big draw for him. He can start to feel some temptation for her.

Just as he was deliberating whether to hug her into in his arms, he also felt that it was an inappropriate gesture and was in a dilemma. Before he can make up his mind, Little Ning revealed, “Unfortunately, it is Mistress who has eyes for you. I can only wait until she is done with you.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, he stuttered, “Your Mistress, ...”

Little Ning nodded, “You should know which room belongs to

Mistress. Tonight after midnight, she will be waiting for you in her room. You just have to push the door to enter. Hee! After the deed is done, you must not forget my effort in bringing the two of you together!”

She slipped out after she finished talking.

Xiang Shaolong sat there like an idiot.

In terms of looks, Zhu Xiuzhen comes in third after Feng Fei and Dong Suzhen within the Song & Dance Troupe. She usually stares at him with such hatred and contempt. In reality, she is masking her affections from him.

This is a one-night stand initiated by her, should he take up her offer?

If Feng Fei hears about it, what would she think of him?

Ever since leaving Xianyang (City), except for a session with Qiuling in Daliang (Capital of Wei), Xiang Shaolong has been leading a celibate and lonely life. With his current cozy environment and his sexual desires re-ignited by the wanton woman Yun Niang, he is intuitively aroused when a dazzling courtesan offers him such an opportunity.

All his sleepiness vanished into thin air.

Needless to say, this eye catching Little Ning must be sharing Zhu

Xiuzhen's cabin bedroom. If he took up the invitation, he may well end up in a threesome.

He suddenly felt guilty and embarrassed.

Back at home, the Talented Lady Ji and the others are worried sick for him and yet he is here having a good time with other women. How can he face his own conscience if he went ahead with his trysts?

He did not have a choice when he made love to Qiuling but he absolutely has no justification if he wants to make love to Zhu Xiuzhen.

He hardened his resolve and lay down once again onto his bed, covering himself with his blanket.

Xiao Yuetan happened to come back to the room this minute, humming a tune happily.

Xiang Shaolong was piqued, "Why would Yun Niang be willing to release you?"

Xiao Yuetan absentmindedly danced a few steps and responded, "This is one of my beliefs when it comes to taking care of my health. We cannot do without sex but we cannot go overboard with it too. Let me tell you something new. Dong Shuzen is implying to me that she is open to a relationship with me and hinted that I can also have her 'sister' Zhu Xiuzhen as well. Looks like they have a

favour to ask of me.”

Hearing this, Xiang Shaolong turned quiet and became disinterested.

It is apparent that Zhu Xiuzhen is a free for all.

Seeing that Xiang Shaolong has something on his mind, Xiao Yuetan pondered for a while before asking, “You having trouble sleeping?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “I was about to fall asleep but I was awakened by someone!”

Xiao Yuetan sat down and probed him for the reason.

After Xiang Shaolong finished telling his story, Xiao Yuetan reflected on it and abruptly exclaimed, “What a close shave! This is definitely a trap!”

Book 22 Chapter 02 - Going Along With The Plan

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “Why do you say it’s a trap?”

Xiao Yuetan surmised, “Few individuals are my match when it comes to plotting and trickery. When you told me how you managed to rise to your current position, I already smell a rat and paid extra attention to everyone and everything around me. Not only does Zhang Quan hates you to the core, Dong Shuzen and the courtesans close to her can’t wait to see the last of you. Given such circumstances, Zhu Xiuzhen’s invitation can only be a trap.”

Xiang Shaolong sobered up and cursed his own inattentiveness. He nodded, “I suppose when something sounds too good to be true, it probably is! Fortunately, I had no intention of going anyway.”

Xiao Yuetan was baffled, “Since when did our great Xiang Shaolong become so easy going? As the saying goes - It is hard to fight external battles when the internal battles are not won yet. If we do not use this opportunity to diminish our enemies’ influence, the schemes coming from these women coupled with that bastard will catch you off guard one day. Moreover, you have promised Feng Fei to assist her in resisting the men lusting over her. If you do not counter attack them with some trickery, how are you going to prove yourself to her?”

Xiang Shaolong was awkward, “I am not used to scheming against women and I always have a soft spot for them. In addition, I have no clue how I can counter this beauty trap.”

Xiao Yuetan beat his own chest with confidence, “Firstly, let me analyze the entire scenario. From my conversation with Yun Niang last night, I found out that Dong Shuzen and Zhang Quan are sleeping partners; and the same goes for Sa Li and Zhu Xiuzhen. They are not genuine lovers but just trading sex for power and vice versa. Now that Sa Li has been dismissed and Zhang Quan demoted, you have indirectly antagonize both Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen. You are in a perilous state right now.”

Hugging his blanket, Xiang Shaolong concluded, “This is Feng Fei making use of me to restructure the Song & Dance Troupe. Otherwise, why should she trust a complete stranger like me?”

Xiao Yuetan agreed, “Feng Fei is a scheming beauty and is even more cunning than a fox. You have become one of her chess pieces. I can sense that she dare not offend Dong Shuzen, otherwise even Zhang Quan will be dismissed along with Sa Li. Ha! What kind of trap is Zhu Xiuzhen laying for you? I don’t think she has the courage to kill you. It is most likely she will malign you for entering her bedroom with an ulterior motive, pressuring Feng Fei to sack you from the troupe.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed, “That sounds like a good deal to me. If I can leave the troupe, you can then engage me as a driver or a manservant. By then, no one will be able to identify me!”

Xiao Yuetan exhaled, “Going over to my side is even more dangerous. Many of my shipmates have seen your WANTED portrait and someone may recognize you after spending more time with you. That is why I tricked Gongsun Heji and the others back

to my ship. Only when I have completed your disguise can you interact more freely with them.”

Xiang Shaolong wondered, “What should we do now?”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head, smiling, “Zhu Xiuzhen is only adept at using her body to trap men. Shaolong, are you interested to try out this woman? I guarantee that it will be a memorable session and you will not be disappointed.”

Xiang Shaolong’s excitement is beginning to stir but he quickly suppressed it. He rejected, “I am not used to making love to a woman who has no feelings for me, nor do I want to overpower her in such a manner. If Feng Fei knows about our relationship, she will have a bad impression of me. So this is undoable.”

Xiao Yuetan concurred, “I forgot that you are a true gentleman. Since this is the case, let’s give her a scare and teach this wanton woman a good lesson.”

He continued detailing his plan in soft whispers.

As the river wind blows through the air, Xiang Shaolong snaked out of his cabin through the cabin window. Using his climbing equipment, he hooked up the higher decks and stepped on horizontal planks protruding from the ship’s body. Like a lizard, he shimmied towards Zhu Xiuzhen’s bedroom.

Luckily, the layer of ice formed on the ship’s external wall has

melted away due to the rise in temperature. Otherwise, it will be a precarious climb even with the hooks and ropes.

There is complete silence on the ship and the shore is equally noiseless. Under such hostile weather, everyone will want to snuggle in their warm bed and blankets.

Every time he passes through a cabin window, he has to stoop down.

He has to travel past ten odd cabins and only a few of the cabins are still illuminated with a faint candlelight. Zhu Xiuzhen's cabin is obviously not one of them.

The three rooms nearest to the ship's front belong to Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen, the three most influential courtesans. Yun Niang's room is on the opposing side.

As Xiang Shaolong's room is nearer to the ship's tail, he has to climb a long distance, through several sections of the ship before he can arrive at Zhu Xiuzhen's window.

It is a different world being inside the cabin and outside the ship. Besides the difference in temperature, it also evokes a different kind of feeling.

Xiang Shaolong was humoured.

He resembles a hero from Wuxia (sword-fighting) novels who can

scale walls and jump from roof to roof. The only disparity is that he is not fighting for justice but simply trying to preserve his existence.

Xiao Yuetan's assessment of Feng Fei has made him more wary of this beauty.

As the saying goes - Never trust anyone. He is too gullible and even more so in front of good-looking women. His mind has subconsciously given him the impression that these women are equally beautiful on the inside. A woman's heart is hard to fathom. Right now, Zhu Xiuzhen is a living example.

Xiang Shaolong retrieved his grappling hooks and shot them out again, further and higher. Using the momentum, he repeated this step a few times and finally landed outside Zhu Xiuzhen's window.

The room is so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

He was about to draw out his dagger and pry open the window when he heard intermittent sounds of moaning coming from Dong Shuzhen's window up ahead.

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and curious at the same time. He couldn't help but inched forward to her window and place his ear against the wall.

Who could be in Dong Shuzhen's room?

He was in a state of shock after hearing what followed.

It turns out that the two person making love in the room are both women and he could hear them screaming in ecstasy as they reached their orgasm.

It appears that Dong Shuzhen is bisexual.

He was about to leave when Dong Shuzhen praised in a hoarse voice, “Xiuzhen is really good.”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Why is Zhu Xiuzhen in Dong Shuzhen’s room? And who is in Zhu Xiuzhen’s room right now?

Didn’t Yun Niang tell Xiao Yuetan that Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen are hooked up with Zhang Quan and Sa Li respectively? In that case, Dong Shuzhen should be opposing Zhu Xiuzhen instead. Why are they a lesbian couple now?

While he was in a state of confusion, Zhu Xiuzhen panted, “To think that you are still in the mood to tease me. That fellow should be making his way here soon. If we continue making out, we will not be able to hear him entering my room.”

Dong Shuzhen giggled, “All we need to hear is Xinyue’s cries of rape!”

Zhu Xiuzhen pondered, “I only switched rooms with Xinyue tonight. Will this arouse Mistress’s (Feng Fei) suspicions?”

Dong Shuzen sniggered, “This is the best part of the scheme. Even if Feng Fei suspects us of any misdeeds, she will also see for herself that Shen Liang is just a pervert. He is newly promoted to manager but is already trying to get fresh with the courtesans. How can he shoulder heavy responsibilities in the future? Besides, she has to bear with us because without us, there is no way she can hope to win Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang.”

Zhu Xiuzhen reflected on her words for a while and whispered, “I really cannot understand what a prestigious person like Mister Tan sees in that lowly servant Shen Liang.”

Xiang Shaolong was just about to leave but upon hearing her comment, he continued to eavesdrop.

Dong Shuzen sighed, “This fellow has certain abilities and his fighting skills alone is heart-stopping. If not for the fact that he is above bribing, I don’t mind letting him take advantage of me.”

Xiang Shaolong doesn’t have an inkling why is Dong Shuzen coming up with all these schemes. He wished that she will divulge more of her plans but when their silence is interrupted by sounds of light moaning, he lost all interest and returned back to his cabin.

After Xiao Yuetan heard his story, he was greatly amused too. He ran the thoughts over his mind and slapped his thigh, exclaiming, “I have a plan. We can turn their scheme around to attack Zhu Xiuzhen and increase your standing within the Song & Dance

Troupe.”

Xiang Shaolong quickly asked him for the details.

Xiao Yuetan whispered, “You can write a letter. Inside the letter, you can express your gratitude for Zhu Xiuzhen’s love but you are unable to accept her affections and ask for her forgiveness at the same time. We will place the letter under the door to Zhu Xiuzhen’s original room, now occupied by Xinyue. In this case, we can expose their scam and at the same time, prove that you are a man who can resist such temptations.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed, “This cannot be accomplished. I can fight or lead an army to war but writing a letter is simply beyond me.”

Xiao Yuetan was in a daze and laughed, “I did not think of that. Well, I suppose I can write the letter for you but you have to sign it yourself. Just remember not to sign Xiang Shaolong on it.”

Solving this difficulty for good, Xiang Shaolong can feel his shoulders lightening and laughed together with Xiao Yuetan.

Early next morning, the ships began sailing, continuing their journey.

After having breakfast in their rooms, Xiao Yuetan joined the courtesans at the ship’s front deck, enjoying themselves as they admired the picturesque scenery on both sides of the shore. Xiang

Shaolong is kept busy as he learnt the ropes as the troupe manager.

As expected, Little Ping'er was guiding him on the side.

He may be thinking too much but Little Ping'er's attitude towards him seemed to have improved. When they were auditing the new purchases at the basement of the ship, she asked out of the blue, "Why did you take the rap for someone else?"

Xiang Shaolong was confounded, "What rap are you talking about?"

Her face reddening, Little Ping'er replied, "Last night, I discovered that Yun Niang's partner is Mister Tan and realized that I have wronged you. Why didn't you refute my accusations?"

Xiang Shaolong deliberately provoked her, "Didn't you mention that Mister Tan is an upright and righteous gentleman? Furthermore, Sister Ping'er did not give me a chance to speak out. My conscience is clear and I do not owe you an explanation. So, I guess Sister Ping'er will not despise me anymore?"

Little Ping'er is greatly embarrassed and changed the topic, "You seemed to have aged a bit over the past two days. Even your hair is turning white."

Xiang Shaolong was panicking inside but acted like nothing is out of the ordinary. He laughed, "There are people whose hair grew white overnight. I am considered to be lucky as I only have a little

bit of white hair.”

Little Ping'er knows that he is hinting that he was so worried about her misunderstanding him that his hair turned slightly white. She was surprisingly pleased and shot him a look before resuming an official expression, instructing him on his responsibilities.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing his heart out. Teasing cute babes is one of life's little happiness.

Oddly, Feng Fei summoned him to join her for lunch. Xinyue was invited as well.

Xiang Shaolong of course knows what this is all about but he feigns innocence.

Feng Fei took this opportunity to ask him about his new duties before going straight to the point, “Does Manager Shen know that he was nearly a victim of a vicious plot?”

Xiang Shaolong acted surprised, “Your servant (polite way of saying I) does not understand Mistress's words.”

Opposite him, Xinyue clarified, “At Zhu Xiuzhen's request, I switched rooms with her last night and I became the recipient of your ‘love’ letter. Does Manager Shen understand now?”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be angry at being cheated. He

cursed, “So she is planning to harm me.”

Revealing a gentle expression, Feng Fei praised, “You did not disappoint me. Whoever I hired in the past will eventually succumb to their advances. Manager Shen is the only exception.”

Xinyue commented, “I did not expect Manager Shen to have such good writing skills too!”

Xiang Shaolong frankly admitted, “That was written by Mister Tan after I begged him to help me. Except for being able to sign my own name, the rest of my writing is unintelligible.”

Feng Fei nodded, “You are willing to speak the truth. That is very rare. But Manager Shen is extremely eloquent and knows a wide variety of proverbs. Why are you unable to write a simple letter?”

Xiang Shaolong obviously cannot reveal the truth. He lied, “I have read a few books but did not practice my writing.”

Xinyue was startled, “Manager Shen must be the son of an official. Ordinary folks will not get to read books.”

Xiang Shaolong is facing the ‘identity interrogation’ of his lifetime. During those ancient times, the printing press is not invented yet and every single book is hand copied onto cloth or bamboo. Books are not commonly found and are considered precious items. If not for ancient scholars starting public schools to educate the masses, only the rich and powerful are entitled to

learning words and becoming literate.

If the two ladies continued asking about the books he has read before and their authors and such, his lies will be exposed.

He sprouted nonsense, “I came across some books while serving Great General Lian (Po).”

Feng Fei bought his story and assured, “Zhu Xiuzhen’s scheme is a small matter. In the future, even if someone disparages you, I will not believe it.”

Xinyue appears to be quite fond of Xiang Shaolong. She suggested, “When we are rehearsing our routine later, it will be good to have Manager Shen around. It will be good for you to know about our manpower arrangement together with the props we will be using. Can you be there?”

Xiang Shaolong acquiesced.

Feng Fei abruptly let out a sigh, frowning her two delicate eyebrows.

Xiang Shaolong may be used to seeing pretty faces but he cannot deny that she has one of the most elegant eyebrows he has ever seen.

The eyebrows looked like they are personally hand painted by the Creator, crescent-shaped and simply flawless.

Xinyue sighed with her and murmured, “Mistress must be feeling perplexed over that issue again! This trip to Lin Zi, we must not lose to the Three Courtesans Troupe and the Soft Boned beauty.”

Xiang Shaolong has nothing to add.

If they need a swordsman for a duel, he can absolutely do his part. But in this aspect, he is unable to make a contribution.

From Feng Fei’s expression, he can guess that she is having some difficulties over the Song & Dance arrangements.

Being in the creative industry, Feng Fei would certainly want a breakthrough.

This also means challenging her own ways of thinking and doing things, to break her own mold. Needless to say, it is not easy to reinvent yourself.

Feng Fei’s expression became slightly downcast and she kept mum.

Xinyue is the one continuing the conversation and specially reminded Xiang Shaolong to come to their rehearsal tonight.

After taking his leave, Xiang Shaolong was about to return to his room and corroborate his story with Xiao Yuetan when someone

called out from his back, “Shen Liang!”

Xiang Shaolong turned around. It is the ‘matchmaker from hell’ coquettish maid Little Ning.

She rushed along the long corridor towards him, speaking in a loud voice, “Why didn’t you come over last night? Mistress waited tirelessly for you the entire night.”

Xiang Shaolong apologized, “I was waiting in bed but I accidentally fell asleep as I was too tired. I beg your pardon Sister Ning.”

Little Ning was infuriated, “You are really incorrigible. Mistress is very upset with you now!”

Xiang Shaolong casually shrugged his shoulders, giving her a helpless look, stunning Little Ning with his indifference. He turned back and started walking towards the wooden steps linked to the lower deck.

Little Ning caught up to him and pulled his sleeve, admonishing, “You are going to just go off like that? How are you going to redeem yourself?”

To prevent her from harassing him, Xiang Shaolong faced her and directly offered, “The person I like is actually you, Sister Ning. Why don’t you accompany me instead!”

Little Ning apparently knows about making out and glared at him

chiding, “Do you want me to be thrown out by Mistress? Ai! Since you are such a nice person, I will try to salvage the situation for you!”

Xiang Shaolong is becoming impatient and coaxed, “Love cannot be forced. Sister Ning need not worry about this. Why don’t you come to my room tonight?”

Seeing that her plan has failed, Little Ning was worried, “How can we use your room? Mister Tan is your roommate.”

Stretching his hand out to pinch her cute face, Xiang Shaolong chuckled, “Mister Tan is a considerate man and will not mind at all.”

Finishing, he walked off, laughing inside his heart.

Back in his room, he shared his story with Xiao Yuetan. Both men found his encounters hilarious.

Xiao Yuetan began to dye his hair and beard. In the middle of the disguise session, someone came to summon Xiao Yuetan at the request of Feng Fei. Both men were shocked and hastily hide the entire disguise apparatus.

Alone, Xiang Shaolong is about to take an afternoon nap. Unexpectedly, Zhang Quan came looking for him. Zhang Quan appear very amicable, the complete opposite of his former self.

After he got seated, Zhang Quan officially stated, “Brother Shen used to serve Prince Wuji. Apparently, you want to make a name and fortune for yourself. I want to make a deal with Brother Shen and see if we can reach an agreement.”

Xiang Shaolong already knew he has an ulterior motive for coming. He plainly requested, “Brother Zhang, please speak your mind!”

Zhang Quan confessed, “I did harbour ill intentions when I first hired Brother Shen as a carriage driver. However, you cannot pin all the blame on me. This is not an easy role to fulfill. You will know what I mean when we arrive at Lin Zi. Those rich men and powerful officials viewed us as lowly servants and we will be in trouble if we let our guard down. After being angry when they failed to gain Mistress’s (Feng Fei) attention, they will vent their frustrations on us. If Brother Shen is willing to work with me, I will definitely take care of you like my own brethren. After all, I have been the troupe manager for the past two years.”

Xiang Shaolong was laughing inside. He prompted, “Brother Zhang, please come straight to the point.”

Zhang Quan’s eyes rotated a few rounds before leaning forward and divulging, “The biggest advantage when working with me is that Brother Shen can enjoy pleasures of the flesh. Except for a few untouchables, I can even get Second Mistress (Dong Shuzen) to sleep with you.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and chortled, “Brother Zhang must be kidding me.”

Zhang Quan hurriedly swore an oath that he is telling the absolute truth before adding, “As long as Brother Shen is willing to follow my advice, I can reward you with five ingots of gold now. When the mission is accomplished, I will give you another ten ingots.”

Xiang Shaolong is amazed.

Fifteen ingots of gold is not a small sum and can allow anyone to lead a luxurious life for many years. Where did Zhang Quan get his money from?

Thinking about this, he can safely predict that Zhang Quan has been bribed by someone rich, powerful and has evil designs on Feng Fei.

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Xiang Shaolong observed Zhang Quan beating around the bush and not going straight to the point . He guessed Zhang Quan is testing his limits before revealing the full picture. He affirmed, “The money is very tempting and I would hate to be Brother Zhang’s enemy. However, Mistress (Feng Fei) and I have an affinity for each other. I will not repay her trust with malice.”

His words are tactfully chosen, making his stand clear that he will not do anything against Feng Fei’s interest.

Zhang Quan cunningly scoffed, “Brother Shen is mistaken! Why would I cause any harm to Mistress (Feng Fei)? For the past few days, I admit that I am upset with her for demoting me. But thinking back, it was my own fault. Thus, I do not have the right to bear any grudges.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious, “What does Brother Zhang expect of me? Whatever I can do, Brother Zhang can do better. There is no need for you to lose those glittering pieces of gold into my pocket!”

Zhang Quan leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and whispered, “Are you aware than Little Ping told somebody she has affections towards yourself?”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “What has this got to do with the deal? Anyway, I don’t believe she will tell anybody she likes me.”

Zhang Quan snickered, “She did not say it out word for word but

she often talks about you in front of the others. Based on her personality, it is as clear as day that she has taken a serious liking to you.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head aching.

In the present situation, he cannot allow himself to be entangled in any relationships. Moreover, he is too softhearted when it comes to handling the fairer sex. All these complications will only add to his burdens and he secretly warned himself to resist such temptations. He rejected, “Brother Zhang need not speak any further. Making use of Sister Ping to achieve our goals is beyond me. How about this? I will plead with Mistress (Feng Fei) to promote you back to your original appointment and I will serve as your Assistant Manager. We will all be on good terms once again. Isn’t this better than all the daily infighting?”

Noticing his resolute countenance, Zhang Quan was irked and cussed, “Brother Shen is too naïve. Do you really believe that you are promoted to my ex-position because Mistress (Feng Fei) believes in your abilities? She is only using you as a scapegoat! In fact, she is already in love with a mystery man. After her trip to Lin Zi, she will disappear with him to an undisclosed location, leading a life of seclusion and happiness. According to my estimations, she will pretend to develop feelings for you and use you as a diversion, drawing attention away from the real culprit. You will die a wrongful death.”

Xiang Shaolong was outraged, “Who is that man?”

Zhang Quan groaned, “I will not have come to you if I know who

he is. Except for Little Ping'er, nobody knows about Feng Fei's affairs."

Xiang Shaolong's opinion of Feng Fei is becoming less and less favourable.

And it is all because Zhang Quan's words make perfect sense.

Feng Fei is as wise as an owl. She is unlikely to place all her hopes and safety in his hands and yet she gave him such an impression. She is obviously trying to stir up his heroism, painting herself as a helpless damsel who requires his protection. In actual fact, she could have easily planned her own retreat from Qi.

On the other hand, Zhang Quan has been bribed by someone to destroy her grand plan and detain her for his (the rich person) personal enjoyment. Even if he (rich person) cannot win her love, he will have her body.

Feng Fei is like a limited, top quality gem, which everyone wishes to acquire. Although no one can openly use force to obtain her, there will be countless schemes to achieve the same result.

The circumstances are unbelievable.

He was unlucky enough to be drawn into this turmoil.

Zhang Quan assumed that Xiang Shaolong has changed his mind. He took his money pouch out from his bosom and counted five

ingots of gold. He put his arm around Xiang Shaolong's shoulders and gently persuaded, "My mastermind is a high ranking and influential man in Qi. He is one in a million. Brother Shen only need to do your job well and you may be even rewarded with an official post. He loves Mistress (Feng Fei) whole-heartedly and will give her a good life. At the end of the day, take it that we are doing Mistress a huge favour."

There is no way Xiang Shaolong will trust his words.

But if he puts himself in Zhang Quan's shoes, he will too bluff about have a rich and powerful backer in Qi because it is indeed an effective way to coerce the weak into submitting.

Xiang Shaolong plainly requested, "Let me try to understand the situation more thoroughly before I commit to a decision. Brother Zhang, please keep your gold for the time being. Ai! Regardless I work with you or not, you should give me some time to consider your proposal."

Looking at his unwavering appearance, Zhang Quan nodded, "All right, but you must give me an answer by the time we arrive in Lin Zi."

After Zhang Quan left, Xiang Shaolong is still fixated in his daydream.

Will Feng Fei really use him as a scapegoat for the man of her dreams?

With her refined and lovely facade, it is hard to imagine that she is such a despicable person.

From the beginning, he had assumed Zhang Quan to be Dong Shuzen's lapdog, but it is apparently not true after analyzing his (Zhang Quan) tone.

Dong Shuzen is trying her best to get rid of him, while Zhang Quan is trying his best to bribe him. Their actions are contradictory to each other.

He is getting more and more muddle-headed when Xiao Yuetan returned to the room.

Listening to Xiang Shaolong's exchange with Zhang Quan, Xiao Yuetan frowned, "Never in my wildest imagination did I expect Feng Fei's retirement to cause such a big hoo-ha. It appears to me there is indeed a mastermind trying all means and ways to have Feng Fei all for himself. To a certain extent, Zhang Quan's words sounds logical. Feng Fei enjoys the respect of numerous Kings and Lords. If she takes the trouble to ask for assistance, she will have no lack of capable men coming forward to offer their protection. And yet she has to be so secretive about the whole thing. Thus, I conclude that her mystery lover is someone unique, maybe even someone who has a lowly status. Exposing this person's identity will cause disaster to befall upon him."

Compared to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan has a better understanding about the mentality of the rich and powerful. He queried, "Is Feng Fei so wicked that she will really use me as her scapegoat?"

Xiao Yuetan grinned, "Let's wait and observe the situation further. I am sure things will be clearer after some surveillance. Our Shaolong is no pushover after all; whoever dares to scheme against us can expect a scheme in return."

Xiang Shaolong agreed.

Who would have thought that such a small Song & Dance Troupe would involve such complications?

Watching the Song & Dance Troupe rehearsal, Xiang Shaolong finally understood how Poetry, Singing and Music can be amalgamated into one body. In the past, either he did not pay much attention to these performances or he only stare at the beautiful main character. In this moment, he can feel himself immersing into the presentation and can fully appreciate every component of it.

By itself, the 30 odd member orchestra led by Yun Niang is show-worthy.

Yun Niang plays a set of 8 hanging bells, representing the 8 ancient and original tones (Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do). Ranging from big bells to small bells, they took up one-fifth of the space in the hall. She strikes the bells in a graceful posture, mesmerizing the audience with her nimble stances and dance steps. It is no wonder why she is highly respected by Feng Fei.

Xiang Shaolong assumed that Yun Niang is aware of Feng Fei's

plans to disband the Song & Dance Troupe. Thus, she is using every opportunity to get close to Xiao Yuetan, hoping to marry him after the disbandment. As one grows older, one becomes more practical. If he was in her shoes, he too would choose the 'successful' Xiao Yuetan and not the 'pathetic' Shen Liang.

The hall is full of ancient instruments like the stone clappers, metal cymbals, pipes, lutes, bronze drums, chimes and harps, providing well-matched melodies. The music is soothing, gentle and pleasing to the ears.

Xinyue, Zhu Xiuzhen and the other courtesans are dancing to the music.

Feng Fei and Dong Shuzhen are standing at a side, analyzing the dance. From time to time, they will lean towards each other and exchange feedback. From their body language, it is impossible to tell that they are secretly opposing each other.

The serving maids are tasked to assist the courtesans in changing clothes and serving refreshments. It was a busy and lively scene.

On this occasion, Feng Fei did not invite Xiao Yuetan along. As a result, Xiang Shaolong is sitting at a side, watching the rehearsal all by himself.

Fortunately, he can feast his eyes on the gorgeous courtesans. He kept himself busy checking them out.

On several counts, Xinyue flutter her eyelashes at him, giving him a sense of warmth, making him feel less lonely.

Zhu Xiuzhen appears to be as angry with him as before. She gave him a fierce stare and no longer pays any attention to him.

Out of a sudden, an icy voice sounded out beside him, “Who are you staring at?”

Xiang Shaolong turned in head in astonishment. It is Little Ping'er dressed up as a boy, looking at him with a hostile expression. He was momentarily shaken before he spluttered out, “I am watching the rehearsal!”

Little Ping'er whined, “I think you are looking at Mistress (Xinyue) instead.”

‘None of your business’, Xiang Shaolong was scolding inside. On the outside, he swallowed his pride and inquired, “Doesn’t Sister Ping think the rehearsal is fantastic?”

Little Ping'er stomped her feet, “You are paying so much attention to her and must be lusting for her.”

Xiang Shaolong can detect the overpowering jealousy in her words and since he feels no affections for her, he is beginning to feel annoyed. He intentionally rebuffed, “It is common for men to be drawn to attractive women. When Miss Xinyue performs in front of a large audience, is Sister Ping going to scold the few

hundred spectators?”

Her face reddening on the spot, Little Ping'er marched away in anger. Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel a burden released from his shoulder. This lass is willful, easily jealous, stubborn and demanding. It is best not to get involved with her.

Feng Fei waved him over and enquired, “What does Manager Shen think about this new routine?”

Dong Shuzen's gaze fell upon his face, scanning him with full attention. Despite knowing that this is a loose woman whom he can easily sleep with, the fact that he has heard her moaning before, coupled with their close proximity now where he can have a delightful view of her huge breasts and slender waist, Xiang Shaolong is transfixed. He dryly coughed, “I am inexperienced when it comes to music but I must say that the melodies are a treat to my ears. Yun Niang's playing of the bells is clear and precise, akin to a Commanding General leading his huge army to war.”

Dong Shuzen said, “Manager Shen is too modest. Your simple words have explained the essence of the orchestra. The ringing of the bells has all along been essential to managing the timing as well as the sound effects of the orchestra. The bells marked both the starting and ending of every song, and can be played as a solo or as an accompanying instrument to the zither, lute, pipe or flute. The bells are the most versatile and they affect the mood of the song.”

Facing her enticements, Xiang Shaolong knows that she is faking them but is nonetheless surprised by her enlightenment. He

pretended to listen intensively to her words.

Taking in the intoxicating fragrances of the two ladies, Xiang Shaolong visualize himself as the only male species in a country of women. Sailing up the long river on this giant ancient ship in winter, he felt like he is on top of the world.

In a remarkably tender voice, Feng Fei shared, “Content arises from poems, movements arise from dancing, sounds arise from singing. When these three become one body, it will become a special birthday present for the King of Qi. It is named - The Immortal Phoenix Arising. Unfortunately, I encountered some difficulties in the main song. Hopefully, I can resolve it by the time of the banquet. Otherwise, it will be a huge disappointment.”

A strange look flashed by Dong Shuzen’s face. Although curious, Xiang Shaolong cannot guess what is on her mind.

Xiang Shaolong turned his attention to Xinyue and the dancing courtesans. He casually asked, “Is there a different dance movement for every song, portraying a different setting? And lastly, will the main song come in to bring the audiences to a climax, bringing closure to the story?”

The curvy bodies Feng Fei and Dong Shuzen uncontrollably trembled. Their pretty almond-shaped eyes looked at each other in wonder for some time before they both stared at him.

Xiang Shaolong can sense that something is not right. Witnessing their amazement, he awkwardly apologized, “Your servant (polite

way of saying I) is spouting nonsense. Both Mistresses, kindly do not take offence.”

The two ladies remained silent.

Now it was Xiang Shaolong’s turn to shudder. He found out the reason for their reaction.

To a 21st century person, it is common to express a story through a musical. There is nothing new or surprising.

However, during the period of the Warring States, music is traditionally linked to its origin - used as part of prayers to the Creator. Music itself has no ‘storyline’ until the later dynasties of Song and Yuan.

In the eyes of Feng Fei, his words are a groundbreaking revelation.

Her alluring breasts still quivering, Feng Fei finally exhaled, “Ai! Shen Liang, this is a very novel perspective of things. You are indeed a very special person.”

Dong Shuzen quipped, “This idea is not only unique but superbly refreshing. Mistress should consider it.”

Feng Fei’s pair of glimmering, soul-hooking eyes rested on Xiang Shaolong’s face for some time before she decided, “Shuzen, please give some thought to it as well. I am going back to my room to take

a rest.”

Finishing, she took her leave without giving Xiang Shaolong a second glance. Dong Shuzen came closer to Xiang Shaolong until her pert bosom nearly came in contact with his hand. She revealed, “No one has ever cause Feng Fei such agitation. Shen Liang, you are the first.”

Embarrassed, Xiang Shaolong uttered, “Second Mistress must be making fun of me.”

Her lovely face blossoming like a flower, Dong Shuzen tiptoed and whispered into his ears, “My heart beats for you too.” Finishing, she even lightly blew a mouthful of air into his ears.

Xiang Shaolong is fully aware that she is trying to seduce himself to achieve her dark, unspoken goal. Nonetheless, he felt like touching her in return. Hurriedly suppressing his temptation, he rejected, “Second Mistress, please don’t. It doesn’t sound right.”

Dong Shuzen gave him a coquettish smile and shifted slightly away. She batted her eyes at him, “You can come to my room whenever you are free. There will just be the two of us and we can enjoy each other’s company in full privacy.”

Xiang Shaolong thought: Wouldn’t that be sending the lamb into the tiger’s den? Getting himself ensnared in her beauty trap?

He answered, “Your servant dare not. Mistress (Feng Fei) will be

offended.”

Dong Shuzen sweetly smiled, “Your fists are so hard and yet your guts are so little. Mistress (Feng Fei) will not bother with my business. Oh! Unless you are pining for Mistress (Feng Fei)?”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Second Mistress must be joking. Your servant is just a lowly manager. I dare not dream of being the toad lusting after the swan’s flesh.”

Dong Shuzen’s body wobbled, “Toad lusting after the swan’s flesh. How in the world did you think of such proverbs?”

Xiang Shaolong realized that this proverb is not invented yet. He uneasily responded, “It is just me spouting gibberish as usual.”

Dong Shuzen took a closer look at him as if this is the first time she is seeing him. After some time, she questioned, “Every time you say something, you will disclose some thought-provoking ideas. You are such a talent and it is a pity if you are under-utilized. Shen Liang, have you ever thought about your plans for the future?”

Right now, the music has stopped playing. The courtesans are giggling among themselves, awaiting further instructions from Dong Shuzen.

Only Xinyue is alone at a side, jealously eyeing the intimate conversations between the two of them.

Little Ping'er is nowhere to be seen.

Xiang Shaolong professed, "I am completely satisfied with my position now as General Manager. Ah! They (the courtesans) are waiting for Second Mistress's guidance."

Dong Shuzen divulged, "Let me tell you a secret. The Song & Dance Troupe will disband soon. Everyone who knows about it has been keeping a lookout for other prospects. For myself, I am greatly troubled, as I do not wish to end up as someone's concubine or mistress. Shen Liang, if you have any plans, please come and talk to me about them."

She stretched out her hand, pinching his arm and softly beamed, "You are really muscular."

She then smilingly went over to the courtesans.

Xiang Shaolong dared not look at Xinyue's expression and quickly slipped away.

On his way back to his cabin, this is the first time he sympathizes with Dong Shuzen.

She has dedicated her entire life to singing and dancing. She obviously does not wish to lose her career as such a young age. Moreover, it is the only admirable career a woman can have in this ancient period.

To a certain extent, Feng Fei is awfully selfish and only makes plans for herself. It will be even more unforgivable if Feng Fei is using him as a scapegoat, a diversion, as propagated by Zhang Quan.

If there is a way to allow Dong Shuzen to become Feng Fei's successor, giving Feng Fei a hassle-free retirement, that will be a happy ending for both parties. It is a difficult proposition, though not entirely impossible. The issue lies with Feng Fei.

Back in his room, Xiao Yuetan has just completed his new dye and is working on Xiang Shaolong's disguise. When Xiang Shaolong told him about Little Ping'er noticing the changes in his (Xiang Shaolong) appearance, the latter laughed, "I guarantee that nobody can see through your disguise once my work is completed. Our biggest advantage is your weight loss, causing the shape of your eyes to be different from before. You must watch your diet and don't gain too much weight."

Xiang Shaolong groaned, "I have been restricting myself already. Now that Little Ping has expressed interest in me and Dong Shuzen is trying her best to seduce me, I can feel my head aching. What should I do?"

Xiao Yuetan jested, "Xiang Shaolong is Xiang Shaolong. Even Talented Lady Ji has fallen for you; it is no surprise that other girls will do the same. Hey! Let me show you something."

Xiang Shaolong shifted his gaze to the object on his open palm. It

resembles a fruit seed, extremely hard and about the size of a thumb. Piqued, he questioned, “What is it?”

Xiao Yuetan rationalized, “It does not matter what it is. What it is used for is more critical. When you put it under your tongue, it will change the tone of your voice, making you sound vastly different from Xiang Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “But if Feng Fei and the others hear my new voice, wouldn’t it raise any red flags?”

Xiao Yuetan assured, “Your status is not the same as before. When Feng Fei is speaking to outsiders, do you think you have the right to be present? And even if you happen to be around, you do not have the right to interrupt or give your opinion. When you are meeting with someone familiar, all you have to do is to pop this into your mouth and evade identification.”

After experiencing Xiao Yuetan’s bag of tricks, Xiang Shaolong is no longer surprised by the ridiculous stuff he comes up with. He picked up the seed and placed it under his tongue as instructed by Xiao Yuetan. With further supervision by the Master of Disguise, he is re-learning how to talk as if he is a toddler. True enough, the tone of his voice is now very different from before.

As Xiao Yuetan is laughing at Xiang Shaolong’s antics, the sound of knocking is heard. He swiftly went to open the door.

Xiang Shaolong saw Xiao Yuetan being yanked out of the room and was in a state of perplexity when Xiao Yuetan reentered the

room and whispered, “I am going over to Yun Niang’s room tonight to have a good time. If you are feeling lonely, try approaching Xinyue or one of the ladies. I have not tried Xinyue before but I personally guarantee that Dong Shuzen will give you a night to remember. All the best.” When the cabin door was closed again, Xiang Shaolong can only smile bitterly to himself.

The voyage is a lonesome one and a female companion for the night will surely grant him significant happiness. However, he cannot go against his own conscience. After being in a daze for some time, he made peace with his own emotions and snuggled into his bed and blanket. Since he left Qin, his greatest joy lies in meeting his wives and son in his dreams. Just as he was about to fall asleep, his ears picked up the sound of the door softly opening and he woke up in shock.

Xiang Shaolong reached over and barely grasped the handle of Bloodwave hanging by his bedside when he was overwhelmed by a womanly fragrance. A sizzling hot female body has snaked underneath his blanket, entangling him securely like an octopus.

Book 22 Chapter 04 - Knee Deep In Trouble

As Xiang Shaolong is well rested, his mind is especially alert and his five senses are exceedingly delicate. Facing the probability that this lady in front of him can be Dong Shuzen, Xinyue, Zhu Xiuzhen or even the unlikely Little Ping'er, he is excited beyond words.

After expending a tremendous amount of willpower, he managed to evade her lips and whispered into her ears, "Who are you?"

The mysterious lady cooed, "Do you have many women who come to you like this?"

Xiang Shaolong cannot recognize her faked voice and laughed, "It is the exact opposite! If another woman had come to me in such a manner, I would have mistaken you for her! Why would I bother to ask about your identity?"

The lady held tightly to his waist and buried her face into his chest, purring, "It is also possible that you have many ladies coming to you and you could not tell them apart."

Xiang Shaolong is absolutely sure that this lady cannot be Little Ping'er or Xinyue as Little Ping'er is still angry with him and Xinyue should know that he values his chastity and is not easily tempted.

Groping her, Xiang Shaolong countered, "If this is the case, I should be able to tell who you are by feeling you and need not question you further."

The lady murmured to herself and appeared to be moved by his words.

Xiang Shaolong cannot hold back his inhibitions any longer. He flipped over, hugging and pressing her down tightly. Concurrently, he reached for a fire stick at his bedside table.

The lady gave a shrill cry, pulling his hand back, exclaiming, “Are you trying to embarrass me? This is the worst time to put the lights on. Let’s begin!”

All Xiang Shaolong needed was some starlight to see her features but it was a cloudy night and on top of that, both of them are still covered by the blanket. Xiang Shaolong is as good as blind.

On the other hand, it is this kind of ignorance that caused him to be greatly aroused.

The lady should be one of the three ladies: Dong Shuzen, Zhu Xiuzhen or Little Ning’er. Every one of them is good-looking, voluptuous and can mesmerize a man with a look or a smile. He is immensely ecstatic and cannot resist this physical invasion.

If not for the layers of clothes between them, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can hold his ground until now.

At the back of his mind, Xiang Shaolong gingerly felt that if he conquered the lady now, he would be no different from a common

pervert. Indirectly, he has lost his self-control and surrendered himself to a strange intruder.

Which is why despite the lady's caressing, the strong lure of enticement and even with an erection, Xiang Shaolong persisted in suppressing the raging flames of passion. Pushing his upper body slightly away, he purposely lied, "I know who you are!"

Below his body, the lady trembled slightly and responded, "So, who am I?"

Based on her shocked reaction, Xiang Shaolong can tell that the lady did not expect Xiang Shaolong to correctly guess her identity.

This meant that she couldn't be Dong Shuzen or Zhu Xiuzhen as these two courtesans have tried to seduce him and have hinted him to bed them. The two of them will not react in such a manner.

Out of the blue, he was hit by an outrageous revelation. Xiang Shaolong stuttered, "First Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

The lady calmed down and soothingly coaxed, "It is Feng Fei indeed. Don't you have feelings for me?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart bleeding and all his passions dissipated. He realized that Zhang Quan is right after all. If she did not plan to use him as a scapegoat, why would she lower herself to his level and offer her body to him?

Only with this sacrifice can she convince him that he is her lover.

All along, Xiang Shaolong has had the highest regards for Feng Fei. Right now, his impression of her has been largely tarnished.

Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed, “Why is First Mistress (Feng Fei) doing this?”

In a pleading tone, the lady lightly implored, “Can you please don’t interrogate me like this? Come and give me your love.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved with relief, calming down, “So it is not First Mistress but Sister Ping.”

If she did not use her normal tone and voice, he may have to continue making wild guesses.

Little Ping’er has resumed her normal speaking manner. She gave a soft shrill and her lips advance once again, kissing him fervently.

Absent-mindedly satisfying her lips with his kissing expertise, Xiang Shaolong is furiously thinking about the entire situation.

Logically, Little Ping’er will be accompanying Feng Fei wherever she goes. In other words, unlike Xinyue and her fellow courtesans, she need not worry about her future when the Troupe disbands.

Right now, she has cast aside her self-respect and offered herself unconditionally to him. Though it could be partly due to true love, she may have been here on Feng Fei's orders, sacrificing herself to control and manipulate himself (Xiang Shaolong).

This belief is not without reason. Although he hasn't grasp Feng Fei's retirement conspiracy or how he will be tricked into becoming a scapegoat, Xiang Shaolong is absolutely sure of one thing - Feng Fei has been lying to him all along.

It does not make any sense for Feng Fei to bet all her hopes and dreams on a stranger like him.

POK!

The fire stick has lighted the oil lamp.

Little Ping'er protested, "Uhm... Uhm..." Unable to take the sudden brightness, her shining eyes are half closed for a while before she opened them fully.

Xiang Shaolong raised his upper body once again and scrutinized this lady in front of him. Her hair is open like a fan over the pillow and he was amazed at her pristine appearance, easily matching Dong Shuzen in terms of beauty. Her attractiveness has been camouflaged by her dressing up as a boy and not applying any make up.

They were looking into each other's eyes.

Contentment and nervousness is written over Little Ping'er's face. The swirling passion in her eyes is something that Xiang Shaolong cannot fathom.

Xiang Shaolong sighed inwardly. His suspicions have been confirmed.

Lowering his head and kissing her red lips, he gently soothed: "Is this the first time you are kissing a man?"

Little Ping'er nodded in reply.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, strengthening his resolve against the teasing and caressing. He icily questioned, "Are you here on First Mistress's orders?"

Her eyes wide open, Little Ping'er was taken aback. After a while did she give a flustered reply, "Why do you say so?"

From her reaction, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew that his guess is not far from the truth.

If she had come on her own accord and hearing this question, she would be seriously offended - she would either leave the room infuriated or face him with a wronged expression.

Her reaction only serves to betray her guilt, leading her to deny

him an answer, hoping to preserve this secret.

For the past few years, Xiang Shaolong has been debating complicated issues in court. A young girl like her is far from his match.

Xiang Shaolong kept his silence and glared frostily at her.

A clear drop of tear appeared at the corner of her eye, running down her face, staining the pillow.

Little Ping'er turned her face to the side, avoiding his emotionless stare. Breaking down, she began sobbing incessantly and wailed with sorrow, "You don't like me?"

Xiang Shaolong laid down beside her, using his sleeve to dry her tears. He plainly state, "I should have known it is Sister Ping. If it were somebody else, they would have stripped naked before joining me in bed."

Little Ping'er has stopped crying and helplessly submitted, "You are truly formidable. I surrender. Happy?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart softened.

Has he been too ruthless with her?

He actually resorted to such means to deal with an innocent and

naïve teenager. Moreover, she is only acting out the orders of her Mistress.

To pacify her turbulent emotions, Xiang Shaolong comforted, “You are a very good-looking lady. Why are you always dressed up as a boy?”

Little Ping’er pitifully confessed, “If I had dressed up like this all the time, the lady in your arms (I) will no longer be a virgin.”

Xiang Shaolong can appreciate the hidden grief in her words. Sighing to himself, he continued, “Was your nasty behavior an act as well?”

Little Ping’er began to smile. Her eyes brimming, she revealed, “At the beginning, it was an act but eventually I got used to it. Ai! You reminded me of somebody.”

Xiang Shaolong became slightly jealous and asked, “Is it your lover?”

Little Ping’er’s mood took a dip. She dismissed, “You are thinking too much! I have only seen him once and his words are very direct and penetrating, exactly like you. His eyes looked as if they can see into your soul. Mistress (Feng Fei) has a deep impression of him too!”

It is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to be taken aback. Knowing that she is referring to himself, he dared not probe further.

Little Ping'er professed, "I feel so comfortable being cuddled by you. So that is how it feels like between men and women. No wonder Yun Niang came looking for Mister Tan."

Xiang Shaolong mused, "Sister Ping, how young are you?"

Little Ping'er bashfully answered, "I just turned seventeen! I have been dedicating my life to Mistress (Feng Fei) since I was fifteen."

Keeping up the pressure, Xiang Shaolong interrogated, "Why did Mistress ask you to do this?"

Distressed, Little Ping'er howled, "Can you stop forcing me? I am in a dilemma. Ai! What should I do?"

Xiang Shaolong supported her up to a sitting position. Putting his lips to her ears, he decided, "What should you do? Honestly tell Mistress everything that has happened and that I have seen through her scheme and quitting this damned manager position."

Finishing his last sentence, he can feel a large burden being lifted off his shoulders. This job is not well suited for a man like him and additionally, the risk of exposure is too high.

Little Ping'er was frightened, "I can't do this."

Xiang Shaolong gently caressed her alluring back and smooth

neck, smiling, “Just follow my instructions exactly. You need not bother about the consequences.”

Little Ping'er appears to be engrossed in his massage and dreamily asked, “How did you guess Mistress ordered me to come here?”

Xiang Shaolong candidly responded, “Because it is unlike you to do so.”

Little Ping'er seemed to have transformed into a different person. She unwillingly balked, “But I do have some feelings for you.”

Xiang Shaolong is not amused, “It is ONLY some feelings! Come. Be a good girl and go back to your room. I do not wish to have you under such circumstances.”

Little Ping'er went ‘humph’ and enveloped herself into his bosom. She seductively cooed, “Mistress is correct. You are one of a kind and different from other men.”

Xiang Shaolong is filled with earthly desires and can feel himself aroused once more. He was petrified and reminded himself to watch his inhibitions; otherwise, he would lose this golden opportunity to quit his job. He half-forcefully carried her in his arms, sending her to his door.

Little Ping'er turned courageous and hugged his neck with both

arms, kissing him zealously.

After a brief struggle, Little Ping'er grudgingly gave him a heart-breaking look and left reluctantly.

Xiang Shaolong locked his cabin door and prevented himself from thinking any further. He soon fell into a deep sleep.

At daybreak, Xiao Yuetan came back to the room a completely satisfied man. After hearing his womanly encounter last night, he was astounded at Little Ping'er's behavior. He nodded: "It is a wise decision to leave Feng Fei's employment. Sometimes, less is more. At the end of the day, I still do not understand why she is resorting to such a scheme. Ai!"

Noticing his pale expression, Xiang Shaolong was traumatized, "What is it?"

Xiao Yuetan stammered, "Yun Niang came looking for me last night. Was she acting on Feng Fei's instructions too? Otherwise, why would Little Ping'er know about me going over to Yun Niang's room?"

Xiang Shaolong exhaled a breath of air, "Can you give your little brother (me) a break? I am as tense as a tightrope. Even if this is true, it is nothing surprising."

Xiao Yuetan did not know whether to laugh or cry. He explained, "If this is the case, Yun Niang's words become unreliable. All the

information that she has given to me could be lies.”

Looking outside the window, Xiang Shaolong swore, “Who cares if they are true or false. No matter what, I am quitting.”

Knock Knock!

Xiao Yuetan demanded, “Who is it?”

Little Ping'er voice sounded out from the other side of the door, “Good Morning Mister Tan. Mistress (Feng Fei) is asking to see Manager Shen.”

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan exchanged looks before he pushed the door open.

Little Ping'er avoided his gaze and led the way towards a long corridor.

She has resumed her disguise as a boy and has a poker face, behaving as if nothing happened last night.

Initially, Xiang Shaolong was thinking of teasing her but eventually resisted the idea, knowing that this would lead to more troubles.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is stepping into Feng Fei's bedroom on board the ship. Her bedroom is twice as big as his own

and divided into two sections. A curtain separates the two sections and one of the section is furnished like a living room.

Of course Feng Fei will not be waiting for him in bed. Right this moment, she is lying on her side on an animal skin covered long bench, with her upper body resting on a cushion. Her hair is slightly untidy as if she had just woken up and her complexion is pinkish, making her appear exceptionally desirable. When he first saw her, Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned before he finally paid his respects.

No wonder the saying goes: A beautiful woman can cause a country's downfall.

For someone as charming as her, the rich and powerful will go to extreme lengths to possess her for their own enjoyment. After all, during these ancient times, it is common for influential men to acquire a harem of concubines.

Little Ping'er closed the door and took her leave.

With a peaceful expression on her face, Feng Fei pointed to a chair beside her and invited, "Please have a seat!"

Noticing the absence of any hostility on her face, Xiang Shaolong was feeling confounded and took his seat. His nose was instantly filled with the wonderful fragrances emanating from her body.

Feng Fei beamed, "Little Ping'er is definitely not your match.

Otherwise, why would she be tricked by a few simple lies from you?”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so brutally honest and straightforward. He fumbled and dryly coughed twice, “Can I speak my mind?”

Feng Fei plainly state, “If you want to tell me you are quitting, you can save it!”

Xiang Shaolong could not think of anything to say to that. Confused, he vexed: “What is the point of Miss (Feng Fei) keeping me around?”

Feng Fei’s eyes turned to him, “Zhang Quan came to see you yesterday; is he trying to bribe you?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly sighed, “Without my answer, you should know what he is trying to achieve. I do not understand why you allowed him to stay on when you can sack him along with Sa Li. Wouldn’t things be much better without all these obstacles?”

With her shining eyes, Feng Fei gave him a smile. In a gentle voice, she dissected, “Let us settle these issues one by one. Presently, I have only two wishes. Do you want to know what they are?”

Calming down, Xiang Shaolong snapped in a deep voice, “If this is Miss’s secret, you can save it!”

Feng Fei does not mind his outburst and gingerly smiled, “You are not only a unique person but an extremely strange one as well. Of all the people I have met, there are those gentlemen who do not hanker after fame or fortune. They can choose to think highly of themselves because they are born with a silver spoon in their mouths and live their lives in abundance, without worrying about food or clothing. But you are just a poorly paid carriage driver and yet you behaved like you cannot be bothered and you don’t mind starving to death. Shen Liang, why don’t you tell what this is all about?”

Xiang Shaolong is secretly alarmed, knowing that his anxiety to quit has exposed a loophole, drawing the suspicions of this cunning beauty. He hastily salvaged, “Ai! This is just who I am. I will not bow down to power nor follow orders blindly like a fool. Ha! Worse to worse, I’ll just starve to death. There is nothing to hold me back.”

Feng Fei scrutinized him for quite some time and seemed to have made some conclusion by observing his body language. She finally insisted, “Just by looking at your sitting posture, I can tell that you are not used to working for other people. Why don’t you openly tell me who you really are?”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart is beating frantically, guessing that she may have seen through his masquerade and knowing that he is Xiang Shaolong but is unable to verify it. The primary reason lies in Zhang Quan hiring him from the Official Stables of Wei. This is irrefutable evidence of his identity as Shen Liang.

At present, he knows he cannot show any signs of hesitation. He frowned, “Your servant (I) has already told Mistress about my background. To be honest, I am thinking of resigning because I fear that my life will be in danger. At the beginning, I thought Mistress would be supporting me indirectly. Only last night did I realize that Mistress is made from the same mold as the other people trying to get me into trouble. Why should I still trust you?”

Feng Fei is displeased, “Who said that I am scheming against you? You have fulfilled my first wish, allowing me to compose a (Song & Dance) routine that can crush my two major opponents. Therefore, I instructed Little Ping’er to accompany you for a night, relieving your sense of loneliness. At the same time, I am worried that you may eventually succumb to Dong Shuzen’s seduction and switched loyalty to her camp. You have misunderstood my intentions.”

Xiang Shaolong is afraid that he will reveal more clues about his real identity if they continue debating like that. He dared not protest any further and acknowledged, “So it is all a misunderstanding!”

Feng Fei lightly highlighted, “Of course it is a misunderstanding. Moreover, I will never force Little Ping’er to do something against her wishes. I am hoping to find a good husband for her in the process.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled his lowly status and can only keep quiet.

Feng Fei simply declared, “As long as you escort me out of Lin Zi safely, I can guarantee you a generous payout and even marry

Little Ping'er to you.”

Xiang Shaolong was mystified, “Don’t you require her services in the future?”

A hint of sadness flashed past her lovely eyes as Feng Fei lamented, “Who would want to remain a lowly servant for her entire life? Ai! You seemed to be uninterested in Little Ping'er. I really don't know what is going on in your head.”

Xiang Shaolong clarified, “Sister Ping is such an attractive lady; anyone would be glad to marry her. However, my career is more important to me and having a family will only be a liability to me. I hope Mistress can understand my position.”

Feng Fei gave him a look and grieved, “Another fool who does not recognize the brutalities of war. How about this? After accomplishing our mission, I will write you a letter of recommendation that will allow you to find work wherever you go. Regarding your future success, it will have to depend on your character and abilities.”

There is nothing Xiang Shaolong can add to her words. Pretending to be full of gratitude, he took his leave.

On his way out, he unexpectedly thought of a great idea. He recollected Xiao Yuetan faking his own death to escape from Lu Buwei. Who knows, maybe Xiao Yuetan can create a similar potion as seen in ‘Romeo and Juliet’. It is the potion Juliet consumed to fake her own death, allowing her to escape from her family.

Pondering about this, he can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel and can feel his steps becoming lighter and lighter.

Book 22 Chapter 05 - Staying Against His Will

He had barely taken two steps when further up the corridor, a cabin door opened with a ‘Yeeank’ sound. In a graceful, dance-like disposition, Zhu Xiuzhen sashayed out and blocked his path. Her eyes glared at him with annoyance but yet she pleaded, “Is Manager Shen available?”

Xiang Shaolong is not that dumb to take her appearance at face value. The reason is that all these courtesans are well-trained actresses.

Although Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen did schemed against him in the past, he did not bear the slightest hatred against them now that he is more informed about the present circumstances. On the contrary, his sympathies lie with them.

At the end of the day, they are simply fighting for survival in this male dominated society. Though their methods are overbearing, they are left with no other choice.

Most unfortunately, he himself is the number one wanted man by the Eastern States. His own survival is at stake and he could not assist them even if he wanted to.

His main priority right now is to slip away and not get further involved in this problematic turmoil.

Before he can offer an answer, Zhu Xiuzhen is already pulling his sleeve, dragging him into her bedroom.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong realized that he is the critical factor in this Song & Dance Troupe internal struggle, the showdown between Team Feng Fei and Team Dong Shuzhen.

Regardless of whether it is Feng Fei's retirement or Dong Shuzhen usurping Feng Fei's position, both ladies will have to collaborate with him and his 'men'.

In addition, he is their bridge to the outside world.

His present role resembles a manager of an international Superstar in the 21st century or, more accurately, the manager of a girl band.

Without his cooperation, Feng Fei and Dong Shuzhen are like toothless, clawless tigresses, unable to achieve anything on their own. This explains why in the past, Zhang Quan and Sa Li are able to sleep with Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen.

Unexpectedly, Feng Fei has made use of Zhang Quan and Sa Li's infighting to destroy Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen's backers, preventing them from gaining the upper hand. She then bestowed this key appointment onto him, Xiang Shaolong.

He finally understood why did Feng Fei allow Zhang Quan to continue serving in the Troup. In fact, it is a very strategic and

advantageous decision.

Due to the intimate relationship between Zhang Quan and Dong Shuzen, it is very challenging for Dong Shuzen to openly seduce Xiang Shaolong. The only way out is for the two of them to work together to chase Xiang Shaolong away but that will only force Xiang Shaolong to look for Feng Fei herself for support.

If Dong Shuzen disregards Zhang Quan, the latter may submit to Feng Fei, betraying all her plans and secrets to Feng Fei.

Sa Li is Zhu Xiuzhen's backer and with him gone, she is now alone and defenceless. She has now chosen to side with Dong Shuzen and has become her pawn. However, once she finds another backer, it is possible that she will fight with Dong Shuzen once again over the succession plans of the Song & Dance Troupe.

On the side, Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen may be oblivious to the knowledge that Zhang Quan has been bribed by an external party and is harbouring evil intentions.

Presently, Feng Fei has failed to bribe him with Little Ping'er, Dong Shuzen has failed in her beauty trap and Zhang Quan cannot win him over with money, forming a stalemate.

And to think that running away was all that he ever wanted.

As all these complicated thoughts are running through his brain at the speed of light, Zhu Xiuzhen had closed the door, embraced

him tightly and buried her delicate face in his bosom. She emotionally questioned, “How can you be so cold towards Xiuzhen (me)?”

Xiang Shaolong can clearly feel her curvaceous body sending him waves of temptations. In his mind, he felt like treating her with tenderness. Despite knowing that she is faking everything, he feels sorry for her.

He did not hug her in return, nor did he push her away. Standing there without any reaction, he plainly advised, “Miss Xiuzhen, there is no need to do this. Just tell me what you need and I will do it for you.”

Zhu Xiuzhen raised her striking face and burst out in tears. She heart-wrenchingly cried: “I am so frightened!”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to use this tactic. His heart softened: “Miss Xiuzhen!”

Zhu Xiuzhen buried her face on his wider-than-average chest and cried even harder, wetting the front of his shirt.

Xiang Shaolong frantically comforted her, supporting her to her bed and seating her on the bed’s edge. He allowed her to continue hugging his neck and being in his bosom while helping to dry her tears. Eventually, she stopped crying and wailing but she still shudders occasionally (due to the heavy crying).

He is confident that it is a fake show with true feelings.

The feelings are obviously not feelings of love, but feelings of fear about her unknown future.

Zhu Xiuzhen woefully commented, “You should know about Mistress (Feng Fei) intention to disband the Song & Dance Troupe and her plans to use us (courtesans) as gifts to secure her friendship with the rich and famous, allowing herself to leave unscathed.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck, “Are you sure?”

Zhu Xiuzhen assured, “It is definitely the truth. In the past, there were some sisters in the Troupe who left and got married into a rich family. Their lives took a turn for the worse. There were some who are beaten to death by the first wife and some who became prostitutes of the official brothels after their Lords lost power. Those who are neglected considered themselves lucky to have not suffered a worse fate. Xiuzhen (I) will rather choose to be dead than to live such a meaningless life.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Were all of you (courtesans) bought (as a slave or servant) by Mistress (Feng Fei)?”

Zhu Xiuzhen sorrowfully nodded, “She may appear to be treating us with kindness but it is because we are of some usefulness to her, such as supporting her in winning the title of the World’s Best Courtesan. In actual fact, she only makes plans for herself and we are just her tools.”

Xiang Shaolong can tell that she is getting desperate, causing her to confide her insecurities in him. He laments the detestable status of womenfolk in these ancient times and that he is unable to contribute to her situation. He wondered, “You are telling me all your secrets. Aren’t you concerned that I may betray you to Mistress (Feng Fei)?”

Zhu Xiuzhen bitterly smiled, “I have seen all kinds of men and you are the kind who is full of justice. I have judged you erroneously in the beginning but I will not repeat this mistake. Now, I can only cast aside my pride and beg for your assistance.”

She added, “We are sheltered women who knew nothing except our (Song & Dance) routines. When we leave the Troupe, we will be at a disadvantage and would likely be bullied wherever we go.”

Xiang Shaolong proclaimed, “But you have to get married eventually!”

Zhu Xiuzhen raised her head, facing Xiang Shaolong with a tear-stained face. She gently mentioned, “It would be good if we need not get married. All of us (courtesans) have saved our money well and can live the rest of our lives without worrying about food or clothing. Nonetheless, we do require someone to make proper arrangements for us. Now that Sa Li has been dismissed by Mistress (Feng Fei), I can only come to you.”

In an instant, she lowered her head and insisted, “Even if I must get married, I hope my partner will not know about my past as a courtesan. Xiuzhen (I) would rather be a dedicated wife of a poor man than to become a concubine or mistress of a rich man”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden brainwave. This is the crux of the matter that he has been trying to comprehend.

Within the Song & Dance Troupe, there is the ambitious Dong Shuzhen whose aim is to take over Feng Fei's position and the unambitious ones like Zhu Xiuzhen, who only wish to lead an ordinary life from the money that she has made by performing and sleeping with the rich.

Regardless of their goals, everyone wants to be free, to be the master of their own destiny, to forge a life of happiness and independence.

For the first time ever, he is weighing his options about leaving. Even if he can flee successfully, will he bear to leave them in the lurch? The best option is to arrange for them to settle down in Qin. On one hand, they will be spared the atrocities of war and on the other hand, they will be safe under his protection.

As long as they are willing, Xiang Shaolong would have no trouble finding them a good home, given their exceptional appearances.

However, he is now fighting for his own survival, not to mention the Troupe internal bickering and Zhang Quan the traitor. With all these weighing down on him, will he still be able to make a difference in their lives? He decided to test Zhu Xiuzhen's sincerity and warmly enquired, "Sa Li was dismissed because of me. Did you ever think taking revenge for him?"

Zhu Xiuzhen's body shivered, "No wonder you did not come to my room! You have uncovered my scheme! Xiuzhen (I) earnestly offer you my apologies. I will accept any punishment from you."

Of course Xiang Shaolong did not 'punish' her. He even made up his mind to not get involved with any girl from the Song & Dance Troupe, preventing himself from being entangled in a relationship burden.

In this moment, he pledges to do his best for these vulnerable girls of the Song & Dance Troupe, allowing each of them to live a life of liberty. In a way, he hopes this gesture will help to redeem some of sins his fellow men have accumulated.

He tactfully rejected Zhu Xiuzhen's advances and returned to his room, sharing his encounters with Xiao Yuetan.

Xiao Yuetan nodded, "Although some risks are involved, a man should overcome difficulties with courage and strength in whatever he does. Frankly speaking, I feel sorry for them as well but my resources are limited. If we can arrange for them to migrate to Xianyang (Capital City of Qin), you can use this opportunity to travel home, reuniting with your family and they can find a safe abode. It will be two perfect endings."

Xiang Shaolong thought hard and frowned, "But Feng Fei has her own plans and she will not be sharing them with us."

Xiao Yuetan assured, "She is quite dependent on you and

therefore, you must be playing a crucial role in her grand plan. You can simply follow her plan and gather clues in the meantime. Our main priority now is for you to start familiarizing yourself with different members of the Troupe. When you are able to command them like commanding an army for war, you can accomplish your duties more easily.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned, “Sa Li’s supporters have now pledged their allegiance to Zhang Quan. Most of the troupe members appear to be respectful but in reality, they are hostile and cannot wait to witness my downfall. This is my biggest challenge now. It is impossible to win their trust in such a short space of time.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed, “Zhang Quan is just a clown and hardly a threat to us. All I need is to give the command and he will disappear from our lives forever. Nevertheless, we should find out who is the main perpetrator. Only when we understand our enemy fully can we have a chance at victory.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested, “Unless we resort to torturing him, he may not divulge his employer’s identity.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed, “In terms of scheming, your elder brother (me) is way better than you. Using torture is an inferior strategy, potentially causing him to give us false names, which we have no way of verifying. Ha! I have a more sensational plan where we can get rid of Zhang Quan and win the hearts of the people at the same time.” He leaned towards Xiang Shaolong’s ear and began whispering.

After listening to his suggestion, Xiang Shaolong praised,

“Luckily we were best friends from the very beginning. Otherwise, I would have lost to Lu Buwei a long time ago.”

A heavy snow descended from the skies after lunch.

The fleet of ships is about twenty sailing hours away from Lin Zi. They will arrive in this Qi melting pot of different arts and culture tomorrow morning.

With his new mindset, Xiang Shaolong tried his best to understand the affairs of the Song & Dance Troupe. Flipping through the past accounts, he came to realize that besides receiving substantial remunerations for their performances, the valuables presented by the rich and powerful are enough to fill more than forty chests.

Whoever marrying Feng Fei is equivalent to inheriting this astronomical amount of wealth and treasure. It is gaining both money and beauty in one swoop.

He has his doubts about Zhang Quan’s theory of Feng Fei and her secret admirer. Perhaps Zhang Quan hopes to be lucky man himself! When Feng Fei went to rehearse her (Song & Dance) routine after dinner, Xiang Shaolong used this opportunity to initiate a visit to Zhang Quan.

Zhang Quan was elated to see him coming and exclaimed, “I was about to pay you a visit.”

After sitting down and receiving a cup of tea from Zhang Quan, Xiang Shaolong muttered, “Mistress (Feng Fei) summoned me this morning, promising to reward me with 100 ingots of gold and an official appointment in Qi. Honestly speaking, everyone is after fame and fortune. Now that Mistress is going to promote me in Qi, if Brother Zhang is in my shoes, would you reject such an offer?”

His face turning slightly pale, Zhang Quan guaranteed after some consideration, “The mastermind employing me is known for his wealth and his net worth is much more than Feng Fei’s. Nonetheless, I must seek his permission before I can formally endorse a matching offer for you. I am confident I can secure at least 150 ingots of gold.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that unless the person is from Qi, he would be one of the dignitaries visiting Lin Zi for the birthday celebrations (of King of Qi). Otherwise, Zhang Quan will not be able to report to him with such convenience.

Unsatisfied with just this intelligence, he shook his head, “Brother Zhang need not go to the extent! Money may be important but holding an official position has always been my dream. Mistress (Feng Fei) is on good terms with many influential individuals. Everyone will have to grant her some allowances.”

Zhang Quan interrupted, “Brother Shen is a wise man. When we are discussing prominent characters, the topic will ultimately conclude that Qin has the most of such talents. My employer is a powerhouse in Qin. If Brother Shen wants to gain official appointment, you can join me in submitting to him. Otherwise, you may not enjoy your official appointment for long before you

become the citizen of a conquered state.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart thumping wildly, for this Mastermind could well be Lu Buwei.

Based on Lu Buwei’s lustful and possessive personality, coupled with Feng Fei’s previous visit to Xianyang, it is not unlikely that she has drawn his attention.

With his wealth and authority, bribing someone like Zhang Quan is as easy as ABC.

As Lu Buwei is on his way to Lin Zi and matching with Zhang Quan’s description, Xiang Shaolong construed that his invisible opponent is none other than Lu Buwei.

Treacherous and merciless are the two best words to describe him.

But with Tian Dan’s support, it will not be easy to trounce him.

Faking disbelief, he pondered, “Who can it be?”

Zhang Quan sighed, “I would tell you if I can. But if I, Zhang Quan, told you any lies, may I die a horrible death. Brother Shen can put your mind at ease!”

Xiang Shaolong probed, “A cunning rabbit is killed; a traitor is

beheaded. If he went back on his words after obtaining Mistress (Feng Fei), Brother Zhang and I would not only failed to receive any benefits but may even have to forfeit our lives.”

Zhang Quan disagreed, “Your description is very heartrending but you can rest assured that we will not be played out. This man is famous for the countless family warriors he hosts at his residence. He appreciates talent much more than your old employer Prince Wuji. There are numerous scholars and heroes he recruited all over the land. I am sure there is a place for you in his residence. Brother Shen can trust my judgment.”

Xiang Shaolong insisted, “This is only based on Brother Zhang’s opinion. How about this! Get him to pay me half of my reward as a deposit. I will only cooperate with Brother Zhang when I see my money.”

Zhang Quan was relieved, “This should not be a problem. However, let me warn you in advance. In the event that Brother Shen took his money and yet failed to fulfill your obligations, you can forget about leaving Lin Zi alive.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “A gentleman’s word is his bond. Fortunately, I did not agree to Mistress (Feng Fei) terms immediately and used a delaying tactic.”

Zhang Quan was delighted, “This is wonderful. Brother Shen should try to get closer to Mistress and find out who her allies are or who her mystery man is. When I report to my employer, at least I have some results to show him and it will be easier to ask for your deposit money.”

Xiang Shaolong firmly state, “I will naturally tell you everything I know once I see my money. Brother Zhang should know me by now. This deal is cash on delivery.”

Zhang Quan could not negotiate further and nodded in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong was humoured. Having come all the way to Qi, he is still locking horns with Lu Buwei.

Xiao Yuetan will be overjoyed if he knows about this.

Both of them are well versed with Lu Buwei character and schemes. They are in a superior position because they understand their enemy well, as mentioned in Sun Tzu’s Art of War.

Lu Buwei, on the other hand, knows nothing about them. Even with Tian Dan’s partnership, he may not gain the upper hand.

Moreover, Tian Dan himself is intertwined in a power tussle within his own state (the crown prince selection). With the prized Feng Fei at the centre of another skirmish, Xiao Yuetan and he can make excellent use of the circumstances to create plenty of chaos, eventually beating Lu Buwei soundly for good measure.

Relishing these thoughts, he cannot be bothered with Zhang Quan anymore and took his leave.

Outside his room, he had barely taken a few steps when someone called out his name from behind. It turned out to be Little Ping'er glaring coldly at him.

Xiang Shaolong stopped walking. Little Ping'er came to his front and interrogated in a harsh manner, "Did you just come out of Zhang Quan's room?"

Xiang Shaolong can only nod his head.

Little Ping'er blew her top, "What tricks are you up to? Are you thinking of betraying Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

From her expression, Xiang Shaolong predicted that Feng Fei has told Little Ping'er about his stand (on not wanting to marry Little Ping'er), causing her extensive suffering. It is better not to give her false hopes anyway so Xiang Shaolong allowed her to vent her frustrations. He whispered, "Do I look like such a person? This is not a good place to talk. Is Sister Ping looking for me?"

Her two eyes reddening on the spot, Little Ping'er stomped her feet, "Who wants to look for a heartless beast like you? It is Mistress (Feng Fei) looking for you."

His heart softening, Xiang Shaolong explained in gentle tone, "Can you please listen to me? I... .."

Covering her ears with both hands, Little Ping'er cried, "I don't want to hear anything from you." Before her sentence is

completed, tears of emotion are flowing out of her eyes. She left crying.

Xiang Shaolong can only shake his head and give a bitter smile.

Since he must be heartless to her, he might as well make it the first and only time.

He really cannot afford the implications of love.

Isn't Feng Fei busy rehearsing? Why is she looking for him?

Book 22 Chapter 06 - A Fight To The End

There are several major changes to Feng Fei's 'The Immortal Phoenix Arising', showcasing a moving storyline with stages upon stages of spellbinding dances. Feng Fei had just composed an excellent opening song sang together by all the courtesans, singing about the Immortals in the Heaven Realm and the humans having a celebration on the Human Realm.

Feng Fei's talent in the Song & Dance industry is without a doubt and her only concern is lack of inspiration. With Xiang Shaolong lighting a spark of creativity, the overflowing of ideas that followed resembles the bursting of a river dam. Presently, she has an abundance of materials to work on and there is no looking back.

As Xiang Shaolong was cheering and clapping with the other serving maids, Feng Fei came to his side with her eyes glimmering. She joyfully enquired, "Shen Liang, is it much better now?"

Xiang Shaolong sincerely praised, "Mistress's performance is like a magical journey, with the main concept delicately inserted multiple times into the routine, just like a master weaving cotton. This results in a dazzling and attention grabbing sequence. If Mistress were to add your singing to the finale, even the stubborn rocks will bow."

An indescribable pleasure flashed across Feng Fei's lovely eyes. For the first time ever, she held the corner of his sleeve, pulling him to a corner far away from the crowd. She gestured to Dong Shuzen and her fellow courtesans, instructing them to continue the rehearsal before emotionally sighing, "Feng Fei (I) has never

heard such a moving portrayal about my production. Ai! Will the stubborn rocks really bow when they are impressed? This is the greatest glory a singer can ever receive. Shen Liang ah! What should I do with you?”

Xiang Shaolong cursed himself for stealing the limelight again, repeating his past deed of using the phrase ‘absolute power corrupts absolutely’ to win the affections of Talented Lady Ji. He has inadvertently made inroads into Feng Fei’s heart. However, this proves that Zhang Quan’s theory is correct.

If Feng Fei did not have a secret lover, she would not have sigh and fall into a dilemma. He naturally would not snatch her away from her lover and has no desire to get involved with this peerless beauty, despite having feelings for her. He humbly admitted, “My own creative mood has been unleashed after watching Mistress’s performance, causing me to come up with these proverbs.”

Feng Fei stared deeply into his eyes, her shoulder slightly touching his and began chirping like a little girl, “My main song is almost completed save for a few amendments. Heaven has really been kind to me, allowing me to meet a bosom friend like you before my retirement.”

Using this opening, Xiang Shaolong began, “If Mistress can place all her trust and share all her secrets with me, I, Shen Liang, can guarantee with my life that Mistress will have all her dreams come true.”

Feng Fei was taken aback, “Are you implying that I am hiding information from you?”

If Xiang Shaolong do not display some might, it will be impossible to force her to succumb. His eyes shimmering with deathly cold rays, his stare pierce straight into her enthralling eyes as he hissed, “Does Mistress know who is the perpetrator behind Zhang Quan?”

Feng Fei cannot bear to look at him and lowered her eyes, replying, “Isn’t it Suzhen?”

Xiang Shaolong icily laughed, “Second Mistress is just another pathetic victim fighting for her own survival.”

Feng Fei is offended, “What are you talking about?”

Facing Xiang Shaolong for a moment, she lowered her glance again and pleaded, “Can you stop staring at me?”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling wonderful, knowing that she will no longer be able to control him like before. He pressed on, “Zhang Quan is now serving Lu Buwei.”

Her face losing colour, Feng Fei exclaimed, “What?”

Xiang Shaolong repeated, “Mistress is now in grave danger. Lu Buwei is on intimate terms with the people of Qi and with the power he wields in Qin, there is hardly anyone who would dare to offend him. If he wishes to obtain Mistress, it is not an unachievable task.”

Appearing to have lost her self-control after hearing the name of the man and his evil doings, Feng Fei grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and gasped, "What should we do? Why don't I sack Zhang Quan immediately?"

With her petite hand pulling his own shoulder, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart melting. Preventing other feelings from arising, he seriously articulated, "Mistress needs to make a choice. One, you put your complete trust in me. Two, you let me go. If you are indecisive, the consequences will be unimaginable. For example, Lu Buwei can send him men to take Mistress away by force and at the same time, announce to the world that you have decided to retire and marry into his family. I doubt there will be anyone who will contest his words or even raise an objection. Mistress should know better than me that once you have spent a single night in his custody, your future will be gone."

Feng Fei was at a loss, "Do you have a plan to counter him?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "I will make use of Zhang Quan to convey a false message to Lu Buwei that Mistress's lover is someone that even he (Lu Buwei) cannot afford to antagonize. Thus, he can only wait for you to leave before launching a covert attack, buying us more time."

Feng Fei heaved a sigh of relief and scrutinized him with suspicion before muttering, "You are really formidable and do not fear Lu Buwei one bit. You even speak like you are very familiar with his methods. Ai! Without you, there will be no one else can I can depend on."

Xiang Shaolong realized that she had gathered her wits and apparently decided, “Mistress is only depending on me but has yet to trust me. Since I am unable to secure your confidence, I, Shen Liang, will depart tomorrow morning once we arrive in Lin Zi. I do not wish to die a meaningless death.”

Feng Fei glanced at him with confusion for some time before submitting, “The more I get to know you, the more I realize that you are not as simple as you look. Fine! Let’s talk in my room.”

Xiang Shaolong was jubilant. Using a combination of hard and soft tactics to keep up the pressure, this beauty has finally made concessions.

Feng Fei sat down by his side with a kind expression. She gently inquired, “What do you want me to tell you?”

Xiang Shaolong interrogated, “Since Mistress has the courage to go to Lin Zi, there must be someone guaranteeing your safety. Who is this person?”

Feng Fei delayed, “There is indeed such a person. Can I reveal his identity at a more suitable time in the future?”

Xiang Shaolong does not want to push his luck and nodded, “Fine. After the disbandment of the Song & Dance Troupe, may I ask what are Mistress’s plans for the other courtesans and where is Mistress intending to retire to?”

Showing signs of hesitation, Feng Fei lightly exhaled, “I have made appropriate plans for them. Can Manager Shen not interfere in these matters?”

Xiang Shaolong was irritated, “How can I ignore this matter? Right now, all the courtesans are feeling restless precisely because they are worried about their future. I, Shen Liang, may be down and out but my fighting spirit has not deserted me. I will not allow Mistress to destroy their (courtesans) future.”

The captivating eyes of Feng Fei flashed with anger before calming down. She dolefully justified, “We are all forced by circumstances and some things cannot be prevented. If that lass Dong Shuzen did not leak the news of my retirement, there would not be so many complicated matters right now.”

Xiang Shaolong clarified, “I believed you have misunderstood Second Mistress. Based on my analysis, it is probably Zhang Quan who leaked this information to Lu Buwei and Lu Buwei intentionally broadcasted this news, thereby creating the conditions for him to openly seize you for his own gratification.”

Feng Fei appeared to be deep in thought. Subsequently, she insisted with determination, “But I have already given my word to somebody about the future of Dong Shuzen and the courtesans. This cannot be changed. Moreover, this person is someone I dare not offend.”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered, “There is nothing in the

world that cannot be changed. Putting this aside for the time being, Mistress has yet to answer my question.”

Feng Fei whined, “Must I really answer you? As long as you bring me out of Lin Zi without anyone’s knowledge, there will be a person to receive me and you can walk away a free man. On top of that, you will be handsomely rewarded and need not worry about money for the rest of your life.”

Flapping his sleeve, Xiang Shaolong stood up, “At the end of the day, you are still unwilling to trust me. I know Tian Dan is somewhat involved and he must be the same person who is supposed to guarantee your safety. That explains your earlier anxiety and why you are treating me with such kindness! Forget it! From this moment on, we have nothing to do with each other.”

Feng Fei was utterly shocked and in a moment of fear, she hugged him and wailed, “There is nothing I can hide from you. Heavens, what kind of person are you? Pray take your seat again and let us discuss this further.”

Xiang Shaolong scorned, “This is just a simple assumption. Since you have someone in Lin Zi guaranteeing your safety, why do you need Shen Liang (me) around?”

Feng Fei placed her exquisite face against his wide chest and gave a flustered response, “You are able to make a correct guess because you are aware of the friendship between Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. Ai! If not for Lu Buwei personally telling me that Tian Dan will guarantee my safety, I would not have made this trip to Lin Zi. I did not expect Lu Buwei to harbor such hideous motives.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded, “You must not forget that I have served both Great General Lian (Po) and Prince Wuji. Of course I will know about Lu Buwei and Tian Dan’s partnership. Both of them are lustful perverts while the ladies in the Song & Dance Troupe are all rare beauties; how can they not bear malicious intentions? Even if your safety is guaranteed by someone else, unless he is your lover, it will probably be another trap.”

Feng Fei’s world came crashing down and she is using all her strength to hug him tightly. She mourned, “What should I do?”

Ever since she discovered that Zhang Quan is working for Lu Buwei, her normal confidence and calmness have vanished into thin air. Xiang Shaolong lent his support to her and simply questioned, “First of all, you must tell me the truth. Besides Lu Buwei, is there anyone else who is interested in you?”

An embarrassed Feng Fei straightened her posture in front of him. With a complicated look in her eyes, she confessed, “It is obviously someone with considerable standing. On this trip to Qi, the cause of my greatest worry is Zongsun Long. He does not hold any official appointment but his influence in Qi is not below Tian Dan . The talented men serving him are immeasurable and he supports the Second Prince Tian Jian. He is at loggerheads with Tian Dan who supports the First Prince Tian Sheng. When I was in Daliang (Wei Capital), he came all the way to look for me but was harshly rebuffed by myself. Disillusioned, he took his leave and swore an oath that since he is unable to lay his hands on me, others can forget about doing the same.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Are you referring to that bloodthirsty loan shark?”

Feng Fei is no longer surprised at his wealth of knowledge. She nodded, “That is the man. It is rumoured that his net worth has exceeded that of Wu Shijie and he has spies, followers and debtors in every state. Now you can understand the reason for my uneasiness.”

Xiang Shaolong quizzed, “And who is the man unafraid of Zongsun Long?”

Feng Fei whispered, “He is Han Chuang. You should have heard of his name!”

Xiang Shaolong rolled his eyes, “Han Chuang?”

Feng Fei was astonished, “You know him personally?”

Xiang Shaolong lied, “I have heard of this person but did not expect it to be him. This man is famous for his lust. How you can trust a man like that?”

Feng Fei divulged, “He may hanker after pleasures of the flesh but he is quite a nice person. Since we are talking about him, I might as well tell you everything! I have pledged to reward him with Dong Shuzen and the courtesans, as a form of thanking him for his aid. There! I have told you everything.”

Xiang Shaolong prompted, “There is just one more thing. Who is Mistress’s secret lover?”

Feng Fei contemplated for some time before she suddenly embraced him around his shoulder and waist, gently demanding, “I can tell you who he is but you must swear not to tell anyone else.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and forcefully held back his own desire to embrace her in return. He proceeded to give his word and Feng Fei dreamily disclosed, “This man is famous beyond words. Recently, he created plenty of trouble for the Six Eastern States.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head becoming numb. Could it be that Feng Fei is in love with himself? Is she heading to Qin to find him after disbanding the Troupe? Feng Fei announced, “He is Xiang Shaolong, the most feared man amongst the Six Eastern States.”

Despite expecting her to mention his own name, Xiang Shaolong could not help but shuddered, “Does he love you?”

Feng Fei raised her face and look at him, astounded, “What are you asking such a strange question?”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that she is still keeping this secret from him and is just using another name to satisfy his curiosity. His mind evaluating her words like a super computer, he is confident that her secret lover cannot be himself. Otherwise, Dan Meimei would have told him so.

At the same time, he concluded that this person is from Qin. All he has to do is to escort her back to Xianyang and she can reunite with her lover. He joked, "In this case, I will have to deliver you to Zhongmou."

In his mind, he could understand her reason for keeping this an absolute secret. If the mystery man's identity is exposed, Lu Buwei will surely kill him. Recalling the time at Drunken Wind Brothel when she was supposed to assassinate himself but subsequently changed her mind, it could be due to her newfound love with this man. This man could be the same reason behind her desire to retire and settle down. As anticipated, Feng Fei objected, "No! He has given instructions for me to wait for him in Xianyang. All you need to do is to send me to Xianyang."

Enraged, Xiang Shaolong locked Feng Fei in a bear hug and wildly kissed her with a vengeance. Feng Fei put up a fierce struggle but eventually capitulated to his warm lips. There were signs of resistance but she ultimately accepted this invasion. Breaking the kiss, he scanned her perfect complexion and well-defined features before elaborating, "This is me punishing Mistress for withholding information from me. You can hate me all you like but presently, only I, Shen Liang, am able to prevent you from being Zongsun Long's prisoner. Except for me, anybody else would have a hidden agenda for helping you."

Feng Fei's shapely body turned into jelly and collapsed into his bosom, "Don't you have a hidden agenda too?"

Since she did not deny lying to him, Xiang Shaolong retained his

goodwill towards her. Putting his arms around her shoulder, he advised, "If I had come to you with ill intentions, I can easily force myself on you, taking Mistress's precious chastity right now. Think about it!" Finishing his words, he strode off.

Although he is unable to explain it, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart brimming with happiness. Ever since Li Mu beat him to a pulp and causing him to lead a fugitive life, all his accumulated frustration has been released in that one long kiss. He can feel his fighting spirit soaring, reminding him of the time he disguised himself as Dong Horse Fanatic, and heading to Handan City to capture Zhao Mu. The only difference is that besides Xiao Yuetan aiding him, he can only depend on the sword hanging around his waist. He may have to hide his sword as someone may identify him through it. In this moment, he made up his mind to indulge in another round with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. No matter what, he must do his best to liberate these oppressed ladies. This is his way of giving back to society.

Book 22 Chapter 07 - Ancient Capital Of Lin Zi

The founding King of Qi is Lu Shang. After King Zhouwu annihilated the Zhou Dynasty and set up Western Zhou, he assigned Lu Shang to Qi and bestowed him the position of Protector Jiang. He built the capital named Yin Qiu but was later renamed Lin Zi.

Surviving through the periods of Western and Eastern Zhou dynasties, Qi remains a vast country with flourishing commerce, coupled with lucrative fishing and salt trade. It is a strong and prosperous nation.

Qi has been a dominant force during the Spring & Autumn Period, mainly due to the efforts of King Qi Henggong and his Premier Guan Zhong. Together, they introduced a set of reforms that strengthened the country significantly. The wealth and growth of the nation is comparable to the Golden Age of Qin. The country is doing well by all accounts and can be considered a superpower.

Another crucial factor is the conquest of the Laiyi Tribe residing at its borders.

As early as when the Protector is conducting his nation building, the Laiyi Tribe, which shares the sea border with Qi, began to launch aggressive attacks. The hostility continued on and off for several years until Qi officially routed them in 567 BC.

Not only did Qi finally rid itself of a persistent thorn in its flesh, the country's land occupation increased by more than 50%. In addition, it now owns the entire sea border, compared to owning half of it previously.

The people of Qi are known tyrants and constantly harassed the nearby State of Lu and conquer smaller surrounding States. Using the Alliance of Zhaoling, it even managed to wrest control of the State of Zheng from the powerful Chu. Chu is located at the south of Qi.

Due to the alliance and with Qi in the way, Chu is unable to expand northwards and focused their armies on expanding their territory southeast. Qi can only watch on helplessly.

The Alliance of Zhaoling signals the peak of Qi's military expeditions. In the same breath, it signifies the crowning glory of Qi Hengong and Guan Zhong's career.

After their two deaths, the authority of Qi descended into a power tussle between five princes. Without a commanding figure, it is now the time for the other States to showcase their might.

During the period of the Warring States, Qi got General Sun Bin to attack Wei in an attempt to save Zhao from Wei's armies. The invasion was a success and soon, the Qi army has reach Daliang. The next year, the army of Wei was soundly defeated by the army of Qi at Maling. From then on, Qi has replaced Wei as the leading state of eastern China and the States of Wei, Zhao and Han pays tribute to Qi.

With newfound ambition and taking advantage of Yan's internal strife, Qi invaded Yan and occupied the capital of Yan for three years before recalling their armies.

King Qi Xuan arrogantly proclaimed: "One superpower against another, tasting victory in 5 days." It is truly a feat that even the powerful Qin has yet to accomplished.

Chu declined in strength and Sanjing was broken up, resulting in Qi and Qin becoming the two strongest states in China. Qi is in the east and Qin is in the west.

Just when Qi was tasting every success and occupying countless new territories, they realized that war had emptied their treasury. Bearing intense hatred for Qi, Yan made use of this golden opportunity to launch a joint attack with Qin, Chu, Wei, Zhao and Han.

Yan General Yue Yi overran Lin Zi and repeated the atrocities Qi inflicted in the capital of Yan thirty years ago. Every single piece of valuable, treasure, carriage or weapon is not spared from plundering. If not for Tian Dan turning the tide and defeating the army of Yan, Lin Zi will be burnt to the ground.

Nevertheless, much of Qi has been pillaged or destroyed, and the country is once again in decline.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived in Lin Zi, another thirty years have come and gone. In a similar fashion, Tian Dan has

declined from the powerhouse he once was to his twilight years where he faces challenges to his authority.

The City of Lin Zi was built along the west shore of River Zi and is actually two cities linked together, namely Big City and Small City. The total surface area of the Big City and the Small City is approximately sixty square miles.

Within the city, the buildings are grand and imposing. The Qi Palace is situated at the north of the Small City and all major roads are constructed with the palace as a central guideline. The monasteries of Qi and residences of officials are within proximity of the palace. The two sides of the roads are lined with ancient tall trees but their branches are covered with icicles due to the harsh weather.

Although it had suffered the carnages of war, Lin Zi has recovered speedily to become a lively civilization. The city is well populated and the economy is thriving.

As the fleet of ships docked at the east of the city, all the noteworthy officials and men of importance had gathered around, welcoming the world famous courtesan Feng Fei.

A waiting military band began to conjure a friendly tune as Feng Fei elegantly came ashore with Little Ping'er supporting her. Her curvaceous figure, graceful walking style and delicate features left the audience awe-struck.

Following behind Feng Fei are Dong Shuzen and the twelve

courtesans, causing everyone to stare at them without blinking.

Xiang Shaolong had identified Tian Dan among the welcoming party and quickly mingled among the family warriors, making it harder to be identified by Tian Dan's sharp observation skills.

In reality, the likelihood of being spotted is not high.

As directed by Xiao Yuetan, he is wearing a worker's shirt with a woolen lamb fur jacket on the outside. Below his shirt, he is wearing a cloth belt in order to conceal his muscular waist and at the same time, create a fake potbelly.

Standing on the pier, Tian Dan, as well as the rich and powerful residents of Qi, was all dressed either in deer fur coats or fox fur coats. A shirt is worn outside the coat, covering the animal fur, enhancing the exquisiteness of their appearances.

Humans are judged firstly by their external looks. By simply downplaying his dressing, Xiang Shaolong is not as prominent looking as before.

Under Xiao Yuetan's skillful hands, his facial complexion has darkened and is easily mistaken for a man ten years his senior. The effect is so startling that when looking at his own reflection in a bronze mirror, even Xiang Shaolong cannot believe the difference between his current look and his previously handsome looks.

Xiao Yuetan and Feng Fei are the first batch of people to

disembark the ship and were exchanging pleasantries with the welcoming party.

As the sky is still snowing, Feng Fei climbed into her carriage immediately and entered the city under the escort of the Qi soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong dared not ride a horse and sneaked into Xiao Yuetan's carriage, admiring: "You seemed to be highly respected in Qi."

Xiao Yuetan humbly begged his pardon before commenting: "We are the prepared (ones) observing the unprepared (ones). I paid extra attention to Tian Dan and except for Feng Fei, he did not bother to look anyone else. Ai! Comparing his looks from the last time I saw him, he seemed to have aged a lot."

The carriage is moving in a huge convoy, entering the city in an unhurried manner.

Xiao Yuetan educated: "The Big City has 8 city gates. The two horizontal roads going from the east to the west are named Great Eastern Way and Great Western Way, while the two vertical roads running from the north to the south are named Great Southern Way and Great Northern Way. It is rather easy to remember."

Peering out of the carriage window, Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: Like it or not, I am finally here in Lin Zi; let's pray I can leave here in one piece!

With a strong wind and snow blowing through the city, there are only a handful of pedestrians. The pedestrians are walking briskly and gazed at the convoy with curiosity.

Xiao Yuetan suggested: “At the intersection of the four Great Ways, there is a district known as ‘Little Lin Zi’. It is the most vibrant and dynamic locality, a must see for all travellers. I will bring you there tonight and join in the festivities!

Xiang Shaolong objected: “Shouldn’t I avoid taking on such a high profile?”

Xiao Yuetan counseled: “The more you try to hide, the more attention you will draw to yourself. Even if you do not provoke the suspicions of outsiders, you will trigger the doubts of Zhang Quan and his men eventually.”

Xiang Shaolong can only agree: “As per your guidance!”

Ever since he learnt that Lu Buwei is Zhang Quan’s mastermind, Xiao Yuetan is on cloud 9. Currently, he is still basking with joy. Pointing to a gigantic mansion along the journey, he articulated: “These are the residences of the wealthy citizens, with multiple courtyards, tiled roofs and whitewashed walls. Compared to the single courtyard houses along the streets for the common folks, it is a world of difference.”

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at his surroundings, discovering that they are now traveling on Great Eastern Way. The road is 7 metres wide, allowing up to 4 carriages to travel side by

side. Both sides of the road are lined with shops.

There are lanes intersecting the main road where the ordinary locals reside. The lanes made of common materials and are only meant for walking.

The network of roads in Lin Zi is well organized and the city is littered with high walls and huge mansions. The façade of the buildings are very well maintained, in order to live up to the reputation as the Capital of Qi.

Xiang Shaolong abruptly felt that this is a worthwhile trip.

Xiao Yuetan pointed out: “Little Lin Zi has the highest concentration of businesses and you can buy whatever your heart desires. The fortune tellers there are well-known among all the States.”

Because of the description ‘Well-known among all the States’, Xiang Shaolong was reminded of Qixia Sword Saint Cao Quidao. He inquired: “Where is Qixia College (I am changing from school to college)?”

Xiao Yuetan gladly imparted: “It is located at the west of the city, beyond Qi gate. It is an impressive, lofty and spectacular structure. All the teachers who teaches there are specially titled: Qixia Tutor and the students are termed: Qixia Mates. They numbered a few thousand.”

Pausing, he continued: “I have had the honour of being invited there to lecture on music and healing. Thus, I enjoy the respect equivalent of a Marquis.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “I wondered if Zou Yan has arrived?”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: “I am not sure about that.”

Recalling Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong had the inclination to seek her.

Xiao Yuetan added: “Being a Qixia Tutor is quite a feat. Nevertheless, there are outstanding individuals who are conferred a Professorship. They are the only ones who can debate politics besides the Qi Court. Zou Yan is one of them. I can easily enquire about his whereabouts.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “What kind of man is Cao Quidao?”

His eyes emanating with respect, Xiao Yuetan whispered: “His prestige in Qi unmatched and he is the Master-Mentor of the King of Qi. Members of the royal family and officials have to kowtow to him whenever they run into him. He resides alone in a small hut outside Qixia College, leading a simple life. He should be reaching fifty years of age but resembles a thirty-year-old man instead. He does not grant audiences easily.”

Xiang Shaolong originally wanted to trace Shan Rou’s dwellings from him but after hearing these words, he gave up the idea.

Xiao Yuetan continued: “His sword skills have become legendary and due to a lack of challengers, he only participated in a few duels in the recent years.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Did he used to have many challengers?”

Xiao Yuetan responded: “Whoever defeats him will succeed him as the prestigious Qixia’s Sword Saint and his name will be known to the world. However, his sword shows no mercy and his challengers usually end up dead or seriously injured. As a result, at the present moment, no one dares to challenge him.”

If he still possess his Hundred Battle Sabre and can reveal his true identity, Xiang Shaolong would loved to pitch his skills against Cao Quidao’s sword, desiring to know the level of his accomplishment. He is naturally looking at a friendly competition and not a life and death duel.

At this moment, the convoy has entered a VIP guesthouse along Great Eastern Way. They were assigned to Tingsong Villa, one of the sixteen Villas used to accommodate visiting dignitaries and distinguished guests.

Conscious that it is time for him to get to work, he swiftly scampered off the carriage and with Zhang Quan by his side, he liaise with the Villa Manager, allocating the rooms and storage of resources. By the time everything has been taken care of, half a day has gone by. It is now time for Feng Fei to enter the palace for a

dinner banquet.

Tian Dan personally came to escort Feng Fei and Xiao Yuetan was Feng Fei's dining companion.

Xiang Shaolong intentionally came out to supervise matters, opening facing Tian Dan as well as his two bodyguards, the brothers, Liu Zhongxia and Liu Zhongshi. None of them were interested in this 'lowly servant'.

After sending Feng Fei off, Xiang Shaolong is exhilarated. If even someone as sharp as Tian Dan has failed to see through his disguise, he is confident he can fool the rest of the crowd.

After consuming their dinner, Dong Shuzhen and the courtesans began rehearsing their Song & Dance routine as instructed by Feng Fei while Xiang Shaolong headed to the eastern wing to look for Zhang Quan. Once the door has been closed, he proclaimed: "I have gained valuable intelligence about Feng Fei. If Brother Zhang can fork out the deposit now, I will report my findings to you."

Zhang Quan was thrilled: "Well done! However, my employer hasn't arrived in Lin Zi. I can only pay you the deposit two days later. Can Brother Shen prematurely share with me some of your discoveries?"

Xiang Shaolong acted mysterious: "She has someone in Qi who is guaranteeing her safety and he is none other than Tian Dan. Earlier on, Tian Dan was the man escorting her to the banquet. This man wields great authority in Qi and is not someone to be

trifled with.”

Zhang Quan knew the answer all along and is using this to test his allegiance. He wasn't affected by this revelation and simply replied: “I have my ways of dealing with him. He is not a threat.”

Looking at his phony act of arrogance, Xiang Shaolong was amused and added: “However, our employer's opponent is not limited to Tian Dan alone. We have another formidable foe and his name is Zongsun Long. Has Brother Zhang heard of this man before?”

His face changing colour, Zhang Quan stammered: “What?”

Xiang Shaolong exaggerated: “Mistress confided in me personally about this man. Brother Zhang should know that in Daliang, Zongsun Long did approach her and asked for her hand in marriage. After he was rejected, he swore to use every means possible to seize her for himself.”

Zhang Quan obviously knew about this matter and will not question the authenticity of Xiang Shaolong's findings. He had a big frown and decided: “This piece of information is extremely important and must be made known to my employer as early as possible. Otherwise, we may be caught by surprise.”

He exhaled a breath of cool air: “This man is a bloodthirsty loan shark. His methods are devious and merciless; even the rich and the powerful dare not offend him. His greatest strength lies in the countless talented men serving him. He will be a force to reckon

with.”

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily distracted as he recalled how he overcome Feng Fei’s resistance and enjoyed a long kiss with her last night. He can feel his loins stirring and quickly corrected his emotions.

Quietly contemplating for some time, Zhang Quan probed: “Brother Shen Liang, you are truly capable to gather all these critical information in such a short span of time. Have you determined who is Mistress’s secret lover?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I trust Brother Zhang and therefore, I have revealed a few discoveries to you. Regarding the other secrets, Brother Zhang should know what I want. Forgive me for withholding my tongue.”

There is nothing Zhang Quan can do to him. He sighed: “We must cooperate fully with each other. Otherwise, not only will we fail in our mission, we will die without a complete corpse. Ai! I would rather offend the King of Qi than offend Zongsun Long.”

Suddenly, the sound of knocking can be heard.

Opening his door for a look, Zhang Quan found himself facing more than ten family warriors and drivers. They are asking to see Manager Shen.

Their leader is Xiang Shaolong’s ex roommate, the primate-

looking young chap Lei Yun'er. To Xiang Shaolong who has just come to the door, Lei Yun'er pleaded: "We are very bored here and would like to go for a walk outside. Would Manger please give his permission?"

Looking at their eager expressions, Xiang Shaolong knows that he will incur their wrath if he does not approve their requests. He smiled: "I will not stand in your way but please remember to behave yourself and come back before dawn."

The crowd went hysterical and cheerfully left.

Beside him, Zhang Quan advised: "Why did you allow them to go out? Zongsun Long is watching our every move. In a fit of anger, he may vent his frustrations on them."

Xiang Shaolong disagreed: "It is unreasonable to live every second of our lives in fear of the unexpected. I believe Zongsun Long will not create any trouble before Mistress (Feng Fei) has completed her two performances. No matter what, he has to give face to the Tian Dan and the King of Qi!"

Zhang Quan disagreed: "Qi Xiang King is getting muddle-headed in his old age. He has appointed his eldest son Tian Sheng as the Crown Prince but stripped him of his title over an insignificant matter, causing everyone to feel uneasy. Currently, Zongsun Long is going out all to promote Second Prince Tian Jian to become the Crown Prince, clashing head-on with Tian Dan. It is Tian Dan's idea to invite the three world-famous Courtesans, which includes Mistress (Feng Fei) to celebrate the birthday of the King of Qi, in order to get into his good books. For all you know, Zongsun Long

will deliberately spoil his plans because of this reason.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is hearing about these developments. Feeling apprehensive on the spot, he bade farewell to Zhang Quan and left in a hurry.

At the main door, he checked with the sentries, asking them what is the direction Lei Yun'er & company had headed before giving chase.

As the rain and snow fell around him and the street lamps are being lighted along the streets of Lin Zi, he knows that due to extraordinary circumstances, he will inevitably be severely implicated in the power struggle for the position of the King of Qi.

Book 22 Chapter 08 - Local Villain

As Xiang Shaolong brisk-walked along the road, proceeding towards the central Little Lin Zi, he noticed the increase in the number of pedestrians. Under the illumination of the lanterns, the falling snowflakes resemble the Immortals sprinkling heavenly powder onto earth, giving his surroundings a dream-like appearance.

Most of his fellow foot-travellers are walking in small groups and are speaking in different dialects. They are probably admirers of the Three Courtesans from the other six States or even the Qi people from the countryside. The locals only made up a handful of the crowd.

According to Xiao Yuetan, Lin Zi is home to approximately seventy thousand households and has a population of three hundred thousand. Compared to Xianyang, it is far less populated.

As he was beginning to panic in his search for Lei Yun'er & company, he caught someone waving at him across the road. It turns out to be a family warrior Fei Chun (was wrongly named Fei Sun earlier, also a ex roomie) and five other drivers.

Waiting for two carriages to drive by before crossing the road, he came to the side of the six men and prodded: "Where are the others?"

Fei Chun invited: "They are headed to the red light district! We are looking for a place to have a drink. Why don't Manger Shen

join us?”

Xiang Shaolong interrogated: “Do you know which brothel they are visiting?”

One of the drivers joked: “They surely cannot afford the expensive ones. Manager Shen only has to look for the most run-down brothel and you will definitely find them there.” Fei Chun and the other drivers burst out laughing.

Witnessing their lively mood and making sure that there are no suspicious characters nearby, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to spoil their night. Pulling them aside to avoid blocking the road, he then revealed: “Something has cropped up. Assistant Manager Zhang just informed me Mistress (Feng Fei) has offended a local villain of considerable influence. Although he cannot lay a finger on Mistress, he can effortlessly create trouble for us. Please go and have your drink, and return to the Villa as soon as possible.”

Their faces drained of colour, Fei Chun and the drivers nodded in obedience.

Xiang Shaolong speedily continued his search for Lei Yun'er and the others. After walking for some time, all he could see were splendid buildings housing brothels or wine houses. He thought to himself that this is similar to Beijing's Wangfu Jing (王府井) in the 21st Century; unless you are a rich man, this place has nothing for you. The only places an average person can go are the small lanes and narrow streets, where the cheap thrills are situated.

His heart is swelling with regret.

At the end of the day, he lacks experience in managing people, simply because he does not believe in treating fellow humans as servants at his beck and call. His only wish is for them to be happy and free as much as the situation permits.

With the present unfavorable scenario, he should not have let them run amok.

His reservations are not without reason.

A sore and incensed Zongsun Long will use every opportunity to harass Feng Fei.

If he lands himself in trouble when they had just arrived in Lin Zi, everyone will lose confidence in this newly appointed General Manager. In addition, except for a dagger, he did not bring any weapons with him. If he gets into a fight, he will be at a serious disadvantage.

Burning with anxiety, he happened to see a crowd gathering in front of a brothel. The people are whispering to one another and pointing fingers at the brothel.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart sinking. Stepping forward, he squeezed into the pool of people and questioned: “What happened?”

Bearing scorn in his tone, one man ridicule: “Having the guts to visit prostitutes when he hasn’t paid up his debt to Master Zongsun, these people do not know the meaning of death! Ai! Being dragged away like a pack of dogs, how shameful.”

‘Game over’ Xiang Shaolong thought. He made enquiries about the appearances and dressings of the men being mugged and after confirming their identities are those of the missing Lei Yun’er and company, he announced: “Those men are my friends and I have brought the money to redeem their debts. Does anyone know where is Master Zongsun staying?”

Unexpectedly, the faces of everyone in the crowd lost colour. Not only did they fail to give him an answer, they ran off, disappearing without a trace, leaving him stunned on the spot.

Coincidentally, a shifty and mysterious-looking man happened to sneak out of the brothel, Xiang Shaolong grabbed him, asking: “Brother...”

The man was shocked out of his wits: “Please do not tell my wife...”

Xiang Shaolong is not in the mood to laugh at the man’s blunder. He corrected: “Brother is mistaken. I am just asking for directions.”

The man took a closer look and realized Xiang Shaolong is not someone familiar to him. Putting his hand on his chest, he panted: “I was nearly frightened to death! Even if you are asking for

directions, you need not pull my shirt!”

Scanning this man, Xiang Shaolong guessed he is about twenty-five or twenty six years old. Dressed in flamboyant clothes, he is rather fine looking and must be the offspring of some Qi official. Loathing his hen-pecked behavior, Xiang Shaolong grumbled: “I am anxious to locate Master Zongsun’s Residence. Little Brother (I) is his distant relative and is here to visit him.”

The man sighed with relief: “Zongsun Residence is along Great Southern Way, diagonally opposite my house. Let me give you a ride! Ai! I also need to be home soon.”

Xiang Shaolong is secretly delighted to meet such a friendly person and is now having a favourable impression of him. Together, they crossed the road to the opposite side.

There is a carriage parked outside a wine house and as they approached it, a driver climbed out of the carriage and sat down in the driver’s seat in front.

The man proudly declared: “I intentionally parked the carriage here so that nobody will suspect I actually went to a brothel. Hey! I still do not know Brother’s name.”

Xiang Shaolong introduced: “I am Shen Liang. What about Brother?”

The man cheered: “I am called Xie Ziyuan. Come! Get in the

carriage!”

As the carriage began to move, Xie Ziyuan comfortably lounged in his seat, praising: “Lan Lan’s skin is as smooth as silk and she knows exactly what I want. What a pity I cannot stay overnight.”

Xiang Shaolong has calmed down by now and is busily thinking of a plan to rescue his men back from Zongsun Long. He casually asked: “Is your wife ugly looking?”

Like a wronged man, Xie Ziyuan protested: “Of course not! Lan Lan may be rather good-looking but my wife is way prettier than her”

Xiang Shaolong’s curiosity is aroused: “Then why is Brother Xie looking for other women?”

Xie Ziyuan explained: “Please do not jump to the conclusion that I have grown sick of looking at her. Actually, the more I look at her, the more I love her, and also fear her. Whenever we start quarrelling, my Mum will side her and not me because she has given my mum two healthy grandsons.”

Xiang Shaolong sympathized: “Brother Xie is fooling around because your wife has failed to treat you in a kind and loving manner.”

Slapping his thigh, Xie Ziyuan exclaimed: “Brother Shen truly understands me! Ha! Can Brother Shen do me a favour?”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: “How can I help you?”

Xie Ziyuan leaned towards his ear as if he is afraid of being eavesdropped. He whispered softly: “Can you pretend to be my long lost friend, coming to visit me from a faraway place? Thus, I will have to play a good host to you and this will allow me to spend more time outside the household. Hey! I will not treat you shabbily and will pay for all of Brother Shen’s expenses.”

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be angry or amused at his proposal. He rejected: “I will be quite busy over the next two days. I am afraid I cannot visit you at your honourable residence.”

Xie Ziyuan begged: “I will only take up a bit of your time. Is tomorrow good for you? I will wait for your esteemed arrival anytime after five pm.”

Xiang Shaolong helplessly agreed: “I will try my best to make time!”

Xie Ziyuan was thrilled: “Brother Shen is a true friend. Ai! You would not believe it even if I told you. I, Xie Ziyuan, am an Imperial Treasurer but there is nobody who dares to accompany me to a brothel. Even when beauties surround me, there is not a single mate by my side. It is so depressing. Now, I am thankful for Brother Shen’s company.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly kicked himself for not recognizing someone’s true status. The man is a high-ranking official of Qi and

it is rare that he did not display any airs and speaks in a straightforward manner. He is starting to like this new friend of his.

He joked: "I think all your friends are frightened of your wife's scolding."

Xie Ziyuan muttered: "It is her beating."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was reeling in shock, the burly driver turned around and announced: "Young Master! We are reaching Master Zongsun's Residence."

Xie Ziyuan whispered again: "Only Xie Quan is loyal to me."

Finishing his sentence, he faced Xie Quan and commanded: "We will send Master Shen in before going home."

Holding Xiang Shaolong's hand, Xie Ziyuan apologized: "Please forgive Little Brother (me) for only sending you here but unable to stay and accompany you. I have a curfew and need to return immediately. If her anger is provoked, Little Brother (I) will be in trouble!"

The carriage stopped in the front of an enormous property filled with multiple courtyards. Next, Xie Quan reported Xie Ziyuan's name to the sentries and the main door opened in an instant, allowing them to drive straight in.

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. He could not help but asked: “Brother Xie seems to be on good terms with Master Zongsun.”

Xie Ziyuan smiled: “We have a few ongoing collaborations!”

He added: “The relationship between people are partly decided by fate. Somehow, when I first met Brother Shen, I can feel a sense of delight and instinctively feel that Brother Shen is a friend worth having. Hey! Remember to come by tomorrow night!” He pointed to the location of his residence.

In this moment, the carriage grinded to a halt, stopping in front of a flight of steps of the main building within the residence. A few muscular men accosted the carriage and their leader opened the carriage door, respectfully introducing: “Your servant is named Bao Guang. Will Official Xie please alight.”

Xie Ziyuan started: “I am just sending Zong...”

Xiang Shaolong rapidly whispered into his ear: “I am not his relative.”

Xie Ziyuan was stunned momentarily before continuing: “I am sending my good friend Shen Liang to pay his respects to Master Zongsun. Is Master Zongsun at home?”

Bao Guang was slightly surprised: “So it is Master Shen. Master (Zongsun) is hosting an esteemed guest from Chu. Your servant (I) will notify him now. What does Master Shen want your servant

(me) to report to Master (Zongsun)?”

Not wanting to reveal too much about himself to Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong turned to him and promised: “There is no need to hold back Brother Xie any longer. I will definitely see you tomorrow night.”

Concluding his sentence, he got down the carriage and watched Xie Ziyuan drove away.

As Xie Ziyuan was leaving, he continued waving back, not taking Xiang Shaolong’s lies to heart.

The main building inside Zongsun Residence is a spectacular Courtyard built entirely of white stone and is elevated above the ground. The main double doors and walls are lavishly sculptured.

Above the double doors is a majestic signboard with three words written on it: Zongsun Residence, flaunting the wealth and status of its occupant.

The main building is flanked by a left courtyard and right courtyard. Behind the building is a huge garden, housing many more courtyards that are further than what Xiang Shaolong is able to see. Sweeping his gaze across his surroundings, he observed that the entire cluster of courtyards is surrounded by another high wall. The layout of the residence is similar to a fortress and the first door that Xiang Shaolong entered is equivalent to a fortress gate.

As the raindrops and snowflakes fly through the air, scores of eight-sided lanterns are shining brightly into the square in front of the main building, making it look as bright as day. There is a carriage parked by the side but the horse has been led away. It probably belongs to the distinguished visitor of Chu.

Looking at his collected and awe-inspiring posture, Bao Guang dare not behave in a slipshod manner. He welcomed: “Master Shen, please enter to avoid the wind and snow before speaking!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded and climbed the steps alongside Bao Guang.

Zongsun Long is truly a renowned tycoon. The building materials used to build the main building are meticulously selected, leaving a strong impression on anyone who passes by. The pillars and beams are all made up of high quality Nan wood and only complete logs are used. Cornices are carved in suitable corners and stone sculptures are exquisitely engraved. It is an exciting sight to behold.

After sitting down, Xiang Shaolong then implored: “Brother Bao, please inform Master Zongsun that I am here regarding Feng Fei’s issue.”

With astonishment written all over his face, Bao Guang was in a fluster and hesitated for a while before entering the hall to make his report.

Xiang Shaolong coolly waited.

If Zongsun Long chose not to see him, what can he do?

Resorting to force is suicidal.

He retains some confidence that Zongsun Long will see him, for if he truly loves Feng Fei, his curiosity will certainly get the better of him and he would want to find out what Xiang Shaolong is up to.

After a short wait, Bao Guang summoned: "Master invites Brother Shen to go in."

Xiang Shaolong was incredulous that his plan is proceeding smoothly. He did not have time to delve further and quickly stood up and followed Bao Guang in.

Bao Guang whispered: "Master (Zongsun) is willing to see Master Shen because Master Shen (you) is a friend of Official Xie."

Xiang Shaolong knows that Bao Guang has intervened for him and hurriedly thanked him.

They passed through a garden path made up of crushed rocks before arriving at the entrance of the main hall. Four family warriors are standing guard on two sides.

Bao Guang stopped in his tracks and announced in a loud voice: "Master Shen is here!"

Witnessing the elaborate setup of the place, even Xiang Shaolong is feeling slightly uneasy. However, it is impossible to back out now. Taking a deep breath, he stepped over the door ledge. What entered his view is a well-maintained classy interior, with a touch of antique elegance. A wide and bright yarn screen served as a divider, partitioning the massive hall into a south portion and a north portion. Every piece of furniture is made of top quality redwood. Beyond the screen, Xiang Shaolong can vaguely see two men sitting face to face, with serving maids on both sides. Behind each man stood a squad of family warriors, giving him the impression that the guest is not an ordinary person.

Under the direction of Bao Guang, Xiang Shaolong crossed the divider. Staring fiercely at him is a tall man in his forties and tastefully dressed in silk. For some reason, the man is as skinny as a chimpanzee.

When Xiang Shaolong laid his eyes on the other man, he was frightened out of his wits. He nearly wanted to turn around and run for his life.

It is Li Yuan whom he hasn't seen for some time.

His biggest regret now is not putting the fruit seed below his tongue, disguising his voice from Li Yuan.

Just by looking at Li Yuan's expression, he knows that his cover is blown and his disguise is useless.

When Li Yuan looked over, his body trembled slightly and surprise is written all over his handsome features in this face-to-face encounter as the four eyes meet.

Firstly, in order to negotiate with Zongsun Long, Xiang Shaolong did not bother to conceal his strides and heroic aura. Secondly, there is no one around that he can shy behind. Thirdly, Li Yuan knows Xiang Shaolong more intimately than Tian Dan. Thus, he could recognize Xiang Shaolong in one look.

Just as Xiang Shaolong is secretly lamenting the end of his life, Li Yuan actually winked at him, giving him a ray of hope.

In terms of integrity and character, Lord Longyang should be more 'innocent' than Li Yuan. But life is always unpredictable.

There are two charming ladies standing behind Zongsun Long, massaging his skinny shoulder and back as he leaned against a cushion. This magnate who made his fortune through loan sharking looked at Xiang Shaolong through the corner of the eye and remarked: "Please have a seat!"

An absent-minded Xiang Shaolong paid his respects and sat down opposite the two men like a common criminal. In his mind, he was thinking: Zongsun Long, with your kind of looks, it is not surprising why the beautiful swan Feng Fei is not interested in you, the ugly toad.

Zongsun Long's bones supporting his eyebrows are exceptionally high and his gaze is sharp and piercing. Despite the lack of flesh on

his face, his expressions are incredibly animated. Adorned by thick and long eyebrows, Zongsun Long condescendingly mocked: “Does Chancellor Li know why did I bother to attend to this anonymous fellow without any delay and even allow him to be seated opposite me?”

Initially, Xiang Shaolong thought Zongsun Long is speaking to him but realized that he is speaking to Li Yuan. His words are immensely ill mannered and carry an insulting tone.

With a strange expression on his face, Li Yuan answered: “Master Long has always handled your affairs in an unorthodox manner. I do not have the slightest idea.”

Behaving as if Xiang Shaolong is invisible, Zongsun Long continued talking to Li Yuan: “It is because this person is sent here by Xie Ziyuan, therefore, I need to be accountable to him. When Xie Ziyuan ask about this matter in the future, he cannot hold me for treating his friend shabbily.”

Turning his head over and staring at Xiang Shaolong with his squinty eyes, Zongsun Long demanded: “Report your identity and purpose, as well as your relationship to Xie Ziyuan. If I detect any lies, I guarantee you will never be able to walk out of here with your two legs.”

Xiang Shaolong had barely calmed down and exchanged a look with ‘the friend more trustworthy than Lord Longyang’ Li Yuan before turning his head up and burst out laughing.

Behind Zongsun Long, several family warriors are now glaring at Xiang Shaolong viciously with their hands on the hilt of their swords. Once Zongsun Long gives the command, they will beat the daylight out of Xiang Shaolong.

His eyes rotating wildly, Zongsun Long roared: “What is so funny?”

Xiang Shaolong stopped laughing in an instant. With his eyes shining ominously, he stared at Zongsun Long and ridiculed: “I am laughing because the earth-shattering Zongsun Long is actually a rich man using his resources to bully the weak. No wonder Miss Feng Fei chose to reject you.”

Before Zongsun Long has the chance to speak out, the two family warriors standing behind Xiang Shaolong pounced on him from the left and right. From their body movements, they probably want to drag Xiang Shaolong up from his seat and force him down on his knees.

Just when Li Yuan is grimacing at the potential onslaught, Xiang Shaolong has skillfully grabbed the two rough hands that have landed on his shoulders. Without moving his body, he deftly twisted their arms, using their momentum to slam the two family warriors in front of himself.

Behind Zongsun Long, the family warriors are protesting angrily. Drawing their swords, they advanced towards Xiang Shaolong.

When a fight looks inevitable, Li Yuan thundered: “Hold it!”

The warriors freeze in bewilderment.

The two family warriors who were thrown to the floor are now getting back on their feet. Both were holding their hands with a pained expression on their faces. Xiang Shaolong had evidently twisted both their wrists.

Zongsun Long was in a daze and bellowed: “Back down!”

The squad of family warriors returned to their original positions while the two injured men left the hall. The hall is now as quiet as before but the atmosphere is as tense as a fully drawn arrow on a bow.

Xiang Shaolong acted as if nothing had happened, coldly exchanging glances with Zongsun Long.

Zongsun Long suppressed his anger and faced Li Yuan: “Why did Chancellor Li prevent me from teaching this arrogant fellow a lesson?”

Li Yuan swept his gaze across the warriors behind him and plainly state: “If I were Master Long, I will give these servants a beating for taking matters into their own hands. Before Master Long gave the order, they have lost control of their emotions and commence an attack. This move could potentially cause Master Long to lose your life.”

Zongsun Long was taken aback: “Cause me to lose my life?”

By now, Xiang Shaolong is certain that Li Yuan will not betray him. His spirits soaring and resuming his heroic aura, he laughed loudly: “Chancellor Li is really smart. Watch it!”

As fast as lightning, Xiang Shaolong pulled out the dagger tied to his foot and threw it towards a food laden long table in front of Zhongsun Long.

Pok!

The men were staring speechlessly and the maids cried out as the dagger embedded itself deeply into the hard redwood.

Looking at the dagger handle that is still quivering, Zongsun Long's face is drained of colour and he was dumbstruck for some time.

The large hall is completely silent as everyone's attention is now on the dagger.

Nobody dared to move for it is possible that Xiang Shaolong may throw a second dagger at him. Moreover, Li Yuan had earlier chastised the family warriors for taking things into their own hands and deserves punishment. This time round, none of the earlier antics were repeated.

A powerful and accurate attack like this will surely bring fear to

anyone who hears of it but what really subdued Zongsun Long is Xiang Shaolong's display of confidence and heroic air.

Xiang Shaolong plainly asked: "Can we have a good talk now?"

This is the first time ever Zongsun Long feels that his life is at stake. He took a deep breath and agreed: "Fine! Seeing that you possess such an extraordinary skill, speak your mind!"

Xiang Shaolong first turned to Li Yuan and smiled: "Chancellor Li is truly brilliant, guessing that I came prepared."

Li Yuan smiled back: "Just by observing Brother Shen's icy demeanor, I instinctively knew you must be a top assassin."

His gaze turning back to Zongsun Long's face, Xiang Shaolong officially state: "I, Shen Liang, is Miss Feng Fei's General Manager, assisting her in overseeing the operations of the Troupe. I also happen to be a very good friend of Xie Ziyuan but if Master Long wishes to harm me, you need not worry about spoiling your friendship with Xie Ziyuan. Since I, Shen Liang, dare to come to you, I have cast my life aside. It is better to die with honour than to live in infamy."

Li Yuan was agitated: "It is better to die with honour than to live in infamy. This is a very meaningful sentence."

Zongsun Long and everyone else were moved as they can clearly feel Xiang Shaolong's fearlessness, even towards death.

This is an era where talented men are highly valued. Regardless of whether one is rich or poor, as long as one exhibits talent or is educated, one will be respected wherever one goes.

Zongsun Long has never met anyone of Xiang Shaolong's caliber. Faced with Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan's continuous verbal assault, coupled with this life-threatening situation, his ferocity has greatly mellowed.

Nevertheless, he is still a notorious triad boss who is not new to perilous environments and has overcome his fair share of trials and tribulations. Zongsun Long bluntly pointed: "You have earned your right to speak but if you are here to pit yourself against me, I am afraid you have overestimated yourself."

Li Yuan interrupted: "Will Master Long allow Li Yuan (me), this neutral party, to say a few words in fairness?"

Zongsun Long would not dare to offend the highly ranked Li Yuan who easily enjoys the entire backing of Chu. He politely acquiesced: "Chancellor Li, please speak."

Attempting to ease the hostility, Li Yuan professed: "I wish to have Brother Shen's assurance that he will not release any more hidden weapons. Only then can we talk amicably."

Xiang Shaolong knows that this strategy is to give Zongsun Long an opportunity to back down. Moreover, he did not have any daggers left. He gladly agreed: "I, Shen Liang, dare not disobey

Chancellor. In addition, I have always been an admirer of Master Long and was forced by circumstances to act against my own wishes. I pray that Master Long can be magnanimous and pardon me.”

Earlier on, Xiang Shaolong appears to be strong-willed and unyielding but is now using condescending words towards him. This flattery is extremely successful and Zongsun Long’s expression became warmer. In a deep voice, he remarked: “What does Chancellor Li propose?”

Li Yuan harmoniously inquired: “What is Brother Shen’s motive for coming here?”

Xiang Shaolong simply answered: “I am here to ask a favour from Master Long, begging him to show mercy and release my comrades, and not make things difficult for Miss Feng Fei.”

Zongsun Long secretly regretted summoning Shen Liang into the main hall.

Feng Fei is highly respected by everyone all over the world. If he is openly making trouble for her, what will Li Yuan think of him?

He is used to doing whatever he pleases and initially wanted to rough up Xiang Shaolong, demonstrating his might in front of Li Yuan. He is not someone who gives up easily but if he refuses Xiang Shaolong’s request, he will be digging a bigger hole for himself.

His initial plan is to break Xiang Shaolong's legs and have someone to carry him back. Not only can he indirectly challenge Tian Dan's authority, it is also sending Feng Fei a message that he is unafraid of anyone, pressuring her to succumb to him.

Given the current scenario when the man in front of his eyes can take his life in a flash, he obviously cannot carry out this plan.

While he is contemplating, Li Yuan laughed: "I am sure this is a misunderstanding! Master Long will not bear grudges against these servants."

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan supported each other verbally, causing Zongsun Long's face to lose colour, both men are secretly amused.

Being forced into a corner, Zongsun Long had no choice but to snarl at his men: "Who is responsible for kidnapping Miss Feng's subordinates? Did it really happen?"

One of his brainier followers caught the hint and responded: "There were some men creating a scene at a brothel earlier and they got into a scuffle with our guys. We seized them and were prepared to send them to the magistrate office tomorrow. We did not know they are Manager Shen's followers."

Zongsun Long pretended to be angry: "In this case, release all of them immediately and send them back to Miss Feng."

His subordinate left to execute his order.

Li Yuan stood up and bade farewell. To Xiang Shaolong, he offered: “Manager Shen is highly skilled and your bravery is unheard of. I, Li Yuan, admire men like you. Why don’t I send Brother Shen back and use this occasion to have a little chat?”

Xiang Shaolong is deeply grateful because this arrangement will prevent Zongsun Long from exacting revenge on him.

Zongsun Long’s attitude underwent a huge change and suddenly became very hospitable, personally sending both men to the door.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize Zongsun Long is a very tall man, almost as tall as himself.

This bloodsucker looks much more daunting when standing up.

Until the carriage exited Zongsun Residence did Xiang Shaolong finally heaved a sigh of relief but his whole body is already covered with cold sweat.

Book 22 Chapter 09 - Hard To Distinguish Between Leader And Follower

Slapping Xiang Shaolong's fake potbelly, Li Yuan chortled: "If not for your equally shocked expression when you laid your eyes on me, as I first laid my eyes on you, I may be tricked by this fake potbelly. Your looks have indeed changed a lot."

Xiang Shaolong confessed: "Of course I would be shocked; because there is a chance that you will betray me."

Li Yuan was offended: "I, Li Yuan, will never be such a despicable fellow. If we were fairly engaged in war, I would not be the least upset if I lose or die. But how can I sabotage you when you are obviously at a disadvantage?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed, recalling Lord Longyang's betrayal. But for some reason, he is unwilling to brand this friend as a despicable cad.

Li Yuan was taken aback: "Looking at your expression, it seems you were once betrayed by an old friend."

Glancing at the wide roads of the Qi Capital outside the carriage window, Xiang Shaolong's heart is in turmoil and he did not know what to say.

In the past, his trust in Li Yuan is way lower than his trust in Lord Longyang.

But Li Yuan can maintain this camaraderie is partly because Li Yuan is from the State of Chu. He does not feel the pressure of a direct Qin invasion unlike the three States of Zhao, Han and Wei.

Li Yuan stretched out his hand, hugging Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and revealed: "I met Han Chuang this afternoon and he is still grateful to you for setting him free at the risk of your own life. He told me he had wanted to help you when you were on the run but his hands are tied and cannot defy his King. I believe he is bluffing. This fellow indulges in wine, sex, money and ego, leading a repugnant lifestyle. He could be saying one thing and yet doing another."

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's disillusioned appearance, he went on: "Shaolong is exceedingly gifted. Even when you lose the battle, you lost beautifully and evaded the extensive manhunt by the States of Zhao, Wei and Han. Presently, everyone thinks that you are back at Zhongmou. Who could possibly imagine that you have miraculously become the manager of the top beauty Feng Fei and have made your way to Lin Zi?"

Picking himself up, Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Why did you make time to come all the way here?"

Li Yuan chuckled: "You should be able to guess what is going on! Qi did not participate in the two allied attacks and even create trouble for us. As a result, the Five States are now collaborating to support Second Prince Tian Jian to become the next King of Qi, using this opportunity to topple First Prince Tian Sheng and Tian Dan's syndicate. I visited Zongsun Long precisely for this

purpose.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Based on your theory, Lu Buwei must have come here to support Tian Dan.”

His eyes flashing with extreme coldness, Li Yuan coldly snorted: “Lu Buwei still thinks he is living in his past glorious days. He must be dreaming. Everybody knows that the most influential man in Qin is you, Shaolong. Ha! Are you aware that you can soon travel wherever you want without concealing your true identity?”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “What do you mean?”

Li Yuan exhaled a breath of air: “The five states alliance has lost heavily to Shaolong’s army and are unable to continue fighting. Thus, we are forced to seek truce and every State is secretly sending messengers to sign a peace treaty with Qin, hoping not be a target of an invasion. Regarding this matter, Shaolong must lend Little Brother (me) a helping hand.”

Xiang Shaolong declared: “Even without you bringing it up, I will still do my best to help you. Seriously speaking, even if they threaten to kill me, I will never lead an invading army.”

Li Yuan praised: “Shaolong is Shaolong indeed. Otherwise, there is no way Han Chuang can be freed!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Even if the treaty is signed, there are still many people after my life.”

Li Yuan guffawed: “When the treaty is finalized, you can openly reveal your identity, telling everyone where you are. I guarantee no one will dare to touch you. Everyone knows you are Yingzheng’s most respected teacher and anyone who offends you is asking for his country to be invaded.”

Pausing for a while, he added: “During the period when nobody knows if you are dead or alive, Yingzheng blew his top and gave the order to launch a full scale invasion against Zhao. While Li Mu is busy engaging Zhongmou City, Huan Qi, Yang Duanhe, Meng Wu and Meng Tian attacked Zhao relentlessly, taking no prisoners, inflicting heavy damage and occupying a large piece of territory. With regards to this attack, Wei and Han chose not to offer any assistance. (Empress) Hanjing, Guo Kai and their conspirators are now regretting their earlier support of Po Hu, which has indirectly resulted in their predicament.”

Xiang Shaolong felt bad about causing so much trouble but there is nothing he can do.

Li Yuan suddenly cheered: “From Shaolong’s point of view, should we cause Lu Buwei to never set foot again in Xianyang? The people of Qi may protect him but we can always lay an ambush, killing him and every single one of his companions.”

Xiang Shaolong is greatly moved but recognizes the fact that Lu Buwei will surely survive. In a deep voice, he advocated: “Lu Buwei’s days are numbered. We need not bother ourselves with him. Moreover, no one will want Lu Buwei to die within his territory. We should focus our energies on toppling Tian Dan.”

When he heard Tian Dan's name, Li Yuan became boiling mad. He furiously swore: "Tian Dan once collaborated with Lord Chunshen to harm me, I will definitely make him pay for what he did to me."

Lowering his voice, he smugly divulged: "The reason King Xiang stripped Tian Sheng of his Crown Prince title is because his beloved concubine Lady Ning accused Tian Sheng of harboring malicious intentions against her. Ha! Can Shaolong guess who is Lady Ning? She is Lady Qingxiu's sister."

Xiang Shaolong finally saw the big picture and deduced it to be a scheme cooked up to discredit Tian Sheng. Li Yuan is sharing such a piece of critical information with him, exhibiting his utmost trust in him, Xiang Shaolong.

Li Yuan continued: "I don't think you have forgotten who is Lady Qingxiu right? She met you when she made a trip to Xianyang and she specially made a trip here as well. She has moved into the palace while I am staying at the villa beside yours."

Xiang Shaolong obviously will not forget this lady who has zero interest in all men, including himself. He did not foresee that all his acquaintances are unexpectedly gathered together in Lin Zi.

Li Yuan joked: "Shaolong should have tried Feng Fei by now!"

Xiang Shaolong waved him off: "Don't make wild guesses. There is nothing between the two of us. But I will require Brother Li's

assistance on this matter. Besides Zongsun Long, Lu Buwei is harbouring ulterior motives against her.”

Li Yuan is elated: “That is easy. Once we returned to Chu, we will be invulnerable.”

Xiang Shaolong seriously advised: “Brother Li must not belittle our enemies. Lu Buwei and Tian Dan are not easy to deal with. For all you know, they will come up with a scheme and allow Tian Sheng to instantly become the new King of Qi.”

His expression turning solemn, Li Yuan nodded: “Shaolong is right. I am not giving enough credit to my enemies.”

Seeing that Tingsong Villa is within reach, Xiang Shaolong recommended: “It is better to let me off the carriage here. I want to keep a low profile.”

Li Yuan unwillingly pleaded: “Can we fix another appointment where we can catch up? I would like to know how you happen to end up here and even became Feng Fei’s manager in the process.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “Tomorrow is out of the question. I will contact you again!”

After both men decided on a communication method, Xiang Shaolong got off the carriage.

When Xiang Shaolong stepped into Tingsong Villa, the family

warriors on sentry duty came to attention in a respectful manner. Their attitude towards him is completely different from before.

Xiang Shaolong clearly knew the reason for the change. One of them reported: “Lei Yun’er and the others have just been sent here and they are only slightly bruised. Master Shen is really great to make Zongsun Long release them obediently.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Is Mistress (Feng Fei) back?”

Another family warrior bowed: “She has been back for half an hour. She had given instructions for you to see her immediately upon your return.”

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to ask: “Did Mister Tan come back as well?”

The family warrior replied: “Mister Tan has returned to his Tingmei Villa. I think he will probably come over tomorrow.”

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Xiao Yuetan is gathering intelligence. Nodding his head in acknowledgement, he head alone towards the inner courtyard in search of Feng Fei

He barely crossed over the door ledge to the inner courtyard where Feng Fei is staying when Little Ping’er came up to him. Her icy demeanor unable to conceal her delight, she welcomed: “You are finally back.”

Xiang Shaolong wished he could give her a loving pat. He mumbled: “Thank you Sister Ping for your concern.”

Little Ping'er purposely put on a solemn expression and lowered her head, uttering: “I am not concerned about you but Mistress is anxiously awaiting your return.”

Xiang Shaolong really wanted to embrace her into his bosom and comfort her with sweet words but he is unable to love another new woman. He maintained his silence and climbed up the stairs to the upper floor as she had directed.

Feng Fei had removed all her make-up, accessories, and is dressed in simple clothes. Sitting at a corner of the small hall, her face reddened slightly when she saw him, likely due to her recalling Xiang Shaolong forcefully kissing her the night before. She was elated: “You are back! I am so worried for you! Come and have a sit!”

Xiang Shaolong subserviently sat down on the floor opposite her, joking: “I am certain Mistress has mesmerized the entire Court officials of Qi.”

Feng Fei viciously shot him a look, giving him a hint of excitement. The pretty lass was curious: “What trickery did you employ, allowing the malevolent Zongsun Long to release our men?”

Xiang Shaolong casually state: “Of course by using the gift of the gab (literal translation = skillful tongue), is Mistress satisfied with

my answer?”

He was just spouting nonsense but his words have an entirely different meaning in the ears of Feng Fei. Her face flushed with crimson red, she wailed: “I have yet to get even with you regarding what happened last night. How dare you.... I...”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realized he had used an inappropriate description. He awkwardly defended: “That is not what I meant... Hey...”

Feng Fei became so shy she did not know where to hide her face. Even the roots of her ear lobes are thoroughly red. She appears to be at a loss and it was a very enticing look.

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to handle such a situation.

The lure of Feng Fei now is comparable to Ji Yanran and Qin Qing. If not for the fact that she has someone else in mind, Xiang Shaolong doubts he can hold his ground any longer.

Feng Fei recomposed herself after an extended period. She gloomily exhaled a breath of air: “I should not be with you alone in a room like this but unfortunately, our conversation cannot be heard by a third person.”

Giving him another glare, she insisted: “You must behave yourself.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly groaned to himself. If she carried on speaking to him in such a manner, he cannot tell how long his willpower can last.

Expelling a breath of air, he queried: “How is Tian Dan’s attitude towards Mistress?”

Feng Fei is still recovering from her bashfulness and she contemplated for some time before finding the words: “On the surface he is obviously very cordial but I can sense that he is trying to trick me into revealing my plans. How can I ever trust him like before? I certainly would not tell him the truth. Ai! Right now, Feng Fei (I) can no longer distinguish the leader-follower relationship between you and I. It is all your fault.”

Finishing, she lowered her head again.

Xiang Shaolong instantly regretted his moment of folly last night when he forcefully kissed her, causing their relationship to become ambiguous. The atmosphere is awkward but yet filled with attraction.

If she did not use his name as a cover up for her secret lover, no matter whose name she used, he will not be stimulated to perform such an unusual act.

For the time being, both parties did not know to say, resulting in a quiet impasse.

Feng Fei finally broke the silence and gently chided: “You are simply extraordinary beyond comprehension. Based on Zongsun Long’s fearlessness and recklessness in Lin Zi, why should he do you a favour? However, you chose not to tell me what had transpired. Should Feng Fei (I) have the right to suspect that you have betrayed Feng Fei (me) and have made a secret pact with him?”

Xiang Shaolong was peeved: “You are doubting me again.”

Feng Fei gave him a meaningful look and softly lowered her eyelids halfway. In a remarkably warm voice, she mentioned: “While attending the banquet earlier, I sincerely inquired from Mister Tan about your character after having spent the past few days with you. Mister Tan is an expert judge of character and his analysis is consistently accurate. It was he who advised me that Lu Buwei is completely unreliable, which is why Feng Fei (I) has a high regard for his opinions.”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused. He is uncertain regarding Xiao Yuetan’s fortune telling abilities but his views of Lu Buwei are unquestionable. He simply enquired: “What did he say?”

Her eyes flashing with a strange look, Feng Fei whispered: “He told me two sentences, of which I do not agree to the first one and felt really bizarre about the second one.”

Unlike before, Xiang Shaolong is no longer afraid of anyone exposing his identity. Worse come to worse, he will go over and depend on Li Yuan. This is the territory of Qi and nobody will have the guts to attack him, Xiang Shaolong, offending the two

powerful States of Qin and Chu simultaneously.

Even Lu Buwei has to ‘protect’ him; otherwise Xiao Pan will put the blame on him.

After hearing this, his curiosity is significantly aroused and he asked: “May I know the details?”

Feng Fei unhappily shot him a glare: Mister Tan says you are a steadfast, perfect gentlemen and I can place absolute trust in you.

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “A perfect gentleman is not allowed to kiss a beauty? If I am a gentleman, you can place all your trust in me without any reservations. Why would you feel bizarre about it?”

‘Pu ci!’ Feng Fei’s originally stern face could not help but break out into a shrill giggle. Glaring at him once, blaming him for making her laugh, she faintly wailed: “Of course a gentleman can kiss a lady’s lips but someone forcing a kiss on a lady is not a gentleman. Since you are not a gentleman, why shouldn’t I suspect there is something going on between you and Zongsun Long?”

Feasting his eyes on her curvaceous body and protruding chest, Xiang Shaolong mischievously laughed: “If I am not a gentleman, Miss Feng would have lost your virginity last night.”

Initially, Feng Fei had resumed her serenity but her face is flushed with red streaks all over again. She loudly protested: “You

are getting out of hand!”

Xiang Shaolong acted as if nothing had happened. He offered: “It is precisely so that I ran out of options in life. In my opinion, every human being is equal and should enjoy the same rights. The differences between a king and his subordinates or an employer and his employees are just a matter of appointments and responsibilities! If it is not to Mistress’s liking, your servant (I) can always behave as if the kiss never happened.”

Feng Fei whined: “Can you stop bringing up this issue?”

Xiang Shaolong can thoroughly experience this complicated relationship the two of them are sharing. Opening up his palms, he reminded: “You are the one who mentioned it first. Don’t come and blame me now.”

Feng Fei could not win the debate. She sighed: “Take it that I, your superior, is afraid of you, the evil manager. Take it that I am begging you. Please quickly tell me what made Zongsun Long agree to release our men. Otherwise, Feng Fei (I) will surely be unable to sleep well tonight.”

Xiang Shaolong then related the whole encounter accordingly, only withholding the fact that Li Yuan recognised his true identity. To Feng Fei, the story clearly demonstrates Xiang Shaolong’s chivalry, bravery and eagerness to help the less fortunate.

Her eyes wide open, Feng Fei stammered: “Do you know what is Xie Ziyuan’s background?”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered: “Of course I know. He is a high ranking official.”

Feng Fei rebuked: “It is much more than that. Not only is he at the peak of official ranks, he possess many other talents. Most of Lan Gongyuan’s Song & Dance routines are composed by him. Moreover, he is the reading partner for Second Prince Tian Jian, which is why Zongsun Long has to make allowances for him.”

With an understanding expression on his face, Xiang Shaolong finally learnt about the relationship between Zongsun Long and Xie Ziyuan but he did not find it surprising at all.

Feng Fei glanced at him with astonishment: “Why are you behaving in such an unaffected manner? Aren’t you eyeing for wealth and an official appointment? Either Li Yuan or Xie Ziyuan can effortlessly make your dreams come true but you acted like you are not the least bit interested.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly knew he had slipped up, exposing an undeniable loophole. He dryly coughed: “At that point in time, I was focused on saving our men and did not think about my own prospects.”

Resuming her normal, icy poise and with her eyes glowing, Feng Fei pressured: “Manager Shen, do you know why I felt peculiar when Mister Tan told me I can place my absolute trust in you?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that her suspicions regarding him are like

the gushing torrents of the Yellow River: There is just no turning back. He bitterly laughed: “Mistress had better keep it to yourself.”

Feng Fei maintained: “I insist on saying it. You are the most insolent man I have ever met. Let me tell you! When Mister Tan was saying those words, I can tell from his body language that he is speaking as if he has known you for ten over years. He can give such a strong testimony about you without a moment’s contemplation and without the slightest hesitation.”

Xiang Shaolong can only sighed in his heart. At the end of the day, men are not as meticulous as women. While men are reliable in settling the big stuff, they are often unable to manage all the small details. Even the seasoned player Xiao Yuetan is of no exception.

Glaring nastily at him, Feng Fei interrogated: “Last night, Feng Fei (I) personally experienced your unforgivable kissing skills, deducing that you are not someone who is not stirred by women. However, you are not the least tempted by Ping’er, Shuzen or Xiuzhen, what is going on?”

In a state of panic, Xiang Shaolong defended: “I believe that it is due to Mistress’s lack of sexual experience, mistaking my lousy kissing method to be a supreme kissing technique.”

Overcome by shyness, Feng Fei dared not raise her head. She griped: “How dare you continue to spout nonsense.”

Xiang Shaolong raised his hands in mock surrender: “We had a

gentlemen's agreement to not bring up the kissing episode but it was you who brought it up again."

Feng Fei's face is so red it looked as if she is drunk. With a mixture of love and hate written on her incomparably pretty expression, she pretended to be angry: "No more messing around! Tell me when did you suddenly grow a potbelly and why do you have so much white hair?"

Xiang Shaolong gave it all he's got. He faked a surprise tone: "I have had this potbelly for a few years. Didn't you feel it last night? And after I found out that Mistress has a secret lover, I am gravely disappointed, causing my hair to turn white overnight."

Feng Fei suddenly lowered her head in silence.

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to react and meekly waited in silence.

It felt like a century when Feng Fei recomposed herself once again and gently remarked: "Why didn't Feng Fei (I) meet you earlier? For the past twenty-one years of my life, just now was the first time I can feel that all my worries have disappeared."

Not knowing how to answer her, Xiang Shaolong blew out a mouthful of air.

Earlier on, he, too, had momentarily forgotten about his wives and child in Xianyang.

Feng Fei respired a breath of air too and plainly concluded: “You are a true gentleman. Otherwise, you can easily make use of my vulnerability now to obtain my body. Presently, my fate is intertwined with yours. Can you honestly tell me who are you trying to evade with your disguise?”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief, acknowledging that she had not guessed his true identity. He articulated: “Of course it is to prevent the people of Zhao from recognizing me. If they know that I am here, they will do whatever it takes to bring misfortune to me. Mister Tan and I know each other many years back when he came to visit Handan. Mistress should understand my grievances now.”

Feng Fei nagged: “Can you stop acting like a servant in front of me? Feng Fei has seen all kinds of men but there is no one who has as much self-control as you, being able to resist sexual temptations. Ai! It is late! You have had a busy day, please go back and rest!”

Feeling like the king had just pardoned him from a death sentence, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly paid his respect and is about to take his leave.

Feng Fei grouched: “You look like you cannot wait to get away.”

The lure of Feng Fei’s lovely appearance is making it difficult for Xiang Shaolong to live up to her expectation of a gentleman with excellent self-control.

Knowing that she is still stuck in a dilemma, he shifted towards

her and half squatted down. He reached his hand out below her chin, slowly lifting her gorgeous head up to face himself, provoking: “Does Mistress know what are the consequences of your words?”

Feng Fei seemed to have lost all resistance and self-conscious, allowing him to make this suggestive move. Her bright eyes closing halfway, she whispered: “You won’t. Right?”

Xiang Shaolong kissed her deeply, thoroughly enjoying it as she kissed passionately in return before he summoned all his willpower to break the kiss and quietly left.

When he reached the lower level, Little Ping’er is sitting at a corner with her back facing him.

He sighed with a breath, hardened his resolve and walked away.

Book 22 Chapter 10 - Surrounded By Women

Tingsong Villa employs a courtyard design: The front area is used for miscellaneous activities and the rear area is used for living quarters. All courtyards are symmetrical in design. Walking in from the main door, one will pass by a small square, followed by a sitting room, the main hall and a rear living room. The rooms on the left and right are used for various purposes, such as a study room, a playroom, etc.

Beyond that is a huge garden and a 'Sanjing' styled residence. The residence is a cluster of eight courtyards, clearly allocated to different people based on their status and importance. Another well-decorated garden filled with various plants and trees surrounds the residence.

Feng Fei's block is right in the centre of the eight courtyards, with a backdrop of fake mountains, fountains, ponds, bushes, trees and even potted plants. It is a view to die for.

It happened to stop snowing as Xiang Shaolong is leaving the main block. Behind the clouds, the moon is showing half its face. As the golden yellow rays shine down on the silvery white garden, it creates a soothing effect, allowing Xiang Shaolong to relax his tense sensations.

It will be heaven on earth if he is able to spend the night with Feng Fei in the upper floor of the main block.

Pondering on this thought, Xiang Shaolong had a shock as he

stopped at the edge of the garden. If they proceeded with several more encounters in a similar fashion, he will eventually succumb to temptation and have a sexual relationship with Feng Fei.

Letting his eyes take in the exotic and therapeutic garden sightings, he becomes even more aware of the cloak and dagger politics and evil darkness at work.

As he was brimming with emotions, a glib and sweet voice sounded out behind him: “Why is Manager Shen standing there for such a long time?”

Xiang Shaolong turned around. Like an angel appearing in the night, this beauty gracefully sashayed to him. Just one step away before the two bodies collide, she halted her advance and raised her delicate and exquisite face, looking at him meaningfully, awaiting his reply.

He obviously could not tell her what he is truly thinking. He spluttered: “I am immersing myself in the wonderful landscaping of the garden. Whoever designed this garden must be a top horticulturist, being able to blend man-made structures and Mother Nature into one body, creating infinite possibilities in such a limited space.”

In the same instant, he detected a quick flashing of candle light from Feng Fei’s room on the upper floor. He deduced that there is someone who moved to the window before hiding at a side, blocking the candlelight and causing the alleged flashing of the candlelight. Needless to say, she is eavesdropping on their conversation.

Hearing his description, Zhu Xiuzhen became intoxicated in his words. She praised: “That is an excellent description by Manager Shen. I know nature can represent certain moods and feelings. For example, a banana tree reminds me of the falling raining, a fruit tree reminds me of the autumn harvest; a wall reminds me of a row of bamboo. But never did I think of nature as thoroughly and as penetrating as Manager Shen.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Why hasn’t Miss Xiuzhen retired for the night?”

Pulling the corner of his shirt, Zhu Xiuzhen walked him to the side of a pond far away from the main block before whispering: “Sa Li came to see me today.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Why wasn’t I aware of it?”

Zhu Xiuzhen explained: “Gu Ming let him in secretly through the back door. Xiuzhen (I) and him were lovers before. I cannot harden my heart to not see him.”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong can recall the venomous look in Sa Li’s eyes as he was being dismissed. He questioned in a deep voice: “What did he say?”

Zhu Xiuzhen sighed: “I should not be telling you this but he sounded so serious there is no way I can hide it from you. He swore he would hack you and Zhang Quan to pieces. Judging from his tone, I am sure he has someone backing him up.”

As Xiang Shaolong thought of Gu Ming, Fu Yan and the rest of the gang who used to follow Sa Li's leadership, he can feel his own fighting spirit soaring. If he does not make the first move to rid the troupe of these internal spies, in the future, a careless move could see him at a disadvantage and sustaining heavy losses.

He icily quizzed: "Did you try to find out who are his backers?"

Zhu Xiuzhen was stunned: "He is not willing to reveal his employer. Ai. Can you please give him a way out? He is a man who has lost everything."

Xiang Shaolong frankly state: "If you are dumb enough, he will still get to own you and your riches. The fact that he is working with a powerful mastermind clearly shows that he is just making use of you."

Guilt-ridden, Zhu Xiuzhen lowered her head.

Patting her shoulder, Xiang Shaolong comforted: "Please go back to bed; I will take care of this matter. In the future, do not ever meet him alone and do come to me if you have any problems."

Tugging the corner of his sleeve, Zhu Xiuzhen offered: "Will you allow me to accompany you tonight? You are now the hero of the Troupe."

Stretching out his hand, Xiang Shaolong pinched her cheek,

laughing: “I am dead tired and had several frightening encounters today. All I want to do is to lie down and have a good rest. I will have to defer Miss’s generous offer!”

Catching up to his departing figure, Zhu Xiuzhen charmingly suggested: “I am an expert masseuse. Shall I serve you a round of massage? I guarantee you will fall asleep before you know it.”

Xiang Shaolong is highly aroused but he remembered Feng Fei has activated his flames of passion earlier. If he allows himself to be further sexually aggravated by Zhu Xiuzhen’s massage, the small fire can burn down an entire forest. He would lose control and violate his own commandment. Thinking about this, he reached out his hand and embrace her towards himself, giving her a light peck on her lips, gently professing: “With such a fine female specimen on my bed, how can I remain unmoved and how can I fall asleep easily?”

Zhu Xiuzhen breathed heavily: “You do not love me. That is why you do not allow me to serve you.”

Trying his best to pacify and kiss her, Xiang Shaolong finally slipped away after much difficulty. Before he reached his room, he was intercepted by Zhang Quan and was dragged into his room. Zhang Quan probed: “How did you persuade Zongsun Long to release our men? Did you promise him certain benefits?”

He certainly could not be as open with Zhang Quan as compared to Feng Fei. Pretending to break out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Fortunately, the Chancellor of Chu, Li Yuan, is at the scene. He knows I represent Mistress (Feng Fei) and put in a good

word for me. Zongsun Long is afraid of offending him and agreed to release our men as a result.”

Zhang Quan frowned: “Do you think Li Yuan has designs on Mistress too? Today’s troubles are all because you did not consult me regarding human resource management. Do not make the same mistake in the future.”

While he agreed with Zhang Quan on this point, he was glad to make the mistake. Otherwise, he would not know the extent of Li Yuan’s friendship. Inspired, he enquired: “Do you know who Sa Li’s employer is?”

Zhang Quan apparently did not know about Sa Li’s secret meeting with Zhu Xiuzhen and was astounded at this comment. He implored: “What happened?”

Xiang Shaolong mumbled jumbled: “Mistress (Feng Fei) told me someone has seen Sa Li loitering around.”

After a short contemplation, Zhang Quan shook his head: “I am not very sure. Sa Li is a citizen of Zhao and he could be working for someone influential in Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong found this information to be greatly helpful. He bade his farewell and returned to his own room.

Stepping into his room, a vague fragrance entered his nostrils.

Xiang Shaolong is afraid of being poisoned by sleep-inducing incense or something related and instantly held his breath. When he was about to light his lamp, Dong Shuzhen's gentle voice can be heard from his bed: "I do not want the lights on."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a big headache approaching. Earlier tonight, he had been sexually tempted first by Feng Fei, followed by Zhu Xiuzhen. He can feel his willpower decreasing with each new encounter. Moreover, Dong Shuzhen is a high-class escort and even if he laid her, he need not feel accountable for this love debt. Momentarily, his mind is filled with the possibility of this one night stand.

Dong Shuzhen naughtily cooed: "Why aren't you coming over?"

With a bitter smile, Xiang Shaolong walked over to her. Under the faint illumination of the moonlight through the window, coupled with his familiarity of the room in darkness, he is able to vaguely see his way.

Pulling the bed curtains to one side, he saw Dong Shuzhen sitting on his bed with a blanket wrapped around her body. She coquettishly smiled: "Please do not be mistaken. I am only here because I have some secrets to tell you."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself: What if underneath that blanket is her naked body? He can feel a sense of disappointment.

Xiang Shaolong took off his shoes and readily dumped his

overcoat on a chair. Climbing onto his bed, he sat down cross-legged facing her and examined: “What kind of secrets is it that has to be revealed on the bed?”

Dong Shuzen’s aura of exquisiteness may be inferior to Feng Fei’s but she is not too far off. Her beauty is comparable to Dan Meimei. In addition, she is at the prime of her youth, fresh and at an ideal age. Regardless of how you look at it, she is certainly an erection-inducing beauty, a person who will make you lose your self-control. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is filled with perverse thoughts and he would be lying to himself if he said he is not tempted at all.

Dong Shuzen released her grip and allow the cotton blanket to slip off, revealing her perfect hourglass naked upper body.

Under the hazy moonlight, her prominent and high nose became more outstanding, as did her firm and protruding breasts, evoking countless mesmerizing sensations.

The killing point is due to her fast breathing, her supple flesh are quivering minutely, causing Xiang Shaolong to lose his soul in this seducing rhythm.

As Xiang Shaolong was highly agitated, Dong Shuzen’s smooth and warm body snaked into his bosom, letting him enjoy the slick, fragrant and soft female body sticking onto his own, creating intense excitement.

Although Xiang Shaolong unconsciously hugged her tightly in return, his mind remains clear and sharp. He whispered: “Can you

first state your intentions?”

Dong Shuzen unwilling wriggled, causing Xiang Shaolong to become even more disconcerted. Gritting his teeth in endurance, he refocused his mind and warned: “If you are using your body to bribe me, you will earn nothing but my disdain.”

It is not often that he employs such cruel words to a female but if not for this; he will unquestionably fall into this flesh trap.

As anticipated, Dong Shuzen’s body trembled and she withdrew herself from him.

Xiang Shaolong’s mind is still filled with connotations of himself cuddling her tender and slim waist. He could not help but advance his lips towards her, enjoying the taste of her ruby lips.

Soon, Dong Shuzen has entangled herself around his thick and muscular neck but after they stopped kissing, she did not try to seduce him with any suggestive actions.

Seeing that he was silent, Dong Shuzen slowly asked: “You do not love Shuzen?”

Even if he did not love her, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to say it out for this is against his own conscious. He bitterly laughed: “A man who does not love you is not an ordinary man. But we are now in an unusually dangerous situation and surrounded by enemies crying for our blood. If we enter into a relationship without

making sure of each other's agenda, it will only complicate matters and worsen the situation."

Dong Shuzen sat up straight. She apologized: "I did not think about this point. I only wish that after giving my body to you, I would be able to enjoy some of your love and attention in the future. You are truly exceptional, even Zongsun Long has to make allowances for you."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Unlike the others, why didn't you suspect Zongsun Long and I came to a secret understanding?"

Dong Shuzen sweetly chirped: "Because I know you are more than that." Xiang Shaolong immediately felt that she is a friend whom he can confide in but is also concerned that she is just trying to sweet-talk him. He proposed: "If I am able to let Mistress (Feng Fei) retire peacefully and allow you to inherit her business, forming your own Troupe, how would you feel about that?"

Dong Shuzen's body greatly quavered but she recovered as quickly and shook her head: "That is impossible. I have just received news that Mistress (Feng Fei) is giving us away as presents and our new owner is someone influential within the Six Eastern States. Right now, I only pray for someone to take me and my savings away from this place. It does not matter where I end up."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You should have known this matter much earlier and did not just receive the news!"

Dong Shuzen nodded: "Your deduction is correct. But it is only

today that I am able to accurately conclude that we will be presented to the influential Duke Han Chuang from the State of Han. This man has an incredible network of friends from high places and is on excellent terms with Second Prince Tian Jian. We cannot hope to defeat him nor escape his evil clutches.”

Xiang Shaolong was stupefied: “How did you conclude he is the one?”

Dong Shuzen coldly laughed: “Han Chuang paid Feng Fei a secret visit today and you are probably the only one who is unaware of it. If not for some sort of agreement between Feng Fei and him, why would she meet this pervert privately? His repulsive acts in bed make me want to puke whenever I think about it.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong know that Han Chuang had slept with Dong Shuzen in the past. No wonder he had such a deep impression of her. He gently coaxed: “You can put your mind at ease. I naturally have my ways of resolving this issue.”

Dong Shuzen gingerly stared at him for some time before sighing: “This is not a small matter and I will not blindly believe your empty words. Unless there is some way you can prove to me otherwise, I can only depend on myself to find a way out.”

Concerned that she may catch a cold, Xiang Shaolong embraced her and lay down underneath the blanket with her. Biting her ear, he declared: “If you are banking your hopes on Zhang Quan, you are only befriending a man-eating tiger. This man has no integrity and his heart is evil. Regarding the details of my methods, unless you bare your soul to me, there will be things I cannot reveal to

you.”

Misunderstanding his intention, Dong Shuzhen hugged him zealously and kissed: “I can do whatever your heart desires.” At the same time, she reached out her hand and began stroking his back.

Xiang Shaolong almost exhausted his willpower and halted: “That is not what I meant. I want you to tell me all the vested relationships you have with Zhang Quan or any other individuals, as well as all related events.”

Dong Shuzhen stopped teasing him and made a big frown: “But how should I know if you are a die-hard loyalist of Mistress (Feng Fei)? Frankly speaking, my wealth is secondary to hers. In terms of looks, I lose out by an even greater margin. And you are not the least interested in my body. How can I have the confidence to align your interests with mine?”

Xiang Shaolong challenged: “I thought you said you know what kind of person I am?”

Dong Shuzhen bitterly laughed: “But you have always been very aloof towards me!”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely pledged: “Things have changed. In actual fact, I never had the intention to deceive you. For a long time I already knew about Zhang Quan’s relationship with you but I want you to personally confess to me about it to prove your authenticity.”

Dong Shuzen divulged: “Fine. I did spend a few nights with him before. He is a fairly resourceful man and even Mistress is afraid of him to some extent. He wanted me to make a copy of Mistress’s (Feng Fei) latest two songs and he would arrange for me to stay in Qi instead of being sent to Han.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted: “What!”

He instantaneously inferred that the song sheets would eventually fall into the hands of Tian Dan because Lan Gongyuan is working for him.

If Lan Gongyuan gets to perform before Feng Fei and uses a similar tune, it would severely disrupt Feng Fei’s performance. This is a truly nefarious plan.

Rewarding him with another kiss, Dong Shuzen proudly announced: “You never saw it coming, did you? As long as I can bring harm to Feng Fei, there is nothing I will not do. I will slip away before the performance, teaching her a painful lesson that not all the credits belong to her alone.”

Xiang Shaolong got worked up: “Have you given it to Zhang Quan?”

Dong Shuzen commented: “I would not have mentioned it if I had given it to him. There, I have confessed everything to you. Master Shen, what are you giving back in return to appease me?”

Xiang Shaolong finally grasped the devilish methods of these famous courtesans.

Their forte lies in their understanding of the psychology of men. Pretending to be helpless creatures to evoke sympathy and protection, they do not mind using their bodies and their glib tongues to negotiate for assistance. Regardless of whether it is Dong Shuzhen or Zhu Xiuzhen, they are masters of their own game.

Dong Shuzhen is currently using the tactic of indirect confrontation.

She has assumed that Xiang Shaolong is working for Feng Fei and is delivering a message to Feng Fei through him. If Feng Fei refuses to let her go, Feng Fei will have to face undeniable defeat at the Song & Dance showdown between her and the other two famous courtesans.

Due to her unique talent, she is unafraid of Feng Fei pressuring her into submission.

Zhu Xiuzhen is positively the source of her knowledge regarding Han Chuang's involvement. And Zhu Xiuzhen probably got this piece of news from Sa Li. However, Zhu Xiuzhen chose not to tell him, Xiang Shaolong, about this critical piece of information.

Xiang Shaolong is able to come to these conclusions because he knows about the special relationship between these two ladies.

They are still working together, perfectly matching each other and doing their best to execute the plan from different angles. In the eyes of Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen, they have already assumed that Zongsun Long has successfully bribed Xiang Shaolong, explaining the eventual freeing of their troupe members.

They could not be bothered with Feng Fei's destiny. Zhu Xiuzhen did not ask him about it and Dong Shuzhen used it to indirectly praise him, making him feel good about himself and herself.

Even Feng Fei, who is behaving like she totally trusts him, did not reveal about her meeting with Han Chuang. The most suited phrase to describe her is: Unpredictable with hidden agenda.

With all these thoughts running through his mind, Xiang Shaolong felt that his head is about to explode. He surrendered: "Your candid admission is chilling to my bones. Ai. Second Mistress, do you know that your words make me feel like leaving here and forgetting about everything for the very first time?"

Dong Shuzhen passionately served him another warm kiss and smiled: "Shuzhen knows Master Shen is not someone who does not finish what he started."

Xiang Shaolong secretly admitted to her precise judgement. Unexpectedly, he strongly grabbed her waist, nearly spraining it, and icily snorted into her refined ear: "Dong Shuzhen, if you continue assuming that I am blindly helping Mistress (Feng Fei) and using these tactics against me, I guarantee that you will regret it for the rest of your life. Do you believe me?"

A frightened Dong Shuzhen softly wailed and protested: “I am only pulling a fast one on Mistress. With regards to you; I am only hoping that you will pay more attention to me!”

Xiang Shaolong can feel her body rubbing all over his body like a water snake. He almost lost it and push her slightly away before gently challenging: “If I were Feng Fei and I found out that you have an extra copy of the song and lyrics, I would arrest you and Xiuzhen and conduct a search for the song sheet. The song sheet will surely be found in either of your possession. Do you dare to bet on it?”

Like a startled bird, Dong Shuzhen shuddered violently, signaling to Xiang Shaolong that his words have struck her vulnerable spot, which is the secret alliance between her and Zhu Xiuzhen.

All along, Zhu Xiuzhen is using the soft approach while Dong Shuzhen is using the tough-within-soft approach. These approaches are specially formulated to attack Xiang Shaolong’s weakness.

If Xiang Shaolong is lacking in willpower, he would have immersed himself in their fantasies and become one of their pawns. By then, it will be beyond redemption.

Fortunately, he had made up his mind earlier to not succumb to their sex traps, allowing him to maintain his present clarity.

It might be possible that the two ladies are working together with Sa Li against Feng Fei and himself.

From the standpoint of Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen, they will cooperate with whoever that they can derive the most benefits from. If Xiang Shaolong had assumed that the ladies genuinely appreciate him, then he will be the greatest fool on earth.

Both of them exchange looks with each other under the dark and dimly lighted surroundings.

After some time, Dong Shuzhen sadly asked: “What makes you think in such a manner?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Why don’t you go back and think about it? I will not say anything about the song sheet to Mistress. If you want to threaten her, threaten her directly. One day, when you can place your complete trust in me and stop working together with despicable cads like Zhang Quan, Sa Li, please come and talk to me. Only then will I do my best to help you and I ask for nothing in return.”

Dong Shuzhen tried to dispute further but Xiang Shaolong angrily bellowed: “Get out!”

Two rows of teardrops began to roll down the corner of Dong Shuzhen’s eyes. She noiselessly left his bed.

Beyond the bed curtains, Xiang Shaolong saw her covering her milky, jade white body with her clothes and nearly wanted to call her back to his side. Ultimately, he hardened his heart and watch her take her leave.

Book 22 Chapter 11 - Clearing All Misunderstanding

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, it was already well into the day. In fact, it was Xiao Yuetan who extracted him from his slumber.

By now, Xiang Shaolong enjoys special privileges within the Troupe. After ordering his breakfast to be served to his room, both men sat down to talk and eat intermittently.

After Xiang Shaolong told Xiao Yuetan his story, Xiao Yuetan could not help but wipe off his own sweat, affirming: “It is a blessing that Li Yuan is a man who values your friendship. Otherwise, it will be curtains for you last night. With Li Yuan’s support, the circumstances are now highly favourable. Even if you reveal your identity, the people of Qi dare not offend you and moreover, Li Yuan will not allow it to happen.”

Xiang Shaolong quizzed: “Did you gain any new information?”

Xiao Yuetan divulged: “Compared to yours, my job is relatively easy. Grandmaster Zou (Yan) is still alive and is currently residing at Qixia College. The people of Qi worship him like a living deity and if you ever choose to reveal your identity, you should reveal it with his blessings. If Grandmaster Zou informs the King of Qi about the unbearable consequences of your demise, I guarantee that even if someone points a sword at his (King of Qi) throat, he would not dare to harm you.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “Let me first meet up with him

before we decide what to do next. Can Brother Xiao make the necessary arrangements?”

Xiao Yuetan swore: “You can count on me. I will act on it by today. Lu Buwei is due to arrive this afternoon. I will send my men to put Zhang Quan under strict surveillance. The moment he gets the money will also be his unlucky moment.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Do not inflict serious injuries on him. I still need him to indirectly gain knowledge about Lu Buwei’s plans.”

Xiao Yuetan coldly hissed: “Killing someone like him will only dirty my hands. Shaolong can put your mind at ease.”

He laughed: “Do you remember my colleague Zongsun Heji? He happened to be Zongsun Long’s nephew and I will seek his assistance in spying on Zongsun Long’s strategies. Since young, he has been disgruntled with this uncle of his. Moreover, he is a great admirer of Feng Fei and we can appeal to his sense of justice to help us out. But if Shaolong is willing to come out into the open with your original identity, I am certain that even the powerful and reckless Zongsun Long would not dare to do anything rash. Ai. Now that you are alive and can return to Qin, there is no one who will risk antagonizing you, especially the Three States of Han, Zhao and Wei. Each State wishes for the other States to make a move against you and bear the crime of killing you. What wishful thinking!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement.

Ever since he was on the run, the Three States have combined efforts to hunt and kill himself. Now that the window of opportunity is over and they are seeking peace with Xiao Pan, who, in their right mind, would want to cause trouble for him, Xiang Shaolong. The best thing about this is on the surface; the people of Qi have to put up a show of doing their best to safeguard him, in order to maintain the cordial relationship between Qi and Qin.

In the eyes of the people of Qi, their primary target is their longstanding nemesis Yan, not Qin nor Xiang Shaolong.

With the support of the influential Li Yuan, Xiang Shaolong felt that he can become himself again whenever he chooses to and not live life in constant fear of being discovered.

Xiang Shaolong can gingerly feel his natural outstanding aura revitalizing his body but is slightly reluctant to give up the present role he is playing. He laughed: “Li Yuan is representing Chu, from Han we have Han Chuang and Qin is of course Lu Buwei. Who are the other three representatives from the other three states?”

Xiao Yuetan updated: “Coming from Wei is obviously your old friend Lord Longyang. From Zhao comes Guo Kai. For Yan, Prince Dan dare not make the trip in person but sent his Chief General Xu Yizhe. This man has been promoted and awarded the title of Lord Yangle by the King of Yan.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “It is truly a congregation of old friends. Which is the most famous brothel around here? We should

reserve two tables there and hold a gathering for old time's sake!"

Xiao Yuetan is elated: "Shaolong is finally in the mood to crack jokes!"

In this instance, the sound of knocking can be heard. A maid reported: "Shi Sufang's Boss Jin is here and wishes to see Manager Shen."

Xiang Shaolong was caught by surprise but Xiao Yuetan assured: "He is a bit of a hero to some extent and is definitely not a scum. Shaolong, there is no harm in seeing what he wants."

After putting the fruit seed underneath his tongue, he proceeded to the front hall to meet Boss Jin.

Boss Jin may have met Xiang Shaolong in Xianyang before but he obviously failed to recognize him. In addition, Xiang Shaolong's speech is now littered with occasional odd stuttering, erasing any potential doubts.

Once the usual pleasantries have been exchanged, both men sat down according to their status as host and guest while serving maids offered hot tea. Using his 'fruit seed voice', Xiang Shaolong stuttered in phases: "I wonder what instructions does Boss Jin have for Little Brother?"

Boss Jin boisterously laughed: "Of course I am here to congratulate Brother Shen on your promotion to Manager. If that

fella Zhang Quan is still manager, you will never catch me alive in this place.”

Xiang Shaolong is not the least bit surprised because Zhang Quan is indeed a detestable *****. But Boss Jin is someone who is exposed to worldly affairs and by right; he would not speak badly of someone in such a straightforward manner. For him to make this comment, his real intention is to test Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed in return: “I pray that in the future, I, Shen Liang, will not be the reason for Boss Jin to ignore us.”

Boss Jin leaned over slightly and whispered: “There are rumours flying all over, prophesizing that Miss Feng will retire back to her hometown after her Lin Zi tour. I wonder if the rumour is true?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “How do you expect me to answer you? Are you forcing me to lie to you?”

Boss Jin is greatly pleased: “I got it. I specially paid you a visit because I wanted to arrange a meeting between Sufang and Miss Feng. Sufang has always admired Miss Feng’s talent.”

Xiang Shaolong accepted: “Although I cannot decide for my Mistress, I do not foresee any problems with the appointment. Can Boss tell me what is a good time to meet?”

Boss Jin proposed: “Let’s meet again this afternoon. It would be better if we are both around during the meeting.”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong raised a red flag, knowing that it will not be an ordinary conversation. Otherwise, Boss Jin need not be around.

Although Boss Jin shares the same status as him, which is the post of a Troupe General Manager, in reality, their standing is worlds apart.

After all, he is the owner of the Troupe. Although Shi Sufang enjoys more prestige than him, she is legally just the leading female actress under his banner. On the other hand, he, Xiang Shaolong, is just a highly ranked runner.

Boss Jin is only being polite when he asks for Xiang Shaolong to be present as well.

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged: "I got your point. However, can Boss reveal some traces of the discussion topic? It will be easier for me talk to my Mistress."

Boss Jin nodded: "I will have to trouble you to tell Miss Feng that somebody is plotting to win the Song & Dance competition at all costs."

Recalling the Soft-Boned Beauty Lan Gongyuan, Xiang Shaolong immediately understood his point: "I got it. I will inform Mistress right away."

Boss Jin cheerfully bade farewell and took his leave.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to look for Xiao Yuetan first but he has already left his room. Zhang Quan intercepted him once again and began badgering him with questions but Xiang Shaolong dismissed him with vague answers before excusing himself and headed to Feng Fei's building.

Feng Fei and her fellow performers are busy rehearsing in the inner hall and Dong Shuzhen, Zhu Xiuzhen appeared to be slightly haggard. Xiang Shaolong believed that after leaving his room, Dong Shuzhen probably went to look for Zhu Xiuzhen to discuss the latest developments. It is likely that they even engaged in lesbian sex, explaining their present lethargy.

Noticing his arrival, Little Ping'er intentionally hid at a corner, refusing to face him.

Alternatively, Xinyue is batting her eyes at him seductively, as if she is hinting him to make love to her. The attitude of the other courtesans has improved significantly, signifying the newfound respect he has gained after last night's episode.

Feng Fei happened to be giving instructions to Yun Niang and her musicians. Noting Xiang Shaolong's presence, she gracefully sashayed to his side, questioning in a low voice: "What does Boss Jin wants with you?"

After Xiang Shaolong told her the details, he plainly asked in return: "What does Han Chuang wants with you?"

From the corner of his eye, he observed that everyone, especially Dong Shuzen, is secretly paying attention to the two of them.

Feng Fei unhappily complained: “The things that you are interfering with seems to be increasing every time I talk to you.”

Annoyed, Xiang Shaolong coldly retaliated: “My ability to interfere lies in the hands of Mistress (you). If you would kindly give the order, I will pack my belongings and sleep in the streets tonight.”

Giving him an icy stare, Feng Fei scorned: “With the likes of Xie Ziyuan and Li Yuan looking after your well-being, does Master Shen need to resort to sleeping in the streets?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that in her heart, she is actually afraid that he will desert her. Softening his tone, he apologized: “It is my fault for using such strong language but it is natural for me to be upset after realizing that you are hiding things from me.”

Dazed, Feng Fei wailed: “You are behaving as if you are my husband. Why should I report everything to you?”

It is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to feel bad for his overbearing behavior.

Logically, Feng Fei does not need to notify him about her meetings.

The problem lies with the fact that this meeting with Han Chuang has implications on the future of Dong Shuzen and the courtesans, attracting his attention.

It is basically a matter of perception.

Xiang Shaolong helplessly surrendered: “All right. In the future, I will not poke my nose into your businesses.”

After a short spell of silence, Feng Fei lamented: “Why are the two of us quarrelling the first thing in the morning?”

Xiang Shaolong replied without thinking: “It is because we care a lot about each other.”

Just as Xiang Shaolong can feel his head numbing, Feng Fei gladly commanded: “Invite the Lord in at once!”

Observing Feng Fei’s outlook, Xiang Shaolong is certain that she is on intimate terms with Lord Longyang.

Lord Longyang is probably the only ‘man’ Feng Fei need not worry about that is lusting after herself.

There is no way Xiang Shaolong can hide as Lord Longyang

stepped into the inner hall under a heavy escort of family warriors.

Everybody including Feng Fei, her courtesans, musicians and serving maids half-kneel, half bow to welcome this influential person from Wei.

Only Xiang Shaolong is unwilling to kneel or bow down.

When Lord Longyang first laid his eyes on him, he trembled violently and was stunned on the spot, unable to believe his very own eyes.

Feng Fei and the rest of the crowd were flabbergasted.

Letting out a long laugh, Xiang Shaolong put his fists together and greeted: "How are you doing my Lord? I can still remember the times when I, Shen Liang, was serving Prince Wuji as a family warrior and I have had the honour of drinking and chatting with Your Lordship until the wee hours. Time really flies, evoking countless emotions. Those who are meant to depart have departed. Those who are meant to die are dead. Shen Liang has nearly forgotten about the past (when you betrayed me)."

With a flash of embarrassment across his face, Lord Longyang respectfully returned his greetings: "Even though Brother Shen is willing to let go of the past, Lordship (I) will never forget what happened. Regarding Prince Wuji's demise, Lordship (I) is forced by circumstances to act. After the deed is done, I even contemplated suicide. Aye. I do not know what to say next."

Making use of Prince Xinling, Wei Wuji's episode, both men have resolved this mental burden, with one party expressing forgiveness and the other party admitting to the mistake and begging for pardon. Except for Lord Longyang's expert swordsman cum bodyguard Jiaoxi who is familiar with Xiang Shaolong, everyone else is in a state of confusion, not knowing if they had inferred their conversation correctly or incorrectly.

Feng Fei and her Troupe members are still greatly astonished, finally realizing that Shen Liang is such a reputable and prominent person. On the other hand, Lord Longyang's subordinates are still feeling perplexed, unable to comprehend Lord Longyang contradiction. When their master got rid of Prince Xinling, he even threw a banquet to celebrate the event but right now, he is expressing deep regrets over the same incident.

It is amazing how things eventually work out.

Feng Fei straightened her body and merrily smiled: "Your Lordship and my manager Mister Shen are old friends. How wonderful!"

Xiang Shaolong did a quick scan of the crowd. From Feng Fei to Little Ping'er, everyone is wearing a funny expression on his or her face. He instantaneously felt awkward and wronged, conscious that everyone is suspecting that Lord Longyang shares a gay relationship with him.

The crucial point is that he has never proven to any of the ladies that he is 'a normal man', but has proven himself on several occasions to be 'abnormal', leading to such an ambiguous scenario.

The most conspicuous look of astonishment is exhibited on the face of Little Ping'er, as if she had suddenly found the answer to her problems, causing Xiang Shaolong further embarrassment.

He could never imagine himself being caught in a situation such as this.

His demeanor significantly relaxed, Lord Longyang came forward and announced to the courtesans: "Dear ladies, do not allow Lordship's (my) presence to affect your rehearsal. Please treat me like an ordinary spectator."

Dong Shuzen viciously shot Xiang Shaolong a glare before resuming the dance practice with the other courtesans.

Coming to Xiang Shaolong's front, Lord Longyang firstly reached out his hand to grip Xiang Shaolong's hand tightly before releasing his grasp and faced Feng Fei, assuring: "With Brother Shen assisting Miss Feng, all your problems will certainly be solved."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, finally realizing that Lord Longyang is Feng Fei's actual protector. Han Chuang is just another pawn of hers. If he were in Feng Fei's shoes, he too, would rather place his trust in Lord Longyang than the lustful Han Chuang.

Moreover, if Feng Fei wishes to travel to Xianyang to rendezvous with her mystery lover, it would be ideal to seek protection from influential people from Wei and Han. Besides, Lord Longyang has the authority to keep an eye on Han Chuang.

Feng Fei shivered slightly, gazing at Xiang Shaolong first, followed by Lord Longyang, behaving as if she did not understand the meaning of Lord Longyang's words. She whispered: "Has Your Lordship seen Duke Han?" Xiang Shaolong recognizes that she is implicitly asking Lord Longyang if he has been updated about the latest developments: Lu Buwei's involvement. As anticipated, Lord Longyang guaranteed: "Of course I have and I am aware of Miss's concerns. With this bright strategist Brother Shen guiding you, Lu Buwei will surely be biting off more than he can chew."

Feng Fei's initial state of puzzlement turned into a state of shock and virtually fell into a daze.

Lord Longyang realizes that he was overly excited after receiving Xiang Shaolong's pardon, and as a result, his words are 'too honest' for Feng Fei to stomach. He explained: "As an ex-opponent, I have nothing but respect for Brother Shen's talent and wisdom."

Jiaoxi, who had accompanied Lord Longyang to step forward, grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulder in a brotherly manner, highlighting his admiration of Xiang Shaolong's capabilities and heroic deeds.

After experiencing numerous trials and tribulations, Xiang Shaolong can feel his old emotions surging.

Once again, he visualizes the scene when the Eagle King sacrificed itself for its owner.

Noticing the extreme anguish glowing from his piercing eyes, Feng Fei thought that he is grieving for his ex-owner and her own heart is filled with an indescribable feeling.

Taking a look at the rehearsing courtesans, Lord Longyang asked of Feng Fei: “Lordship (I) wish to speak with Brother Shen privately before I come back to you.” Feng Fei could not reject his request and acquiesced. Moving to a side room and dismissing all their men, his eyes welled up with hot tears as Lord Longyang pitifully cried: “I am worse than a beast. Shaolong treated me so well and yet I...”

Xiang Shaolong did his best to comfort him and after Lord Longyang recomposed himself slightly, he faced Xiang Shaolong with a pair of red and swollen eyes, recounting: “I told Han Chuang about this matter and he gave me a piece of his mind. He scolded me, saying that on the battlefield, there is no right or wrong but how can I not help you when you are obviously in trouble?”

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: “Why did you tell Han Chuang this secret? You believe he can be trusted?”

Lord Longyang was guilt-ridden: “Keeping the secret to myself is unbearable. I would rather someone scold and blame me as a way of atoning for my sin. For me, besides Shaolong, hey, besides Shaolong, he is the only person I can confide in. He cannot do without me just yet as I am assisting him with several matters.”

Never in his dreams would he imagine Han Chuang to be such a loyal friend but he dared not voice it out, fearing that it would hurt

Lord Longyang's feelings. He requested: "In this case, can you kindly inform him about my present status, because I will need to ask him to show mercy in releasing Dong Shuzen and the other girls from his control."

Lord Longyang seems to know about the agreement between Feng Fei and Han Chuang. He nodded in agreement: "Besides guarding yourself against Tian Dan and Lu Buwei, you must not neglect Guo Kai. This cunning bastard brought your strange weapon here to Qi, intending to present it to King Xiang as a birthday gift, scheming to drag Qi down with them. King Xiang is now in a dilemma; if he accepts the gift, he will offend Yingzheng, if he rejects the gift, tongues will wag, saying that he is afraid of Qin."

Xiang Shaolong gnashed his teeth, savagely swearing: "Can you find out the location of my Hundred Battle Sabre? No matter what it takes, I have got to get it back."

Lord Longyang sighed: "Your King (Xiao Pan) has just send a special emissary, warning us, the Three States (Han Zhao Wei) that whoever lays a finger on you will suffer his wrath and revenge at all costs. All of us are frightened into ceasing all efforts in hunting you down. The people of Zhao are the worst hit, losing five cities in succession. Li Mu dared not abandon his camp at Zhongmou while we have suffered a fresh defeat. Thus, we are unable to come to Zhao's aid even if we wanted to. As a result, Guo Kai hates us to the core and during Feng Fei's welcoming banquet last night, he kept making snide remarks, jeering and insulting Han Chuang and I. His crap attitude is simply intolerable."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “What is Tian Dan’s current standing?”

Lord Longyang summarized: “He still wields considerable influence in Qi and his weakest link is the lousy bum Tian Sheng whom he is supporting to become the Crown Prince of Qi. Tian Sheng is lagging far behind Prince Tian Jian, who is well loved by the people of Qi. This Tian Jian cannot be considered a man of talent but he is adept at using schemes to gather support for himself, unlike the arrogant and self-serving Tian Sheng. Until today, the successor to the throne of Qi remains a mystery.”

Pausing, he awkwardly inquired: “How did Shaolong have the foresight to leave my residence and ended up as Feng Fei’s manager?”

Xiang Shaolong originally did not want to reveal the truth but does not want Lord Longyang to misunderstand him, thinking that he is still bearing grudges. He used a simple reason to satisfy Lord Longyang’s curiosity and obviously did not mention about his trip to the Palace of Wei.

After hearing his explanation and feeling remorseful for some time, Lord Longyang quizzed: “When does Shaolong plan to declare your true identity and openly ask for the return of your precious weapon?”

Xiang Shaolong contemplated: “It may be inappropriate to reveal my true identity for the time being. Let’s observe the situation further!”

Lord Longyang warned: “If revealing the truth is not a necessity, I would advise you to keep your identity a secret all the way. There is a local saying here: The Extremists of Qixia, meaning that Qixia students are generally very egoistic, doing whatever they please and looking at others with contempt. It is the same regardless whether they are scholars or warriors. Moreover, Cao Quidao will defend some of his top students against persecution. There are indeed a few of his students who have learnt the essence of his skills and go about creating chaos in Lin Zi. Presently, Shaolong has the reputation of being the top swordsman, only second to Cao Quidao. If word goes out about your presence, it will only invite endless trouble. The King of Qi cannot intervene in private duels and if you happened to be killed in a fair fight, even Yingzheng do not have the right to hold Qi to it.”

Xiang Shaolong is definitely not interested in using his fighting abilities to gain fame for himself. He nodded: “Your Lordship is right. Tian Dan, Lu Buwei and even Guo Kai will use this opportunity to incite more chaos. If I get involved with Cao Cuidao, I will be just like Lu Buwei, biting off more than I can chew. That will be disastrous.”

With a ‘Pu Ci’ sound, Lord Longyang could not help but break out into a girly giggle. He contentedly voiced: “I can finally sleep well tonight. Ever since that fateful night, my heart is so painful it seemed to have broken into pieces.”

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has indeed lost a fair bit of weight over the incident. Showing concern, he vouched: “From the beginning until the end, I have never forgotten about you, my friend.”

Lord Longyang is still reluctant to take his leave and Xiang Shaolong persuaded: “It is not ideal for us to spend too much time talking in private. You should visit Feng Fei on your own while I have to attend to a few of my men who were injured by Zongsun Long.”

Lord Longyang was appalled: “Zongsun Long already made a move?”

Xiang Shaolong went to the extent of repeating the entire story to him. An embarrassed Lord Longyang lamented: “Even Li Yuan is a better friend than me. I am not fit to be human.”

After Xiang Shaolong coaxed him with many kind words did Lord Longyang finally leave in an unwilling manner.

Book 22 Chapter 12 - Meeting Of The 2

Courtesans

Amazingly, Feng Fei did not look for Xiang Shaolong after the departure of Lord Longyang. It was only until lunchtime was over before Little Ping'er received her command to summon Xiang Shaolong for a talk.

As he walked behind her towards the inner hall, Little Ping'er who has been ignoring him for the past few days suddenly remarked with a friendly disposition: "So you prefer males instead of females. Little Ping'er can finally give you up."

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Xiang Shaolong knows that he should not deny it but he cannot don't deny as well. Exhaling a breath, he predicted: "Sister Ping will know the truth one day. But there is something I do not understand. Shouldn't Sister Ping be following Mistress all the way? Why does it seem like... Like... Hey!"

Covering her mouth, Little Ping'er giggled: "Are you implying that I appeared to be looking for someone to settle down with? Frankly speaking, it has never crossed my mind to marry you. I am only annoyed at your condescending behavior. Mistress has advised me that my first time is the most important, and must be given to someone who truly loves me. I naturally do not wish to leave Mistress's service but she had given me the freedom to leave if I choose to."

Suddenly, he was struck by a thought and quizzed: "What if you got yourself pregnant?"

Her face reddening slightly, Little Ping'er chided: "It is none of your business. Furthermore, all troupe members would know how to prevent fertilization. Oh, are you still interested in women? Why are you asking these embarrassing questions?"

Seeing that in the opinion of Little Ping'er, it is a forgone conclusion that he is gay so he kept quiet instead.

The side of the inner hall is still occupied by various instruments but there is nobody else except for Feng Fei. After Little Ping'er excused herself, Xiang Shaolong sat down alongside Feng Fei, inquiring: "Has Mistress met Shi Sufang before?"

Feng Fei shook her head in an uninterested way, lamenting: "(Boss) Jin Cheng is a real talent, managing the operations, courtesans and clients in an admirable fashion, gaining the respect of one and all. Unfortunately, I am unable to recruit someone as capable as him, otherwise, I need not bear with your nonsense."

Xiang Shaolong prompted: "Mistress is still mad at me?"

Feng Fei lowered her head, chuckling: "Who dares to be angry at you? Even Lord Longyang is full of admiration and respect for you. Moreover, you would hug and kiss me whenever you are in a good mood but will turn around and give me a piece of your mind when you are in a bad mood. Luckily, Feng Fei no longer needs to worry about you needing a companion for the night. Otherwise, it will be a source of insomnia for me."

Deflated like a balloon, Xiang Shaolong mused: “Even you believe that I am gay.”

Feng Fei shook her head: “Nope, but this is what everyone else is thinking. Xinyue was so heartbroken she went back to her room in tears. But I am certain you are not adverse to females, because I am speaking from personal experience. I am intentionally teasing you, dying to wipe that silly smile off your face.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “You are really good to me.”

Feng Fei admitted: “I can no longer fathom what kind of person you are but since Lord Longyang guarantees your absolute reliability, singing the same tune as Mister Tan, I am willing to conclude that you are a man of your word. Feng Fei will no longer doubt you and wishes to listen to your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly advised: “We must resolve our internal issues before we can confront external parties; there is no better way. If Mistress is prepared to delegate complete authority to me, I will firstly commit to getting rid of Zhang Quan, Sa Li and their conspirators. Once we reached Xianyang safely, it will be mission accomplished.”

Feng Fei was slightly upset: “You seemed to have forgotten that Lu Buwei wields considerable influence in Xianyang.”

Acting surprised, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “Mistress is going for Xiang Shaolong, isn’t? What can Lu Buwei do to him?”

Feng Fei knows that she had spilled the wrong beans and shyly lied: “But he is currently engaged in war. I am afraid that Lu Buwei will hunt me down before I get to see him.”

Amused, Xiang Shaolong purposely teased her: “That is not an issue. All we need to do is to notify the Wu Family. They will surely offer Mistress protection.”

Feng Fei’s face has turned completely red: “We must never do that. Nobody knows about our special relationship. Aye. Can we talk about this later?”

Xiang Shaolong decided to let her off this time. Checking the sky, he reminded: “Shi Sufang should be here any minute. I will receive her at the main gate. Does Mistress have other instructions?”

Feng Fei questioned: “Do you have any appointments tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “I have to pay a visit to Xie Ziyuan tonight. What do you have in mind?”

Feng Fei responded: “It is nothing much. I initially wanted you to accompany me to attend a banquet hosted by the King of Qi and Tian Dan. It is a welcoming feast for Lu Buwei and I wanted you to observe him from the side. Forget it. ”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly grateful for this close shave. Ever since Lord Longyang and Li Yuan saw through his masquerade, he does not have the confidence to face Lu Buwei.

When Xiao Yuetan offered to disguise his appearance, they were not prepared for face-to-face encounters so Xiang Shaolong could not blame him.

Feng Fei meaningfully batted her eyes at him, imploring: “Can you come to my room tonight? I have several matters to consult you.”

Knowing that she is finally trusting him, Xiang Shaolong cheerfully left.

Striding out of the main gate, Shi Sufang’s convoy of carriages was just arriving. Xiang Shaolong hastily hunched his back and slipped the fruit seed under his tongue before advancing forward to welcome her.

As charming as ever, Shi Sufang dismounted from her carriage in an unhurried manner. Xiang Shaolong and his fellow colleagues from Feng Fei’s troupe were in a daze over her worldly beauty. He bowed down to pay his respects to her, not daring to meet her at eye level.

After two maids adjusted her cape, Shi Sufang came up to Xiang Shaolong with Boss Jin by her side.

This beauty did not put on any make up and her hair is bundled to the top of her head before forming a short braid at the back. It is a somewhat casual style, unique to her and matching her aura perfectly.

Under the wind-breaking cape, she wore a coat with a singlet on top. There were shoulder pads on her two shoulders, tied prettily with ribbons. In addition, three thin belts are coiled around her waist, showing off its slenderness and causing her breasts to become more noticeable, enhancing her beauty by several notches.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but secretly praise her intelligence.

In terms of beauty, only Ji Yanran, Qin Qing or Li Yanyan is able to match Feng Fei.

But since Shi Sufang is fully utilizing her strength, which is her individuality, she only appears to be slightly inferior to Feng Fei.

On the surface, it is a friendly meeting between the two ladies but comparisons will inevitably be made.

Shi Sufang appears to be unable to see through Xiang Shaolong's disguise. When Boss Jin introduced the two of them, she only nodded her head as a show of courtesy.

Xiang Shaolong swiftly moved ahead to lead the way.

Boss Jin took two quick steps, walking shoulder to shoulder with him before querying: "I just received news, saying that Brother Shen barged into Zongsun Residence all by yourself, asking for your captured men to be released. Is it really true?"

Xiang Shaolong realized that news really travels fast in Lin Zi and answered: “It is just a lucky break!”

Boss Jin instantly had a better opinion of Xiang Shaolong, raising a thumb up and cautioned: “Now I know why Miss Feng assign Brother Shen such a heavy responsibility. However, Zongsun Long has always been a domineering man. Now that he has lost face, he will certainly get even with you one day. I noticed that Brother Shen did not even have a sword with you. I will get someone to deliver one to you later. Whenever necessary, you can use it to defend yourself. If you do not accept, you are disregarding Jin Cheng (me) as a friend.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I guess my only choice is to thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Shi Sufang’s pleasant sounding voice advised from behind: “Zongsun Long’s son Zongsun Xuanhua is one of the top four disciples of Mister Wangyou, Cao Qiudao. Mister Shen must be careful.”

Boss Jin painstakingly guided: “I am not aware of Brother Shen’s sword skills but this man has yet to meet his match in Lin Zi and shares equal fame with Tian Dan’s number one swordsman Dan Chu. When Brother Shen face him and is not confident about winning, you can throw down your sword and admit defeat. The swordsmen of Qixia value their reputation and will never attack a declared loser. Hey. Although we are newly acquainted, I am already using such a heavy tone. Brother Shen please do not hold it against me.”

Xiang Shaolong can only feel goodwill for this man. He nodded: “I have yet to express my gratitude for your concern. Why would I hold anything against you?”

Behind him, Shi Sufang was astounded: “I did not expect Mister Shen to be so broadminded, not taking to heart when Master Jin asserted that you are inferior to Zongsun Xuanhua.”

Slightly tensed, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: “Qixia is famous for their swordsmen. I am sure there are many outstanding characters besides the two of them.”

Boss Jin articulated: “The sword practitioners are immeasurable but the cream of the cream are only a handful. Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang are two of them and they love to participate in duels. After Brother Shen’s encounter last night, you may have invited more trouble for yourself.”

Shi Sufang gently reasoned: “No matter how reckless they are, they would not dare cause trouble here. But if Mister Shen leaves this place, you may be open to their provocation.”

Xiang Shaolong appreciated: “Many thanks for Mistress’s pointers.”

By now, they have arrived at the stairs of the main block where Feng Fei is residing. Feng Fei came out of the door to welcome

them and both ladies exchanged a knowing look, wasting no time in scrutinizing each other, capturing every little detail.

Feng Fei sweetly smiled: “I have heard of Junior Sister Shi’s fame a long time ago. Today we finally get the chance to meet each other.”

After Shi Sufang paid her respects as a junior, she went forward and held Feng Fei’s hands, exclaiming: “Senior Sister Feng is giving me too much credit. When I first laid my eyes on Senior Sister Feng, I almost thought you are an angel from heaven!”

With a melodious and ringing titter, Feng Fei hooked arms with Shi Sufang as they stepped into the hall.

Seeing that Boss Jin is still dazzled on the spot like a wooden chicken due to his first encounter with Feng Fei’s ultimate magnificence, Xiang Shaolong gave him a slight push, bringing him to his senses and following Xiang Shaolong into the hall.

Feng Fei and Xiang Shaolong sat down on one side while Shi Sufang and Boss Jin sat on the other side as Little Ping’er served tea.

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong thought of a crazy theory.

To a certain extent, Lu Buwei’s desperate attempts to obtain Feng Fei are due to a hidden competitive nature against Xiang Shaolong specifically.

Ji Yanran is Xiang Shaolong's wife and Lu Buwei's pursuit of Qin Qing has ended in failure. Unless he gets his hands on Feng Fei, he will be inferior to Xiang Shaolong in this aspect. To be honest, even Lu Buwei himself may not be able to perpetuate this reality.

After a round of pleasantries, Shi Sufang humbly sought: "Master Jin has his own point to make but Sufang (I) is sincerely here to learn from Senior Sister Feng, curious to find out what is Senior Sister Feng's secret to making everyone fall head over heels over your performances."

Feng Fei knows that she is just being modest because Shi Sufang herself is another captivating courtesan. Nonetheless, there is some truth in her words. Feng Fei warmly articulated: "Junior Sister need not put me on the high pedestal. We are simply entertainers and everything we do follow this 16-word motto: Great Song & Dance, White Teeth & Pretty Eyes, Performing according to Segment, Finding one's Niche. Although we are just a display of Song & Dance, at the same time, we are spreading culture and aesthetic appreciation."

Shi Sufang was overjoyed: "Sufang would like to hear about the details of the 16-word motto."

Feng Fei's lovely eyes turned to Xiang Shaolong and plainly invited: "Why don't Manager Shen explain on my behalf?"

Shi Sufang and Boss Jin cannot conceal the surprise on their faces. Feng Fei is known to be proud and aloof; why would she

allow a lowly manager to represent her views? Xiang Shaolong obviously knew that Feng Fei is testing him and can only groan inwardly. Currently, the fruit seed is underneath his tongue, so the minute he starts talking, the meticulous Feng Fei will start suspecting that he is afraid of Shi Sufang for certain reasons. He could only stutter: “I just bit my tongue accidentally and it is not convenient for me to speak at length. It is better for Mistress... Hey!” Seeing that the three persons are staring at him with their eyes wide open, he had to stop talking and awkwardly opened his palms skywards.

Looking at him shrugging his shoulders and opening his palms skywards, Shi Sufang was reminded of a similar cheeky body language by someone she had met before but at that point in time, she could not relate it to Xiang Shaolong. She intriguingly remarked: “I did not know that Mister Shen is a fellow connoisseur. I will seek your guidance next time.”

Boss Jin guffawed: “Even my curiosity is stirred by Mistress (Feng Fei).”

Feng Fei nastily stared at Xiang Shaolong for a moment before explaining: “Great Song & Dance, White Teeth & Pretty Eyes refers to the combination of performing talent and a beautiful appearance. They make up the star power of the performer and by utilizing a pleasant and inviting set up, you will attract the audience’s attention and subsequently leave them bedazzled. Junior Sister need not feel inferior to me. You are a success in your own right!”

Shi Sufang shook her head: “Senior Sister Feng is being too

polite. Among the Three Famous Courtesans, with regards to beauty, talent, song composition or choreography, anyone you ask will absolutely nominate Senior Sister Feng to be the best. Thus, it is widely acknowledged that you are the leading courtesan. After learning that Senior Sister Feng is planning to retire to your hometown, no matter how difficult it is; I will have to pay Senior Sister Feng a visit and respectfully seek your advice.”

Boss Jin enquired: “May I ask Mistress (Feng Fei) what is the meaning behind Performing according to Segment, Finding one’s Niche?”

Xiang Shaolong first scanned Feng Fei before moving his gaze to Shi Sufang, feasting his eyes on their beauty. He did not feel tired at all and wished that this exchange can go on for much longer.

He did not expect the difficult-to-get-along Lady of Three Perfections Shi Sufang to behave in a subservient manner in front of Feng Fei. If she is not here to learn a few tricks on the sly, she would be harbouring a hidden agenda.

Nevertheless, Feng Fei is exceptionally quick witted and it will not be easy for Shi Sufang to benefit from her sharing.

Feng Fei simply rationalized: “People on different social levels will exhibit different interests and appreciation. If we are performing in the royal palace, the main concept has to be an auspicious celebration. Before an audience of learned scholars, a less boisterous performance is preferred. It would be ideal to have a performance with deep content, invoking one’s afterthoughts. If you are performing to the mass public, you must create a lively

atmosphere, emphasizing concepts of love, separation, joy and sorrow, stimulating the viewers' emotions.”

Boss Jin slapped the table, sighing: “With these few words, Sufang will benefit to no ends.”

Shi Sufang was exhilarated: “An example of Finding one's niche is Senior Sister Feng who created her own brand and unique performing style. Even if someone wishes to copy, one can only copy the context but never the content.”

Recalling that Feng Fei challenged the singing norms with her novel singing method, Xiang Shaolong could not help but agree in unison.

Feng Fei was not the least flattered by their praises but plainly queried: “Now that you have heard it all, I wonder what instructions does Boss Jin and Junior Sister have for Feng Fei?”

Boss Jin replied in a serious manner: “I wonder if Mistress has heard of this playboy named Qi Yu?”

Feng Fei frowned: “Yes, I have heard of his name. He is said to be the descendent of an official. Blessed with good looks and the gift of the gab, he has deflowered numerous pitiful girls. Why did Boss Jin bring him up?”

Hearing the name Qi Yu, Xiang Shaolong recalled that this is the man whom Zhao Mu used to seduce Zhao Ya. Now that Zhao Ya

has passed on, his heart was firstly struck with grief; but Feng Fei used his proverb: Gift of the Gab, and her face turned slightly red momentarily, indicating that she is thinking of him, causing his heart to be struck by longing.

The two irreconcilable feelings arise at the same time, causing him to experience an indescribable sensation.

Boss Jin continued: “This man is now an active companion of Soft Boned Beauty Lan Gongyuan. Two nights ago, he was extremely drunk at Yiya Brothel, the biggest local brothel, and started to speak in an absurd manner. He predicted that this time round, Lan Gongyuan would be able to outshine Mistress’s brilliance, causing Mistress to retire with regrets and hatred. It is a bizarre statement indeed.”

This is a good example to highlight Feng Fei’s refinement. Despite the threat, her face remains calm and peaceful, only revealing simple signs of deep contemplation.

Shi Sufang softly surmised: “We could not help but feel worried for Senior Sister Feng. He only mentioned Senior Sister Feng’s name and not Sufang’s (my) name, indicating the possibility of a scheme and the high likelihood of success, inciting our bewilderment.”

Hearing these words, Xiang Shaolong was greatly alarmed, deducing that this matter must be linked to the leaking of the song sheet. But logically, the song sheet is still in the possession of Dong Shuzen; why is Qi Yu acting so confident? The more he thought about it, the more he felt that something is not right. Not in the

mood to carry on the conversation, he stood up.

The other three individuals looked at him questioningly.

Xiang Shaolong excused himself and left alone in search of Dong Shuzhen. The gorgeous beauty was resting in her room when Xiang Shaolong barged right in, dismissed her maids and immediately interrogated: "Where is the song sheet which you secretly copied?"

Dong Shuzhen was irritated: "Are you going to force a confession out of me?"

Suppressing his anger, Xiang Shaolong sat down and illustrated: "Qi Yu openly declared that he has a way to make Mistress (Feng Fei) retire with regrets and hatred. If he did not have the song sheet, why would he make such a wild prophecy?"

Dong Shuzhen's face lost some colour but she firmly shook her head: "The song sheet is still here. Aye. I just got it back from Xiuzhen and was prepared to have you burn it!"

Xiang Shaolong demanded: "Then give it to me now!"

Dong Shuzhen furiously glared at him for some time before moving to a chest in the corner, retrieving a bamboo tube and throwing it to him in an angry manner.

Xiang Shaolong easily caught the tube and pried the cover off, obtaining a roll of parchment.

Opening the parchment, his face lost all colour. In a horrified tone, he questioned: “Why is it blank?”

This time round, it is Dong Shuzen’s face that underwent a drastic change. Petrified and coming to his side, she fearfully shrieked: “Heavens! Who made a switch?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart sinking in. Unless Feng Fei can create a new song within the next ten days before the performance, she will have to resort to singing her old songs. It will be a great letdown as the new song is specially composed to commemorate the birthday of the King of Qi. Her face deathly grey in colour, Dong Shuzen stammered in a trembling voice: “This is impossible. Xiuzhen and I have been extremely careful.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “The only solution now is to be honest with Mistress (Feng Fei) and pray for some form of salvation.”

Leaping into his arms, Dong Shuzen was shaking uncontrollably: “Shen Liang, please save me!”

Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen are kneeling in front of Feng Fei, completely crestfallen like inmates on a death row. Until now, they could not comprehend who made the switch and stole the copy of the song sheet.

There is no sign of blood on Feng Fei’s delicate face now that her painstaking creation has landed in the hands of Lan Gongyuan. Needless to say, it was a devastating blow to her and she was not in

the mood to punish the two ladies.

Xiang Shaolong was depressed too. He suggested: “If Mistress can be the first to perform, it does not matter even if Lan Gongyuan has the song sheet.”

Feng Fei shook her head: “It has been agreed that we will be performing the finale item. Moreover, Tian Dan is the organizer and they are out to make things difficult for us. They will not permit the change in order of the performances.”

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “Is Mistress able to come up with a new song?”

Feng Fei bitterly laughed: “Unless I can come up with a song within a day, we would not even have the time to rehearse for the song, leading to a lackluster presentation. Aye, it is hard to guard against internal spies but I guess Feng Fei (I) is partly to be blamed too.”

Hearing her words, Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen cried inconsolably and collapsed on the floor.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but feel respect for Feng Fei. Although this beauty has been selfish to some extent, she possesses the magnitude to reflect on her own behavior given the present circumstances. It demonstrates her broadmindedness and empathetic personality.

Feng Fei looked over to Xiang Shaolong with her eyes filled with disappointment. In an amazingly harmonious tone, she lamented: “I would rather refrain from performing than to put up a substandard show. I have committed to using a new song for the birthday celebration and it is inappropriate to recycle an old tune with new lyrics. Looks like I have to fake an illness to excuse myself from this competition.”

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong’s muscular body shook vigorously as his eyes glowed with newfound energy. He proposed in a solemn voice: “I once composed a song and if I try to hum the tune, would it stimulate Mistress’s thinking cap, allowing you to alter it into a new song?”

In actual fact, he is hardly a songwriter but he did frequent Karaoke Lounges back in the 21st Century and there are ten odd songs that he is familiar with. Faced with a desperate situation like this, he wishes to contribute as much as possible.

The tunes of these songs are totally different from ancient tunes but under Feng Fei, this ancient musical talent, it may be convertible to suit the music of this era.

Feng Fei consented: “Let’s hear you sing it.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I cannot sing. I can only hum.”

Feng Fei appears to pay little regards to his composition and snapped: “Then let’s hear you hum. Aye, you said you have hurt your tongue and yet you are speaking in such a flawless manner

now.”

Xiang Shaolong is not interested to rebut her and picked the most popular song back in the 21st Century: ‘I cannot leave him’ and began humming.

His humming skill is deplorable but his rhythm and accuracy of the beats is rather precise.

When he first began humming, Feng Fei thought nothing of it but after Xiang Shaolong awkwardly hummed halfway through the song, her emotions went from keen interest to shock and awe. Even Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen have stopped crying, staring at him with disbelief.

After humming the entire song, Xiang Shaolong pathetically asked Feng Fei as his face turned red: “How is it?”

Dazed like a wooden chicken, Feng Fei stared at him for quite a while before exhaling a breath: “You never fail to surprise me. This is the first time I ever heard such a strange tone. It is pleasing to the ears but the tone is sorrowful and unsuitable for a festive atmosphere.”

Xiang Shaolong panicked: “I have another song.”

Feng Fei was astounded: “I thought you only composed one song?”

Xiang Shaolong had to confess: “I was uttering rubbish. To be honest, I have composed several songs.”

Touched, Feng Fei nodded as if she suddenly recalled something. Turning to the two ladies, she hissed: “Get out of my sight.”

The two ladies hurriedly took their leave. As they were leaving, the look on their faces for Xiang Shaolong is enough to mesmerize any man for years to come.

Xiang Shaolong chose a fast and upbeat ‘Navy Anthem’ and began humming.

Feng Fei stood up after the second song has ended and threw herself into his arms, embracing him tightly in a bear hug, swearing: “Even if you want Feng Fei’s (my) body, Feng Fei will gladly give it to you. I only ask that you hum all the songs that you have composed. This time round, I will make that thieving Lan Gongyuan suffer a crushing defeat.”

By the time Xiang Shaolong left Feng Fei’s block, he felt like he just woke up from a dream.

He obviously would not take advantage of the situation and make love to Feng Fei. However, he is certain that based on his ten odd songs, he has won her heart.

It is not as if Feng Fei has fallen in love with him but rather Feng Fei is viewing him in the same way he views Li Mu: Nothing but

admiration.

Xiang Shaolong may be feeling guilty but his endeavor to assist Feng Fei to defeat Lan Gongyuan is more important than anything else.

He barely left the garden of the main block when he was intercepted by Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen.

Xiang Shaolong had to fulfill his appointment with Xie Ziyuan and comforted them as much as he can with kind words. At the same time, he reminded them not to disturb Feng Fei who is working hard at composing a new song. He instructed: “The two of you should think about who is the third party who knows about the hiding place of the song sheet. We must find out who is the culprit.”

Zhu Xiuzhen replied: “Only Zhang Quan knows about it besides us but it is impossible for him to enter my room without my knowledge.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “He can easily overcome this obstacle by bribing your serving maids.”

As Zhu Xiuzhen was feeling guilt-ridden, Xiang Shaolong took this opportunity to take his leave. Arriving at the main hall, the sword as promised by Boss Jin happened to be delivered at the same time. Pulling out the sword for a look, he can tell that it is a high quality weapon although it is inferior to Bloodwave. The sword felt heavy, which matches his needs and he can feel an

increase in goodwill towards Boss Jin as a result.

Xiao Yuetan is right. Boss Jin is a hero in his own ways.

After making arrangements for Feng Fei's dinner appointment to be cancelled, Xiang Shaolong piled on additional clothes and a cap before he left Tingsong Villa.

As the rain and snow fell around him, he noticed that the roads were largely deserted.

Recalling his earlier encounters, he was amused that everyone had the notion that he was unfathomable. His infinite pool of ideas, methods and resources is due to 2000 years of human advancement, paving a way out for him in countless situations.

If he wanted to make love to Feng Fei tonight, she will surely succumb despite some initial resistance but this is something beyond his integrity.

Having some fun with her is one thing but if he goes overboard, he would be a third party breaking up her relationship, which is something he wants to avoid at all costs. Right now, he is on close terms with several beauties and yet maintains a non sexual relationship is surprisingly another source of delight.

When he initially lost the battle and was on the run, he would never imagine himself leading his current lifestyle.

When Feng Fei holds her rehearsals again, it would be necessary to keep it confidential, preventing her valuable intellectual property rights from being pirated. Although he was a pirate too for violating the copyrights of other songwriters, there is no conflict of interest.

Because in the 21st Century, all records of ancient music have been lost.

Thinking on a deeper level, even if Lan Gongyuan gets hold of the new song, she would not have sufficient time to practice. Moreover, Feng Fei can insert other lyrics into the new song and there is nothing Lan Gongyuan can do.

As he thought up till this point, hoof beats sounded behind him.

He did not think too much about it until the hoof beats stopped about ten steps behind him. He instantly increased his sense of alertness.

Next, the quivering sound of a spear can be heard.

His hand grasping the handle of the new sword Boss Jin presented to him, he calmed himself down.

His attacker is a single man on a single horse. By observing the rhythm of the hoof beats, he can tell that his opponent is a seasoned fighter.

The corners of his mouth curving up to form a grin; Xiang Shaolong did not bother to look back. He slowed down his pace and leisurely walk amidst the rain and snow.

As forewarned by Boss Jin, his challenger has finally appeared.

end of Book 22

Book 23 Chapter 01 - She's Married

Xiang Shaolong's mind entered a psychic realm and became as still as water. His footsteps developed into a regular momentum, as if he is marching to an invisible rhythm. Concurrently, he can accurately sense the speed and distance of his approaching attacker.

Ever since he traveled to this period of the Warring States via the time machine, not a single day goes by without him using a weapon to some extent. As a result, he is acutely familiar with the different types of weapons in this era. Focusing on his hearing abilities, he instantly rejected his earlier hypothesis that his assailant is using a spear. Instead, he concluded that the enemy is wielding a long halberd.

A halberd is a combination weapon, as it can be used to stab like a spear or slash like a sabre. It is a piercing weapon that also allows for a hook attack. Thus, the swishing sound of the weapon is obviously unlike that of a spear.

Xiang Shaolong is dying to turn around and have a look but acknowledges that if he does that, he would fail to deploy his strategy of unpredictability. Moreover, it will only irk his opponent to increase his speed in a fierce assault.

A strong gust of wind came blowing and Xiang Shaolong nearly had to close his eyes because of the snow and rain peppering his face

The resonating of the halberd became muffled against the noisy wind.

Presently, the rider is about seven metres behind him. If the assassin chooses to utilize his full strength, his crushing blow will land on Xiang Shaolong in the blink of an eye.

Out of the blue, like the sound of lightning striking the ground from behind, a voice reverberated: “Shen Liang, prepare to meet your maker!”

Xiang Shaolong instantaneously closed his eyes and took a step to his right, standing in the lane meant for horses and carriages. His right hand released its grip on the sword handle as his left hand simultaneously drew out his sword.

All along, he has been walking slowly on the pavement to the left and was clutching his sword with his right hand. Any potential aggressor attacking from the back would expect him to shift to the left side, increasing the distance between the two of them and using his right hand to draw out his sword to parry any incoming blows. Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong chose to do the exact opposite, stepping to his right onto the vehicle lane, resulting in the enemy’s long halberd stabbing in the wrong direction.

A miss is as good as a mile.

Furthermore, this is a life and death situation.

The man cried out in surprise and tried to alter the direction of the attack but it was too late.

Without turning his head back, Xiang Shaolong used a backhand move and stabbed the backside of the horse as it dashed past him.

The warhorse whinnied in pain and wildly sprinted ahead, nearly throwing the rider off.

Watching the single assailant disappear into the snow and rain as if he is running for his life, Xiang Shaolong was greatly humoured.

Winning this battle appears to be easy on the surface but it requires courage, critical timing and perfect coordination between body movement and footwork.

The sudden gust of wind and snow is a blessing in disguise.

Although Xiang Shaolong himself is slightly blinded, his opponent who is riding against the wind would feel a much greater impact. Otherwise, it would be much more challenging for Xiang Shaolong to execute this strategy.

Returning his sword to its sheath, Xiang Shaolong tunneled through a horizontal alley and walked briskly for quite a distance in the direction towards Xie Residence. He got to his destination within an hour.

Reporting his name to the family warriors guarding the front

gate, he was led into the property and told to wait at the external sitting room.

The serving maids were bearing strange expressions on their faces as they scrutinized him and whispered among themselves as if he is an eccentric creature who came out of nowhere.

Under their direct stares, Xiang Shaolong was feeling out of place when Xie Ziyuan suddenly appeared with an ashen face. After dismissing the servants, he sat down beside him and uttered in a soft voice: "This time round, we have picked a bad timing. Someone has reported to my wife about my visit to the brothel last night. She just threw a tantrum and nearly laid her hand on me. Brother Shen, you must leave while you can. She would not believe our words right now."

Xiang Shaolong was sympathetic: "In this case, I will look for Brother Xie two days later."

Pulling him to his feet, Xie Ziyuan hurried: "Quickly!"

As the two men hastily walked towards the main gate, a shrill voice screeched from behind: "Where do you think you are going!"

Xie Ziyuan's entire body shook once and he froze on the spot as if his acupoints has been blocked

Filled with disbelief, Xiang Shaolong was badly shaken as well and was stunned on the spot.

Accompanied by the sound of her tinkering accessories, Xie Ziyuan's shrew wife came to the back of both men and coldly laughed: "Where are you going? Do you think I am in the dark about the conspiracy between the two of you?"

She shrieked: "Xie Quan, come here you idiot. I want you to tell me everything that happened last night. EVERYTHING. I guarantee that nothing will happen to you."

Xie Ziyuan felt like he was struck by lightning for even the last servant loyal to himself has switched sides.

Xie Quan suddenly appeared and kneeled down, confessing in a quivering voice: "Young Master! Your servant was forced to betray you."

Turning around like robot, Xie Ziyuan looked as if he is going to burst out crying. He declared: "This is wholly my idea and has nothing to do with Brother Shen."

With his back still facing Xie Ziyuan's wife, Xiang Shaolong's heart is intertwined in countless knots, for he recognized the voice of Xie Ziyuan's wife to be Shan Rou whom he once deeply love.

She has finally given up her dream of leading a wandering lifestyle, returning back to her roots, becoming the Mistress of the Xie household and even giving birth to two sons.

His only wish right now is to leave the Xie Residence without looking back so that Shan Rou would never know that he did come by.

He could instinctively understand why Xie Ziyuan loved her and feared her simultaneously. Frankly speaking, that is the ‘kick’ Shan Rou gives to men.

Until today, he has fond memories of his dalliances with Shan Rou.

He is touched at Xie Ziyuan’s gesture of ‘brotherhood loyalty’ for shouldering all the blame upon himself.

His mind wanted to leave but he could not lift his foot to take a single step.

Turning his attention to Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou scolded: “You are named Shen Liang right? You look so tall and muscular but you are acting like a coward. Do you lack the guts to turn around and face me?”

The crowd of servants began giggling among themselves

Xiang Shaolong calmly pleaded: “Would Mistress Xie please invite everyone else to leave the hall? Shen Liang (I) would like to talk to you privately on behalf of Brother Xie.”

Xie Ziyuan swiftly interrupted: “This matter does not concern

Brother Shen. Dear wifey, can you let Brother Shen go? If you want to punish someone, let me be the one.”

To everyone’s astonishment, Shan Rou turned speechless and was fixated on the spot as if her acupoints are blocked.

Xiang Shaolong can feel Shan Rou’s piercing gaze on his back and his heart is filled with an indescribable feeling.

As everyone present is in a state of bewilderment, Shan Rou commanded: “Everyone get the hell out of here.”

Xie Ziyuan was traumatized: “Does hubby (I) have to leave too?”

Shan Rou shouted: “Hubby my arse, you better be the first to scram!”

In a split second, everyone has cleanly left, leaving only the two of them in the spacious hall.

Shan Rou’s excited and fast breathing can be heard from behind as Xiang Shaolong gradually turned his body around. As the four eyes exchanged glances, both parties shuddered as if they were being electrocuted. Shan Rou has put on some weight but is far more enchanting than before.

Shan Rou took two steps towards him and stopped, excruciatingly trying to suppress the urge to throw herself into Xiang Shaolong’s arms.

Xiang Shaolong felt as if his throat is entangled. He has so many things to tell her but did not know where to start. Ultimately, he let out a long sigh, shaking his head with a bitter smile and strode towards the main door.

Shan Rou tried to catch up by taking two steps forward, softly calling: "Shaolong!"

Over ten pairs of eyes are now focused at him. Regardless whether they are servants or family warriors, every single person's mouth is wide open with surprise that Xiang Shaolong managed to come out of the hall unscathed and with his clothes in a tidy manner.

Xie Ziyuan extracted himself from the crowd and put his hand around Xiang Shaolong's shoulder as he led him towards the main gate. "What did Brother Shen tell her?" He asked excitedly.

Xiang Shaolong spouted nonsense: "Sister in law (polite way to address) is domineering to some extent but she can be quite understanding if you talk to her nicely. I explained to her the simile: The more she oppresses you, the more resistance she can expect in return. For example, if she allows Brother Xie to fool around, I guarantee Brother Xie will grow tired of it after some time."

Xie Ziyuan wondered: "Why would I grow tired of fooling

around? What is her reaction?”

Xiang Shaolong lied: “She says she wants to think it over.”

Xie Ziyuan was overjoyed: “It is a miraculous 180 degrees turn! Can Brother Shen stay and accompany me for a chat?”

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is feeling depressed as if his intestines are all entangled together. Therefore he is certainly not in the mood for idle chatter. He intentionally threatened: “The first thing you should do now is to obediently spend more time accompanying Sister in Law. Otherwise, she may have the impression that you are still up to no good and would not even consider letting you fool around.”

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck and hastily withdrew his hand from Xiang Shaolong’s arm. His expression is priceless.

Waving his goodbye, Xiang Shaolong walked to the main road. The sky is filled with falling rain and snow.

He felt lost.

Ever since he came to Lin Zi, he has been trying ways and means to locate Shan Rou. He did not anticipate meeting her under such circumstances and moreover, she is the wife of another man.

Xie Ziyuan should be a good husband. Aye!

In the past, when Mei Canniang got married to another man, he did not undergo any emotional turmoil, as their love has no depth.

But he did love Shan Rou intensely.

He respects Shan Rou's decision. Furthermore, he himself has a fulfilling marriage and a complete family. The only issue is he is now far away in Qi, a foreign territory, and it is easy for feelings of loneliness and the desire for companionship to arise. As a result, he is feeling disheartened as he could not continue his previous relationship with Shan Rou.

As the wind and snow assault his face in a cold and hurting manner, he felt as if he had just woken up from a dream.

After heaving another breath, Xiang Shaolong started making his way back to his accommodation.

Let bygones be bygones!

He sincerely wished Shan Rou happiness and is relieved that she has given up her plan for revenge.

Back at the guesthouse, Xiao Yuetan has been waiting for him for some time. Observing his early return, he was astonished: "I heard your men saying that you would be back late in the night and was about to take my leave. Eek. Why are you wearing such an ugly expression on your face?"

Pulling Xiao Yuetan into his room and after they both sat down, Xiang Shaolong began: “You should have heard of Shan Rou, right? She is (Zhao Zhi) Zhi Zhi’s blood sister and we used to be lovers. She is presently married to Xie Ziyuan.”

Xiao Yuetan was stupefied: “Another coincidence!”

Not wishing to dwell on this matter, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic and enquired about Zou Yan. With a puzzled expression, Xiao Yuetan revealed: “Grandmaster Zou has wandered off looking for a suitable burial plot for himself. He hasn’t been home for several days.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart throbbing with pain and did not know what to reply to that.

Xiao Yuetan lowered his voice: “Lu Buwei has arrived this afternoon by ship. He is accompanied by Han Jie and Xu Shang.”

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: “Isn’t Han Jie working for Lao Ai?”

Xiao Yuetan articulated: “From this gesture, we can conclude that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are in cahoots with each other. Han Jie is one of the four top disciples of Qixia Sword Saint. With him paving the way, the swordsmen of Qixia may align themselves with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. This could potentially tip the balance in power.”

Pausing for a while, he continued: “Based on Lu Buwei’s method of scheming, he would definitely try to give the King of Qi the impression that appointing Tian Jian as the next Crown Prince will be detrimental to the relationship between Qin and Qi. If Cao Cuidao were to side with First Prince Tian Sheng and Tian Dan, it would not be unexpected if Tian Jian is the loser in this power tussle.”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered: “Whoever wins or lose is Qi’s internal affairs. My utmost concern is how to assist these beauties of the Song & Dance Troupe to realize their dreams. Lu Buwei can do whatever he wants to.”

Xiao Yuetan was taken aback: “It is indeed rare to see Shaolong so despondent. Don’t you find any meaning in tripping Lu Buwei up? Please have a good night’s rest, for you may change your mindset when you wake up tomorrow.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Unless I can reappear as Xiang Shaolong, otherwise, it would be impossible to exert influence over the King of Qi. But if I do so, it would be openly inviting Lu Buwei to scheme against myself. Oh! I forgot to tell you. Both Li Yuan and Lord Longyang have seen through my disguise.”

Xiao Yuetan speedily pressed for details and after Xiang Shaolong finished telling his story, Xiao Yuetan gleefully cheered: “In this case, the situation is far from bleak. For the time being, the greatest fear of Qi is an alliance between Chu and the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), suppressing their ambitions towards Yan. As long as Tian Dan do not directly confront you, our job would be much

easier!”

Xiang Shaolong was in a dilemma: “Whenever there are gains, some losses would inevitable be incurred. As Xiang Shaolong, Lu Buwei, Tian Dan or even Guo Kai would start to plot against me. If I continue to masquerade as Shen Liang, I would have to contend against the likes of Zongsun Long as well as the swordsmen of Qi. I am stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

The sound of knocking can be heard. It turned out to be Little Ping’er who is here on Feng Fei’s orders, inviting Xiang Shaolong for a meeting. After Xiao Yuetan whispered ‘see you tomorrow’ and took his leave, Xiang Shaolong followed Little Ping’er to see Feng Fei.

Feng Fei is playing a zither on the second storey of the main block with full concentration, filling the air with subtle, divine music as if it came from the nine heavens itself. Until Xiang Shaolong sat down opposite her, she did not show any signs of knowing that he has arrived.

After Little Ping’er excused herself to the lower floor, Xiang Shaolong half-slouched, half-sat on a soft cushion, feasting his eyes on this beauty’s attractiveness and immersing himself in the celestial music. His disenchantment over Shan Rou decreased by about 30%.

Strumming the zither strings, Feng Fei let loose another series of melodies before stopping in an instant. Lifting her pretty head to meet his gaze, she quizzed with her eyes shining: “Does Mister Shen recognise this part?”

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze and shook his head in a flabbergasted manner.

Feng Fei sweetly chirped: “This is a combination of melodies I extracted and edited from snippets of your songs. You ah! How can you miss it?”

Xiang Shaolong awkwardly scratched his head: “I really cannot distinguish my songs from your melodies. Why is this so?”

Feng Fei gently cooed: “I obviously cannot religiously follow your original tune. After several modifications, this is the final outcome! Do you like it?”

This is the first time Feng Fei is cajoling Xiang Shaolong, surprising him. He praised: “Mistress is truly talented. Have you assign new song tunes for the Birthday routine? ”

Her lovely eyes gazing at the snowy night outside her window, Feng Fei sighed: “Do you know I just realized that it has been snowing heavily outside? After listening to your bizarre tunes, Feng Fei (I) felt as if I am possessed, churning out one new song after another. It is unbelievably easy.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic: “My heartiest congratulations to Mistress.”

Shifting her gaze back his face, she sharpened her stare and

mused: “What kind of man are you, seriously?”

Xiang Shaolong snorted: “I have arms, legs, eyes, ears, a mouth and a nose, just like everybody else.”

Feng Fei observed: “But in my eyes, you are like an immortal from heaven, coming down to earth to help those in need. Aye! If immortals truly exist, that would be so wonderful. There are too many frustrating issues plaguing humans. Sometimes, I would even hate myself.”

After some contemplation, Xiang Shaolong nodded: “It is true that certain things in life are rather annoying but in the eyes of many others, Mistress is regarded as an unreachable sacred being, light years away from themselves. Being able fall beneath your skirt is already an unmatched honour.”

Feng Fei shifted her body to lean on a cushion, giggling: “Your descriptive proverbs are really weird. What is ‘unreachable sacred being, light years, fall beneath my skirt’? Aye! Feng Fei is only an ordinary person too. I only feel superior to others when it comes to creating music and performing.”

Following her statement, she glanced at him with her starry eyes and pleaded: “Would you please stay for the night and accompany me for a night of chit-chatting? Every time I have a new composition, I would have difficulty sleeping and moreover, I usually lack a friend I can confide in.”

Xiang Shaolong had quite a scare at her suggestion and he warily

cautioned: “Ultimately, I am a lowly servant. Wouldn’t it invite rumours if I spend the night in Mistress’s bedroom?”

Feng Fei grumbled: “Where was the same display of courage two nights ago? If it was another man in your shoes under the present circumstances, he would not leave even if I try to chase him out.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Ever since I know that Mistress’s secret admirer is Xiang Shaolong, I have become more and more jittery. In the near future when we arrive at Xianyang and if he learns that I did spend a night in Mistress’s bedroom, even if nothing happened between us, my life would be in jeopardy. Mistress, do you agree with me?”

Feng Fei was speechless and did not know how to reply to that.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. This is called: Using your words against yourself. It is indeed preposterous to use her ‘Xiang Shaolong’ to suppress himself, the authentic ‘Xiang Shaolong’.

After some time, Feng Fei lamented: “All along, I have the impression that men are fearless when it concerns matters of the fairer sex. Why are you such a bold character on other issues but is acting like a coward in this field.”

Pretending to be surprised, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “Judging from the tone of Mistress, it seems like we would be doing much more than idle chatter by the candlelight.”

With a girly chortle ‘Pu Ci’, Feng Fei enticingly batted her eyes at him, cheerfully stating: “Talking to you is so meaningful. For the longest time, only I, Feng Fei, get to tease other men. To think that now, you are the one teasing me instead. Bring it on!”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Bring what on?”

Feng Fei’s mouth curled up seductively and suggested: “My dear manager, please help me take off my shoes first? ”

Xiang Shaolong glanced at her for a short spell and whispered: “Mistress, are you serious about this? Once we start the ball rolling it would be difficult to stop. By then, it would be impossible even if Mistress wants to back out.”

He is not kidding. With a beautiful disposition to match Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, together with her strong intention to seduce, even a meditating monk would be tempted by her, not to mention him, Xiang Shaolong.

Out of the blue, the wind and snow outside, coupled with the lantern-covered candle light, on top of the warm feeling from the burning firepot strengthened the already romantic and inviting atmosphere in the room by several times.

Scanning her blossoming beauty, refined brows, seducing aura, protruding breasts and slender waists, the temptation is simply irresistible.

Feng Fei shot him a look, clarifying: “Manager Shen is thinking too much. Before climbing onto my bed and going to sleep, I would need to take off my shoes first. Since Little Ping’er is not around, I shall have to trouble you instead!”

Xiang Shaolong was so angry he nearly burst his arteries. Gnashing his teeth, he shifted forward, using his hand to support her right foot.

Feng Fei let out a surprise wail, frowning: “Manager Shen, can you please be more gentle?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own breathing quickening. Using his left hand to support her foot, his right hand slithered north, softly caressing her flawless calf, sighing: “A shining example of: as smooth and white as jade.”

Feng Fei’s body shuddered in response to his touch. Closing her eyes halfway, she lightly approved: “As long as your hand do not move any further up, I don’t mind letting you take advantage of me like this. Take it that I am rewarding you for helping me solve this problem.”

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated: “Judging from Mistress’s words, are you instigating me to progress further?” As he spoke, he vulgarly shifted his hand further up her leg.

As Feng Fei felt Xiang Shaolong’s hand slide past her kneecaps, exploring her out-of-bounds thigh, she let out a squeal and pressed down his hand underneath the fabric of her dress.

Xiang Shaolong withdrew his hand in a flash and gingerly took off her two cotton shoes with an official expression. He then proceeded to massage her feet, causing Feng Fei's body to turn into jelly and her pupils began to dilate.

In one swift movement, Xiang Shaolong lifted her in his arms and strode towards her bedroom.

Feng Fei tightly embraced his neck, fragrantly puffing beside his ear, hissing: "You are going to land Feng Fei in hot soup!"

Xiang Shaolong was confused: "How is that possible?"

Feng Fei protested: "If you make me fall in love with you, wouldn't that land me in hot soup?"

Xiang Shaolong came to his senses and secretly gave thanks for this close shave. He should not have a physical relationship with this beauty whose heart belonged to another man. Otherwise, it would only complicate matters and result in unbearable consequences.

After tucking her in, Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and gave her a kiss on the lips before warmly reassuring: "Mistress can put your mind at ease! Whenever I remind myself you are Xiang Shaolong's woman, even if I have ten times more guts, I would not dare to lay a finger on you."

After speaking, he quickly left as if he is running for his life.

Book 23 Chapter 02 - Unfinished Love

Just as he left Feng Fei's bedroom, he was intercepted by a subordinate who made the following report: Zhang Quan was ambushed outside the Villa, suffering heavy injuries and is barely alive.

Although Xiang Shaolong knows that Xiao Yuetan is behind this incident, he cannot choose not to attend to him. Outside Zhang Quan's room, he ran into his (Zhang Quan) trusted follower Kun Shan. This scoundrel was enraged: "It must be the doing of Zongsun Long. Lin Zi is a lawless place, full of outrageous hooligans calling the shots."

Xiang Shaolong is secretly glad that they are mistaken, saving him the trouble to mislead them. He questioned in a low voice: "How are his injuries?"

Kun Shan responded: "He received a few punches to his head and face. Now, his eyes are puffy and he can barely see while the corner of his lips is bruised and bleeding. It is upsetting to see him in such a condition."

Completing his answer, he walked away, sighing.

Stepping into the room, Xiang Shaolong was amazed to see Dong Shuzen and two maids tending to Zhang Quan's wounds.

As per Kun Shan's description, Zhang Quan's head is swollen like a pig's head. It would be impossible for him to face the public in

the near future.

This is the vicious strategy employed by Xiao Yuetan, intentionally causing Zhang Quan to lose his usefulness to Lu Buwei, indirectly forcing Lu Buwei to rely on Xiang Shaolong instead.

Sitting by Zhang Quan's bedside, Dong Shuzen gave Xiang Shaolong a sad look and sighed: "These people are really ruthless. Look! They have beaten Assistant Manager to such a sorry state."

Zhang Quan groaned: "Is it Brother Shen?"

Recalling the fact that this gorgeous Dong Shuzen did spend a few nights with this ruffian, Xiang Shaolong's heart is brimming with hatred. He faced Dong Shuzen and demanded in an uncouth manner: "All of you need to leave the room for a while. I need to talk to Brother Zhang."

An annoyed Dong Shuzen frowned with her brows knitted together. After dismissing her two maids, she firmly insisted: "What secrets are there that Shuzen has to be kept in the dark about?"

With much difficulty, Zhang Quan begged: "Second Mistress, please excuse yourself for a short while."

Dong Shuzen was taken aback and left unhappily.

It is now Xiang Shaolong's turn to take Dong Shuzen's seat. Lowering his head, he asked in a soft voice: "Brother Zhang, how are you doing?"

His mouth swollen like a pig's lips, Zhang Quan can only mumble his words vaguely: "My body is fine as they only hit my head, forcing me to tell them why did I visit my employer. Of course I refused to tell them anything. Aye! My biggest loss is the sum of money from my employer, which they robbed! The money is actually meant for you."

This clearly demonstrates the brilliance of Xiao Yuetan's stratagem. Not only did Zhang Quan fail to come up with the money to bribe Xiang Shaolong, he cannot go back to see Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong probed: "Who did Brother Zhang went to visit?"

Zhang Quan cautioned: "I cannot tell you yet. Aye! I did not anticipate Zongsun Long's involvement. Presently, every one of our Troupe member is placed under close supervision by his cronies."

Xiang Shaolong is not in mood to chat further and stood up, advising: "Brother Zhang, please have a good rest!"

Pulling his sleeve to restrain him, Zhang Quan anxiously beseeched: "No matter what, you must help me. I will definitely get the money for you as soon as possible."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “What can I do for Brother Zhang?”

Zhang Quan briefed: “Try to become Feng Fei’s confidante and find out what is the relationship between Lord Longyang and herself.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “If you were Feng Fei and I am now your confidante, would you tell me your life-changing secrets?”

Zhang Quan replied after much agony: “Feng Fei trusts no one but herself, and that includes Lord Longyang. Moreover, the King of Wei harbours designs on Feng Fei so at the end of the day, she can only rely on you. Do you understand?”

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily shaken before he nodded: “Fine! I shall see what I can do about it. But until I receive my money, Brother Zhang can forget about my collaboration.”

Pushing his hand away, he walked out of the room all by himself.

Dong Shuzen was waiting by the door and saw him leaving the room. Dragging him to a pavilion in the garden, she lamented: “Are you still upset with me?”

Xiang Shaolong denied: “Your lowly servant dare not. No matter how Second Mistress tries to scam me or distrusts me, I, a lowly manager, can only submissively follow your commands.”

With a 'Pu Ci', Dong Shuzen giggled: "Look at your angry countenance. Shuzen begs your pardon, ok? Aye! I really do not know how to gain your affections. Are you someone who prefer males and not females?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Is every acquaintance of Lord Longyang considered a gay man?"

Pressing her entire body onto Xiang Shaolong and using her exquisite hands to entangle his neck, Dong Shuzen smiled: "There is no use hiding it. Witnessing his coquettish expression when he stares at you and the excitement in his eyes, I am certain that you are his male lover. Unless you are not his partner, he would not react in such a fashion. Now, Shuzen's only hope is that besides men, you are also into women."

Xiang Shaolong was stupefied, thinking that he has reached a dead end and he could never redeem himself from this wrongful grievance. Exerting some strength to give her butt a playful slap, he helplessly pleaded: "You can continue to evaluate me along those lines. Second Mistress, can you please release me back to my room for a rest?"

Dong Shuzen exaggeratedly cried out in pain and gave him a bear hug. Biting his ear, she hinted: "If you are into other forms of deviant sex, Shuzen is willing to play along."

Xiang Shaolong grabbed her aromatic shoulders and pushed her slightly away before declaring in an official tone: "Your lowly servant has to pass up Second Mistress's kind intentions. Nonetheless, there is something you still do not comprehend: Even

if you and Xiuzhen do not sleep with me, I, Shen Liang, would make suitable arrangements for you two and no one will have to end up as a concubine or mistress of the rich and powerful. If there is any falsehood in my words, may I, Shen Liang, die a horrible death.”

Dong Shuzen calmed down and hazily eyed him with suspicion for a while. She softly quizzed: “What is in it for you? Are you aware that one wrong move can result in death and disaster? If Feng Fei gets to know that you are out to spoil her plans, she will be the first to come after you.”

Xiang Shaolong swore: “You can label me a fool, an idiot or whatever you desire but I have committed myself to make this a reality. All I need is your full obedience and I will definitely come to a solution.”

Wriggling her body sensually, Dong Shuzen cajoled: “Are we not obedient?”

Xiang Shaolong counselled: “Your obedience has gone overboard and your obedience is not only limited to me but also towards Zhang Quan, Sa Li and whoever that is useful to you. This is not the obedience I am looking for. Please go back and give it some thought but time is not on your side. We must make our move immediately after the performance. If you miss the boat, do not blame me for not offering you salvation.”

Her entire body trembling, Dong Shuzen leaned into his bosom, flustering: “Shen Liang ah! I am at a complete loss after hearing your words! Can you please tell me clearly what plans do you have

for Shuzen?”

Xiang Shaolong lovingly kissed her charming face and sincerely revealed: “If the two of you are still unwilling to place complete trust and share all your information with me, there is a limit to how much I can assist you. My plan is to promote you to become another famous courtesan to continue Feng Fei’s legacy, allowing her to retire peacefully and living the life she wants to live.”

A frightened Dong Shuzen pitifully reminded: “This would be an ideal arrangement but how is it possible? Feng Fei regards me as her enemy and would never give her consent. Even if she somehow agrees, it would require the approval of everyone in the troupe. This is an impossible task.”

Xiang Shaolong was full of conviction: “I will settle Feng Fei’s side. But whether can you eventually become another famous courtesan comparable to Feng Fei will have to depend on your own abilities.”

Dong Shuzen was shocked: “What abilities?”

Xiang Shaolong articulated: “I will convince Feng Fei to allow you to play the role of the main character in one of the Song & Dance routines. As long as you do a good job, I can sing your praises in front of Lord Longyang and other influential figures, persuading them to invite you to perform at their official banquets. Ha! What do you think will happen next?”

Dong Shuzen jolted once and suddenly moved away from him.

With a pair of lovely eyes shining with never-seen-before brilliance, she pondered in a throbbing voice: “Can you really convince Feng Fei?”

Stretching his hand out and lifting her pretty head, Xiang Shaolong unconsciously gave her a deep kiss on her lips. Only until she started panting did he release her, promising: “Give me three days and I will get Feng Fei to give you her consent personally. However, Xiuzhen and you must give up all your devious plans. Right now, I need you to go to bed obediently.”

Her body turning limp from his kissing and her pupils dilated, Dong Shuzen pestered: “Can I spend the night with you? Shuzen is feeling so horny from your provocation.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling desperate too, secretly cursing himself for stirring her flames of passion. Strengthening his will, he turned her sexy body around and pushed her for ten over steps, reaching the corridor leading to her bedroom, laughing: “Didn’t you mentioned I am into males? Go and look for Xiuzhen and tell her about this good news! You must remember not to let a third person know about this plan; otherwise, it will not come true!”

Finishing, he quickly fled back to his room.

Before he could have his breakfast the next morning, a subordinate came to report that Xie Ziyuan is looking for him. Xiang Shaolong was alarmed, for his greatest fear is Shan Rou telling him about their relationship. If this was the case, it would be really awkward to see him.

Fortunately, Xie Ziyuan is still as friendly as ever when Xiang Shaolong came to meet him in the front sitting hall. After getting him to dismiss the serving maids, Xie Ziyuan excitedly expounded: “Brother Shen is superb. Not only did wifey not give me a hard time last night; she gave me permission to befriend you. She mentioned that with you looking after me, it is all right even if I go out and have a bit of fun. Ah! Brother Shen is truly my best friend and savior!”

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly, knowing that Shan Rou still harbour feelings for himself, resulting in this decision which made Xie Ziyuan deliriously happy.

“Brother Xie need not attend morning court today?” Xiang Shaolong was curious.

Xie Ziyuan answered: “Our great King caught a cold last night so today’s court session has been adjourned. Hey! Is Brother Shen available tonight?”

Noticing that he is as joyful as a dog without a lease, Xiang Shaolong cautioned: “You better be careful for your significant other could be testing you.”

Slapping his chest as a sign of guarantee, Xie Ziyuan swore: “My wifey is a woman of her words and will not lie to me. She wants to invite Brother Shen to our humble abode tonight for dinner before allowing us to go out and have fun, giving Little Brother (me) an opportunity to play a good host. Ha!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “You looked as if you can’t wait for tonight.”

Without the slightest trace of guilt, Xie Ziyuan validated: “Of course. Only when lying in the arms of an unknown lady and breathing in her womanly scent can my creative brain juices start flowing. Aye! You have no idea how much pressure the great King is exerting on me. If I do not come up with the lyrics for Soft Boned Beauty’s congratulatory birthday song, I will be in hot soup.”

Realizing the genuine motivation behind it all, Xiang Shaolong became agitated: “Over the past two days, did you attend Lan Gongyuan’s rehearsal?”

With a pained expression, Xie Ziyuan grieved: “Without an excellent composition, I do not dare to face her. I ran into her lover Qi Yu in the palace yesterday and was at the receiving end of his sarcasms and insults. Fortunately, I was in a good mood or else I would teach him a lesson or two.”

As if he suddenly recalled the matter, he rapidly enquired: “What is going on between you and Zongsun Long?”

After Xiang Shaolong cut the story short and explained the chain of events, Xie Ziyuan groaned: “This is bad. Yesterday, he sent someone to probe about our relationship. Not suspecting anything amiss, I truthfully mentioned that we are newly acquainted. Oh. I better speak with him personally. If he is still adamant, I will get the Second Prince to intervene. That will surely force him to

yield.”

Wanting to keep things simple, Xiang Shaolong assured: “It is not wise to blow up the matter and Brother Xie need not intercede. Even if things go out of hand, I will be able to handle it.”

Xie Ziyuan was suspicious: “Does Brother Shen knows about Zongsun Long’s incredible influence in Lin Zi? He is more powerful than a Marquis and now that he has suffered at the hands of Brother Shen, he would not give up his quest for revenge so easily.”

Xiang Shaolong promised: “Relax! If I do require Brother Xie’s assistance, I would not refrain from asking for it!”

Xie Ziyuan affirmed: “In the future, feel free to confide your problems in me. I have to rush back to my official ministry for work; shall I pick you up tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong has nothing to say about that and nodded his head in agreement.

As Xie Ziyuan rose with delight, out of a sudden, the sentry announced: “First Mistress is here!”

Xie Ziyuan had a big shock and welcomed her respectfully with Xiang Shaolong.

Clothed in an ordinary yellow dress adorned with white flowers

and decked with a cotton singlet on the outside, Feng Fei lightly stepped into the hall, escorted by a bevy of maids. Xie Ziyuan's eyes started to glow at the sight of her elegance and captivating beauty.

After giving Xiang Shaolong a vicious glare, Feng Fei knitted her brows and frowned at Xie Ziyuan: "What is the matter with Official Xie? It is normal for someone to pass by without entering, but now that Official Xie has passed by and entered, you did not even say hi to Feng Fei? Is Feng Fei someone unworthy of Official's attention?"

Xie Ziyuan is justly worth his weight in gold; prostrating himself to the floor without a moment's hesitation, he narrated: "Miss Feng has wronged me! Ever since I first laid my eyes on Mistress during the palace banquet, my soul has been hooked away by Mistress's charisma. Only today did I finally reclaim my soul and thus, dare not pay another visit to Mistress."

Feng Fei and the maids could not hold back their laughter.

Feeling like a child playing games, Xiang Shaolong put an arm over Xie Ziyuan's shoulder and used the other hand to cover his eyes, pushing him towards the main gate. Towards Feng Fei, he laughed: "Your servant (I) had better escort Official Xie out."

Feng Fei was laughing vigorously, causing Xiang Shaolong to quickly look away, afraid that he would lose his soul like Xie Ziyuan.

Pushing Xie Ziyuan out of the Villa, he removed his hand covering his eyes.

Xie Ziyuan exhaled a breath: “Such a pristine treasure, such a rare encounter. No wonder Zongsun Long is going all out to obtain her.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “Brother Xie is interested as well?”

Xie Ziyuan solemnly state: “You may not believe my words but every time I reached home, I would cleanly forget about all my external liaisons.”

Xiang Shaolong was gratified and commended: “How wonderful. I finally got it! Brother Xie chose to fool around because it is your unique way of getting inspiration to compose music and write lyrics.”

Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Only Brother Shen knows me.”

After sending Xie Ziyuan off, Xiang Shaolong found Feng Fei waiting in the hall for him to have breakfast together, resembling a wife anticipating to serve her husband, sending chills down his spine.

Dismissing Xiao Ping'er, the beauty interrogated: “When you are around, Xie Ziyuan seems like a totally different person and appears to be in great spirits. Why is he looking for you?”

Xiang Shaolong intentionally hid the truth from her: “It is boys stuff. It is better for Mistress to be unaware of it.”

Feng Fei loudly wailed: “You are becoming more and more insolent. Don’t you forget that I can be nasty too.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Please be appeased my Mistress. We are simply going to have some fun at a brothel tonight.”

Feng Fei was astounded: “Are all men born cheap and low-class? We have top rated beauties right here and yet you are paying money for those normal looking girls.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled: “Is Mistress implying that your servant (I) can kiss you any old how?”

Feng Fei was annoyed: “How dare you speak like this!”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused: “Mistress must not forget that it was you who said that you are being forced!”

Feng Fei was so angry she nearly wanted to box him but instead calmed herself down, sighing: “Looks like I am the one who has lost my soul to you. Whenever you want me to be happy, Feng Fei must be happy. When you want me to be angry, Feng Fei must be angry. Can you please tell Feng Fei once and for all, what do you want me to do?”

Xiang Shaolong gently remarked: “Of course I want to you

obediently listen to my instructions, allowing me to accomplish my dream.”

Resuming her icy demeanor, Feng Fei stared at him for a second before softly asking: “Speak!”

In an official tone, Xiang Shaolong enunciated: “My dream is to allow everyone in this Troupe to realize their wishes and ambitions.”

Feng Fei sighed: “I am beginning to believe your sincerity but my question is: What makes you think that you, Shen Liang, has the ability to achieve all these? It is not as simple as getting my consent for this issue involves several other parties.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “The most crucial factor lies with Mistress’s approval. I will take care of the other matters.”

Feng Fei challenged: “All right! Take it that you have my consent. How are you going to deal with the likes of Han Chuang, Zongsun Long, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong was about to give his reply when a servant came to report that Han Chuang is here.

Book 23 Chapter 03 - Rectifying Misjudgments

From afar, Han Chuang paid his respects to both of them: “My greetings to Miss Feng and Shen Liang!”

Xiang Shaolong instantly loosen up, knowing that Han Chuang came over after learning his whereabouts from Lord Longyang. Thus, he would be mentally prepared to see Xiang Shaolong here and not arouse further doubts about his identity.

Feng Fei was stupefied: “Marquis is an acquaintance of Shen Liang?”

Striding over in huge steps, Han Chuang chuckled: “Years ago in Handan City, Brother Shen assisted me greatly regarding several matters. How can I not recognize him?”

Feng Fei did not show any signs of suspicion and it appears that Xiang Shaolong’s standing in her heart has been enormously elevated due to Han Chuang’s testimony. She joyfully offered: “Shall Feng Fei (I) excuse herself so that Marquis can have a good catching up with this old friend?”

Of course she is just being polite but to her dismay, Han Chuang vigorously nodded his head: “Miss Feng is truly considerate and hospitable to our needs.”

Feng Fei was taken aback because this signifies that Xiang

Shaolong is more revered by Han Chuang than herself. But since she had made the offer and could not withdraw her suggestion, Feng Fei retreated from the hall together with her serving maid Little Ping'er.

Sitting down beside Xiang Shaolong, Han Chuang gleefully remarked: "Knowing that Shaolong is safe, I was so happy I could not sleep at all!"

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze after hearing his declaration. All along, he wasn't a fan of Han Chuang and never expected him to place their friendship above his loyalty to his country.

He bitterly laughed: "Do not forget that little brother (I) is still the most wanted man of your esteemed country (Han)!"

Han Chuang sighed with a breath of air: "That is something beyond our control as we all strive to serve our own kings. For all you know, we may meet in the battlefield once again. However, our countries are not at war now so it is friendship above everything else!"

After a bitter smile, his eyes began to glow with deep gratitude before Han Chuang softly revealed: "In that battle which I lost and was eventually captured, I thought I was destined to die there and then. Unpredictably, Shaolong set me free without the least hesitation. I, Han Chuang, have never been so touched all my life. Right now, even if someone points a sword to threaten me, I would never do anything against Shaolong's interest."

Xiang Shaolong swore in a low voice: “The day of the official coronation of the Crown Prince is the same day I will depart Qin for the wild plains beyond the borders. Therefore, Marquis need not worry about facing me in battle.”

Han Chuang was shocked: “Why would Yingzheng release you? Without you, Qin is as good as a body which has lost a limb.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “This is a pact between me and the Crown Prince. However, you must not be complacent because of my departure. Qin possesses countless valiant generals. Wang Jian, Huan Qi, Meng Wu and Meng Tian are not to be trifled with.”

Han Chuang disagreed: “I do not believe there is any general who is as good as you.”

Xiang Shaolong recapped: “Lest you forget, Li Mu gave me a thorough trashing and reduced me to a state of desolation.”

Han Chuang articulated: “Winning and losing is part and parcel of a military life. Moreover, you were defeated in the most splendid fashion and maintained the strength of your core army. So it can hardly be considered a genuine defeat. After the skirmish, Li Mu and I had a good discussion over it and he expressed his admiration for your war strategies. He originally intended to annihilate your entire army since it is deep in foreign territory but did not expect your faction to put up a fierce resistance in sacrifice. With this dragging him down, he is unable to pursue Teng Yi’s main army body before they returned to Zhongmou City, missing this golden opportunity. If he had been successful, we may organize another allied campaign and attack all the way to

Xianyang Capital. Aye! The difference between a win and a loss is often determined by a single stratagem.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Going by your reasoning, you should hate me to the core.”

Han Chuang awkwardly countered: “Shaolong need not tease me. After all, whatever happened has happened. The fact that I can still stay alive and have a good time now is all due to Shaolong’s kindness.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Since we are all comrades, we can dispense with the pleasantries and formalities. I suppose there is more than meets the eye concerning your current trip to Lin Zi.”

Han Chuang smiled: “Shaolong knows me best. I personally cannot be bothered with the birthday of the King of Qi. However, I would never object to a trip to Lin Zi. Have you tried the local Qi girls? They will give you a night to remember.”

Xiang Shaolong was not the least surprised: “You are incorrigible, womanizing wherever you go.”

His face turning red, Han Chuang corrected: “Do not mock me for this is called: Living life to the fullest. In the future when the great Qin army marches east, the first to be eliminated is our State of Han. When that happens, it will be impossible for me to womanize even if I wanted to.”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “I am just kidding.”

Han Chuang heaved a sigh of relief: “Frankly speaking, I am fearful of you to a certain extent but in a respectful manner. As a result, you must speak to me in a lenient tone. Otherwise, it would be disastrous if I develop a phobia of womanizing.”

Both men exchanged a look and could not hold it any longer, bursting out in wild laughter, reveling in the sensation of barrierless brotherhood.

Recalling an issue, Han Chuang brought up: “Did you know that the idiot Guo Kai presented your strange weapon to the King of Qi as a birthday gift, causing a huge dilemma over whether he should accept it or not. Ultimately, somebody suggested a counter strategy where the King of Qi would bestow the weapon upon Cao Quidao and enshrined it in the main hall of Qixia College.”

Xiang Shaolong is itching all over with agony: “I shall steal my Hundred Battle Sabre tonight.”

Han Chuang was aghast: “You must never do that. With his maturing years, Cao Cuidao that old fellow has made tremendous advancements upon his already godly sword skills. Shaolong may be an adept sword wielder but it would be inadequate against him.”

Xiang Shaolong laughingly jested: “I am going to steal, not going to rob. What is there to fear?”

Still worried as ever, Han Chuang advocated: “After Shaolong make your way back to Qin, you can request Yingzheng to write a letter demanding Qi to return your weapon. I guarantee Qi would obediently follow his instructions. Why should you risk your life at this juncture?”

Xiang Shaolong inquired: “Let me think about it. Hey, it may be good to flex my muscles and see some action. Oh yes, did you have a secret agreement with Feng Fei?”

Han Chuang was awkward: “So you knew about it too. Is there a problem?”

Focusing his gaze on him for a while, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “You really do fear me, don’t you?”

Han Chuang bitterly laughed: “Even Li Mu is terrified of you, not to mention me. Just tell me what you have in mind! I can never envisage your motives.”

Xiang Shaolong probed: “On this occasion when Feng Fei requested for your assistance, what benefits did she promise you?”

Han Chuang sighed: “Originally, it is a fair deal but since Shaolong is intervening, I shall have to painfully surrender my only opportunity to kiss Feng Fei on her lips.” Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “What?”

Han Chuang was surprised: “You did not know about it? If I

knew you have no idea, I would not have told you about it.”

Inside his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing a rising tsunami. Since the beginning, regardless of Dong Shuzen or himself, everyone has been utterly deceived by Feng Fei into believing that Feng Fei will present Dong Shuzen and her fellow courtesans to Han Chuang in return for his assistance. As this arrangement appears logical from all angles, even Xiang Shaolong did not have any doubts about its existence. Only now did he realize that it was a smokescreen by Feng Fei.

Why is she lying? What is the Head of the Three Famous Courtesans really cooking up?

When they first met, Feng Fei disclosed that she has accepted an assassination contract to poison him but decided to give up her attempt. The mastermind behind this assassination could be her secret lover.

He, Xiang Shaolong, has enemies all over the land. He is unable to make a guess from the countless possibilities.

After a long while, Xiang Shaolong inhaled a deep breath to clear his mind before whispering: “What does Feng Fei ask of you?”

Han Chuang divulged: “She needs to hide in one of my villas in Han for about three months. When the public has lost interest in her affairs, she will take her leave.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Does that mean she will leave Lin Zi under your escort?”

Han Chuang confirmed: “Of course. Who would dare to undermine my authority?”

Xiang Shaolong has unearthed another lie of Feng Fei for she did mentioned she would require Xiang Shaolong to assist her in leaving Lin Zi before meeting up with Han Chuang.

What is she trying to accomplish with all these schemes?

Han Chuang sighed: “Aye, we never expected Shaolong to be involved; I guess Lord Longyang and I can only watch helplessly as our missions end in failure!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: “The two of you are assisting her while harbouring selfish motives?”

Han Chuang replied in a grieving tone: “She is a rare and exceedingly attractive beauty. Who, in their right minds, would allow her to enter a reclusive life? Aye! In actual fact, Lord Longyang and I had a deal, letting me enjoy her for some time before allowing Lord Longyang to present her to the King of Wei. Presently, this deal is as good as gone, landing Lord Longyang in a predicament.”

Xiang Shaolong instead breathed in a mouthful of cool air before enquiring: “Do you know who is Feng Fei’s secret lover?”

Han Chuang was mystified: “Her heart has finally found a home? No wonder she became much more appealing and dazzling!”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “When did you first notice this change in her?”

After some contemplation, Han Chuang slowly announced: “It should be after her trip to Xianyang.”

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table and exclaimed: “In this case, her lover must be someone she met in Xianyang, paving the path for her retiring and marrying mindset. But why did she have to come all the way here before slipping away? Based on her intellect, she should know that no one is reliable, even the two of you.”

Han Chuang bitterly laughed: “After hearing your deductions, I am only more confounded than before. How should I proceed from here?”

Xiang Shaolong pondered: “Pretend that you are still in the dark and continue to liaise with her just like before. You must take care not to leak any information. We shall discuss further at a later date.”

Han Chuang agreed: “All right. I will now speak briefly with her before leaving. Are you aware of my current lodgings? I am residing at Tingmei Villa just two blocks away. Feel free to come to me if you need any help.”

When Han Chuang left for the inner courtyard to look for Feng Fei, Xiang Shaolong remained in the hall deep in thought.

Assuming that Feng Fei's lover is from Xianyang and it is the same guy who instigated her to kill himself, Xiang Shaolong, therefore, it is highly probable that her lover is someone who belongs to Lu Buwei's organization. But who can it be?

For someone to gain the affections of Feng Fei, he cannot be an ordinary folk. Can it be Guan Zhongxie or even Xu Shang?

On a more insightful level, it doesn't make sense because if her lover is working for Lu Buwei, Lu Buwei need not go to the extent of bribing Zhang Quan to investigate the identity of her lover.

Additionally, regardless of whether it is Guan Zhongxie or Xu Shang, neither man would abandon his glorious career for Feng Fei.

If her lover is not related to Lu Family, then who can he be?

In the middle of his intense, troubling speculation, Little Ping'er came and invited him to see Feng Fei. He easily concluded that Han Chuang has left before entering Feng Fei's room on the second storey of the main block. Once Little Ping'er excused herself to the lower floor, the conniving beauty glared unwavering at him with her lovely eyes, interrogating: "It seems like the powerful and influential men from various states are all your old buddies. This is really baffling, isn't it? Based on your impeccable connections,

why were you living in desolation for two years in Daliang and eventually lowering yourself to become an ordinary carriage driver?”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong was as steady as a rock for Zhang Quan genuinely recruited him from the official stables of Daliang. He plainly state: “It is because they are indeed my friends that I do not wish to implicate them.”

Bewildered, Feng Fei pressed on: “What do you mean by that?”

Xiang Shaolong explained in a serious tone: “Guo Kai, the Premier of Zhao, and I are on irreconcilable terms. Moreover, if not for my intricate maneuvers, Great General Lian (Po) may have difficultly leaving Zhao in one piece. Thus, whoever that takes me in is akin to making himself an enemy of Guo Kai.”

Stunned for a short spell, Feng Fei slowly remarked: “You are well acquainted with several influential men all over the land but your relationship with them is not clear to me. How do I know I can trust you?”

Xiang Shaolong snapped: “Is there a difference? You had never trusted me.”

Her charming face turning frosty, Feng Fei unhappily disputed: “Except for the early stages of knowing you, when did I display any signs of misgiving?”

Hardening his resolve, Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed: “Who is Mistress’s secret lover?”

Feng Fei was thunderstruck: “Didn’t I tell you already?”

His face wearing a cool smirk as his eyes glowed like an icy blizzard, Xiang Shaolong very slowly shook his head, exposing: “That is just a delay tactic you used on me. Otherwise, Mistress would want to go to Zhongmou and not Xianyang.”

Upset, Feng Fei rebutted: “Is Manager Shen being too reckless when you assumed my distrust based on this singular point?”

With thoughts running through his mind at the speed of electricity, Xiang Shaolong simply proposed: “Why don’t your servant (I) try to guess the identity of Mistress’s secret lover, the man whom you are willing to live together with for the rest of your life.”

With a composed demeanor, Feng Fei serenely dared: “Your mouth belongs to you. Guess all you want.”

Xiang Shaolong is aware that she thinks he would never make the correct guess and to be honest, he had no idea too but is just employing a scare tactic. He laughed: “Does Mistress think it would be a difficult guess?”

Feng Fei shot him a look: “Any more rubbish from you and I will chase you out of my room.”

Brimming with confidence, Xiang Shaolong challenged: “Mistress would not bear to do so, for you love to play the scheming game. With a worthy opponent like myself, you are secretly overjoyed at my presence.”

Feng Fei howled: “How dare you pass this judgment on me!”

Xiang Shaolong was steadfast: “Like spotting glow worms among chicken feed, Mistress need not conceal the obvious. You should know better than anyone whether my words are true or false.”

Feng Fei was in a stupor: “Glow worms in chicken feed? Are there really worms that glow? How clever of you to think of that.”

She continued in a worried tone: “Say it! Do not beat around the bush.”

Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: “The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray. Based on your words, it is obvious that Mistress’s secret lover is not Xiang Shaolong.”

Her mouth curling up with disdain, Feng Fei remarked in an ordinary tone: “I am only curious at your crazy ideas. At no time did I acknowledge or deny anything.”

Moving to her back, Xiang Shaolong stretched out his hand, caressing her tender, zero fat abdomen with a small amount of strength, causing Feng Fei to moan in her sweet voice as she

collapsed into his arms.

Nibbling her cute ear lobe and deeply inhaling her womanly fragrance, Xiang Shaolong gently revealed: “Your lover is from Qin and not only is he not Xiang Shaolong, he happens to be Xiang Shaolong’s nemesis.”

Feng Fei’s petite frame trembled but she insisted: “You have gone over the top. Where is the logic in all these predictions?”

Sticking his own face to her smooth face, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “It is very simple logic. You believed Zhang Quan is in cahoots with me and is using me to relay a message via Zhang Quan to Lu Buwei, causing him to mistakenly assume Xiang Shaolong is your lover.”

Feng Fei wondered: “But how did you infer that he is at loggerheads with Xiang Shaolong?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize he has exposed his own shortcoming. In his eagerness to succeed, he has inadvertently disclosed too much of his own knowledge. Only he himself knew about the incident when Feng Fei tried to assassinate him and he obviously could not divulge this piece of information. Frowning his brows, he spouted gibberish: “This news would serve to increase the enmity between Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong. If not for the fact that your lover is Xiang Shaolong’s enemy, why would you sabotage him in such a manner?”

Feng Fei whined: “Do not utter nonsense. Firstly, I did not

suspect you and Zhang Quan were partners and secondly, my lover is indeed Xiang Shaolong. Aye! I am confused after hearing your analysis. Can we take a break and will you please give me a kiss?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Is Mistress afraid of what I am going to say next?”

Feng Fei viciously struggled and extracted herself from his embrace. Turning her slender body around to face him, she confronted: “Bring it on! I want to hear what other outrageous thoughts that you may have!”

Using a finger to prop up her chin, Xiang Shaolong lightly pecked her lips before smiling: “What remains is an easy guess! In Xianyang, Xiang Shaolong’s mortal enemies are Lu Buwei and Lao Ai’s organizations. Whoever that can gain the affections of Mistress must hold some standing in society and is likely someone with both brains and brawn. It is neither Lu Buwei nor Lao Ai themselves because otherwise, Mistress need not scheme and lie your way through. Thus, it is as clear as day who our mystery figure is.”

With a mixture of fear and shock initially printed on her face, Feng Fei instantaneously recomposed herself. Lowering her head, she conceded: “Please stop your meaningless charade. Feng Fei will definitely do your bidding in the future!”

Xiang Shaolong pressured on: “Finally showing your true colours? Or else you would not be singing a different tune now.”

Feng Fei angrily threatened: “These are my heartfelt words; if you don’t believe me, get lost.”

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong stood up and served another scare: “I know who he is.”

Feng Fei tranquilly commented: “I am very tired and I don’t care if you know or do not know. I only wish for some peace and quiet right now.”

As Xiang Shaolong made his way towards the stairs, he suddenly turned back with his body shaking. Glaring ferociously at Feng Fei, he declared: “He is Han Jie.”

Feng Fei was visibly shaken and there was no trace of blood on her face anymore.

Book 23 Chapter 04 - Evil Upon One's Door

Despite Feng Fei's lack of admission, Xiang Shaolong is unwaveringly assured that her lover is Han Jie.

He can visualize Feng Fei getting to know Han Jie in Xianyang and both parties begin to rendezvous with full awareness that Lu Buwei or Lao Ai would surely object to their relationship. The critical factor is Lu Buwei is in cahoots with Lao Ai so even if Lao Ai approves of their relationship, it would still be in jeopardy.

As a result, the couple has decided to reunite in Qi before eloping or executing a similar plan. Since Han Jie is one of Cao Cuidao's top disciples, he can openly travel with Lu Buwei to Qi with good reason.

In this aspect, Xiang Shaolong's role as a troupe manager is absolutely crucial as Feng Fei requires someone to see to her travel arrangements and an appropriate cover up, allowing her to leave Qi unmolested.

Supposing Han Jie is Feng Fei's Prince Charming, the perpetrators behind his assassination must be a joint scheme between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei. For Feng Fei to change her mind, it must be due to her intention to elope with Han Jie. It would be unwise to bear the risk of this murder charge.

Delving deeper, Feng Fei could be acting on Tian Dan's instructions and was given the poisonous ring by Lu Buwei. With a slow acting venom taking his life several days later or a venom that

causes blindness, she can safely depart once she completed her assignment.

He may not possess all the fine details but Xiang Shaolong is confident that he has a good grasp of the big picture.

Before he could step out of the front hall, he collided with Xiao Yuetan who had came looking for him. The two men isolated themselves in the quiet eastern chamber.

Xiang Shaolong began: “Is there a way for you to obtain a blueprint of Qixia College?”

Xiao Yuetan was incredulous: “What do you want it for? Cao Cuidao is not to be trifled with.”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “I am only going to steal something that rightfully belongs to me. The King of Qi has bestowed my Hundred Battle Sabre to Cao Cuidao and it is now hanging in the main hall of Qixia College.”

Xiao Yuetan questioned: “I was about to tell you about it. Who did you get this information from?”

Xiang Shaolong told him everything about Han Chuang’s morning visit. Knitting his brows in a giant frown, Xiao Yuetan thought long and hard in complete silence.

He finally warned: “Shaolong must not blame me for being a nag

but I know Han Chuang's character very well. He is a greedy pervert and is extremely selfish. To achieve his goals, he can forsake his integrity and morals. Although he owes you a huge debt of gratitude, it makes no difference when it comes to fulfilling his agenda."

Recalling Han Chuang's sincere outlook this morning, Xiang Shaolong found it arduous to agree with Xiao Yuetan's point of view. Nevertheless Xiao Yuetan meant well and momentarily, Xiang Shaolong did not know what to reply.

Doing his best to persuade Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan advised: "Shaolong cannot afford to let your guard down. Presently, you are jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. You are not out of the woods yet. If I were you, I would never trust anyone from the Three States (Han Wei Zhao). Inversely, Li Yuan is much more reliable because at the end of the day, Chu is not under direct threat from Yingzheng's aggressiveness."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I am alone by myself. It would be awfully easy for Han Chuang or Lord Longyang to take my life."

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: "You are too gullible. Firstly, Han Chuang and company knows that they must remain confidential about your presence. If Qi knows the truth, the King of Qi may welcome you as a VIP and honourably escort you back to Xianyang."

Pausing, he added: "Or he may simply use this opportunity to get rid of you for good and no one will be the wiser."

Xiang Shaolong kept silent.

Xiao Yuetan continued: “Currently, no one would dare to shoulder the responsibility of being your murderer. He who kills you today can expect the Great army of Qin descending on his city gates the next morning. I can assure you this is hardly amusing.”

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “If they killed me in secret, who would know about it?”

Xiao Yuetan replied: “At least Li Yuan would know. Han Chuang and Lord Longyang cannot choose to sit idle too.”

He added in laughter: “Our Shaolong is not a sitting duck and your sword skills are top notched. If you managed to escape a murderous attempt and coupled with the fact that this is not the territory of the Three States, who would have the guts to try and take your life a second time round? If I were in their shoes, I would do my best to reduce your suspicions and defenses, thereafter steadily luring you into an inescapable dead end before making my move. Even with your consummate abilities, strength and tricks, it would all be useless as you are ambushed and butchered.”

Though his entire body is breaking out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong is still doubtful and gave a cursory assurance: “I will be careful!”

The objective Xiao Yuetan nodded: “Maybe I have been thinking too much! But it is better to be safe than sorry. Theoretically, Lord

Longyang has tried to harm you before and it would be more challenging for him to harden his resolve to repeat this crime. However, a man's heart is unfathomable. Furthermore, this implicates the survival of one's country and clan. Shaolong had better give it some serious thought!"

Patting Xiao Yuetan's shoulder, Xiang Shaolong gratefully thanked: "Now, Senior Brother you is the only man I can place all my trust without any reservations. Feng Fei's issue has grown in complexity."

Xiao Yuetan hastily enquired and after Xiang Shaolong revealed his conclusions, Xiao Yuetan mused with his brows locked in a frown: "I do not know Han Jie personally but seeing that he came all the way to Xianyang to seek his fortune, would he be willing to give up his career over a lady?"

Xiang Shaolong agreed: "It is said that Han Jie is a member of the Han Royalty and got acquainted with Lao Ai in Han a long time ago. For someone to be a close friend of Lao Ai, one can hardly expect him to be a man of integrity. If he is out to deceive Feng Fei and does not truly love her, the problem will be bigger than what I imagined."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "As outsiders, it is tough for us to comprehend the truth. Feng Fei is a definitely a beauty who can cause a man to sacrifice everything for her. Why don't Shaolong have a go at her, at least it is better than letting Han Jie obtain her."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "Knowing that her lover is Han

Jie, I would be less inclined to get involved with her.”

Slamming the table, Xiao Yuetan exclaimed: “I’ve got it! Feng Fei must have decided to elope to Xianyang and become Han Jie’s secret mistress. This matter has been approved by Lao Ai and all they need to do is keep Lu Buwei in the dark.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Feng Fei is really a cunning fox. Back on the ship when I confess to her that Lu Buwei is the mastermind behind Zhang Quan, she pretended to be surprise and desperate, thoroughly misleading me and implicating me in her devious scheme.”

Xiao Yuetan disclosed: “I have discovered a piece of information that will only add to your worries. Are you keen to hear about it?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I am already numb to all these upheavals. It would not affect me much even if I know about it.”

Xiao Yuetan went on: “Upon my instructions, Zongsun Heji went looking for Zongsun Long to gather intelligence and he found out that this bloodsucker secretly spread rumours among the wayward students of Qixia, professing that you are proud of your capable swordsmanship and regarded the swordsmen of Qi with contempt. Aye! What a despicable cad. He is afraid of offending Li Yuan or Xie Ziyuan to resort to this underhand, indirect attack.”

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders, remarking: “Someone already tried to assault me but he failed miserably. If they wish to attack me in an open manner, there is nothing to be afraid of.

Don't tell me Cao Cuidao will personally come for me!"

Xiao Yuetan cautioned: "You must be extra vigilant against Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang. These two men enjoy creating trouble wherever they go and they simply thrive in chaos. In addition, their sword skills are truly amazing."

Before he could complete his sentence, family warrior Fei Chun came to report in a flustered manner: "Manager, bad news, a gang of hostile swordsmen have come barging in, demanding to see nobody but you."

Both men exchanged a look of astonishment, secretly startled at the coincidence.

Xiang Shaolong do not wish for Xiao Yuetan to be embroiled in this troublesome affair and expose their intimate friendship. He insisted on facing this rowdy crowd all by himself.

Since he uncovered Feng Fei's lies from his conversation with Han Chuang this morning, his act of chivalry is being replaced by feelings of disillusionment.

With regards to Han Jie, whose sword skills are comparable with his own, Xiang Shaolong neither adore nor detest him but if he were to label this man, Han Jie is unquestionably a man with dubious morals. Still, Feng Fei has fallen in love with his handsome looks so Feng Fei's standing in his heart has fallen drastically. He may not be interested in Feng Fei but in the end, he would want her to dedicate the rest of her life to someone of good

character.

With his new change of heart, he dreams of arranging the future paths of Dong Shuzen and her fellow courtesans, thereby accomplishing his mission and retiring from the scene. He would head back to Xianyang to reunite with his pretty wives and lovely son, and wait patiently for Xiao Pan's coronation and his showdown between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's organization.

Xiao Yuetan may have pointed out Han Chuang's unreliability but he still holds faith that Han Chuang places their friendship beyond the reach of the dark side.

Until today, he still has the naïve mindset that there is goodness in everyone's heart because he himself is one shining example.

There is no one who abhors war and violence like himself but in these ancient times, it is as common as breathing.

In the midst of his thoughts, Xiang Shaolong crossed the door ledge and took his first step into the main hall of the front courtyard.

Five young Qi swordsmen of uneven height were standing in a single file in the centre of the hall. In the instant he treaded into the hall, he became the single focus of the ten eyeballs.

They were dressed in lavish warrior uniforms and by simply observing their ornate swords; one could tell that they are either

the descendants of high ranking officials or the sons of rich businessmen.

Zhang Quan's trusted follower Kun Shan, together with family warriors Feng Liang and Lei Yun'er were wearing an angry expression on their faces as they stood at a side. It is obvious that they are annoyed at these arrogant and overbearing ruffians.

To be honest, Xiang Shaolong is not in the best of moods and would not mind venting his frustration on these men who had volunteered to be his punching bag. He is fully aware that acting out his emotions would only serve to blow the matter out of proportion and eventually lead to confrontations with the likes of Zongsun Xuanhua, Dan Chu, Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang, all the best fighters of Qi.

From their composure and aura, the five men in front of him are many notches below these accomplished swordsmen.

Nonetheless, he could not appear too subservient. Otherwise, these opponents would take advantage of the situation, causing him to lose his standing in Lin Zi.

Finding a balance among these factors is the true test of his competency.

Among them, the tallest and most burly youngster coldly grunted: "Are you the self-proclaimed Sword without Equal, dog-slave Shen Liang?"

Xiang Shaolong icily snorted and advanced quickly towards them.

The five men were shocked and all their hands move to press down on the hilt of their swords.

Halting suddenly about five feet away from the five men, his keen eyes speedily scanned and memorized the reactions of every one of them before Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “Who is this gentleman here and why did you make two mistakes in a single sentence?”

The lanky and stout youth seems to be the leader of the five men pack. Staring back, he answered in a sharp voice: “Throughout my life, my name is the owner of all my actions and will never change; ‘Fast Sword’ Nian Chang is the gentleman you are referring to. What mistakes did I make?”

From his tone, Xiang Shaolong knew that he (Nian Chang) has been stifled by his (XSL) own awe-inspiring aura. Secretly tickled, he plainly retorted: “Firstly, I do not think very much of my sword skills and secondly, I am not a dog-slave.”

Another shorter and stocky youth jested: “As a servant to the courtesans, who are you but a dog-slave?”

As the other four men began to jeer and howl with laughter, somebody added: “Get your Master to come out and apologise and we will consider letting you off!”

The expressions of Kun Shan, the two family warriors as well as Fei Chun who came in with Xiang Shaolong started turning ugly at the insults. In the same breath, they acknowledge that these men cannot be trifled with and were dejected with helplessness.

With an air of unaffectedness, Xiang Shaolong acted surprised and yelled: “AH! So anyone who is working for somebody else is classified as a dog-slave. Therefore, in Qi, everyone besides the King is a dog-slave too?”

The five men are all brawn and no brains. Dumbfounded, they did not know how to verbally counter him.

His voice turning gentle, Xiang Shaolong saluted: “May I boldly ask the five gentlemen here, who personally told you I boasted about my swordsmanship as being without equal. Can we find this man to corroborate his statement with me? If it turns out to be true, I, Shen Liang, would kowtow to make amends.”

The five men glanced at one another speechlessly.

Using this break, Kun Shan interrupted: “Your servant had already told you it must be somebody slandering Manager Shen!”

With an irritated expression, Nian Chang dared: “Since we came all the way here, we cannot leave empty handed. Why don’t Manager Shen show us a move or two?”

Xiang Shaolong cackled: “This is easy. My sword skills may not

be as good as the five gentlemen but I have some other tricks of my own. Watch it!”

In the middle of his roar, he lifted his left and right arm concurrently, allowing two concealed daggers to smoothly slide into his hands from his sleeves. In the same momentum, he shot out both daggers horizontally to his front, flawlessly and accurately embedding them into the frame of a window. There is no difference in height between the positions of the two daggers.

The faces of everyone present became void of colour, including Kun Shan.

The most challenging part is a simultaneous attack from both hands with deadly speed and accuracy.

Conscious that he has displayed enough prowess to satisfy these clowns, he bowed and paid his respects: “I have errands to run and will not send gentlemen off!” He solemnly turned his back to them and left the hall.

Under the cover of Xiao Yuetan’s carriage, Xiang Shaolong left Tingsong Villa and proceeded in search of the ‘most reliable’ Li Yuan.

Xiao Yuetan praised: “Shaolong understood the psychology of Qi citizens very well, mindful that they value their reputation above all else. After your excellent display, the five kids would surely hide the truth and lied that you apologized to them, causing other troublemakers to lose interest in you.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed: “Zongsun Long is a Qi national too who values his reputation more than anyone else. He will not give up easily.”

Xiao Yuetan grinned: “Now that you are getting Li Yuan to intercede, Zongsun Long will have to let you go no matter what happens.”

Pausing, he questioned in a low voice: “Do you know that just a while ago, Feng Fei and Little Ping’er were escorted by several of her trusted subordinates out of the Villa through the back door?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “How did you know?”

Xiao Yuetan responded: “It was Yun Niang who saw it and told me about it.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Are they going to rendezvous with Han Jie? How I wish I can stalk her.”

Xiao Yuetan advised: “You are not familiar with Lin Zi and it would be a miracle if no one discovers you.”

In this moment, the sound of hoof beats can be heard as several horses tried to catch up to the carriage from the back.

Sticking his head out for a look, Xiang Shaolong saw that it was

Boss Jin, Jin Chenjiu chasing him with several of his troupe members. Boss Jin called out: “Manager Shen, please wait up.”

Xiao Yuetan commanded the driver to stop the carriage.

Cantering to the side of the carriage window, Boss Jin professed: “Is Manager Shen available for a quick chat?”

Xiang Shaolong would never reject him and nodded his head in consent. To Xiao Yuetan, he whispered: “Senior Brother must remember to get me a map of Qixia College. I will make my way to Li Yuan’s residence on my own.”

As Xiang Shaolong disembarked from the horse carriage, Boss Jin dismounted from his horse and led him to a nearby wine house. After locating a secluded and quiet corner, he sat down and cautioned: “Brother Shen! Trouble awaits you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “My troubles are endless as of now. An extra one would not make any difference.”

Gesturing a thumbs up, Boss Jin praised: “Brother Shen is a true hero indeed. I, Boss Jin, did not befriend the wrong person.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart warming up: “Boss Jin is the better buddy between the two of us. What is it about?”

Boss Jin explained: “Tian Dan hosted a welcoming banquet for Lu Buwei last night and both Sufang and I were present.

Incidentally, I was seated at the same table with a subordinate of Zongsun Long. As we chatted idly, he asked if I knew who you are. Of course I did not tell him the truth about our friendship.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “Are they issuing a reward for my precious head?”

Laughing raucously, Boss Jin commended: “Brother Shen is really open minded. Things are not so serious yet though. Have you heard of Qixia Sword Meet?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head to indicate his ignorance.

Boss Jin articulated: “On the first day of every month, Qixia College would host a riding and archery jamboree, providing newcomers a platform to showcase their abilities. Today is the 27th. The next Sword Meet is three days later. As usual, they would invite some guests to participate. Hey! It is just a polite way of saying it. In actual fact, they are looking for dueling opponents.”

Xiang Shaolong snickered: “If they try to invite me, I would fake an illness to reject the invitation. Don’t tell me they can make me attend the Sword Meet by force!”

Boss Jin sighed: “The invitation cards are sent out by the King of Qi. Does Brother Shen have the guts to reject the King’s invitation? I heard that Zongsun Xuanhua, the son of Zongsun Long, is infuriated with Brother Shen and has decided to personally teach you a lesson on the dueling ground. He would not dare to take your life and only wooden swords are used but due to his sword

strength, he can easily break one of Brother Shen's legs."

His brows immediately creased into a huge frown. Xiang Shaolong is not concerned about the unbeatable fighter of Lin Zi, Zongsun Xuanhua. He is more concerned that Tian Dan and Lu Buwei may be spectators at the Meet and it would be a miracle if they failed to single him out.

Boss Jin assured in a low voice: "Brother Shen should leave Lin Zi under the cover of the night. I am positive Miss Feng would not bear grudges against you."

Xiang Shaolong is highly motivated for this is a brilliant plan but what about Dong Shuzen and the other ladies? If he left without a care, this episode would surely become a knot in his heart and he will never find peace for the rest of his life.

Boss Jin continued to egg him on: "Zongsun Long's influence is overwhelming such that even high ranking officials and men of influence and stature are terrified of him. Brother Shen can never hope to overcome him."

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air: "My utmost appreciation for Boss's reminder. I may just have a way to manage this situation."

Finishing his sentence, he patted Boss Jin on his shoulder and went in search of Li Yuan.

Book 23 Chapter 05 - Touring Cow Mountain

Li Yuan is a guest resident at Tingzhu Villa, which is located just two streets away from Tingsong Villa. From this arrangement, one can infer that Feng Fei's status is equivalent to that of a State Chancellor Li Yuan.

Arriving at the Villa entrance, he reported his name Shen Liang to the sentry. Upon hearing his name, the guard came to attention and respectfully saluted: "Good day to you Master Shen, Chancellor has left instructions about your possible visit. However, Chancellor has just left the Villa. Would Master Shen like to leave a message?"

Xiang Shaolong initially wanted to leave a note asking Li Yuan to come and look for him but rationalize that it is inappropriate given his lowly status. He simply remarked: "I have to trouble Mister to inform Chancellor that I did come by. That's all."

At this juncture, the central gate swung wide open and an elaborate carriage escorted by several riders in the front and back drove out of the residence. As the carriage window curtains are not drawn up, the passenger could not be seen.

As the carriage drew further and further away, Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to inquire about its occupant and began trekking his way home.

The weather was excellent; it was cold but it was a comfortable kind of cool. As Xiang Shaolong strode along the congested and

lively streets among other pedestrians and vehicles, his heart, on the other hand, was feeling lonely and solitary.

While he was on the run, all his energy and time is dedicated towards avoiding enemy search teams and related considerations. Although he has entered Lin Zi and is now surrounded by both old and new friends, he was feeling lonesome instead.

He glanced about his surroundings, soaking in the magnificent views of the Qi Capital, deeply experiencing the meaning of the proverb 'Surrounded by luxury, feeling sad and lonely'.

Besides Xiao Yuetan, there is no one he could trust.

The most maddening fact is that he did not have any warriors at his personal disposal. Otherwise, he could simply send someone to keep Han Chuang under surveillance and easily determine if Han Chuang would betray him or not. For example, if Han Chuang visits Guo Kai on a regular basis, it would indicate his disloyalty.

The Three States have always been on intimate terms with one another and Guo Kai's Lady Boss is Han Chuang's clanswoman Han Jing. If he wants to do something against Xiang Shaolong's interests, both men would definitely form a partnership. Under those circumstances, even Lord Longyang could not voice his objection.

Their only stumbling block is Li Yuan but whether Li Yuan would risk offending the Three States to protect him is still an unknown fact.

As his mind weighed down with these issues, his senses suddenly tingled with alarm. A single horseman is seen riding towards him from the front and as he got nearer, the rider gazed downwards at him, checking: “How do I address Brother?”

Xiang Shaolong stared at him with astonishment and after confirming that he has never seen this man before in his life, he raised his alertness and quizzed: “What is going on?”

The rider was reasonably polite and smiled: “My Mistress is Lady Qingxiu and I was commanded by her to invite Mister to meet her. As Mistress did not tell me the honourable name of Mister, I had to trouble you for it.”

Realizing that the convoy which departed earlier from Tingzhu Villa belongs to Lady Qingxiu, Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: either Li Yuan has told her about his presence in Lin Zi or his disguise is really terrible.

Thus, he gave his name as Shen Liang and accompanied the horseman to meet this beauty who has had an unhappy marriage.

Boarding Lady Qingxiu’s carriage that was waiting by the roadside, the beauty who has concealed her gorgeous face behind a few layers of veil greeted in her usual wintery voice: “How are you doing, Great General! Please sit beside Qingxiu.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling disappointed that he did not get to see her face. Additionally, he is conscious that her invitation for him

to sit down beside her is not because of intimacy but rather a more convenient way to hold a secret conversation. He hurriedly stabilized his emotions and sat down.

A whiff of womanly fragrance began invading his nose and mind as the carriage move slowly along the busy highway of the ancient capital.

All of a sudden, his loneliness has completely evaporated. As the carriage shook occasionally, causing their shoulders to knock against each other, he could not help but recall the wonderful and moving time in Daliang when Ji Yanran shared a similar episode with him.

Lady Qingxiu plainly state: “Great General’s masquerade is truly brilliant. If not for Qingxiu hearing about Great General’s arrival in Lin Zi from Chancellor Li (Yuan), I would not have recognized you.”

A relieved Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I certainly hope Chancellor Li would not tell everyone he met that I am here in the State of Qi.”

Lady Qingxiu was displeased: “Chancellor Li is not someone who does not know what he is doing. He did not hide the truth from me because after all, Qingxiu is the best friend of Grand Tutor Qin!”

Xiang Shaolong shot his mouth off: “I thought Your Ladyship is not on good terms with Chancellor Lee!”

Looking out of the window through the curtain, Lady Qingxiu kept silent for some time before softly suggesting: “It is snowing again. I wonder what scenery Cow Mountain will offer? Is Great General interested to accompany Qingxiu for a tour of Cow Mountain?”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to propose a tour out of the blue and even invited him to accompany her. He stammered: “Cow Mountain?” At the same time, his heart was filled with surprise and shock at her warm hospitality.

The sky began to darken as flakes of snows gently and feebly descended on earth.

Appearing to be in deep contemplation, Lady Qingxiu stared out of the window and gently articulated: “Touring Cow Mountain during the rainy Spring season is widely regarded as the top attraction among the eight top touring locations of Lin Zi. Due to recent deforestation, Cow Mountain is wastefully degenerating into a barren highland. Fortunately, after a bout of tree planting, it is overheard that it has regained its spread of bountiful forestry and seas of greenery. Of course this cannot be seen as it is still winter!”

Xiang Shaolong finally discovered the origin of the saying: As barren as Cow Mountain. He nodded: “Since Your Ladyship is feeling adventurous, I dare not reject your offer.”

After instructing the convoy to proceed towards Cow Mountain, Lady Qingxiu enthused with anticipation: “When Qingxiu was young, I did visit Cow Mountain with my late father. It was in

March during Spring. There were gushing streams formed by spring water seeping out of crevices of Cow Mountain, materializing into a descending body of water. With mass evaporation, it resembles a combination of rain and mist, giving the impression of a smoky downpour. Till today, the scene is deeply ingrained in my memory.”

Listening to her eloquent description and witnessing her graceful aura, Xiang Shaolong was immensely mesmerized. Secretly picturing her face veils to be the smoky rain of Cow Mountain, he was bedazzled at her attractive though blurry face.

Lady Qingxiu continued: “Qingxiu is always perturbed when revisiting past sites of beautiful sceneries. I am deeply fearful that it may become different from what I previously remembered.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Then why are we revisiting this attraction?”

Lady Qingxiu shook her head slowly: “I do not understand too. Maybe it is because I am presently accompanied by the earth-shattering figure Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong noted: “It appears that I hold certain weightage in the heart of Your Ladyship.”

Glancing at him, Lady Qingxiu whispered: “Earlier, when I noticed Great General standing alone outside the Villa gates and comparing it to Great General being at the top of the command chain in Xianyang, I can clearly experience a world of difference

between the two and the intense sensation of how things have changed with the times. Finally, I could not bear it and had to stop my carriage to see Great General. Does Great General find me ridiculous?”

Xiang Shaolong was startled: “So Your Ladyship is feeling sympathetic towards me.”

Shaking her head, Lady Qingxiu clarified: “It is not sympathy but adoration. Does Great General know that you are in grave danger?”

At this moment, the carriage drove through the city gates and headed towards the south.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I am sure there is a logical explanation behind Your Ladyship’s words. Shaolong is all ears.”

Lady Qingxiu simply admired: “In my entire life, it is once in a blue moon for Qingxiu to experience anything that matches Great General’s nonchalance and indifference about his safety. Even if it is not on the account of Senior Sister Qin, Qingxiu would assist you all the same.”

Suppressing his voice to a lower volume, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Can your bodyguards be trusted?”

Lady Qingxiu assured: “Great General can put your mind at ease! These family warriors have been in my service for over ten years; in addition, they would never have guessed that you are Xiang

Shaolong!” After a pause, she leaned in closer and speak with her breath landing on his ear and her veil occasionally rubbing against his face: “Chancellor Li entered the palace yesterday to look for my sister, Lady Ning and was wearing a depressed and pained expression. Only upon my interrogation did he reveal your affairs.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “This is bad. Did he say anything else?”

Lady Qingxiu lamented: “He would never confide the truth to me but I am certain that he truly appreciates and view Great General as his bosom buddy. However, he is the Chancellor and it is more often than not where he has to put aside his personal feelings and put the State’s interests above his own. Otherwise, he would not be so troubled.”

As if she does not want to get too close to him, Lady Qingxiu suddenly turned her face away, sighing a breath as she gazed out of the window.

Sighing along with her, Xiang Shaolong was speechless for some time. He concluded that when Li Yuan initially saw him, that was his genuine and authentic behavior but in afterthought, reality and practicability would set in. His troubled mind could also be due to Han Chuang giving pressure.

Except for Xiao Yuetan, who else can he trust now?

A word at a time, Lady Qingxiu slowly advised: “If not for the

terrible weather, I would recommend Great General to simply depart now that we are outside the city. It will be a good and clean getaway.”

Recalling the days when he was critically ill and staggering along the unfamiliar roads of Daliang, Xiang Shaolong was filled with apprehension. He sighed: “I still have some unfinished business. Besides, I would certainly not be a sitting duck even if someone tries to come after me. Aye! Before Your Ladyship’s warning, I did anticipate this development.”

Lady Qingxiu nodded: “History has long proven Xiang Shaolong to be someone who is able to overcome danger and difficulties. Until now, no one has a clear picture of what is going. Maybe I am just overly worried!” Abruptly, she joyfully pointed to a faraway hill beyond the window and exclaimed: “Look! That is the tomb of Guan Zhong, the famed Premier who assisted Henggong to acclaimed success and dominance.”

Naturally leaning forward and trailing her far gaze, Xiang Shaolong can only see the mountainous wilderness blanketed with a layer of silver snow and every tree branch laden with snowflakes. It was an absolutely spotless, breath-stopping white wonderland. The snowy landscape seems to have merged with the sky, resulting in no difference between the two.

Not far away a huge mountain stood erected as River Zi and River Nv, the two rivers meandered from east to west. Lined along the river shores were towering, centuries-old pine and birch trees. The backdrop was unbelievable.

Several mountains were connected to the first along the southern direction, forming a series of peaking mountain range. It was a breathtaking sight.

Lady Qingxiu lowered her head, softly remarking: “Great General, you...”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize his own chest is tightly pressed against the side of her shoulder. He awkwardly shifted away and after observing the environment, he perceived: “Without a ship to cross the river, we cannot ascend the mountain and enjoy the fantastic view from above!”

Lady Qingxiu simply decided: “It is time to go back! If I wanted to look for Great General in the future, what should I do?”

Noticing her tone turning chilly, Xiang Shaolong can feel his pride swelling and replied in a low voice: “Your Ladyship has better not get involved in this matter. Life and Death is predetermined. If Heaven does not bless me, Xiang Shaolong, what can I do? Man cannot go against the Will of Heaven.”

Lady Qingxiu lightly shuddered: “Man cannot go against the Will of Heaven. Great General is indeed open-minded. I shall not interfere any further.”

Back at Tingsong Villa, Xiang Shaolong’s mind is still persistently filled with images of Lady Qingxiu.

He could not understand the strong influence she exerts over him. It could be due to her indifferent and cold attitude towards life or her graceful style of cool arrogance that has moved his heart.

Fortunately, he is bristling with alertness at the slightest sign of danger. Using his spare time, he analyzed the layout of Tingsong Villa down to the smallest details in readiness of a swift evacuation in times of peril. Only after retrieving his grappling hooks and ropes and securely fastening them around his waist did he finally steadied his frayed nerves.

Once he settled some routine troupe responsibilities and visited the bedridden but recovering Zhang Quan, he retreated to his own room for a break. Just as he was about to fall asleep, Dong Shuzen came a knocking.

Hugging his blanket, Xiang Shaolong sat up as Dong Shuzen nestled herself on the side of his bed. She was astonished: “Has Manager Shen caught a cold?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I am as fit as a fiddle and can kill two tigers right now. What is the purpose behind Second Mistress’s visit?”

Calming down from her shock, Dong Shuzen patted her perky bosom, exclaiming: “You gave me a fright!” Shooting him a look, she admonished: “Must I visit you only when I have a purpose? Come! Let me give you a massage. I guarantee you will have a good nap thereafter.”

Flipping his body and lying prostrate on his bed, Xiang Shaolong was pleased: “Let me experience the excellent massage skills of Second Mistress.”

Dong Shuzhen took off her outer coat and conveniently kicked her cotton shoes away. Sitting on his back, she reached out and grinded his shoulder muscles, revealing in a low voice: “I have discovered the culprit who switched the song sheet.”

Without thinking at all, Xiang Shaolong remarked: “It is Little Ning.” Little Ning is Zhu Xiuzhen’s personal serving maid.

Dong Shuzhen was thrilled: “This time round, Manager Shen is wrong. The criminal is Zhang Quan himself. Little Ning did catch him acting sneakily near her room and found the room to be slightly untidy upon entering but did not think too much about it. She only confessed to this after Xiuzhen’s interrogation.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “I do not believe a word of it. It is Little Ning framing Zhang Quan for her own wrongdoing. Ow! This spot is really comfortable. I am going to doze off!”

Dong Shuzhen panicked: “Do not doze off yet. Do you have any news regarding the promise you committed to me?”

Xiang Shaolong knows she is asking about the issue of Feng Fei allowing her to sing solo for one of the routines. Distressed, he honestly admitted: “I have not had the opportunity to talk to her about it. Shall I update you tomorrow instead?”

Dong Shuzen prone down and embraced him in a bear hug, biting his ear as she questioned: “I heard that you and Han Chuang go way back and are old buddies. Would you assist him in harming me?”

Xiang Shaolong is not as confident about Han Chuang as before. He bitterly smiled: “We are just acquaintances! And definitely not old buddies as you mentioned. Second Mistress can put your mind at ease. As long as I am still breathing, I would do my best for Second Mistress.”

Dong Shuzen shivered once and wondered: “Shen Liang, why are you sounding so negative today? Where has your confidence and willpower disappeared to?”

Xiang Shaolong did a big body flip, pressing her below his body and greedily kissing her tender lips. It was only when she began to moan did he release her, explaining: “Life is unpredictable; no man can be confident about everything in the future. We can only strive to do our best which is why I require full trust and cooperation from both of you.”

Her pupils dilating as she stared at him, Dong Shuzen’s eyes begin to shine with searing flames of passion as she whispered: “You are not only into men (but women as well).”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “When did I ever admit I am into men?” At the same time, he was becoming highly aroused.

Ever since he reckoned the possibility of betrayal by Han Chuang or the others, his spirits have sunk to unfathomable depths and are at an all time low. He was desperate to indulge in some excitement to distract himself and Dong Shuzen has ‘volunteered’ to provide the excitement he needs.

Maybe it is only through her sexy figure can he forget about all the unhappy events.

Hooking his neck with her arms, Dong Shuzen softly dared: “Words are just empty talk. I need to see some real action to prove that you are into women.”

As his wall of determination came crashing down, Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and was about to taste the lipstick on her lips when someone called out beyond his door: “Master Shen, Official Xie Ziyuan is here and is waiting for you in the main hall.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sense of uneasiness. There are several hours till sunset. Why is Xie Ziyuan so early?

Book 23 Chapter 06 - Expired Love

Xie Ziyuan had a ghastly expression on his face and appears to be in distress. The moment he saw Xiang Shaolong, he began dragging him towards the main entrance, explaining: “Little Brother unexpectedly has something urgent to attend to and may not be able to fetch Brother Shen at the predetermined time. Therefore, I chose to come by much earlier.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Since Brother Xie has an important task at hand, we can simply postpone our activities.”

Xie Ziyuan shook his head and apologized: “That would land me in hot soup. Originally, I thought of sending someone to fetch you but felt that was inappropriate after reconsideration. Moreover, it is more convenient this way, as I will be passing by. Once I delivered Brother Shen back to my residence, you’ll have to make do without Little Brother for some time.”

As the two men stepped out of the main gate, they entered the square where thirty odd family warriors were awaiting their esteemed presence with horses and a carriage.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong witness Xie Ziyuan in such a grand and imposing procession. He was amazed: “Brother Xie is truly awe-inspiring.”

Shaking his head, Xie Ziyuan sighed: “It is not my style to take on a high profile but Zongsun Long demanded I do so. Let’s speak further in the carriage.”

An attendant opened the carriage door and the two men climbed aboard, taking their respective seats. As the carriage drove out of the Villa, Xie Ziyuan sighed with a breath: “Don’t be misled by the lively and prosperous appearance of Lin Zi. Behind the scenes, every person can barely fend for themselves and one will never know when trouble will come knocking.”

Xiang Shaolong probed in a low voice: “Is Brother Xie referring to the two princes fighting for the throne of Qi?”

Xie Ziyuan was astounded: “I did not expect Brother Shen to know about these insider information.”

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “I just have a rough idea about what is going on. Looking at Brother Xie’s heavy frown, has something abrupt happened, causing Brother Xie so much anxiety?”

Sighing again, Xie Ziyuan insisted in a deep voice: “For Brother Shen, some things are better left unknown. I shall send Brother Shen to my residence first for a talk with my wife. After meeting Zongsun Long, I shall return back to see Brother Shen. Hey! No matter what, we must definitely have a good time tonight. Brother Shen should be capable of negotiating with my wife, right?”

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh: “I thought Brother Xie has forgotten all about it.”

Xie Ziyuan bitterly laughed: “Compared to all previous occasions, Little Brother is most wanting now for a visit to a brothel to de-

stress.”

Xiang Shaolong is concerned about Shan Rou and his love covers her family, which includes Xie Ziyuan as well. Nonetheless, he is conscious that Xie Ziyuan would not easily reveal the intricacies of the palace infighting to an outsider like himself. His mind thinking at the speed of electricity and grasping the genuine reason, he tested his theory: “Is it Lu Buwei deploying some devious scheme?”

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck: “How did Brother Shen know about this?”

Lowering his voice, Xiang Shaolong clarified: “I did stay in Xianyang for a period of time and was on extremely good terms with the movers and shakers of the Qin Court, leading to my familiarity with Lu Buwei’s evil methods, resulting in my calculated guess.”

Xie Ziyuan was caught in a daze for a while before reflecting: “Movers and Shakers. This is the first time Little Brother has heard this phrase and after thinking thoroughly, it is such an apt description. Who are the people that Brother Shen is familiar with?”

Xiang Shaolong mentioned the names Li Si, the Lord Changping Brothers and naturally included his own name.

Upon hearing, Xie Ziyuan was left gaping with his mouth wide open and tongue-tied. Exhaling a breath, he observed: “That means Brother Shen is well-acquainted with the loyal subjects of

Yingzheng? The best of the lot is Xiang Shaolong. Despite using every trick in the book, Lu Buwei is still unable to trip him up. By the way, Brother Shen, is Yingzheng the son of Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji?”

Xiang Shaolong resolutely affirmed: “Of course not! Otherwise, their relationship would not be so strained. What did Lu Buwei do exactly that has caused Brother Xie so much agony? Did he make some remarks to your Great King?”

Xie Ziyuan is truly a kind soul. Shaking his head, he enlightened: “The affairs which I am involved in are of such importance that any allusions would result in the extermination of one’s clan. Little Brother is afraid of implicating Brother Shen. It is better for Brother Shen to stay out of this.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that it would be unkind to press on any further and he secretly swore to prevent anyone from exterminating the household of Shan Rou. However, he is unable to come up with a suitable solution for he is unaware of the whole picture.

Xie Ziyuan changed the topic: “It seems like Feng Fei holds Brother Shen in high regard!”

Remembering the ever-complex relationship between Feng Fei and himself, he plainly muttered a reply. Focusing his attention back to the succession dispute of Qi, he realized that he could not longer ignore this event for it has a direct impact on Shan Rou’s household.

Tian Dan and Lu Buwei are professionals when it comes to the scheming game. Faced with opponents like Zongsun Long, Xie Ziyuan and supported by the other States, it is still unclear who will be the final victor.

It would be wonderful if Zou Yan is still around. All this world-famous fortune telling grandmaster has to do is to point to the stars and say a few words to overpower all the persuasion and debating strategies thrown at the King of Qi.

By this time, the carriage has arrived at Xie Residence and Xiang Shaolong disembarked. Without dismounting at all, Xie Ziyuan rode the same carriage to Zongsun Long's Villa for a secret meeting with their allies.

A maid led Xiang Shaolong into the inner residence to see Shan Rou. Along the way, Xiang Shaolong repeatedly warned himself mentally, reminding himself that Shan Rou has become the wife of another man and there must not be any rekindling of past love. Otherwise, he would be acting against his own conscience.

Shan Rou, without a doubt, is still Shan Rou. Without the slightest display of womanly vulnerability, she expectedly chased all her servants to the side hall before going straight to the point: "Have I become a man-eating tiger after getting married? How dare you flee for your life at the first sight of me? Have you developed a habit of running for your life?"

Continuing with a 'pu ci' giggle, she shot him a look with the

aura of a milf, laughing as she panted: “An ***** will be an ***** wherever he goes. How dare you collaborate with Ziyuan to deceive me? If not for Zhi Zhi’s (Zhao Zhi) account, I would have broken both your dog legs.”

Witnessing Shan Rou’s ferociousness, Xiang Shaolong was instead relieved. Vulgarly taking a seat, he smiled: “Why aren’t you bringing me your two white and chubby sons for a look? Little Brother is extremely fond of anyone who resembles Madam Rou. Are they born inherently with fist fighting and leg kicking skills?”

Shan Rou laughed heartily like the shaking of flowers on branches, collapsing onto the floor. She wailed: “How I wish I can give you a beating right now. Aye! After become the Mistress of the Xie household, it is not easy to find someone who would retaliate physically or verbally. With Master unwilling to duel and coupled with his batch of useless disciples, my hands are really itching.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood: “No wonder Brother Xie is terrified of you.”

Glaring viciously at him, Shan Rou hissed: “Don’t make me sound so frightening. Shall we have a friendly duel using wooden swords?”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “Your Master has four top disciples and I know two of them are Han Jie and Zongsun Xuanhua. Who are the other two?”

With a look of contempt on her face, Shan Rou disparaged:

“What four top disciples? I have no idea. I only know Master is most fond of me, Shan Rou. That turtle egg Zongsun Xuanhua is just a cowardly good for nothing. Every time I suggested a friendly exchange, he would make up all sorts of excuses. How I wish I could cut his balls off. Hee!”

Hearing that, Xiang Shaolong could not help but hold his tummy and burst out into laughter. Even though this obstinate beauty has become a mother of two children, she did not lose a single bit of her unique style, satisfying him to a great extent. He took the opportunity to ask: “Does Tian Dan know you have become Madam Xie?”

Shan Rou coldly grunted: “So what if he knows about it. That old crook should prepare a huge prayer session to thank his ancestors and Heaven that I did not pursue the matter any further. Aye! It is really bizarre. After killing the fake dummy, all the hatred and anger in my heart has dissipated. Although that villain is still alive and kicking, I have long regarded him as a dead man.”

Xiang Shaolong grew solemn: “Shall we talk about something more serious? Are you familiar with Han Jie? What kind of person is he? What is his character like?”

Pouting her cute little mouth, Shan Rou scorned: “What kind of good man would end up as Lao Ai’s partner in crime? He has earned neither my admiration nor respect. However, his sword skills do hold water.”

She suddenly frowned: “Why are you not on your way back to Xianyang? Zhi Zhi must be worried sick.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I ended up here because there was no other way out. Do you think I am here to tour the local sights?”

Shan Rou nodded: “I heard both the roads and the river has been blockaded due to several days of continuous snow storm. One cannot survive without a decent fire stove. When the weather gets better, I will get Ziyuan to send you away!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: “You must never do that. Brother Xie must not know about my real identity. If this matter leaks out, he would be found guilty of deceiving the King.”

Shan Rou proudly declared: “Based on the reputation of the Xie Family, worse come to worse, he would only lose his official post. What’s so good about being an official?”

Xiang Shaolong is aware that her hatred and opposition is due to her father holding an official post and eventually facing a clan extermination order. He agreed: “Brother Xie is too kind and gullible! It is not very suitable for someone of his character to thrive in officialdom.”

Shan Rou chuckled: “Neither you nor him are good people anyway; forever thinking of having a good time outside with other women. You nearly became an accomplice.”

Xiang Shaolong simply reasoned: “The less he gets, the more he wants. You can try forcing him to visit brothels for ten straight

nights. I guarantee he would be so sick of them he would avoid them like plague in the future. Besides, he visits brothels for inspiration for his music composition and is not really sleeping around.”

Her almond shaped eyes staring at him, Shan Rou interrogated: “Did he plead with you to negotiate with me on his behalf?”

In actual fact, like Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong is terrified of Shan Rou. He raised his arms, surrendering: “Big Sister Rou should know whose side I am on!”

Thawing, Shan Rou sweetly smiled: “Of course I know la! It is wonderful that you are here. How about this? While Ziyuan is having a good time outside, you shall accompany me.”

Xiang Shaolong stammered: “What?”

Shan Rou justified: “It is only fair!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “To be honest, I am spending every day thinking of how to preserve my life. I...”

Shan Rou scolded: “Forget it! You think you are so desirable? Who needs your company? Both of you better scram as far as you can; otherwise, do not blame me for being merciless.”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded at her words.

Shan Rou instead shot him a look and cackled with a ‘pu ci’: “I’m just scaring you. How would I bear to chase you away? Master Xiang is little girl’s first lover. If I cannot even grant such a small request, how can you face up to Ziyuan’s expectations? How about this? I shall permit the two of you to have all the fun you want tonight but you must return by 11 o’clock, otherwise, Ziyuan will have to sleep at your place.” Rubbing her tummy, she wailed: “We shall not wait for Ziyuan any longer! I’m hungry.”

When dinner is over and there is still no sight of Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to bid farewell and made his way back to Tingsong Villa. Just as he stepped into the Villa, the sentry reported: “Chancellor Li from Chu sent someone to look for Master Shen but Master Shen is not around so he left. Hey. Master Shen is truly well connected. Our band of brothers will follow you in the future!”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong was thinking: I can barely fend for myself, how am I supposed to take care of so many of you? As he gave a token response, this young family warrior named Chi Zichun lowered his voice and disclosed: “Your servant has something to report to Master Shen. It is something for Master Shen to be aware of and it mustn’t be known to others that it was I who leaked this information to you.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: “What is it?”

Chi Zichun began: “Earlier today, I saw Gu Ming and Fang Sheng behaving in a suspicious manner and the two men slipped out into the streets. I decided to stalk them and witnessed them conversing

with Sa Li. I believe they are up to no good and I am worried that they are plotting something against you, Master Shen.”

Xiang Shaolong thought: I have my limitations and cannot cope with so many issues cropping up at the same time.

The best solution is to make another pair of ice skis and while the snow outside the city is waist deep, it is the perfect timing to ‘skate’ away. Even if all the soldiers of the six states were to jointly pursue him, it would still be fruitless.

This plan is indeed appealing but the problem lies with him being unable to convince himself. Moreover, Xie Ziyuan’s problem is unresolved and he can never leave with a peace of mind.

Patting Chi Zichun’s shoulder and dispatching some words of encouragement, he ambled towards the inner courtyard.

Chi Zichun instead caught up to him and pulled him to a corner before adding: “There is something more I need to tell Master Shen. Upon Gu Ming’s return, he went to look for Second Mistress. Following that, Second Mistress and Miss Xiuzhen left the Villa too.”

Xiang Shaolong was burning with rage. Up till today, Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen don’t know what’s good for them and have remained in cahoots with Sa Li. To think he is still risking his life by staying behind for their sake.

Back at the inner residence, Xiao Yuetan is waiting for him in a small side hall in the same courtyard where his bedroom is located. He gleefully exclaimed: “Big Brother has fulfilled your request. Look!”

As he spoke, he produced a roll of parchment from his bosom and opened it up for Xiang Shaolong’s perusal. It was indeed a blueprint of Qixia College that Xiang Shaolong desired.

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “That’s fast.” Xiao Yuetan enlightened: “It took me four long hours to finish drawing it.”

Pointing to the city gate drawn on the right side of the map, he gushed: “This gate is named Beishou Gate and is situated at the west of Big City. It is also known as Qi gate and the college is beyond it. Qixia College is built near the river, increasing transportation conveniences. With the river flowing partially around it, the college becomes even more mesmerizing to look at and is among the top eight touring sites of Lin Zi. It is a must-see attraction.”

Scrutinizing the parchment map, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Qixia College is like a small city outside the city. It even has its own city wall and roads. If I were to abruptly barge in looking for my sabre, it would be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

Drawing attention to a cluster of magnificent buildings, Xiao Yuetan indicated: “This is Qixia Hall, serving as the assembly grounds for the college as well as the place where all ceremonies and prayers would be held. Your Hundred Battle Sabre is hanging on the south wall of the big hall.”

Xiang Shaolong was fiercely determined: “Tonight is the night I will get my sabre back.”

Xiao Yuetan was stunned: “This is not the best time, right? Why don’t Shaolong steal the sabre when you are about to leave Qi?” Xiang Shaolong swore: “After I steal the sabre tonight, I will leave Lin Zi first time tomorrow morning, saving Han Chuang and his conspirators plenty of headache and consideration.”

Xiao Yuetan was mystified: “The heavy snow has paralyzed all forms of transportation beyond Lin Zi City, how are you going to leave?”

Xiang Shaolong confidently assured: “I have my ways of traveling across heavy snow, otherwise, I would not have landed up here. Big Brother can put your mind at ease.”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: “It would be best if you can leave here immediately but didn’t you commit to assisting Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans?”

Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed: “That is purely my one-sided and naïve thinking. In fact, I am merely one of their pawns. Presently, I am feeling disheartened and will only make plans for myself.”

His words are filled with strong emotions. Right now, his only worry is Shan Rou. However, the internal strife of Qi is beyond his jurisdiction and he cannot help much even if he stays.

The minute he decides to leave the next morning, he can feel his entire body relaxing tremendously. Whatever that is about to happen is totally none of his business.

Since Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the others are treating him like an idiot, why should he occupy himself with their affairs?

Xiao Yuetan supported: "I will prepare clothing and provisions for you at once. Tomorrow morning, I shall smuggle you out of the City."

Suddenly recalling something, he frowned: "How are you going to steal your sabre tonight? Unless you have a special travel pass, nobody is going to open the city gates for you in the middle of the night."

Slapping his forehead, Xiang Shaolong cursed: "I forgot the city gates would be closed." He began to feel anxious as he can foresee snow accumulating on the walls of the city, causing them to be impossible to climb. But he continued brainstorming at the speed of light, rationalizing that if even Mount Everest can be scaled, what is a measly city wall? Inspired, he wondered: "Is there any way Elder Brother can get his hands on a dozen iron chisels?"

Seemingly understanding his intentions, Xiao Yuetan was pleased: "Tomorrow, I will buy them for you from the blacksmith along the neighbouring street! Do you need a hammer too?"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "Since I am going to steal, I might as

well steal the hammer and chisels tonight. It would shield Elder Brother from any future implications too.”

Xiao Yuetan agreed: “Since you are planning on leaving, it is always better to leave earlier than later.” Reaching out and holding Xiang Shaolong’s hand, he hinted: “After Lu Buwei’s downfall, I may accompany you to the borderlands. I am really sick of the Central Plains.”

When Xiao Yuetan left, Xiang Shaolong retrieved Bloodwave and inspected the climbing equipment on his body. Upon completion, he is still feeling agitated so he concealed a dagger on each calf and had a short rest before putting on his clothes and heading to the rear entrance of the Villa.

With heavy snow continuously landing from above, everybody within the Villa is keeping to his or her respective bedrooms.

When the rear entrance came into sight, Xiang Shaolong’s senses suddenly picked up something and he hastily scrambled behind a large tree.

The rear entrance door sprung open and three silhouettes slipped in.

Borrowing whatever blurred illumination the faraway lanterns could offer, Xiang Shaolong recognised two of them to be Feng Fei and Little Ping’er. The third person is a tall and imposing man whose face remains hidden.

After a reluctant Feng Fei converse briefly with the man, he reminded in a deep voice: “You must not let your heart soften. This Shen Liang is only after your money and body.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken for he could pinpoint the voice to be that of Han Jie’s.

There is a difference between knowing something and affirming something. All of a sudden, he is beginning to resent Feng Fei. Based on her intelligence, she could not tell that beyond Han Jie’s handsome outlook, he is basically a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Feng Fei had wanted to say something but held herself back and sighed with a breath.

When Han Jie left, both owner and servant returned back to their building.

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong ran out in pursuit. In the dark alley, the carriage Han Jie was using to send Feng Fei home was about to drive off.

As the alley is narrow and slippery, the carriage is moving at a slow pace.

Xiang Shaolong darted over and scaled the back of the carriage, noiselessly landing on the roof and prostrating down.

He did not think about the purpose of this tactic and is just trying

his luck. If the carriage is not heading towards his ideal direction, he can leave anytime he wants.

With this kind of weather, it is a perfect setting for crime.

Book 23 Chapter 07 - The Sword Saint Of Qixia

The carriage made a turn onto the highway and began picking speed.

Glancing around and trying to make sense of his surroundings, Xiang Shaolong concluded that the carriage is not moving in the direction of the Chancellor Residence where Lu Buwei is supposedly residing. 'Where is Han Jie heading to?' He wondered.

He initially wanted to make use of Han Jie's carriage to discreetly leave the Villa, avoiding the detection of spies who are keeping Tingsong Villa under surveillance. However, his curiosity is significantly aroused and he might as well enjoy his free ride and investigate further.

A long night looms ahead and there is more than sufficient time for him to execute his original grand scheme.

Pulling up his hood from his windbreaker, he was feeling at ease.

Ever since Xiao Yuetan's morning warning, the fear of betrayal by his buddies has formed an indistinguishable source of stress, making him bitter and despondent. The moment he vowed to leave with great determination, the horror has completely disappeared without a trace. His only concern is Shan Rou. If Xie Ziyuan turned out to be the loser in this conflict, based on Tian Dan's cruel methods, Shan Rou could face another calamity of clan extermination. Regarding this, he is at his wit's end and can only

look on helplessly.

As the carriage swerve left and right occasionally, it finally entered the highway leading to Xie Residence.

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Who is Han Jie rendezvousing?

The carriage came to a stop at the main gate of Zongsun Long's residence. The next second, a side door swung open as a tall and remarkable fellow dashed out and swiftly boarded the carriage.

Once again, the carriage began to move forward slowly.

Xiang Shaolong is incredibly puzzled. Han Jie came to Lin Zi along with Lu Buwei and should therefore align himself with Tian Dan, who is at loggerheads with Zongsun Long. Why did Han Jie meet up with someone from Zongsun Long's residence and is behaving furtively as if they are afraid of being spotted by someone.

Contemplating to this point, he would not hesitate any longer. Shifting to the edge of the carriage, he leaned over and placed his ear against the wall of the carriage and focused all his attention into eavesdropping.

A voice as deep as a bass instrument sounded from within the carriage: "Xuanhua pays his respects to Elder Martial Brother. I miss you a lot."

The man turned out to be the holder of the title: Lin Zi's number one swordsman. It is Zongsun Long's capable son, Zongsun Xuanhua.

Han Jie's voice rang out: "You are much more awe-inspiring compared to before. I am sure you have made significant improvements in your sword skills."

After Zongsun Xuanhua gave a modest reply, he praised: "Elder Martial Brother is giving me too much credit. What is the situation in Xianyang now? I heard Elder Martial Brother is doing very well!"

Han Jie guffawed: "Lao Ai is in urgent need of talented men and is naturally hospitable towards me. However, this man is extremely narrow-minded and cannot accommodate others better than himself. He can never amount to anything great. On the other hand, Lu Buwei is indeed a hero who can see the big picture. If not for Xiang Shaolong, he would have gained absolute control of Qin."

Zongsun Xuanhua coldly grunted: "Is Xiang Shaolong's swordsmanship as formidable as what the rumours say?"

Han Jie sighed: "He is as unfathomable as a ghost. No one has ever comprehended what he is genuinely up to. You should have seen his Hundred Battle Sabre right! Who could imagine and create such a unique weapon that can both hack and slash?"

Zongsun Xuanhua agreed: "After esteemed teacher received the

sabre from the Great King, he toyed with it for some time. Although he did not say anything, I can tell that he is moved. I rarely witness this expression on his face over the past ten years.”

Han Jie warned: “Back to business. You should take precautions in case Tian Jian and Tian Dan form a partnership.”

On the carriage roof, Xiang Shaolong was immensely stunned; finally understanding why Xie Ziyuan is behaving like it is the end of the world. Expectedly, Zongsun Xuanhua sighed with a breath: “We already knew about this and never anticipated Tian Dan to use this trick. Does Elder Martial Brother have a good counterstrategy?”

Han Jie articulated: “Lu Buwei is the mastermind behind this scheme, using his connections to pull Tian Dan and Tian Jian to the same side of the fence. Aye! Ultimately, Tian Dan is the most powerful official of Qi. If he is willing to sacrifice Tian Sheng, it is with absolute certainty that Tian Jian would be the next King of Qi. This is unlike the past where the winner remains unpredictable. Thus, the circumstances are highly unfavourable for you and your allies.”

Zongsun Xuanhua was infuriated: “Both Father and myself have done so much for Tian Jian, how can he simply switch sides to rely on our nemesis?”

Han Jie sighed: “Power tussles within the Court are simply the way it is. From Tian Jian’s point of view, whoever that can assist him in becoming King is a useful official. Moreover... Aye! I do not know how to continue. Lu Buwei gave Tian Jian his assurance that

as long as Tian Dan stays in power, Qin would never invade Qi and would even harass the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), permitting him to invade Yan without any reservations. You can see for yourself how tempting the conditions are.”

Zongsun Xuanhua icily snorted: “Only a fool would be taken in by these lies. At the end of the day, this is just Qin’s strategy of: Befriending Afar; Conquering Near.”

The eavesdropping Xiang Shaolong is even more confused than before. Whose side is Han Jie on?

Han Jie suddenly suppressed his voice and speaks even softer than before. Xiang Shaolong could not catch a single word and was about to curse him when Zongsun Xuanhua dismissed: “This is preposterous. My father and Tian Dan cannot see eye to eye and would never reconcile. In addition, given Tian Dan’s unscrupulous reputation, it would be a matter of time before we become cannon fodder.”

Han Jie reasoned: “This is merely using their strategy to your advantage. Tian Jian has unwavering trust in Xie Ziyuan. If you can offer the same terms to Tian Jian, I guarantee Tian Jian would still lean towards your side.”

Up till this point, Xiang Shaolong has lost all interest in the conversation. He carefully and gingerly somersaulted off the carriage and vanished into the gloomy lanes.

Locating a shadowy and secluded corner along the west city wall,

Xiang Shaolong tore off a part of his shirt and wrapped it around the head of the hammer. He incessantly hammered one chisel after another, one higher than the other, into the city wall, which had accumulated a large amount of snow. He then began to step on the iron chisels and ascended the city wall just like mountain climbers.

To avoid the wind and snow, the patrolling soldiers have fortified themselves within a battlement. Using the grappling hook and ropes, Xiang Shaolong easily flipped himself out of the city and treaded on the snow towards Qixia College.

Despite the flying snowflakes and dim illumination of lanterns, he caught sight of the tall surrounding wall around the courtyard where Qixia College is situated. The college sits atop a small hill beyond the west gate and is formed by countless conjoined buildings, emitting an impressive sensation.

Currently, Xiang Shaolong is no longer concerned about Xie Ziyuan's fate in the power tussle for the throne of Qi. Since Xie Ziyuan is Tian Jian's most trusted subordinate, even if Tian Jian switched sides and relied on Tian Dan, Xie Ziyuan would retain his usefulness. The sacrificial lambs would be limited to Zongsun Long and First Prince Tian Sheng.

Once he obtained his Hundred Battle Sabre, he could instantly run as far away as he likes, filling him with infinite joy. With the aid of snow skis, he would be back in the warm comfort of his own home in Xianyang within thirty days. In this world, is there anything more delightful than this?

Utilizing the cover of snowy forest on the left of Qixia College, he

slithered towards the east wall, fully displaying this forte of the Special Forces. As the wall is only a third as high as Lin Zi's city wall, he simply somersaulted over the college's outer wall.

Identifying the main cluster of buildings, Xiang Shaolong raised his alertness to a maximum as he snuck towards his goal.

From the lantern's glow, the corridors linking the various courtyards were void of pedestrians and noise. From afar, the sound of a flute and a zither is audible. It was a scene of tranquility.

The time is nearly eleven o'clock and most of the population should be fast asleep in bed, granting Xiang Shaolong much convenience.

Arriving at the garden of the main hall, he finally observed three men who are dressed in scholarly uniforms walking by. Promptly concealing himself behind a clump of trees, he did not anticipate the three men to suddenly halt and began admiring the snow. Stuck, Xiang Shaolong could neither advance nor retreat and was forced to listen to their exchange.

Out of the blue, one of the men started to ponder about 'Heaven'. He professed: "A ruler must first familiarize himself with Heaven. Not knowing the workings of Heaven and the laws of Nature, the ruler will be like scratching an itchy feet without taking off the shoe. Tutor Shen, what is your opinion on this?"

The man named Tutor Shen wondered: "Is Lecturer Lao feeling

the effects of the relentless snowstorm and becoming pessimistic, thereby allowing these thoughts to arise?”

The third man laughed: “Nobody understands Lecturer Lao better than Tutor Shen but I would connect his present thinking to his recent research of Xun Kuang’s System of Heaven.”

The camouflaged Xiang Shaolong is first hand experiencing for himself the culture of hollow discussion by Qixia scholars. He prayed they would leave as soon as possible.

Lecturer Lao solemnly explained: “This time round, Lecturer Chou is mistaken. I am in full disagreement with Xun Kuang’s System of Heaven. Xun Kuang’s Non Intervention is only good in theory but is non-executable. It is a wide departure from reality despite the wide topics that have been debated. Compared to Guan Zhong’s Man King Heaven Earth, they are poles apart. The latter book relates a necessary and practical approach to recognizing the correlation between Heaven and Man.”

Tutor Shen bellowed with laughter: “Lecturer Lao has stirred my interests! Come! Let us return to our rooms before cooking some wine and chatting into the night.”

After the three men have wandered off, Xiang Shaolong thanked Heaven & Earth. Scooting out, he furtively made a wide detour around a frozen pond outside the main hall. Coming to a west facing window of the main hall, he pried open a window shutter and opened it slightly. Upon peeping in, he observed a tall, spacious and wide inner structure that could easily accommodate a hundred men. Towards the south wall, a portion of it stands an

elevated platform that is usually reserved for prayers. Right above the stage is a giant signboard, which the four words 'Qixia Hall' were sculptured.

What left Xiang Shaolong the deepest impression were the craved flowers on the beams situated at the top of the hall. Coupled with huge, red painted pillars, they give the hall an authoritative and formal ambience while appearing intimidating at the same time.

In this moment, the other doors and windows are securely fastened. The only source of light is two oil lamps positioned on the platform, bathing the main hall in dim red illumination and from bright to dark depending on the distance between lamps and the section of the hall.

Scanning the hall a few times, he finally pinpointed his Hundred Battle Sabre hanging high up in the middle of the East wall. If he tried jumping, he should be able to touch the end of the sabre.

Exhilarated, Xiang Shaolong crossed the window ledge and somersaulted into the hall, briskly walking towards the Hundred Battle Sabre.

The interior of the great hall is still void of noise and human but in his heart, Xiang Shaolong was instead experiencing an indescribable feeling, causing him extreme discomfort.

His hand wrapping around the hilt of Bloodwave, Xiang Shaolong stopped walking.

With an 'Eeek' sound, the door leading to the front portion began to swing open despite the lack of wind or action.

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. He was about to make a run for it but it is already too late.

What followed was a cold snigger as a man dressed in white arrogantly entered the hall. Every time his step lands on the ground, it would create a sound; seemingly playing a melody that resembles a death knoll. The bizarre thing is although he was not walking very quickly, Xiang Shaolong could sense that this man could intercept himself if he had tried to retreat through the window.

What was truly disheartening and frightening was: Although this man has yet to draw his sword, he is already emitting an overpowering and domineering aura, making Xiang Shaolong feel that he would lose without a doubt.

An encounter with such a fearsome swordsman is a first for Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong bravely turned around to meet his opponent face to face.

The man leisurely stopped about ten odd feet away from Xiang Shaolong. With charcoal black hair that laid spread over his wide and muscular shoulders, he possess a nose hooked like an eagle's beak and a pair of deep set, penetrating eyes, giving the impression that he is a man without mercy. Hanging by the side of his body,

his two hands are longer than the average man and the skin of his face and hands are as white as snow. In terms of appearance and body built, it is something even Xiang Shaolong considers rare. He is even taller and ferocious looking than Guan Zhongxie, giving others a ruthless vibe.

His eyes are profound and unfathomable, glowing with focus and a sense of fearlessness, and felt like they never need to blink.

The sharp contrast of black hair and white skin portrays him to be like a Warrior Chief from Hell who has broken through the earth to enter the human realm.

Xiang Shaolong gasped with a surprise breath: “Cao Cuidao?”

The man assessed him swiftly and nodded: “That is right. I did not expect the sabre thief tonight when I just received news this very afternoon. Report your name. I wish to see who is it that has the guts to create trouble at my, Cao Cuidao’s, place.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart sank all the way to the bottom.

Only two men, Han Chuang and Xiao Yuetan, know about his intention to commit theft. The latter obviously would not betray him. Only Han Chuang remains. Despite saving his life on multiple occasions, Han Chuang has resorted to using this despicable scheme of ‘Borrowing someone else’s knife’ to kill himself, causing Xiang Shaolong to feel depressed and hurt.

From the standpoint of the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), it would be excellent if Xiang Shaolong was killed by a Qi native. When Qin and Qi wage war on each other, the Three States will stand to benefit without paying any price.

Casting aside all desires to retrieve his sabre as well as all irrelevant thoughts, he fixated his attention on surviving this encounter. Once he composed his emotions, he drew Bloodwave out with a ‘Jiang!’ and hollered in a low voice: “Awaiting instructions from the Saint!”

He is aware he cannot get off the hook easily and a quick battle is the best way out. In the meantime, he will look for a window of opportunity to make a getaway. If more people are alerted and rushed over in assistance, he would not be able to escape even if he grew wings.

Cao Cuidao plainly state: “You have got guts. For the past ten years, nobody has dared to draw his sword in front of me. You have come with pure defiance as I have given strict orders, forbidding anyone to enter the great hall at night. I will personally deal with all offenders and you happened to be the first.”

Witnessing that with his sword still sheathed, this man is already eyeing the world with contempt and behaved as if he is unstoppable, he dared not be complacent and shifted slightly forward and pointed his sword at him, generating his own fighting aura that can barely withstand the invisible pressure coming from his opponent. Only the best fighters are able to produce such an astounding effect.

His eyebrow twitched as Cao Cuidao revealed a small sign of surprise on his face. He demanded: “Show me what you have!”

How glad was Xiang Shaolong when he heard these words. Fighting against this widely acknowledged number one swordsman whose sword skills have attained a saintly level, he was actually filled with horror. Looking at his posture as if he need not use his sword, Xiang Shaolong cannot afford to hold back and unleashed Mozi’s most powerful attack from the Three Killing Stances: Attacking while Defending. Coupled with his striding footwork, Bloodwave whizzed towards Cao Cuidao.

Xiang Shaolong could not think of another swordplay that was more suited for this kind of situation. Even if Cao Cuidao has three heads and six arms, this would be his first encounter with such an amazing sword style. No matter what, he would have to adopt a defensive position for a few moves before counterattacking. When that happens, he could use this advantage to run for his life.

With a ‘Yi!’ sound, the front of Cao Cuidao abruptly exploded into a mass of sword flashes.

Xiang Shaolong has never seen such a fast sword in his whole life. The moment he saw his opponent’s hand move, the sword flashes instantly advanced towards himself. Not only is there no sign of a defensive position, it is a hardcore style of facing an attack head on with his own attack.

His mind processing at the speed of electricity, he concludes that beside a fast sword, his opponent’s sword strength and sword skills are beyond comparison, achieving an amazing and fascinating

level. Based on past formidable opponents such as Guan Zhongxie, Cao Cuidao's fighting ability is at least two levels higher up. Simply put, Xiang Shaolong is definitely not his match.

As the thoughts sink in, his fighting spirit decreased by half and he no longer possess the courage to attack forcefully, deciding to concentrate on defending instead. He swung his sword out.

DANG!

Using all his innate abilities, Xiang Shaolong shifted horizontally by three feet. Coupled with his footwork, he barely parried the incoming sword Cao Cuidao has sent flying towards his chest. He could instantly feel the strength of his opponent crushing down on him like a mountain and could not help but take half a step back.

Retrieving his sword and standing still, his eyes shone with delight as Cao Cuidao cheerfully laughed: "You actually managed to block an attack that I have launched with full strength. This is wonderful. It is hard to find a worthy opponent nowadays. If you can withstand another nine strokes from me, I will let you leave."

Xiang Shaolong's right hand is turning numb as he realized his opponent is born with the strength of an ox, easily surpassing his own. No wonder he has yet to meet with defeat.

Just by forcefully slashing with a sword, he could easily overwhelm most swordsmen. Moreover, he has trained to become an outstanding and invincible swordsman, inducing fear wherever he goes.

In front of this master swordsman, even though they are about the same height, Xiang Shaolong would somehow view himself as being the shorter one.

Don't even talk about nine strokes of his sword. He would be glad if he could successfully block the next strike.

Xiang Shaolong knows that without confidence and hope, he would certainly and regrettably meet his demise in this hall tonight. However, his opponent's stifling effect has never left the scene, giving him the sensation of futility as if his every effort would surely be thwarted. At his level of accomplishment, he is already undergoing such pressure. If it were a less skillful swordsman in his shoes, his heart and gall would have imploded, ending his life without the sword necessarily piercing his body.

Cao Cuidao is able to surpass all other swordsmen because his cultivation of the sword has reached a godly state.

Cao Cuidao coldly rumbled: "The second stroke!"

With a 'SWA!' sound, the opponent's long sword came slashing down.

Xiang Shaolong has gathered all his energy in preparation for this blow but this attack of Cao Cuidao has somewhat given him the illusion that it is unblockable.

This strike is neither a fast strike nor a slow strike. Cao Cuidao is in full control of the speed of the attack but Xiang Shaolong could inherently sense that Cao Cuidao is putting all his strength into this blow.

Logically, the more strength one puts into the attack, the faster the weapon would move and vice versa. However, Cao Cuidao's strike is neither fast nor slow but is able to create the perception that it carries his full strength behind it.

Xiang Shaolong is exceedingly depressed. What strongly bugged him was this strange and unexplainable sword move and the conflicting speed. His conviction is beginning to waver and he could not fix the point where he wishes to parry the attack, causing tremendous anxiety. In all his duels and battles, this is the first time he felt so powerless despite his abilities.

His fear may consume him but the inbound sword needs to be parried nonetheless. Fortunately, his mental energy has always been steady. Notwithstanding this disadvantageous scenario, he is able to swiftly recollect his emotions and resumed his calm demeanor.

His intuition tells him if he were to step back, the opponent's sword would attack with the force of a bursting dam and death will be a likelihood.

Running out of choices, Xiang Shaolong adopted a horse stance and twirled his sword, trailing a crescent of sword brilliance before piercing towards Cao Cuidao's abdomen.

Theoretically, his attack is faster than Cao Cuidao's by a tiny bit. Therefore, unless Cao Cuidao increases his attacking speed, he would have to block Xiang Shaolong's blow instead. Otherwise, by the time Xiang Shaolong's sword impaled his abdomen, Cao Cuidao's sword would still be about six inches away from Xiang Shaolong's face.

As cool as ever, Cao Cuidao snorted once and twisted his wrist downwards, flawlessly and accurately chopping down on the sword tip of the advancing Bloodwave. It is as if Xiang Shaolong had purposely prepared the sword for him to chop down on.

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed. With a 'DING!' sound, the top section of Bloodwave, around an inch long, has been sliced off. With the vibrating hilt causing much pain to his hand, he has no choice but to take a step back.

Cao Cuidao let out a string of laughter. His sword stance becoming strong again, he roared: "The third stroke!" In a flash, his sword is about to reach Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Xiang Shaolong finally and thoroughly experienced the worldly sword skills of this world famous Grandmaster Swordsman. His sword skills are simply extraordinary and behind a seemingly ordinary move are countless hidden variations and tricks, which one can never expect or guard against.

For example, this is an ordinary attack but it would somehow give the impression that he has devoted every muscle in his body,

all his feelings and spiritual energy concentrated into one single blow. As a result, even a plain move like this is filled with a devastating power that one cannot hope to resist against.

In the past, no matter what types of marvelous sword moves Xiang Shaolong encounters, he could easily launch a counterattack. On the contrary, confronted with Cao Cuidao's simple looking but complicated sword style, he felt as if his hands and legs are tied and could not put up a successful defence.

To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong was in the middle of taking the step back while Cao Cuidao's sword is fast approaching him like a lightning strike, causing him to be in a dilemma whether to step back or forward. From this episode, it demonstrates Cao Cuidao's excellent grasp of timing.

Since the beginning of the duel, Xiang Shaolong has been encountering restrictions in all his sword moves. If this goes on, it would be a miracle if he did not end up dead.

Xiang Shaolong viciously gnashed his teeth and turned his body while attacking with his sword. He simultaneously kicked out from below at the speed of light, aiming at Cao Cuidao's right calf, which happened to be taking a forward stride.

Cao Cuidao bellowed in a low voice: "How dare you!"

Hacking his sword against Cao Cuidao's sword, Xiang Shaolong was surprised when he did not hear the sound of weapons clashing. It turned out that when both swords came into contact,

Cao Cuidao displayed an uncanny move by twisting his sword around Xiang Shaolong's, forcing him to stumble forward with the same momentum and naturally negating his kick from below.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong knows he is in deep trouble. As the whistling of the sword rang out in the air, an ominous atmosphere descended on him from all directions, making him feel like he is caught in the middle of a tsunami.

In this life and death situation, Xiang Shaolong casted off every single notion about escaping away that has been occupying his mind. With regards to Cao Cuidao's aggressive sword stances, he treated them with emptiness and gathered all his vigor to launch a blow towards Cao Cuidao's head.

Under the present circumstances, he could only rely on the fastest speed and selecting the shortest route, forcing his opponent to parry this attack no matter what. Otherwise, even the powerful Cao Cuidao would end up in a scenario where both men would be severely injured.

Nevertheless, he has underestimated Cao Quidao once again.

Out of a sudden, he can feel a cold sensation emanating from an area near his left ribcage. Cao Cuidao's sword had stabbed his body before flipping upward, breaking his killing move.

Although the opponent's sword only penetrated about an inch into his flesh, Xiang Shaolong can feel fresh blood gushing out of the wound. If this loss of blood were to go on, it would not be long

before he would lose the ability to fight. Cao Cuidao's sword is so quick that up till this point in time, he has yet to feel the pain from the injury.

Cao Cuidao laughed boisterously: "The fourth stroke!"

Rapidly formulating a plan, Xiang Shaolong pretended to collapse, discarding Bloodwave onto the ground and at the same time, staggered a few steps backwards.

Just as Cao Cuidao was still reeling with astonishment, Xiang Shaolong retreated to the spot below the Hundred Battle Sabre. He hurriedly leapt up, grabbing the end of the sabre sheathe, finally obtaining his beloved treasure weapon.

Cao Cuidao furiously thundered: "You are asking for death!" Conjuring a multitude of sword flashes with the sword in his hand, he darted forward with steady footwork, propelling another attack at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong drew out the sabre from its sheathe, something that he hasn't done for quite some time. With his left hand clutching the sheathe and his right hand gripping the sabre, his confidence increased by several folds.

DANG!

Unanticipated by Cao Quidao, Xiang Shaolong vehemently parried his sword with the sheathe and with a wave of his wrist,

SUA! SUA! SUA! He made three continuous chops at his opponent, resembling three lightning strikes. The chops were indomitable and overbearing to the max.

Cao Cuidao's is vulnerable as this is the first time he is fighting against a sabre which forte lies in chopping moves. To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong is using the sheathe to block his sword and simultaneously counterattacking with the sabre.

Nevertheless, he did not exhibit the slightest display of fluster and for the first time, adopted a defensive position. Without taking a single step backwards, he resisted torrent after torrent of sabre chops.

The sound of clashing of the sword and the sabre rang out non-stop.

Xiang Shaolong senses that his opponent is like a fortress which cannot be conquered. Regardless of the angle he struck with his sabre, Cao Cuidao is always able to negate his attack. This consciousness is beginning to weigh down on his mind, resulting in a form of stress. Nonetheless, being able to force him into a defensive position within a short space of time is something he can be proud of.

Letting out a long laugh, Xiang Shaolong delivered another earth smattering strike before retreating and calling out: "How many strokes is it now?"

Cao Cuidao halted in bewilderment, realizing that they have long

exceeded the agreed ten strokes.

Picking up Bloodwave along the way, Xiang Shaolong made good his escape through the window.

Book 23 Chapter 08 - Edge Of Death

After ten odd steps, both his legs softened and Xiang Shaolong collapsed in the snowy garden. The area around his sword wound was splattered with blood, soaking through his clothes. He is beginning to feel a heart wrenching pain.

His head spinning, he forced himself to get up. It could be due to his earlier overexertion or the substantial loss of blood. Either way, it is impossible for him to leave this place.

But if he chose to stay in this freezing weather, it would be a miracle if he did not end up as a stiff, frozen corpse tomorrow morning.

He could detect some voices from afar. It appears that the noise generated from their fight has cause some alarm among the College residents. However, nobody dared to investigate due to Cao Cuidao's strict orders!

Digging out his dagger, Xiang Shaolong tore off a section of his clothes and brought out the external wound medicine Xiao Yuetan had prepared for him to bring on his journey. After applying the medicine, he bandaged the wound and recomposed his emotions before getting back on his feet.

The voices he heard earlier have dissipated and are replaced by complete silence.

Discarding Bloodwave among a clump of tall grass, he tied

Hundred Battle Sabre securely on his back. Enduring the heart throbbing pain, he limped towards the outlying area one step at a time.

Passing by several houses, Xiang Shaolong could not take it any longer and had to stop for a break. He thought to himself: It would be great to have a horse carriage right now. Regardless of where it is heading, he would not mind at all. In his current condition, skiing back to Xianyang is but a crazy dream.

Inspired, he quickly and furtively proceeded towards the square in the front courtyard.

It is the usual practice to leave the carriage body in the square after the horses have been led away. If he can sneak into an empty carriage box and last till tomorrow morning, he may be able to find a way to leave this place.

In a short while, he had made his way to the driveway leading to the square. All around him, most of the houses have extinguished their lanterns and are filled with darkness. Only two or three windows are still illuminated, likely belonging to students who are defying the cold to continue their studies.

Because of overexertion and loss of blood, Xiang Shaolong's body temperature is decreasing rapidly and he is shivering nonstop. Right now, even taking a single step is an arduous task for him.

Right at this second, the sound of carriage wheels rotating can be heard from behind.

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amazed. It is deep into the night. Who is riding a carriage and leaving the College at this hour? He hurriedly shied to a side.

The carriage came closer and closer. It turned out to be Han Jie's carriage and Xiang Shaolong could recognise the clothes of the driver.

Xiang Shaolong thanked the Heaven and Earth. As the carriage drove past him, he used his last ounce of energy to climb onto the carriage roof, allowing the carriage to deliver him back into the ancient city of Lin Zi.

After additional difficulties and hardships, he finally found his way back to Tingsong Villa. The moment he tumbled into bed, he was knocked out immediately. He pretty much laid there without moving an inch until midday when Xiao Yuetan roused him awake, wondering: "Why is your face so dreadful looking?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "After being pierced by Cao Cuidao's sword, who can maintain a healthy appearance?"

Xiao Yuetan was aghast: "What!"

Xiang Shaolong updated him about everything that happened last night before adding: "We are able to prove two things from this episode. Firstly, Feng Fei's lover is none other than Han Jie and secondly, Han Chuang has betrayed me."

Xiao Yuetan was upset: “Based on your current condition, you are not ready to travel.”

Xiang Shaolong swore: “I will make a full recovery in three days time. By then, I can go as far as I wish and ignore everything at hand.”

Xiao Yuetan advised: “I will spread the word that you have fallen ill. For the next three days, you should try to stay within the boundaries of Tingsong Villa. No matter what, it is safer here.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Let’s hope so!”

After Xiao Yuetan’s departure, Xiang Shaolong pretended to be asleep to avoid entertaining well-wishers.

Xiao Yuetan came over to change his dressing and medication when it was late in the afternoon. He whispered: “It is truly puzzling. There were simply no signs of excitement or news from Qixia College. It is as if nothing has happened last night. They should at least inform the public about the theft of Hundred Battle Sabre.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “From your understanding, would Cao Cuidao correctly deduce the thief he encountered last night was me, Xiang Shaolong?”

Slapping his thigh, Xiao Yuetan nodded: “Of course he would.

Only someone familiar with the qualities of Hundred Battle Sabre is able to showcase the full abilities of the weapon. And only Xiang Shaolong has the potential to match Cao Cuidao in terms of swordsmanship.”

He then frowned: “But if Cao Cuidao exposes your presence to the Qi Court, future problems would only increase in complexity.”

Xiang Shaolong disparaged: “No matter what, I am going to leave soon. So it is no big deal. Most crucially, nobody dares to deal with me in an open and aboveboard manner. Even Han Chuang has to make use of someone else’s hand to take my life.” Recalling this matter, he could not help but sigh with a breath. Being betrayed by a good friend really hurts.

Comprehending his pain, Xiao Yuetan patted him, quizzing: “Did Li Yuan send anyone to ask about you?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Logically, since Li Yuan knows that I am looking for him, he should come over and visit me.”

After a short contemplation, Xiao Yuetan suggested: “Maybe he is feeling guilt-ridden and is too embarrassed to face you. Aye! Is Cao Cuidao really that good?”

Still retaining some horror from last night, Xiang Shaolong described: “His swordsmanship has exceeded all physical limits, surpassing the capabilities of human and entered a godly state. Against him, I am totally powerless and is basically a punching bag for him.”

Xiao Yuetan informed: “Do you know that when he duels with other challengers, most of them could not even stand properly. Without him making a move, they would have discarded their sword and admit defeat.”

Xiang Shaolong had a similar experience and he confessed: “I know how that feels like.”

Xiao Yuetan analyzed: “If you were equipped with Hundred Battle Sabre at the start of the fight, what would be the outcome?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “The outcome would be my demise.”

Xiao Yuetan was surprised: “You are really a modest person and do not place too much emphasis on victory or defeat. From my point of view, the main reason he has the upper hand is because you just discovered that a good friend had betrayed you. Thus, your mind is too distracted to summon your full fighting spirit. Moreover, your mind is also clouded with thoughts of wanting to escape, resulting in you harnessing less than half of your full potential. In a different setting and equipped with Hundred Battle Sabre, I am certain you would be a worthy adversary to Cao Cuidao.”

Xiang Shaolong’s confidence has been shattered by Cao Cuidao the night before. He sighed: “Right now, I just want to run away as far as possible and never come back. In the past, regardless of how terrifying or perilous the situation is, death would never cross my

mind. However, Cao Cuidao's sword is like a weapon constantly reminding me about my fear of death. With such extraordinary sword skills, he is someone I both fear and admire.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed with a breath and changed the topic: “Has Feng Fei been here?”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Almost everyone has been here except for her who has been keeping away from me. With regards to her, I have given up all hopes.”

Learning that he was ‘awake’, Dong Shuzen came to visit. Xiao Yuetan took the opportunity to excuse himself.

Taking small steps, the beauty sashayed to his bedside and sat down. Reaching out with her hand and stroking his face, her eyes glowed with intense emotions as she soothingly asked: “Are you feeling better? Aye! You do not appear to be a feeble man. How did you suddenly fall sick?”

Xiang Shaolong wished he could interrogate her about her continuing liaison with the despicable cad Sa Li but eventually suppressed the urge. He weakly replied: “Regarding this, you have to seek the answer from Heaven.”

Dong Shuzen threw herself on his chest and began crying wretchedly.

Xiang Shaolong could feel her agony and stretched out his

uninjured left hand, caressing her fragrant shoulder. In a loving and sympathetic tone, he consoled: “This is not the time to grieve. For your future, Second Mistress must learn to be strong.”

Dong Shuzen pitifully mourned: “All my hopes for the future can only be decided by men. Now that you are down with a strange illness, what should I do?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger stirring. He lamented: “I am not the only person you can rely on. Why is Second Mistress so distraught?”

Her petite frame trembled once before Dong Shuzen straightened her back. With tear filled eyes, she questioned in a surprised tone: “What do you mean by that? Currently, Xiuzhen and I have placed all our hopes on you. We do not have other arrangements.”

Xiang Shaolong was filled with disdain: “If this is true, why did you secretly communicate with Sa Li yesterday?”

Dong Shuzen panicked: “That is a baseless allegation. If Xiuzhen or myself is still in cahoots with Sa Li, may we die a horrible death.”

Scrutinizing her body language, Xiang Shaolong can tell that she is not putting on an act. Concurrently, he was enlightened about the fact that Chi Zichun is a follower of Sa Li. He had intentionally made these comments to frame the two ladies, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen, and at the same time, he could gain the trust of Xiang Shaolong in preparation of laying another trap. He was

nearly tricked.

However, another problematic issue has arisen. With the two ladies placing their faith in him and him alone, he can no longer leave without with a care in the world. Presently, he is barely able to fend for himself. How can he afford to extent his protection to them?

Tears began welling up in the pretty eyes of Dong Shuzhen and two large tears the size of a bean soon rolled down her face. She bitterly sighed: “Xiuzhen and I are now trusting you without any reservations, you...”

Xiang Shaolong used a finger to press on her full, red lips, breaking off her sentence. He whispered: “Is there any way for you to notify Lord Longyang, asking him to come and see me.”

Dong Shuzhen nodded: “I understand. Shuzhen will see to this straightaway and it will be accomplished without anyone’s knowledge.”

After Dong Shuzhen left, the seemingly unperturbed Feng Fei finally came to visit him. For some reason, Xiang Shaolong can sense that her attitude is somewhat different from before. Her eyes appear to be hiding some sort of secret.

In her usual graceful and elegant fashion, she sat down by his side and stretched out her right hand to touch his forehead before gently speaking: “Fortunately, your fever is not very high. I heard Mister is attending to your healing. You should make a full

recovery in a short while.”

Relating her presence to Han Jie, Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “My sincere thanks to Mistress for your concern. How is the ongoing rehearsal? The birthday banquet for the King of Qi is in five day’s time.”

Feng Fei bitterly wondered: “From your tone, it sounded like we are complete strangers. Since when did our relationship degenerate to such a state?”

In this instance, Xiang Shaolong noticed the side of her hair is a little messy, as if she cannot be bothered to groom herself. Raising his hand to arrange her hair, he enquired along the line: “Didn’t Little Ping’er help to comb your hair and apply your makeup today?”

Feng Fei bitterly smiled: “After learning that such a healthy man like you has become unwell, she has lost focus in her duties.”

As she talked, Feng Fei naturally raised her pair of dainty hands to tidy her own hair.

Xiang Shaolong’s gaze firstly landed on her chest. Due to Feng Fei raising her arms, her curvy and protruding breasts are much more highlighted than before and Xiang Shaolong could trace their outline. Shifting his gaze upward, his attention was immediately captured by an exquisite silver ring on her slender finger. His heart was instantly filled with shock.

Feng Fei stopped arranging her hair and questioned with astonishment: “Why is your face so ghastly looking?”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing a tsunami.

That silver ring, as he remembered correctly, was a secret killing weapon with a concealed poison needle. Back at Xianyang Drunken Wind Brothel when they first met, Feng Fei frankly admitted to him that someone has instructed her to use this ring to murder him, Xiang Shaolong. Eventually, she discarded the ring on the floor, demonstrating her abortion of the assassination plan. Presently, this dangerous ring has suddenly appeared on her lovely finger. Needless to say, it must be Han Jie egging her to kill himself in order to demonstrate her loyalty towards Han Jie. No wonder her bearing is so much different compared to before.

Of course Feng Fei did not know he has seen through her scam. She whined: “Why are you not answering me?”

Suppressing his surging emotions, Xiang Shaolong is deeply troubled.

If Feng Fei tries to prick him with the poison needle in the ring, what should he do?

He naturally could not allow himself to be pricked but if he exposed her right now, it would be as good as telling her he is Xiang Shaolong. He was stuck in a dilemma.

While he was as dazed as a piece of wood, Feng Fei threw herself across his chest, grieving: “Why does Feng Fei have to meet a man like you under such circumstances?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is having an emotional outburst but his main concern is still centered around the killing weapon on her jade finger. Swiftly grabbing her ‘poisonous hand’ which is trying to hug him around the neck, he simultaneously distracted her: “Why would Mistress fall in love with a man who happens to be Lao Ai’s partner in crime?”

Guilt ridden, Feng Fei’s hourglass figure shuddered violently and as she sat upright, retracting her ‘poisonous hand’. Pretending to be angry, she furiously derided: “Can you stop making wild guesses? I do not know this Han Jie at all.”

Still occupying himself with the poisonous ring and anticipating an attack anytime, Xiang Shaolong tempted: “You are still trying to hide the truth from me. Does Mistress wish to know who did Han Jie visit after sending you home last night?”

He was simply saying the first thing that came to his mind but as the words left his lips, he was shaken by a new realization.

Isn’t Zongsun Long desperate to obtain Feng Fei for himself? Now that Han Jie is on close terms with his son, wouldn’t it appear controversial?

Feng Fei made an ‘Ah!’ sound and turned speechless.

Xiang Shaolong began to calm down; knowing that she would not ambush him without first finding out who did Han Jie went to see. He cheekily smiled: “If Mistress continues to deny the truth, there is no point in discussing this any further.”

Lowering her face, Feng Fei questioned in a low voice: “Who did he went to see?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Zongsun Xuanhua.”

Feng Fei gasped: “What?”

Reaching out and patting her face with his hand, Xiang Shaolong mumbled incoherently: “Mistress had better think carefully over it! I am dead tired and need a rest. Only in my dreams can I avoid this scheming and deceitful world that is filled with hatred and violence, and visit Paradise.”

Feng Fei was taken aback: “What is Paradise?”

Xiang Shaolong began telling her the story from ‘Tales of Paradise’, authored by Tao Yanming. He altered the characters and the timing of the story according.

Out of the blue, Feng Fei’s face was all covered with tears and she cannot even speak properly from her crying. Leaping into his arms once again, she bemoaned: “What should I do?”

Xiang Shaolong honestly advocated: “Regarding this matter,

patience and further observation is required. Although Han Jie did went to see Zongsun Xuanhua, it does not amount to anything yet. Will Mistress grant your servant some time to investigate further?”

Feng Fei shook her head: “At least he should tell me he is going to meet Zongsun Xuanhua!”

On behalf of all men, Xiang Shaolong apologized: “It is a habit of men to withhold knowledge of his activities from women.”

After some thought, Feng Fei slowly revealed: “If it were someone else, given the present circumstances, he would surely speak badly of Han Jie. Aye! Shen Liang ah! What kind of person are you?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Till now, you have no idea? I am an authentic, real life dummy, which nobody can deny. Despite knowing Mistress lying and plotting against me, I could not bear to see you crying and in pain.”

Feng Fei sat upright and allowed Xiang Shaolong to wipe away her tears while maintaining a wooden expression.

Xiang Shaolong did not know what to say next. Luckily, Lord Longyang happened to come by and prevented an awkward scenario.

After Lord Longyang took over Feng Fei’s seat, Xiang Shaolong

nonchalantly remarked: “I nearly died at the hands of Han Chuang and I thought I will never see Your Lordship again.”

Lord Longyang was thunderstruck: “What do you mean?”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lord Longyang has ‘feelings’ for him and would be truthful. Therefore, he concluded that he is in the dark about this matter and told him about everything that happened last night.

His face continuously drained of colour, Lord Longyang contemplated for a short period of time before deciding: “The snowing has finally stopped. When the weather improves over the next two days, I will immediately escort you out of Lin Zi.”

Xiang Shaolong cautioned: “We must never do that; otherwise, Your Lordship would be found guilty of committing treason. Right now, I only want to find out if Han Chuang had informed Guo Kai about my affairs.”

Lord Longyang affirmed: “You can count on me. Now that you have mentioned it, Han Chuang did verbally test my loyalty towards you. This ***** is always saying one thing but doing another. How contemptible!”

Xiang Shaolong reassured: “I would not pin all the blame on him. I am sure he has resorted to this because he had no other choice. Based on our friendship, it is not difficult to guard against him but if he had informed Guo Kai, then the situation would be much more dangerous.”

Standing up, Lord Longyang swore: “I will launch my investigations immediately. All I need to do is to pretend to scheme against you in front of Han Chuang. I guarantee he will divulge all his plans.”

After Lord Longyang’s departure, Xiang Shaolong can feel his mood improving, aiding in his recovery and healing by more than half.

This time round, he made the correct bet.

Based on the friendship between Lord Longyang and himself, it would be challenging for Lord Longyang to plot against him for a second time.

In the midst of his thoughts, he unknowingly drifted into slumber. By the time he woke up again, it was already evening time.

Xie Ziyuan is here.

Book 23 Chapter 09 - Enemies Are Bound To Meet On A Narrow Road

Settling down on a cushion beside Xiang Shaolong's bed, Xie Ziyuan scratched his head, wondering: "How did you end up in such a terrible state? Little Brother was thinking of asking you out for some fun."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: "Have you resolved your problem?"

Xie Ziyuan lamented: "Even if it cannot be solved, Little Brother is still required to compose a finale song for Lan Gongyuan. This time, I am in trouble and I am afraid the Great King would hold me responsible."

Feeling anxious for him, Xiang Shaolong panicked: "There are only five days left. What should we do? Can't you go on your own?"

Xie Ziyuan bitterly smiled: "Wifey only trusts you and you alone. If I do not bring you home for her approval, I would be stuck at home."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Why don't you say you are going over to Zongsun Long's place for an important discussion?"

Xie Ziyuan sighed: "Zongsun Xuanhua is terrified of her. She will know that I am lying by just simply questioning him."

Pushing his blanket aside and rising from his bed, Xiang Shaolong gave in: “Then Little Brother has to put my health at risk and accompany you despite my illness.”

In actual fact, other than his face turning ashen white due to substantial loss of blood, Xiang Shaolong is not as bad as he looks. After half a night and a full day of rest, he has recovered his physical strength. All that remains is an occasional pain from his wound.

Arriving at Xie residence, Shan Rou was equally shocked at his appearance. Sending Xie Ziyuan away for an errand, she privately inquired: “What happened to you?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I was injured by your Master’s sword.”

Shan Rou was confounded: “What?”

In a brief manner, Xiang Shaolong highlighted the important points to her. Before Shan Rou could say anything in reply, Xie Ziyuan had returned and they are forced to change topics.

The minute they stepped outside Xie Residence, Xie Ziyuan seemed to transform into a rope-playing monkey. He enthusiastically gushed: “We are going over to Lan Gongyuan’s Jade Orchid Brothel tonight. That girl has expressed some interest in me.”

Compared to Shi Sufang and Feng Fei, Lan Gongyuan barely knows about himself so Xiang Shaolong nodded: “I shall follow Brother Xie’s arrangement.”

Xie Ziyuan joyfully chirped: “If I inform this Soft Boned Beauty we are there for the purpose of composing a new song, she would surely pay us a visit regardless of her busy schedule.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Do not forget we must be home by eleven o’clock. Otherwise, even the King of Qi cannot save you.”

Xie Ziyuan solemnly promised: “Whenever Little Brother visits the brothel, it is only to soak in the ambience of the red light district, evoking inspiration for my songs. I do not bear any ulterior motives and four hours is more than sufficient for me!”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I see. In this case, I can put my mind at ease.”

Xie Ziyuan suddenly sighed with a breath and stared out of the carriage window at the pure white landscape formed after the snowfall.

Xiang Shaolong understandingly enquired: “Are you still bothered about work?”

Xie Ziyuan resentfully smiled: “I would be lying through my teeth if I say I am not bothered. I just met the Second Prince this

morning. Aye! I should not tell you about my affairs.”

Following that, his spirits rose as he exclaimed: “We are here!”

Under a bevy of escorts at the front and back, the carriage drove into the compound of Lin Zi’s most famous Jade Orchid Brothel.

With great fanfare, both men were ushered into the brothel.

The sky is turning dark and the lamps are being lighted at this point in time. Jade Orchid Brothel is already filled with guests and the atmosphere is extremely lively.

The two men have been assigned to a luxuriously furnished lounge and the maids naturally provided excellent service. Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Why does everybody in the brothel seem to be familiar with and going all out to flatter Brother Xie?” Xie Ziyuan proudly explained: “You must not forget that it is compulsory to play Little Brother’s compositions here. Moreover, I specially implored Zongsun Long to book this lounge for me last night. In Lin Zi, everyone has to give face to him.”

At this instance, the supervisor of the brothel, Madam Orchid, entered the room. Smiling widely before uttering a word, she batted her eyelashes seductively and informed: “When Yuan Yuan knows Official Xie is coming to visit her, she is so excited she forgot about everything else. Right now, she is having a shower and applying makeup and will be here shortly. Does Official Xie or Master Shen wish to ask for another two ladies to add to the festivities?”

Although she is approaching middle age, her pleasant grooming, coupled with a good sense of fashion and on top of her well-maintained figure, Madam Orchid is still rather appealing to the eyes. With her mind-blowing eloquence, she exudes a captivating and wanton bearing, arousing excitement in men and provoking dirty thoughts. Scrutinizing her, Xiang Shaolong is full of praise for the Qi Lady. Regardless of their age, they truly possess a unique character. Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi are two shining examples.

Taking in her praise, Xie Ziyuan was laughing with his mouth wide open. He swiftly decided: “No need! We came specially for Miss Yuan.”

Carrying a womanly fragrance, Madam Orchid came to Xie Ziyuan’s side, sitting between the two men. With half her body leaning onto Xie Ziyuan’s body, she placed her lips beside his ear and began whispering secretively.

Observing Xie Ziyuan’s intoxicated look, Xiang Shaolong easily deduce that Madam Orchid is sweet-talking him and is telling him things that are pleasing to the ears.

Following that, Xie Ziyuan and Madam Orchid suddenly burst out laughing simultaneously. Only then did she bother to shift her mesmerizing gaze to Xiang Shaolong. She cheerfully offered: “Tonight, Yuan Yuan shall accompany Official Xie. Does Master Shen want me to help you to select a good female companion?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly rejected: “I am just accompanying

Official Xie.”

Madam Orchid did not press on and coquettishly sashayed away.

As foretold, Xie Ziyuan indeed became highly invigorated. Producing a roll of parchment from his bosom, he ordered the maid to deliver some ink and brushes and began composing on the spot.

Xiang Shaolong dared not disturb him and half prone on a soft cushion, pretending to be asleep. The two young and pretty maids are very attentive and well trained. Without any prompting, they started to massage the back and shoulders of the two men. Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, gained a new insight. He is beginning to comprehend the importance of one's status.

Now that he is masquerading as Shen Liang, he is obviously at a different status level compared to Xiang Shaolong. In the past, wherever he went, he would, without a doubt, gain the attention of the crowd and end up as the centre of attraction. Presently, even Madam Orchid cannot be bothered with him.

In the midst of his thoughts, he actually fell asleep.

In a blurry state, he imagined hearing a soft, gentle as cotton singing of a lady. It was heavenly to his ears.

He could not make out the lyrics of the song but can relish the wonderful sweet sensation in between the words she spouted. He

felt as if he is high up floating among the mists and clouds as the tune swayed continuously in a melancholic water ripple and yet feeling light and soothing as if it was a gentle breeze blowing across a grass field.

Xiang Shaolong thought that he was dreaming but when he opened his eyes, he discovered that Lan Gongyuan had arrived and was presently prostrated against Xie Ziyuan's back and lightly singing the song he newly composed.

On a table opposite him sat a sturdy and tall youth. Noticing Xiang Shaolong stirring from his slumber, he gestured a greeting before refocusing his attention to Lan Gongyuan and Xie Ziyuan.

At the end of the song, the young man began clapping: "The song is exhilarating and Miss Yuan is a superb songstress. Xuanhua take my hat off to both of you!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, finally realizing the man in front of him is Zongsun Long's son, Lin Zi's famed swordsman Zongsun Xuanhua.

Leaning back into the bosom of Lan Gongyuan, Xie Ziyuan threw a side glance at Xiang Shaolong, cheerfully exclaiming: "Brother Shen is awake. Let's drink. No one shall go home sober tonight."

Her lovely eyes shifting to Xiang Shaolong, Lan Gongyuan's eyes rotated two rounds before shifting back to Xie Ziyuan. She unyielding protested: "I hereby ban Official Xie from mentioning the word: Home. Allow me do my best to serve you tonight!"

Xie Ziyuan and Zongsun Xuanhua exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

Embarrassed, Xiang Shaolong sat upright and wondered: “How long did Little Brother slept?”

Zongsun Xuanhua laughed: “I have been here for two hours and Brother Shen has been asleep throughout my stay. If not for Miss Yuan’s delightful singing, Brother Shen may have continued dozing.”

Lan Gongyuan personally poured wine for all three men. With the presence of the Soft Boned Beauty, the ambience of the room is much more lively as if Spring had arrived.

After three rounds of toasting, Lan Gongyuan leaned back into Xie Ziyuan’s bosom. Witnessing their intimacy and Lan Gongyuan’s clinging, any man would definitely feel jealous.

To Xie Ziyuan, Zongsun Xuanhua sighed: “A beauty paired with a talented gentleman. This is the first time Little Brother has seen Miss Yuan behaving so submissively! Little Brother has yet to experience Miss Yuan’s tender loving care.”

Xie Ziyuan is fully intoxicated like a flying immortal and his soul seemed to have left his body.

Inheriting his father’s long and narrow face, Zongsun Xuanhua

turned to Xiang Shaolong. His chilling eyes flashing, Zongsun Xuanhua insinuated: “Brother Shen’s flying dagger skill has left a lasting impression on my father. Little Brother wonders if he has the good fortune to witness it with his own eyes.”

Groaning to himself, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “You would have to wait till Little Brother recover from my sickness.” He then secretly laughed for he would have slipped away by then.

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded his head and replied with sarcasm: “Of course. Ha! Brother Shen is truly lucky to have befriended Official Xie.”

Lan Gongyuan was stunned: “Flying Dagger Skill? Young Master Zongsun, can you stop beating around the bush?”

Xie Ziyuan laughed: “It is only a misunderstanding! Miss Yuan, this Brother Shen here is currently the Troupe Manager for Mistress Feng.”

Taken aback, Lan Gongyuan glanced towards Xiang Shaolong. Her eyes glowing with additional signs of contempt and arrogance, she acknowledged with a ‘Mm’ sound but did not pass any comment.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling extremely uncomfortable and was planning to use his illness as an excuse to leave early, Madam Orchid came into the lounge. Passionately sitting down beside Zongsun Xuanhua, she cajoled: “Your servant wishes to borrow Yuan Yuan for thirty minutes. I hope three masters can give me

some leeway and don't take it to heart."

Lan Gongyuan wailed: "They may not mind but I do mind! But since Auntie Orchid takes such good care of Yuan Yuan, Yuan Yuan cannot bear to object so I will definitely oblige!"

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong was full of praise. Every single one of these famous courtesans is an expert when it comes to eloquence and mind games. With the flawless coordination between the two of them, how can they voice any objections?

Zongsun Xuanhua is no pushover too. He plainly inquired: "Is it because of Brother Qi Yu?"

Madam Orchid giggled: "Young Master Zongsun has hit the jackpot. He is accompanied by the Qin heavyweight, Great Chancellor Lu."

His eyes flashing with electricity and ice, Zongsun Xuanhua coldly snorted: "If we are talking about Qin heavyweight, the most befitting is Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei? Humph!"

Reacting emotionally, Lan Gongyuan sighed with a breath and stood up from Xie Ziyuan's bosom. She gently swore: "I will just pay my respects and be back before you know it."

Xie Ziyuan hurriedly stood up to send her off and winked at Xiang Shaolong, reassuring: "Miss Yuan need not hold it to heart. It is also time for me to go home."

It is unclear if she is being genuine or just putting on a show when Lan Gongyuan stubbornly remonstrated: “No matter what, I will not let Young Master (XZY) leave. If this is the case, I will remain here.”

Turning to Madam Orchid, she questioned: “Who else is accompanying Imperial Uncle (Lu Buwei)?”

This time round, it is Xiang Shaolong who had a big shock. He quickly suggested: “It would not be nice if Miss Yuan refuses to pay your respects!”

Madam Orchid smiled: “After learning that Official Xie and Young Master Zongsun are here, Imperial Uncle is coming over to exchange greetings!” She left after finishing her sentence.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Xiang Shaolong apologized: “Little Brother is feeling dizzy and my legs are giving way. Please excuse my early departure. My heartfelt thanks to all three of you for tonight’s session.”

Ignoring the strange looks from the three of them, Xiang Shaolong strode towards the door in huge steps. The instance he opened the door, he came face to face with Madam Orchid who is escorting a high-spirited Lu Buwei. Behind him are three men, namely Qi Yu, Dan Chu and Han Jie.

As the two men exchanged looks, Lu Buwei’s giant frame shook excessively and he halted his footsteps in astonishment, unable to

believe that he is staring at his old nemesis Xiang Shaolong.

Han Jie, Qi Yu and Dan Chu have yet to identify Xiang Shaolong. They stared at the two men with surprise.

An ignorant Madam Orchid giggled: “What a coincidence! I happened to run into Imperial Uncle and these fellow masters making their way over here.”

Stuck in a dilemma, Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Forcing himself to face the music head on, he smiled and greeted: “Shen Liang pays his respects to Imperial Uncle.”

With a complicated look flashing across his eyes, Lu Buwei swiftly resumed his demeanor and loudly chuckled: “Mister Shen resembles an old friend of Lu Buwei, giving me a fright.”

Hearing the name Shen Liang, Han Jie’s eyes blazed with a murderous aura.

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Lu Buwei has identified himself but has decided not to expose him. He retreated back into the lounge to avoid blocking the entrance. Out of the blue, he can feel his fighting spirits surging to new heights and casting aside all his reservations.

Frankly speaking, he is sick of always pretending to be someone else.

Lu Buwei took the lead to enter the room and everyone including Zongsun Xuanhua hastily stood up to pay their respects. A minute ago, Zongsun Xuanhua had indicated his disrespect for Lu Buwei but right now, he is behaving in an uptight manner. Thus, he was likely stifled by Lu Buwei's reputation and bearing.

Giving up the best seat in the lounge, Xie Ziyuan shifted to Xiang Shaolong's table. As there are only four tables in this room, Xiang Shaolong and Xie Ziyuan had to share a table. Observing Lan Gongyuan clinging onto Xie Ziyuan, Madam Orchid personally served Lu Buwei.

Squeezing between Xiang Shaolong and Xie Ziyuan, Lan Gongyuan suddenly leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and queried in a low voice: "Why is Master Shen still here?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "It would be considered rude if I were to leave now."

Lu Buwei firstly raised his cup to toast everyone and with his second cup, he faced Xiang Shaolong and professed: "Miss Feng is indeed lucky to have Brother Shen Liang managing the Troupe for her!"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lu Buwei has seen through his ruse: Sabotaging his efforts to obtain Feng Fei from within the Song & Dance Troupe. Raising his cup in a return toast, he smiled: "It is nothing. Little Brother is just doing my best!"

Besides the two of them, everybody else was astounded. In terms

of status, these two men are worlds apart but ever since Lu Buwei entered the room, all his attention seemed to be centered around Xiang Shaolong.

Qi Yu, Han Jie and Dan Chu's interaction with Xiang Shaolong is minimal and therefore, they are unable to pinpoint Xiang Shaolong as quickly and as efficiently compared to Lu Buwei. All three men are awfully confused; why is Lu Buwei behaving as if he knows this insignificant character and is placing so much emphasis on him?

Pouring wine for Lu Buwei, Madam Orchid enquired from the side: "Have Imperial Uncle and Mister Shen met before?"

His eyes shining with a deathly killing aura, Lu Buwei plainly state: "We know each other previously and it was truly unexpected to meet under such different circumstances."

Listening to the intense emotion in Lu Buwei's tone, the crowd can sense his 'high valuation' of this Shen Liang and began to reassess their previous judgment of him.

Fully aware that Lu Buwei's brain is filled with thoughts of how to get rid of himself, Xiang Shaolong's mind speedily churned a reply: "I did not expect to meet so many old friends during my Lin Zi trip."

Taking in his words, Lu Buwei was flabbergasted and sank into silence.

Xiang Shaolong obviously understood his predicament. Even if he is ten times braver, he would not dare to plot against him, a Great General of Qin. If Xiao Pan eventually learns that Lu Buwei did meet him here and subsequently, he, Xiang Shaolong was murdered, Lu Buwei can forget about disassociating himself with the crime.

The only way that Lu Buwei can carry out his nefarious plot is when nobody knows Shen Liang is actually Xiang Shaolong.

He would certainly not reveal this secret to anyone to prevent the news from leaking out, especially to Qi. It would be a disaster for Qi if they are found ‘guilty’ of harming Xiang Shaolong.

Zongsun Xuanhua is now treating Xiang Shaolong very differently from before. He tested: “I did not realize Brother Shen has such a wide network of friends all over the land. No wonder even Marquis Han and Lord Longyang are considered your acquaintances.”

From his comment, Xiang Shaolong instantly concluded that Zongsun Long has planted a spy within the Troupe. For all you know, it could be Sa Li’s gang.

Lu Buwei’s huge body frame shuddered lightly, appearing to realize that he has lost the opportunity to assassinate Xiang Shaolong. In fact, he even had to resort to protecting him from harm. Otherwise, in the future, he could end up as a target of suspicion or be found guilty of Xiang Shaolong’s death. He is at a great disadvantage.

Everybody was staring at Xiang Shaolong, unable to comprehend how did this newly appointed manager of Feng Fei's Song & Dance Troupe managed to gain the friendship and high regards from the heavyweights of various States.

Xiang Shaolong raised his cup and toasted: "It is all due to their kindness. Little Brother toasts every one of you."

Nobody could understand the meaning of his words and returned the toast with a puzzled expression

Only Lu Buwei realize that Xiang Shaolong is warning him not to act rashly. Finishing his drink, he officially proposed: "Is Brother Shen available over the next two days? Can we schedule a time to meet or I can personally pay you a visit?"

When the words left his mouth, everyone present was left with their mouths wide open with astonishment. What is going on? Based on Lu Buwei's status and his usual condescending attitude towards the world as well as his arrogant and self-serving behavior, why would he lower himself to pay a visit to this Shen Liang?

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Not meeting is better than meeting. Imperial Uncle, please reconsider."

Everyone's expression went from shock to speechless, guessing that the relationship between the two of them is not as simple as it meets the eye.

Even Madam Orchid who was pressing her bountiful breasts against Lu Buwei's arm forgot about everything and was sitting with her back straight.

From the side, Lan Gongyuan's captivating eyes stared unblinkingly at Xiang Shaolong, scanning him at a speed that is neither fast nor slow.

His eyes glowing with anger, Lu Buwei lowered his head and glared at the empty cup in his hand. He replied in a deep voice: "Shen Liang is truly Shen Liang. When I heard Mister Shen barging into Zongsun Residence all by himself, I should have guessed that it was this old acquaintance."

Zongsun Xuanhua immediately became uneasy and dryly coughed once.

Cursing inside, Xiang Shaolong knows that Lu Buwei is purposely revisiting the old enmity between himself and the Zongsun Family, even covertly hinting his fake identity to the others. The best outcome would logically be a famed swordsman like Zongsun Xuanhua issuing a challenge to Xiang Shaolong. If Xiang Shaolong perished in an open and fair duel, even Xiao Pan cannot hold Qi responsible. However, Lu Buwei cannot directly expose his true identity and intentionally constructed this confusing statement.

Right now, the lounge is so quiet you can hear a pin drop. From far, the sound of a flute and zither playing can be heard, adding to the awkward atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong simply articulated: “Regarding that incident, it was all due to Brother Zongsun’s esteemed father who showed great mercy, coupled with Chancellor Li putting in a good word for me. Otherwise, it would be impossible for Little Brother to be here drinking wine and listening to Miss Yuan’s heavenly singing.”

Hearing Xiang Shaolong’s modest words and giving praise to Zongsun Long, Zongsun Xuanhua’s stiff face became relaxed. Raising his cup, he respectfully clarified: “That... That was only a small misunderstanding!”

Xie Ziyuan finally had the chance to speak up. He laughed: “It is genuinely a small misunderstanding. Let’s drink up.”

Dan Chu and the others were all feeling doubtful and reluctantly raised their cups and drink the wine while remaining deep in thought. Lan Gongyuan poured wine for Xiang Shaolong first before pouring for the others. With Lan Gongyuan away from her seat and no more obstruction between the two of them, Xiang Shaolong moved to Xie Ziyuan’s side and whispered: “Do not forget about Sister in Law’s instructions.”

Stupefied, Xie Ziyuan exclaimed: “I beg everybody’s pardon. Little Brother needs to rush home now!”

Book 23 Chapter 10 - No More Hiding

When Xiang Shaolong returned to Tingsong Villa, Chi Zichun who is bearing a malicious agenda welcomed him in front of the main courtyard: “Your servant has something to report to Manager.”

Feeling doubtful, Xiang Shaolong checked: “What is it?”

Peering to his left and right, Chi Zichun whispered: “Why don’t we proceed to the garden before we speak further? At the garden, it is less likely to be spotted by the others.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “It is so late; who would spot us?”

Behaving as if he has something serious to reveal, Chi Zichun disclosed: “Actually, I wanted to bring Manager to the garden to witness a rendezvous between two shameless individuals.”

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned and wondered if Dong Shuzen was lying earlier despite swearing that she is loyal only to himself. Suppressing his voice, he quizzed: “Is it Second Mistress?”

Chi Zichun nodded his head: “And Sa Li too. It is all due to me paying extra attention to the movement of Gu Ming and company, discovering that they have smuggled Sa Li into the Villa.”

His anger rising, Xiang Shaolong icily hissed: “Lead the way!”

A surge of delight flashed past Chi Zichun's face and was gone the next instance. He led Xiang Shaolong to a wide detour around the buildings, following a small path towards the rear garden.

Stepping into the garden, it was all quiet and serene. The moon is shining brightly high up in the sky and there were no signs of human activity.

Growing suspicious, Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Where are they?"

Pointing to a storage hut located far away in the corner of the rear courtyard, Chi Zichun warned: "Right there where we store our firewood. We must take precautions for Gu Ming or someone else could be stationed nearby to act as a lookout. Manager, please follow me!"

Without waiting for Xiang Shaolong's acknowledgement, Chi Zichun went around a bush of flowers that was planted on the left side of a pavilion within the rear garden. He is apparently trying to take a small path along the rear wall.

Xiang Shaolong can smell a rat. While it is not surprising if Dong Shuzen and Sa Li are still in cahoots but given the present circumstances, coupled with him voicing his misgivings about Sa Li and herself earlier today, it would be illogical for them to rendezvous under these constraints. As he thought further, an image of Chi Zichun's earlier delight surfaced in his brain. It is as if he cannot hide his exhilaration at successfully luring Xiang Shaolong into a trap.

Ten odd steps later, Chi Zichun noticed Xiang Shaolong still standing at the same spot and shooed: “Manager, come quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong gestured for him to come back and brought him to the back of a clump of small trees, explaining: “There is something I do not understand.”

Chi Zichun asked: “What is it?”

Pointing to something behind him, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Who is that?”

As Chi Zichun turned around in astonishment, Xiang Shaolong grabbed him from behind and whisked out his dagger, pointing it at Chi Zichun’s throat. He bellowed in a chilling voice: “Why are you lying to me? I saw Second Mistress in her bedroom with my own eyes.”

Chi Zichun begged in a quivering voice: “Master Shen, please spare my life. Your servant is not aware that Second Mistress has returned to her room.”

From these words, Xiang Shaolong knows that Chi Zichun is in a state of panic and could not tell that Xiang Shaolong is simply fabricating a lie.

Using a merciless tone, Xiang Shaolong frostily interrogated: “Who is laying an ambush for me? If you dare to say you have no

idea, I will instantly cut a section of your throat and let you slowly bleed till death.”

Chi Zichun is much more timid than what Xiang Shaolong expected. His entire body trembling, he stammered: “Master Shen, please spare my life. It is Sa Li who forced me to do this.”

Recalling that Zongsun Xuanhua is extremely familiar with the Troupe affairs, he had a brainwave and demanded: “How many men did Zongsun Long send to assist Sa Li?”

By now, Chi Zichun is a broken man. He quavered: “So Master Shen knows about everything. Your servant recognizes his mistakes.”

Finally discovering the perpetuator behind Sa Li, Xiang Shaolong can feel his body loosening up. Without someone backing him up, Zhu Xiuzhen and Dong Shuzen would not give a damn about Sa Li. In the same context, those bootlickers Gu Ming, Fu Yan, etc, would not obey his instructions.

If not for his injury, he would teach Sa Li and the other swordsmen a lesson they would never forget. But if he does not use this opportunity to punish them, it would be letting these despicable cads off too easily.

Pulling out Chi Zichun’s belt, Xiang Shaolong used it to tie him up securely. Tearing a portion off Chi Zichun’s shirt, he made it into a ball of cloth and stuffed his big mouth with it. He then snuck out and headed towards the firewood hut in a different direction.

Moving without detection and camouflaging his tracks is a daily routine he practices as a member of the Special Forces. He managed to arrive at the vicinity of the firewood hut and the enemies are none the wiser.

Surveying his surrounding, Xiang Shaolong observed that the two door panels facing the garden are slightly ajar. There were another two men laying in ambush on the roof and were armed with bows and arrows. If he had trotted down the path Chi Zichun had recommended, it would be a miracle if he did not end up with countless arrows sticking from his body. After more scrutiny, he discovered that there were men hiding in the trees as well. It is an accurate depiction of: Danger lurking at every corner.

Xiang Shaolong was amused and darted towards the back of the firewood hut. Using a dagger, he stealthily pried open a window at the back. Pushing the window marginally open, he stared into the hut.

In a short period of time, his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness within the firewood hut. Borrowing some light from the moon, he could barely make out two men hiding in ambush behind every window, ready and waiting in anticipation.

Sa Li's voice happened to sound out: "What is that dog slave Chi Zichun doing? Why is he hiding there with that bastard?"

Another man replied in a deep voice: "Something is not right."

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in the rest of the conversation. Concealing himself at a side, he lighted his fire stick and very quickly dashed to the side of the window, throwing the fire stick towards a pile of dry grass and whatnots.

Cries of help can be heard from within the hut and it was a state of mayhem.

The wooden doors are thrown open as several strongmen pathetically staggered out and began running towards the rear courtyard exit.

Xiang Shaolong leapt out from behind the hut and fiercely roared: "Where do you think you are going!"

Identifying Sa Li, his dagger left his hand.

Letting out a tragic howl, Sa Li crumbled to the ground with an injured calf.

The men on the trees were all jumping down and joining the men from the hut in making their swift escape via the rear exit.

Xiang Shaolong casually strolled over and came to Sa Li who is still lying flat on his face. Using his leg, Xiang Shaolong flipped his body over.

Sa Li wretchedly begged: "Don't kill me!"

As the firewood hut dissolved into a huge ball of fire, it clearly illuminates Sa Li's cowardly expression. It was as ugly as a toad.

Feng Fei blew her top and immediately fired all Troupe members who are in cahoots with Sa Li or are spying for him. Tying Sa Li securely like a giant mummy, Feng Fei is going to deliver him to the King of Qi tomorrow morning and demand justice to be served.

By the time Sa Li was escorted away, it is already past midnight. Feng Fei requested Xiang Shaolong to accompany her back to the main building. When they are alone in the small sitting room of the upper floor, Feng Fei retorted with sarcasm: "I thought Manager Shen is so sick he was confined to his bed? In the blink of an eye, he had slipped out with Xie Ziyuan to have a good time and even showcased his mighty prowess in capturing a villain and delivering justice."

Xiang Shaolong is completely drained of energy and is leaning against his chair. He simply remarked: "I saw your lover just now."

With her back to him as Feng Fei glanced out of the window, she calmly replied: "From tonight onwards, Feng Fei no longer has a lover and will never have one in the future."

Xiang Shaolong can detect the sensations of grief and pain in her tone. He sighed: "Aren't you overreacting?"

Feng Fei shook her head and denied: "You would not understand. I did bring up Zongsun Long's issue to him and implored him to

intercede for me since he is the Elder Martial Brother of Zongsun Xuanhua but he flatly rejected me. At the same time, he swore to me he would never meet Zongsun Xuanhua privately. Aye!”

She melancholically added: “Feng Fei’s heart is dead and only wishes to find a secluded place and live the rest of my life in tranquility. I want nothing to do with all the fame and glamour.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “That is my ideal dream as well. I have grown sick of all the wars and revenge killings.”

Feng Fei turned her petite frame around and stared at him viciously, declaring: “Finally willing to tell the truth? Feng Fei already guessed you are such a man.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered and offered: “Whatever. If Mistress is agreeable to letting Second Mistress become your successor, I can guarantee that Mistress will realize your dream.”

Feng Fei challenged: “On what basis are you offering this guarantee?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Based on the three words: Xiang Shaolong. Is it sufficient?”

As Feng Fei’s fragrant body shuddered uncontrollably, her eyes are shining with utter disbelief. Bewildered, she gazed at Xiang Shaolong for a long long time before collapsing onto a chair, exclaiming: “You have got to be kidding me!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “If it is anyone but me, Little Brother would not be petrified upon seeing the poisonous ring when Mistress came to ask about my illness and was forced to reveal the secret meeting between Han Jie and Zongsun Xuanhua.”

With considerable embarrassment, Feng Fei lowered her head. Lost and confused, she muttered: “Feng Fei did not treat you kindly; why are you still helping me?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Mistress originally is not evil in nature. It is just due to constant interaction with people who are harbouring evil designs on Mistress. Thus, you do not trust anyone easily!”

Feng Fei dejectedly wondered: “What should I do now?”

Xiang Shaolong highlighted: “Earlier tonight, Lu Buwei has learnt that Shen Liang is in fact Xiang Shaolong in disguise. Therefore, continuing this masquerade is not beneficial but harmful instead. Tomorrow, I might as well seek an audience with the King of Qi as Xiang Shaolong. By then, anyone who wishes to lay their hands on you would have to reconsider the consequences.”

Feng Fei was taken aback: “Aren’t you afraid of being assassinated?”

Xiang Shaolong boisterously laughed: “If anything were to happen to me here, Qi cannot claim ignorance. I have grown to

detest a life of lies and deceit. Right now, I miss my home terribly and my only wish is to return home as soon as possible to reunite with my wives and son. If Mistress wishes to settle down in Qin, I can guarantee it will be done.”

With hot tears flowing down her cheeks, Feng Fei softly grieved: “Feng Fei’s heart is dead. I shall adhere to Great General’s arrangements.”

Before Xiang Shaolong could accumulate enough sleep the next morning, someone roused him from his slumber, saying that Zongsun Xuanhua is waiting for him in the main hall.

Recalling Sa Li’s issue, he had a good grasp of the situation and proceeded to the hall to meet Zongsun Xuanhua. As anticipated, after a round of pleasantries, Zongsun Xuanhua immediately went to straight to the point: “Little Brother has an inappropriate request and prayed that Brother Shen will grant this allowance to my Zongsun Family.”

Xiang Shaolong knows what he is up to. After observing Lu Buwei’s attitude towards himself last night, Zongsun Xuanhua is now having a better opinion of him. Moreover, Xie Ziyuan is a good friend of him as well and has decided to back down from the flying dagger issue. Now that Xiang Shaolong has a chance to do Zongsun Xuanhua a big favour, he smiled: “With Brother Zongsun’s words, I, Shen Liang, would never disagree. Sa Li will be handed over to Brother Zongsun and no further words are necessary.”

(meaning that there is no need to say thanks)

Zongsun Xuanhua did not expect Xiang Shaolong to be so easygoing and reached out with a hand of friendship: “Brother Shen is now my buddy.”

Stretching out his own hand to grab Zongsun Xuanhua’s hand, Xiang Shaolong affirmed: “Little Brother has always regarded Brother Zongsun as a friend.”

Before Zongsun Xuanhua could reply, Fei Chun barged in with a flustered expression and reported: “Qin’s Imperial Uncle Lu Buwei is here to look for Manager!”

Zongsun Xuanhua did not expect Lu Buwei to really come looking for Xiang Shaolong. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong had openly hinted he did not wish to see him. Utterly shocked, he stared at Xiang Shaolong in a daze.

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong assured; “Brother Zongsun should have guessed that Shen Liang is just an alias of Little Brother. Let’s have a detailed discussion in the future!”

With skepticism written all over his face, Zongsun Xuanhua slipped out from the rear exit.

Lu Buwei’s grand arrival has every single troupe member buzzing with excitement. Except for Feng Fei who has seen it coming, the rest are still feeling puzzled.

The moment this world famous Qin Imperial Uncle stepped in, he requested to speak with Xiang Shaolong privately. Once everybody else has retreated from the hall, Lu Buwei let out a long sigh: “Shaolong is truly amazing to disguise yourself as Shen Liang and hide yourself in Lin Zi.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly questioned: “Have I caused Imperial Uncle a great deal of disappointment?”

His two eyes flashing a chilly aura, Lu Buwei stared at him and promised: “Shaolong, why are you speaking like this? The Crown Prince is worried sick over your survival. Now that I have ran into Shaolong, I will definitely do my best to protect and escort Shaolong back to Xianyang. I am here today to ask about your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “We shall discuss about it later. Now that I do not have a valid reason to continue my disguise, I hope Imperial Uncle could officially notify the King of Qi about my presence and allow me to seek an audience with him.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Lu Buwei sighed again: “Why did our relationship degenerate to such a terrible state?”

Xiang Shaolong sarcastically replied: “It doesn’t seem like I am the correct person to blame.”

Lu Buwei conceded: “It is my fault and I only wish to know if there is a way to redeem our relationship. As long as we work hand in hand to assist Crown Prince Zheng, all the lands would

eventually end up as Qin territory.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock.

He knows Lu Buwei’s character extremely well; a strong willed man who always rises to the occasion and would never admit defeat or his wrongdoings in any situation. For him to behave in such a submissive manner, it only indicates that he has gotten a trump card and is temporary making peace with himself.

What formidable scheme has he formulated?

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “From the beginning till the end, I, Xiang Shaolong, have always been a peace loving man and was forced by circumstances to retaliate. The differences between the two of us can no longer be resolved by just bare words.”

Putting on an earnest face, Lu Buwei clarified: “Imperial Uncle would not hold it against Shaolong for having such thoughts. Back then, Imperial Uncle had wanted to marry Niangrong to Shaolong, expressing my sincerity to repair the ties between us. That obstinate daughter refused to obey me and ruined my plan.”

Pausing, he glared at Xiang Shaolong and slowly avowed: “Right now, Imperial Uncle will inform the King of Qi about Shaolong’s presence. Shaolong, please give some thought about Imperial Uncle’s words. Even if Shaolong is unwilling to forgive me, Imperial Uncle has made up my mind to forget about all the disputes I have with Shaolong. Time shall be my witness.”

After Lu Buwei took his leave, Xiang Shaolong is still sitting in a daze.

He is one hundred percent certain that Lu Buwei has come up with a plan to kill himself, explaining his pretense at making amends. If he is unable to expose the murderous plot, he could incur a terrible defeat.

Even if he, Xiang Shaolong, is dead, as long as Xiao Pan is still alive, Lu Buwei cannot consider his victory to be a complete triumphant. Thinking about this point, his entire body suddenly broke out in cold sweat.

He believes he has discovered Lu Buwei's trump card. It is the only but deadly loophole that can cause immediate and total devastation to Xiao Pan and him, Xiang Shaolong: The truth behind Xiao Pan's birth.

Via Zhu Ji, Lao Ai could learn about the process and could also retrieve the address of the couple who had raised the 'real Yingzheng'. After bringing the couple back to Xianyang and spilling the beans, not only would Xiao Pan lose the throne, Xiang Shaolong himself would be found guilty of treason.

But looking at it from another direction, if this had indeed happened, Qin Shihuang would not have appeared in the records of history.

Despite guessing correctly about Lu Buwei's trump card, there is nothing he can do to stop it due to time constraints. He can only

live according to fate and pray that history cannot be altered.

Although he is adopting this mindset, his heart is still filled with anxiety, causing him much irritation. He nearly wanted to beat his own chest and shout out loud to vent the frustration amassing in his heart.

At this juncture, Feng Fei came into the hall and gracefully sat down beside him. She suggested in a low voice: “Shall we make clear our intentions to Shuzen and the others?”

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his turbulent emotions and nodded in agreement.

After several trials and tribulations, the affairs plaguing the Song & Dance Troupe are more or less resolved. However, regarding his personal troubles, this is just the beginning. Presently, he has lost all interest to stay in Lin Zi and only wishes to return to Xianyang as early as possible and join hands with Xiao Pan to manage his ‘Identity Crisis’. How long must he wait before he can enjoy days of peace?

Book 23 Chapter 11 - Meeting The King Of Qi

With a serious expression, Xiao Yuetan is helping to restore Xiang Shaolong original appearance while the latter is weighed down by troubling thoughts, causing the tension in the room to be very heavy.

Finally noticing Xiao Yuetan's serious demeanor, Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "What is bothering Elder Brother?"

Xiao Yuetan sighed with a breath: "I am only too familiar with Lu Buwei's methods. He would never allow you to return to Xianyang alive. The more pleasant his words are, the more brutal the methods he will employ."

Xiang Shaolong was instead worried about Xiao Pan's identity crisis, secretly blaming himself for being too slow to realize that the moment Lu Buwei and Lao Ai joined forces, this would be a loophole they would exploit sooner or later. To make it worse, he could not get other people to help out and get them involved in this matter.

Xiao Yuetan continued: "Given the current situation, it is difficult for me to lend a hand. On one side, we have Li Yuan, Han Chuang and Guo Kai who are scheming to get rid of you and on the other side, we have Lu Buwei and Tian Dan who wants to murder you. Your situation is a hundred times more perilous than before. If they can stage an accident, for example: a house collapsing or a ship sunk by huge waves and strong wind, it would be impossible for Crown Prince to hold anyone responsible."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Lord Longyang, concluding that he could be the only person who can save him now. However, he did not understand why is he not back with any news yet? Logically, after he has tested Han Chuang, he should make his way back to give his report. Is there more than meets the eye? Contrary to his thoughts, he assured Xiao Yuetan: “At least I will be safe in Lin Zi because no one would dare to openly assassinate me.”

Xiao Yuetan reasoned: “That is hard to say. If Tian Dan arranged for someone to challenge you to a duel and kill you in the process, it would be an uphill task for Crown Prince Zheng to avenge you. How is your injury?”

Peering into the bronze mirror at his familiar and yet unfamiliar original appearance, Xiang Shaolong flexed his shoulder muscles and determined: “I should make a full recovery in a maximum of three days.”

Xiao Yuetan reminded: “It is no longer convenient for me to visit you on such a regular basis, for it may arouse Han Chuang’s suspicions. Aye. With these new developments, I am really worried.”

A subordinate came in at this time to report that Lord Longyang is here.

Receiving Lord Longyang in the East Hall and sharing with him the intention to end his masquerade, Lord Longyang was badly shocked and he professed in a troubled tone: “This has greatly complicated matters.”

Xiang Shaolong do not wish to expend further energy on this bothersome issue and questioned him about Han Chuang's reaction. Lord Longyang firstly lowered his head and contemplated for a short while before raising his head and gazed at him, suggesting: "Is it possible that Cao Cuidao coincidently happened to be there when you are about to steal your sabre?"

Xiang Shaolong resolutely shook his head and affirmed: "Impossible. He personally informed me that someone has tipped him off. What did Han Chuang say?"

With his eyes glowing with distress, Lord Longyang replied in a low voice: "I proceeded accordingly to the plan and suggested to Han Chuang about hatching a plot against you but received an earful from him instead. It seems like he was not the one who betrayed Shaolong. Could Shaolong have forgotten somebody else he may have revealed this matter to?"

Xiang Shaolong could only think of Xiao Yuetan and immediately strike out this possibility. He quizzed further: "Is it possible for Han Chuang to see through Your Lordship's ruse to test him?"

Lord Longyang attested: "I can feel that he is not putting on an act. We have been friends for so many years and it would be rather tough for him to successfully deceive me. This affair is indeed baffling."

Xiang Shaolong grew hopeful. If Li Yuan, Han Chuang and Lord Longyang are on the same side of the fence as him, it would be a

walk in the park for him to arrive safely in Xianyang.

Lord Longyang reassured: “Shaolong need not fret. No matter what happens, I will always been on your side. Why don’t we make plans to leave tonight? Once we have reached Wei, I will have a way to send you back to Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong was visibly tempted. He mused: “But what about Feng Fei and the others?”

Lord Longyang recommended: “If you can leave a letter to Han Chuang or Li Yuan, imploring him to watch over them on your behalf, I am sure they will follow your instructions despite whatever plans they already have in mind.”

Xiang Shaolong is even more motivated than before and asked about the road conditions. Lord Longyang swore: “For the past two days, the weather has become significantly warmer and absent of snow. The river should have thawed by now. I will use an excuse to deploy a ship to send you off and I guarantee that even if someone wishes to pursue you after your departure, it will only be a futile attempt.”

Firstly, Xiang Shaolong is desperate to go home and secondly, Lin Zi is not an ideal place to continue loitering. He ultimately agreed to Lord Longyang’s offer and finalized the details of his escape tonight. At this point in time, Han Jie and Dan Chu arrived together and announced that it is time to enter the palace and meet the King of Qi.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is entering Small City from Big City as he headed north towards the palace on a carriage. Along the way, he observed that the buildings are much more imposing compared to the largely residential Big City.

Lined along both sides of the highway are enormous mansions of the rich and powerful or high-ranking officials, coupled with numerous state buildings, all radiating with a luxurious and grand aura, majestic and magnificently designed.

The two men Dan Chu and Han Jie are behaving very respectfully on the surface, courteous and accommodating. Dan Chu even provided a travel commentary and introduced the various sights and buildings along the way.

Arriving at the palace, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan came up together and welcomed him as per standard diplomatic courtesy.

Concluding the usual pleasantries, Tian Dan, who still retained his heroic air, let out a chuckle: “Regardless of Great General’s ally or enemy, everyone is full of admiration for Great General. The world would be a much more boring place without someone as earth shattering as Great General.”

Regaining his past grandeur, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Life is but a game. Witnessing Chancellor Tian’s open mindedness, Shaolong should be the one expressing admiration.” At the same time, he observed that Tian Dan is already displaying signs of aging and vulnerability, a far cry from his young and valiant days.

Putting on an act of sincerity and intimacy, Lu Buwei suggested: “We are all old friends and since the Great King is anxious to speak to Shaolong, let’s talk further at the welcoming banquet Chancellor Tian will host for Shaolong.”

King Qi Xiang will be meeting Xiang Shaolong at the most outstanding structure within the palace: Henggong Pavilion. It is also the same place where Feng Fei will be performing and the birthday banquet will be held three days later.

Henggong Pavilion is the most remarkable cluster of buildings within the royal grounds. It is situated at the northwest area of Small City and is only 800 feet away from the Small City west wall. It can be considered tall and overwhelming. The rectangular shaped pavilion measures 250 feet in length from south to north and about 200 feet in width from east to west. It stands at a height of about 50 feet and its brilliance is unimaginable. From the top of the pavilion, one could view the colossal parade square located between Henggong Pavilion and Golden Imperial Palace that could accommodate ten thousand soldiers executing their drills.

Henggong Pavilion itself is quite unique and resembles a pyramid with a flat top. There are two storeys at the tip of the pavilion and the three corners of east, west and north is inclined at a sharp angle while the south side is less steep. From the bottom to the top of the pavilion are one hundred stone steps and on the pavilion top, grey bricks are stacked in a certain manner to create a distinctive pattern. In the middle of the pavilion top is a squarish stage about 5 feet tall and the flooring of the stage is lined with mosaic tiles, exuding an impressive and elegant sensation.

The King of Qi is waiting at the lower deck of Henggong Pavilion, which is also known as Dianjiang Hall, to meet Xiang Shaolong. Accompanying him are First Prince Tian Sheng and Second Prince Tian Jian.

King Qi Xiang is around seventy years of age, short and overweight. With a lethargic expression, he looks as if he will breathe his last anytime.

Both princes Tian Sheng and Tian Jian are of medium built and share limited resemblance. Despite their royal heritage, they are ordinary looking and do not possess the bearing of a King. If held in comparison, Tian Sheng has the typical playboy look who had overindulged in alcohol and women while Tian Jian is much more energetic looking.

The ambience is unexpectedly relaxing and friendly.

After paying their respects, Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei sat down in front of the King of Qi but at a lower level while Tian Sheng, Tian Jian and Tian Dan sat at the side.

Using his blurred eyesight to scrutinize and assess Xiang Shaolong, the King of Qi then began to laugh and articulate from his elevated throne: “In the past when Zhang Yi visited Chu as a guest, he attended a banquet where they are showcasing the national treasure of Chu, a jade disc. The [jade disc](#) was passed around and was abruptly stolen. Someone suspected Zhang Yi to be the culprit and gave him a beating. When Zhang Yi got home, he asked his wife if his tongue is still there. He declared that as long as he still has his tongue, there is nothing he would fear. Ha...”

Everyone laughed along in a flustered manner although they do not have a clue why he is sharing this story.

The King of Qi gladly added: “Based on his tongue (eloquence) which was not severed in the beating, he was made a marquis and eventually became the Chancellor. Based on the sword in your hand, Great General Xiang was promoted to Great General. A tongue in the past, a sword in the present. Both have been used to achieve greatness.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is confronted with the weird imagination of the Qi populace. He responded: “The Great King has made an excellent comparison.”

Tian Sheng laughed: “However, Great General has switched to using the long dagger he created and has abandoned his sword.”

The King of Qi shot Tian Sheng a glare and countered with annoyance: “Are you hinting that I am ignorant? I have already sent someone to retrieve Great General’s precious weapon.”

This time round, it is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to feel extremely awkward. He opened his mouth and wanted to say something but did not know how to express himself. He cannot possibly reveal that he himself has already stolen his sabre and even received a stab from Cao Cuidao’s sword. Concurrently, he could see for himself the hostile relationship between the King of Qi and First Prince Tian Sheng. No wonder Tian Dan made a last minute turnaround and switched to Tian Jian instead. But judging from

Tian Dan's feeble appearance, he would not outlive King Qi Xiang for long.

King Qi Xiang is in the mood to chat and began talking nonstop: "Ever since the late King launched the campaign 'Dominate Barbarians and Be their King', we, Great Qi, bear the ambition to surround the world, living peacefully regardless of whether one is civilised or uncivilized. When Qin underwent reform to introduce the rule of law, the two countries Qi and Qin have become the two large states with one in the east and one in the west. It is obvious that cooperation is mutually beneficial and estrangement will only bring about harm. This time round, with Imperial Uncle making a personal trip and Great General as a guest, it serves to reinforce the close ties between the two States. This is the best present I could ever ask for."

Within the hall, every person has a different expression written on his face. Tian Sheng who had just been reprimanded by his King father kept his head low and was fearfully quiet. Tian Jian's eyes are shining with passion as he stared at Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei may be laughing along but his body language is very unnatural. Tian Dan is still maintaining his deep and unfathomable outlook, possibly concealing a hidden agenda.

At this moment, a nearby official walked up to the throne. Kneeling down, he passed a letter to the King of Qi and whispered a few words to him.

Surprised at the words he heard, the King of Qi looked over to Xiang Shaolong and revealed: "Grandmaster Cao says he has already returned the precious weapon to Great General. He has

also a letter here that he wishes me to pass it to Great General.”

Tian Dan was taken aback: “What is going on? Has Great General met up with Grandmaster Cao?”

Feeling exceedingly uncomfortable, Xiang Shaolong gingerly nodded his head.

The King of Qi got the inner official to pass the letter to Xiang Shaolong. After opening and reading the letter, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Since Grandmaster Cao has a favourable opinion of Great General, he has invited Great General to Qixia College’s Stargazing Pavilion on the day after the birthday banquet to exchange pointers. It is truly an honour for Great General.”

While the faces of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei flashed quickly with delight, the King of Qi trembled excessively and his face turned ashen white.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly humoured. Three days later he would be safely in the territory of Wei; even if others jeer at him for being afraid of Cao Cuidao, he would not give a hoot.

There are only two men he dreaded meeting. One of them is Li Mu and the other one is the fear-inducing Cao Cuidao.

The minute Xiang Shaolong left Henggong Pavilion, he was intercepted by Xie Ziyuan. Dragging him to one side, Xie Ziyuan gasped: “Great General has deceived Little Brother thoroughly, so

you...”

Firstly winking at Xie Ziyuan (to hint that it is inconvenient), Xiang Shaolong then paid his respects to Tian Dan and Lu Buwei: “Great General dare not bother the two of you any further and will leave the palace by myself!”

Tian Dan nodded: “Let’s find some time to catch up over the new few days.” Finishing, he left with Lu Buwei.

Scrutinizing Xiang Shaolong’s chiseled features, Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Brother Xiang is indeed handsome looking and outstanding.”

Shoulder to shoulder, the two men strolled out of the palace gate. Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Brother Xie is certainly well-informed.”

Xie Ziyuan proudly affirmed: “Nothing in the palace can escape my detection.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “In this case, are you aware that Cao Cuidao has just issued a challenge to Little Brother, fixing the duel at Qixia’s Stargazing Pavilion four days later? In addition, no one is allowed to witness the battle.”

His face losing colour, Xie Ziyuan was petrified: “What should we do? Aye, to think you can still smile at a time like this.”

Xiang Shaolong of course knows that he can still smile because he is going to slip away tonight and it would be a different outcome four days later. He consoled: “Worse to worse, I will just discard my sword and admit defeat. Will he still kill me after that?”

Xie Ziyuan was horrified: “Wouldn’t Yingzheng be upset if Brother Xiang really abandon the fight?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that he is representing the glory of Qin and forsaking the fight is certainly not an option. However, escaping for his life is a totally different perspective.

After all, anything is better than dying under the merciless blade of Cao Cuidao. Suppressing his voice, he assured: “Brother naturally has a way to resolve the problem. Brother Xie need not worry for me.”

Xie Ziyuan bitterly laughed: “I would be lying if I say I am not worried. Grandmaster Cao’s sword skills have reached an immeasurable level and countless well-known master swordsmen are like children challenging adults when dueling him; they can barely defend themselves.”

Xiang Shaolong deeply understood that sensation. Arriving at the carriage parking lot, an attendant pulled the carriage door open for the two men to board.

After they sat down, the horse carriage started to move.

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Where are we heading?”

Xie Ziyuan disclosed: “To see Zongsun Long. He wishes to apologise to Brother Xiang in person.”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong can feel his emotions stirring. Life has its ups and downs; human feelings have its warmth and coldness. What an apt description!

Ever since he has resumed his Xiang Shaolong persona, the entire environment seems to have changed. Within the Song & Dance Troupe, everyone is worshiping him like a deity and going all out to get into his good books.

On the other hand, as Shen Liang, he can witness the more genuine side of their characters.

Xie Ziyuan added: “Once the Zongsun father and son knows that you are Xiang Shaolong, they are exhilarated and quickly begged me to plead with Brother Xiang, inviting you to join hands with them to oppose Lu Buwei. With Brother Xiang on our side, the Second Prince may change his mind once again.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Can Brother Xie arrange for me to meet the Second Prince today? I am doing this not for the Zongsun father and son but for Brother Xie.”

Xie Ziyuan was visibly touched and decided: “Brother Xiang is a true friend indeed! I shall fix the appointment to be tonight!”

Looking at the streets through the window, Xiang Shaolong observed the people of Qi busy sweeping snow off the roads and property. The harsh winter is nearly over.

Contradicting their usual habits, Zongsun Long and his son are waiting for them at the door with overwhelming friendliness.

Xiang Shaolong has become their only savior.

To the people of Qi, there is nothing more critical than maintaining good relations with Qin. Only then can Qi occupy the lands of their nemesis Yan without any distractions and slowly expand their territory and eventually uniting the lands.

The reason why Tian Dan can wrest control of Tian Jian from the hands of Zongsun Long is purely because he has Lu Buwei, this ace card.

If Xiang Shaolong who wields greater influence over Yingzheng compared to Lu Buwei decides to stand on Zongsun Long's side, Tian Jian need not switch sides to Tian Dan who had previously supported his own brother.

With this given circumstances, Zongsun Long is naturally treating Xiang Shaolong with utmost hospitality.

Seating themselves in the main hall, Zongsun Long firstly apologise to Xiang Shaolong. Before he could say anything more,

Xiang Shaolong declared ahead of him: “Whether privately or officially, I, Xiang Shaolong, will do my best for Brother Xie and Master Long. There is no need for any pleasantries.”

Zongsun Long father and son were deliriously happy.

Xie Ziyuan wondered: “Little Brother will enter the palace immediately and seek an audience with Second Prince to make the necessary arrangements for tonight’s banquet. Where is a good place to hold it?”

Zongsun Long decided after a quick analysis: “Why don’t we have it at Jade Orchid Brothel? Over there, the ambience is more relaxing”

Xie Ziyuan was ecstatic: “Yes. That is a very good place.”

To Xiang Shaolong, Zongsun Xuanhua presented: “Xuanhua has specially selected a batch of top rated swordsmen and will assign them to Great General to use at your disposal. Their integrity and character are above suspicion. While Great General is in Lin Zi, they will only take orders from Great General.”

Xiang Shaolong thanked: “Brother Zongsun is really considerate. However, can this arrangement be postponed until tomorrow?” In his mind, he was thinking that he’ll be long gone by tomorrow.

Zongsun Xuanhua respectfully consented: “We shall adhere to Great General’s instructions.”

He then frowned: “I heard my Master has issued a challenge to Great General. This is indeed troubling. Xuanhua will pay his respects to Master later and will try to persuade him to retract his challenge.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and dismissed: “There is no need to go to such an extent. Your Master’s decision is something even your Great King is unable to influence. Moreover, Little Brother is interested to try out Grandmaster’s Cao ultimate swordplay.”

Zongsun Long anxiously stammered: “Grandmaster Cao may be a nice and approachable person but once his sword leaves its sheathe, he becomes a heartless fighter. If Great General happens to meet with some misfortune, that will... Aye!”

If he had not tasted Cao Cuidao’s prowess before and someone like Zongsun Long is speaking as if he would surely lose, Xiang Shaolong would be greatly offended. Presently, he obviously would not react the same way. He laughed: “I have my ways of keeping myself safe. Master Long need not fret.”

Zongsun Xuanhua had a brainwave and exclaimed: “Why don’t Martial Sister and myself visit Master together? He is most fond of Martial Sister and may make an exception, altering the duel to a friendly match just to exchange pointers.”

Xiang Shaolong has his own plans and smiled: “I really do not require any help from you. Brother Zongsun is a fellow swordsman and should understand how a swordsman think!”

Deflated, Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: “Great General is truly one of a kind. Master has lost interest in dueling a long time ago and only Great General is able to stir his fighting spirit. It must be partly due to Great General’s precious sabre.”

Zongsun Long reminded: “Brother Xiang is remarkably famous. In my opinion, I think Xuanhua had better warn the two troublemakers Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang. It would be hard to resist if they come forward and challenge Brother Xiang too.”

His eyes blazing with a chilling aura, Zongsun Xuanhua coldly grunted: “If they are thinking of dueling with Great General, they will have to contend with me, Zongsun Xuanhua, first.”

Since he is running away tonight, Xiang Shaolong leisurely proclaimed: “It is all right as I could use some practice with my sabre. Brother Zongsun is too kind.”

With a mixture of hero worship and admiration, Zongsun Xuanhua respectfully and solemnly suggested: “Now wonder the whole of Xianyang is in awe of Great General. Just be simply observing Great General’s open mindedness and indomitable aura, one can deduce that Great General’s sabre skills have attained a godly state. Xuanhua can only admit defeat. Nevertheless, if there is an opportunity, Xuanhua hopes Great General can give Xuanhua some pointers.”

Xiang Shaolong exposed: “Brother Zongsun is really itching for a fight or is he trying to gauge Little Brother’s skills in order to

decide to beg your Master to let me off or not?”

With Xiang Shaolong seeing through his ruse, Zongsun Xuanhua's face turned red and he awkwardly insisted: “Great General must be kidding. Xuanhua is sincere in learning from Great General.”

Zongsun Long abruptly apologized: “I, Zongsun Long, would like to use this opportunity to bare my soul to Great General, hereby swearing that I no longer bear any ulterior motives towards Miss Feng Fei. If I break my word, may I, Zongsun Long, die in the wilderness with an exposed corpse. Will Great General please relay this message to her and tell Mistress I, Zongsun Long, is truly sorry.”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and checked: “Little Brother may have to leave Lin Zi before Mistress. I may have to trouble Master Long to protect Mistress on Little Brother's behalf.”

Thumping his chest, Zongsun Long swore: “You can count on me, Zongsun Long. Great General can put your mind at ease.”

The aggressor is now the protector. Life is indeed unpredictable.

Xie Ziyuan's body shuddered once and he recommended: “Why don't Brother Xiang find an excuse to return to Qin before the duel with Grandmaster Cao? That would solve everything without a hitch.”

Zongsun Xuanhua was the first to praise: “You can lie that your Father in law is sick. With this justification, no one would blame Great General for missing the appointment.”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong could not agree more and this scenario best depicts: Only a hero will recognize another hero. Pleased, he ended: “We shall decide further after discussing with Second Prince tonight.”

Noting that he did not reject this idea, the other three men could finally calm down.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and bid farewell. Zongsun Long ‘reluctantly’ send him all the way to the main entrance before the other two men, Zongsun Xuanhua and Xie Ziyuan accompanied him back to Tingsong Villa.

Book 23 Chapter 12 - Dilemma

Back at Tingsong Villa, Fei Chun came up to welcome him: “Reporting Master Xiang, the two men, Zhang Quan and Kun Shan have left.”

Xiang Shaolong has forgotten about these two men and was stunned upon hearing this news. He interrogated: “Did they take any luggage with them?”

His hands relaxed by the side, Fei Chun respectfully replied: “Their belongings took up two carriages. Mistress knows about it too.”

Secretly acknowledging that the cleanup is now completed, Xiang Shaolong is about to return to his room when Fei Chun awkwardly questioned: “Master Xiang, after the disbandment of the Song & Dance Troupe, can our band of brothers throw in our lot with you?”

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong advised: “The Song & Dance Troupe would not be disbanded. You guys should do your best and support Second Mistress. Touring the various States is much better than cooping yourself in one place.” Finishing his sentence, he began to climb the stairs leading to the main hall.

Fei Chun caught up to him and added: “First Mistress and Second Mistress are looking for you. And there is Miss Xinyue too. Oh, it nearly slipped my mind; Mister Tan is here as well and is waiting for Master Xiang in the East Hall. He says it is a matter of life and

death!”

Although he is now more popular than before, Xiang Shaolong is feeling more troublesome instead. He naturally went to look for Xiao Yuetan first.

Standing in front of the window, a dazed Xiao Yuetan was staring at the garden scenery beyond the window with his arms akimbo. Until Xiang Shaolong arrived at his back did he calmly divulge: “Shaolong, I have a piece of terrible news for you.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and enquired: “What terrible news?”

Xiao Yuetan described: “Today, I disguised myself and stalked Han Chuang. This ingrate actually went to visit Guo Kai in secret. They had a two hour discussion before he finally left.”

His heart swelling with a sour feeling, Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: I do not offend others; yet others try to offend me. What more can I say? This fella is getting better and better. Even Lord Longyang has been deceived by him. He cannot be bothered and replied: “It doesn’t matter anymore. I will be leaving tonight. Lord Longyang has arranged everything for me.”

Turning his body around, Xiao Yuetan used his hands and grabbed both of Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders. He seriously remarked: “How do you expect to leave? Both the river and roads have been blockaded by heavy snow. Lord Longyang and Han Chuang are in it together. Both of them are after your life!”

He continued: “The reason for my suspicion is because Lord Longyang came to visit Han Chuang. After a short discussion, Han Chuang then left to look for Guo Kai. What do you think they are up to?”

His face drained of colour, Xiang Shaolong stammered: “What?”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “Shaolong, you are too trusting with your friends. You must understand that when the interests of the Country and the glory or shame, life or death of their entire clan is concerned, every strand of relationship will be cast aside. To the people of the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), the three words Xiang Shaolong is equivalent to their Soul Reaper. Only with your demise can they put their mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head turning numb. If he does not leave, he would have to face Cao Cuidao’s godly swordplay and handle other annoying issues.

He decided: “I will leave by myself.”

Xiao Yuetan disagreed: “Your arm injury has yet to recover fully. Leaving now is too dangerous.”

Pausing, he continued: “I heard Cao Cuidao has issued a challenge to you. Are you leaving and forsaking the duel?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “What else can I do? Elder

Brother is well-informed indeed.”

Xiao Yuatan warned: “It is not that I am well-informed but there is someone intentionally spreading this news, announcing this to the whole city and making it difficult for you to avoid this battle. Aye, did you ever think that if you had really slipped away, it would be significantly detrimental to yourself? Lu Buwei will definitely make a big hoo ha over this matter and damage your revered status among the Qin military.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “You are asking me to fight Cao Cuidao despite knowing that I will surely get killed?”

Xiao Yuetan reasoned: “Based on your current disposition, you will lose without a doubt. But since he personally issued the challenge, he must have regarded you as a worthy adversary.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “It could be Lu Buwei who ordered Han Jie to invite him to issue this challenge to me.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed: “You are saying this because you do not understand Cao Cuidao. There is no one in this world who can influence him. With a passion for sword fighting, he toured the land since he was young, looking for challengers to better himself. After the age of twenty five, he has yet to taste defeat and ultimately gained the admirable title of Sword Saint.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: “And you are still asking me to fight him?”

Xiao Yuetan officially articulated: “I am just being realistic. The population of Qin values the glory of its military and swordsmen. You can afford to lose but you cannot afford to run away from the duel. The impact on your reputation is beyond imagination. Maybe you can persuade Cao Cuidao to limit the fight to ten strokes. That may perhaps create a win win scenario and both parties can maintain their personal standing without committing offence.”

Xiang Shaolong is highly enthusiastic and nodded: “Why don’t I make an official petition to the King of Qi. Of course I will be tactful about it and mention stuff like not wanting anybody to be hurt, etc.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Xiao Yuetan suggested: “Why don’t we write directly to Cao Cuidao? Since this old fella is unable to overcome you the last time, it must surely bug him and he may approve of this condition. Moreover, if nobody else knows about this arrangement and you manage to successfully deflect ten strokes from him, everyone would have the impression that you are evenly matched with Old Cao. This will enhance your reputation significantly without any side effects.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Cao Cuidao may have studied and understood his sabre moves and it will not be a repeat of their first encounter when he could only defend without attacking. He dejectedly mused: “These ten moves are not easy to defend against. Regardless of speed, strength or skill, I am inferior to him.”

Grabbing Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders and violently shaking him once, Xiao Yuetan fiercely painted: “Xiang Shaolong. Look at me.

This is either make or break. If you persist in thinking that you will lose this duel, you can never return to Xianyang and see your wives and son. As long as you can walk down Qixia College Stargazing Pavilion three days later with your life intact, you can leave Lin Zi that very night, returning back to Qin for an ultimate showdown with Lu Buwei. Otherwise, all your previous efforts would have come to naught.”

His whole body breaking out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong was shocked into awakening. His sharp eyes teeming with energy, he stared back at Xiao Yuetan and swore in a deep voice: “I got it. Xiang Shaolong would not let Brother Xiao down. I, Xiang Shaolong, will definitely return to Qin in one piece.”

Xiao Yuetan released his grip on him and concluded: “I will proceed to draft the letter in your room. Once you have signed it, I will personally deliver it to Cao Cuidao. After that, we can only pray for his gallantry.”

Xiang Shaolong made his way to the enormous garden of the rear courtyard. With the area swept clean of snow, Feng Fei and the others are conducting an outdoor rehearsal. Right now, Dong Shuzhen is practicing the critical main song.

Now that he is better at assessing a woman’s artistic talents, he discovered that compared to Feng Fei, Dong Shuzhen evokes a totally different aura.

Unlike Feng Fei sloppy and diva attitude, Dong Shuzhen carries an exquisite and enchanting aura that reminds him of a poem or a work of art. Even when she is feeling upset or angry, she can still

radiate an indescribable sensation of playfulness and passion. It is truly captivating.

As the courtesans are fully immersed in the performance, none of them noticed Xiang Shaolong stepping into the garden. Only Feng Fei approached his side and whispered: “Once Shuzen finish singing this song, Great General will then announce Feng Fei’s retirement and her subsequent marriage into the Xiang Family. Shuzen shall officially succeed Feng Fei and be responsible for the performance at Qixia College.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “What?”

Chuckling with a ‘Pu Ci’, Feng Fei jested: “What is your what about? Didn’t you impersonate Shen Liang to seduce me?”

Xiang Shaolong realizes that she is just fooling around and changed the topic: “Did Han Jie look for you?”

Feng Fei shot him a look and replied in a slow and melancholic manner: “I was looking for you regarding this issue. He told me he went to see Zongsun Xuanhua because he wants to gather more information about Zongsun Long and my case. He even swore to Heaven & Earth that he would never let me down. I am so confused by his promises and I am at a loss now.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “As an outsider, it is impossible for me to intervene. However, Zongsun Long did swear that he no longer bears any malice towards you. He even guaranteed to safely escort you to wherever you wish to go.”

Her petite frame shivered once, as Feng Fei demanded: “From your tone, you sounded as if Lord Longyang and Han Chuang are both unreliable and at the same time, hinting me to give up Han Jie. What is going on?”

By now, the song has reached its highest peak and the environment was packed with a joyful and celebratory atmosphere like an energetic and dazzling display of fireworks. With the striking of the bell, the entire performance came to a stop instantaneously. However, the images of the spectacle continue to linger in one’s memory.

Leading her fellow courtesans, Dong Shuzen came to the front of Xiang Shaolong and Feng Fei, bowing and paying their respects in their shrill voice.

Xiang Shaolong intensely felt that the bearing of the whole Song & Dance Troupe has improved tremendously, with every member working with a high fighting spirit and full of hope that the future is bright and can only get brighter.

If he had left tonight without saying goodbye, it would severely impact their morale. Thus, he can feel his own heroic sensation arising and matching their high morale.

His phobia towards Cao Cuidao has been cast to the back of his brain.

When Dong Shuzen stood up again, her eyes are filled with hot

tears and glowing with utmost gratitude that no words can describe.

At this juncture, a subordinate came to report that Yan General Xu Yizhe is here to seek an audience with him.

Sighing to himself, Xiang Shaolong knows that another set of troubles await.

Xu Yizhe came to visit him in ordinary clothes and without any followers. His entourage is completely different from Lord Longyang and the others.

It has been years since they last met and the wrinkles on his face have increased considerably, signaling a tormenting lifestyle.

After exchange pleasantries, both men sat down according to their status as host and guest. This famed General of Yan lamented: "Today we may be pouring our hearts out to each other but tomorrow we could be meeting in the battlefield. This is truly dreadful."

Xiang Shaolong can comprehend his emotions and enquired about Prince Dan's situation.

Xu Yizhe sighed: "With wolves and tigers as neighbours, who can enjoy a day of peace? Great General should be aware of Qi's ambitions towards our territory. This time round, we initially did not wish to send anyone over. However, Guo Kai kept egging

Prince Dan, promising that if we can support Tian Jian and suppress Tian Dan, it will result in a different outcome. Thus, here I am. And I have discovered that regardless of whoever is in power, halting these ambitions is simply impossible.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. The people of Zhao and Yan are mired in gratitude and hatred themselves. In the same year when he took the time machine and traveled to this era, the Yan invading army has just been freshly defeated by Lian Po, who subsequently attacked all the way to the capital of Yan. At that time, Wei, Han, Qi and Chu joined hands in pressuring Zhao, forcing them to withdraw. Taking advantage of the situation, Qi invade Yan and this time round, Chu came in to attack Qi from the back, as the Three States are unable to cope with Qi due to the fierce threat from mighty Qin.

The entire history of the Warring States is a record of large States conquering the smaller States. Every State has its expansionary policy and increased its own strength by absorbing territory from other States. If they do not increase their own strength, they would be conquered by others to be used to increase the strength of others. For example, if Yan is a bigger state than Qi, the people of Qi would be the ones feeling depressed now.

Ever since their crushing defeat at the hands of Zhao, Yan has been struggling at the brink of extinction. If not for Prince Dan who sent Jingke to assassinate Xiao Pan in the later years, probably nobody would have a deep impression of Yan.

Xu Yizhe added: “Prince Dan is currently based at Wu Yang, it is a developed city beside River Wu and it is nearer to the South border

in preparation for any threats from Qi. If Great General can spare the time, Prince Dan would love to meet his old buddy.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Now, I am not even confident if I can make it safely back to Xianyang alive and would not burden myself with other matters.”

Xu Yizhe officially state: “Is Great General referring to the duel with Cao Cuidao? I am certain it is Tian Dan and Lu Buwei fanning the flames from behind. Great General must exercise caution when dealing with it. We did send a few top swordsmen to challenge Cao Cuidao, hoping to ruffle the feathers of Qi. Unexpectedly, they could not even overcome Zongsun Xuanhua, causing us some distress.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that his present predicament is indirectly caused by Han Chuang. Not wishing to discuss any further, he changed the topic: “When is Brother Xu going back to Yan?”

Xu Yizhe answered: “I had planned to leave the next morning after the birthday banquet but right now, I would only leave after witnessing Great General triumph over Cao Cuidao.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Brother Xu is expecting too much from me.”

Xu Yizhe was slightly stunned and queried: “The match has not yet begun. Why is Great General already feeling disillusioned?”

Xiang Shaolong obviously could not tell him he had experienced Cao Cuidao's prowess before and could only mutter some gibberish and changed the topic again.

After some idle chatter, Xu Yizhe finally brought up the topic that Xiang Shaolong feared most of all: "Besides paying my respects to Great General, Xu Yizhe has a special request."

Xiang Shaolong could only respond: "Brother Xu, please speak without any reservations."

Xu Yizhe solemnly explained: "Although we took part in the allied campaign and attacked your State, we did so reluctantly and were in fact forced by circumstances. Otherwise, we would be helpless and alone the next time Qi attacks us. If we can get rid of this thorn in the flesh, I guarantee that my State will never participate in any allied campaigns."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "This is a high level decision. Can Brother Xu have the final say?"

Xu Yizhe sighed: "This is no longer regarding who has the final say but this is the dream of the key decision maker. Now that Tian Dan and Lu Buwei are in cahoots and the might of Qin military is suppressing the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), causing them to be unable to divert any resources to the north, giving Tian Dan the opportunity to occupy our territory. All I ask of is for Great General to hint Qi that Qin will not sit by and watch while Qi expand their borders. With that, even if Qi has all the guts in the world, they would not dare to be complacent. With just one sentence, Great General shall win the friendship of my State on

behalf of your State.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong found himself in such a complicated dilemma. Although he could influence Xiao Pan, that is purely because he does not possess any selfish motives and is always thinking from Xiao Pan’s point of view.

Ever since Qin implemented Shang Yang’s reforms, they have a policy of befriending distant States while invading neighbouring States. For example, they maintained cordial relations with Qi and Chu while making inroads into the lands of the Three States. With regards to Yan, Yan did enjoy a glorious period when King Yan Zao constructed a Golden Pavilion to recruit famed generals such as Le Yi who successfully repelled the Qi army. Presently, Qin cannot be bothered with pathetic Yan, which is situated in the desolated northeast. Therefore, Qin would never forsake their relationship with Qi for Yan.

From another angle, he has to make provisions for Shan Rou and assist Xie Ziyuan in regaining Tian Jian’s cooperation. To a certain extent, he has to match the same promise Lu Buwei has committed to Tian Jian. The promise naturally involves Yan, this juicy piece of meat.

He knows better than anybody that he is not someone who is suitable for political work. Of course he could easily win the affections of Xu Yizhe by pretending to agree first and subsequently doing the opposite. However, this is something his conscience would never allow.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “It may appear easy for me to

accept your proposition and just mention this one sentence; however, I am afraid it cannot be done.”

His countenance slightly altered, Xu Yizhe admitted: “Then it must be my imperfect judgment, assuming that Great General is a true friend of Prince Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong clarified: “Brother Xu is mistaken. Friends are friends. This fact would never change. The problem is that I am not officially visiting Qi on behalf of Qin and with Lu Buwei posing an obstruction, it would be challenging for me to put your message across. Therefore, I dare not recklessly agree. Can you give me some time to think this through?”

Sighing, he added: “If I succumbed under Cao Cuidao’s sword, all my undertakings would be meaningless.”

His expression turning warm, Xu Yizhe was slightly embarrassed: “It is me who had jumped to conclusions. We shall speak again after Great General return victoriously from Qixia College.”

Xu Yizhe concluded his visit, standing up and bidding farewell. After sending him off at the Villa entrance, Li Yuan happened to come along.

In the past, Xiang Shaolong has the free time to take an afternoon nap. Presently, he is handling one appointment after another, working himself to death.

Firstly instructing Li Yuan to wait for him in the main hall, he proceeded to put his signature on the letter Xiao Yuetan had prepared. While he was rushing towards the main hall, Little Ping'er detained him, demanding: "Mistress is urgently looking for you and insists that you see her at once."

Witnessing the melancholic and pitiful glow of her eyes, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart grinding with agony. However, there is nothing he can do about it as he had made up his mind to refrain from taking another wife or concubine. Love is in fact the greatest burden of all. Since the passing of Princess Qian, the only women who have moved his heart are Qin Qing and Li Yanyan.

Xiang Shaolong was in a fix: "But Li Yuan is waiting for me in the main hall!"

Little Ping'er declared: "Nevertheless, you must visit Mistress first because Lady Qingxiu has sneaked into her bedroom."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong knows Lady Qingxiu and Feng Fei are acquainted. After weighing his options, he hurriedly made his way to meet this gorgeous lady.

As anticipated, Lady Qingxiu's face is covered with several layers of veil as she refuses to let Xiang Shaolong view her actual face. After Feng Fei knowingly excused herself, Lady Qingxiu went straight to the point: "Does Great General knows that you are in an extremely dangerous situation?"

Nodding, Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: "What updates

does Your Lady have for me?”

Lady Qingxiu enlightened: “Chancellor Li naturally would not talk to me about his affairs. However, I did send someone to keep an eye on him. For the past two days, Han Chuang visited him several times and held secret discussions. Great General yourself is an observant man and should be aware that Han Chuang’s character is deplorable. All along, Chancellor Li does not have a high opinion of Han Chuang. When they are suddenly behaving so intimately, I sense something is afoot. ”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “I understand. Thanks so much Your Lady. I am extremely grateful.”

Lady Qingxiu simply state: “I am doing this for Yanyan; otherwise she would certainly blame me. We are just ordinary women and in our eyes, Great General has done Chancellor Li a huge favour and Chancellor Li would be at fault if he repays your favour with evil. We do not care about other details. I dare not hold Great General back from your official work anymore. Great General, please help yourself.”

Xiang Shaolong is used to her icy demeanor, seemingly putting an enormous chasm between her and everybody else. He paid his respects and bade farewell before heading to meet Li Yuan.

Sitting alone in the main hall, Li Yuan was sipping his tea in silence. Wearing a look of anguish, it may be due to the fact that he is betraying Xiang Shaolong, causing his mind to be turbulent.

Settling down by his side, Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger rising. He coldly hissed: “I shall have to trouble Brother Li to inform your best friend that I have decided not to leave tonight.”

Li Yuan shuddered forcefully: “Is Brother Xiang leaving tonight?”

Observing his body language, Xiang Shaolong deduced that he is not putting on an act. Mystified, he wondered: “Didn’t that ingrate Han Chuang tell you about it?”

Li Yuan swore to heaven that he was wronged: “I really do not know about this matter. I came to look for you today because I wanted to tell you that the fella Han Chuang has convinced Guo Kai to get rid of you and frame Lu Buwei for it, causing internal strife within Qin. Hey? Are you assuming that I am in the same league as him? If I really stoop so low, can I, Li Yuan, be considered a human being? Yanyan will hate me for life.”

His thoughts jumbling up, Xiang Shaolong can no longer discern who is a friend or foe. He disputed: “Why didn’t you visit me over the past two days? If I had tried to leave tonight, wouldn’t I be falling into Han Chuang’s and Guo Kai’s trap?”

Li Yuan was guilt-ridden: “Han Chuang did approach me consistently over the past few days. I did intend to stay out their affairs but eventually, I could not answer to my conscience any more. Shaolong, please do not blame me. It is Little Brother who is lacking in willpower.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Did it ever cross your minds that as long as I am alive and confining Lu Buwei in a power tussle, it would be unlikely for Qin to attack your States with its full potential. I am certain all of you can imagine what would be the alternative if I am not around.”

He could not help but recall Xiao Pan’s identity crisis again. This event would cause both him and Xiao Pan to be at a severe disadvantage. Even if Lord Changping and the others continue to express their support for Xiao Pan, he would have lost the legal and moral right to rule.

Li Yuan bitterly smiled: “Essentially, Lord Longyang could not bear to betray Shaolong too. Due to a moment of carelessness, he did mention to Han Chuang he once saw you in Daliang. After the incident, he did not make a report to Wei. Thus, he was blackmailed by Han Chuang into cooperating with him because this information could lead to the annihilation of his clan. His affections towards you is deeper than any one of us and he is naturally experiencing the most agony. Brother Xiang should understand what I meant.”

Xiang Shaolong was incensed: “This fella Han Chuang has gone overboard. On the surface, he is spouting all kinds of friendship and integrity quotes. No wonder he has a special fear of me; his conscience is overpowered by guilt. Aye, since he could feel pangs of guilt, that means his personality is not completely evil.”

Li Yuan bitterly smiled: “I cannot imagine that Brother Xiang is still in the mood to joke. Han Chuang is indeed exceedingly troubled. Part of the reason behind his actions is due to pressure

from Guo Kai. The loophole is that someone from Han Chuang's entourage is a spy of Guo Kai, causing this information to be leaked out. Currently, Han cannot afford to offend Zhao and Han Chuang himself is terrified of Han Jing. If she lodges a complaint against him to the King of Han, he would be in hot soup."

His anger faintly subsiding, Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "If I had knew about this earlier, I should have killed Guo Kai when I had the chance. It will save me from facing all these problems."

Li Yuan reminded: "Even if it was somebody else, there would be no difference because in order to survive, men have been known to use all forms of despicable methods. However, this is simply against my conscience. In my opinion, even without your intervention, Han Chuang would terminate his scheme to escort you out of Lin Zi tonight. Using Cao Cuidao's sword to get rid of you is surely better than getting his own hands dirty."

From this sentence, Xiang Shaolong is confident that Li Yuan did not participate in this scheme; otherwise, he would be aware that Lord Longyang was the one escorting him away. On the surface, Han Chuang is supposed to be ignorant about this arrangement.

His mood improving, Xiang Shaolong perceived: "In this case, I should be safe before my duel with Cao Cuidao."

Li Yuan sighed: "Logically, that is correct. However, I am concerned that the idle swordsmen of Lin Zi may be eager to challenge you and assess your swordsmanship beforehand."

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: “I am in a terrible mood right now; they had better not mess around with me.”

Li Yuan wondered after some contemplation: “Cao Cuidao is truly a brilliant and exceptional swordsman. There has never been a swordsman as skillful as him. Does Shaolong have the confidence to defeat him?”

Recalling Xiao Yuetan’s ‘Ten Strokes’ proposal, Xiang Shaolong immediately felt better and nodded: “I should have no difficulty in defending myself.”

Li Yuan was amazed at his reply and did not probe further. Just as he was about to continue the conversation, Xie Ziyuan came looking for Xiang Shaolong. Knowing that it is inconvenient for him to stick around, Li Yuan swiftly left.

As Xiang Shaolong welcomed Xie Ziyuan into the hall, the latter bitterly laughed: “The appointment is fixed. However, Little Brother is facing a new setback. My wifey does not believe that we are going out together tonight and must witness your presence before she will give her approval.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Shan Rou is only making up an excuse to see him. He bitterly smiled: “This time round, I shall fetch Brother Xie at your residence.”

Xie Ziyuan was elated: “Brother Xiang is a true friend indeed. When Second Prince knows that he is finally meeting you, he was overwhelmed with happiness. He states that in front of Yingzheng,

a word from you is way more effective than ten words from Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt that the eventual demise of Qi is precisely due to this kind of mindset.

Xie Ziyuan fantasized: “Once again, we must get Soft Boned Beauty to accompany us tonight. It is an incredible sensation to feel her leaning onto my body.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed: “Isn’t she working for Tian Dan? It would be inappropriate for her to overhear our conversation!”

Xie Ziyuan assured: “You can put your mind at ease. She is famous for not meddling in political affairs. Moreover, our discussion is not fully confidential. We mainly need to make it clear to the Second Prince that you are on our side.”

Recalling the incident this morning when the King of Qi scolded the First Prince Tian Sheng without mincing his words, he could comprehend why everybody is having a better opinion of Tian Jian and his higher chances at the throne.

Suppressing his voice, Xie Ziyuan clandestinely revealed: “It is rumoured that the Great King will announce the Crown Prince succeeding his throne during the birthday banquet. It will unquestionably be Second Prince. As a result, we need to borrow Brother Xiang to ruffle the feathers of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei.”

In his wildest dream, Xiang Shaolong could not imagine pitting himself against Lu Buwei and Tian Dan in this political struggle. It clearly demonstrates that political battles can kill without shedding blood.

From being an ‘insignificant’ being, he is now a Qin political heavyweight and can even influence the political outcome of other States. Life is truly beyond anticipation.

After informing him the appointed time, Xie Ziyuan speedily left to update Zongsun Long father and son.

Retrieving the Hundred Battle Sabre which he had securely hidden in his room, Xiang Shaolong hung it around his waist. In his mind, he decided that in the event that Cao Cuidao refuses to accept the ten-stroke proposal, he would immediately flee with Feng Fei once the festivities of the birthday banquet have been completed. Staying alive is of utmost importance. The swordsman’s glory is only secondary.

Reminiscing Cao Cuidao’s amazing swordplay, all his fighting spirit drummed up earlier by Xiao Yuetan disappeared without a trace.

But if Old Cao is willing to accept the ten-stroke limit, he does not mind giving it a go. No matter how inferior he is, he can surely defend against ten moves.

He obviously understood that Xiao Yuetan is thinking from his point of view. Fleeing from a duel will leave a huge blemish on his

celebrated life as a warrior. It is considered an unwise move, especially during this period when Xiao Pan is undergoing an identity calamity.

Nevertheless, no one understands him better than himself. Cao Cuidao's sword cannot be defended with pure strength alone. Dying in such a manner is not worthwhile, causing him to think of ways to avoid the fight. In addition, he cannot afford to leave his wives and child behind.

Until now, he is still unsure if Lord Longyang has betrayed him or not. The truth will come to light depending on whether he will cancel the arrangement to leave Lin Zi tonight or not.

He felt inclined to practice his sabre moves in the garden but on hindsight, if Old Cao is unwilling to accept the ten-strokes suggestion, all his practice would be meaningless. Absorbed in his thoughts, a fragrant smelling Xinyue suddenly squeezed herself into his arms and embraced him tightly. She faintly panted: "Great General has thoroughly deceived us!"

Hugging her enticing, curvaceous body and facing her attractive features, Xiang Shaolong is speedily losing his self control. However, he does not wish to hurt her feelings and could only quiz: "Doesn't Miss Xinyue need to participate in the rehearsal?"

end of Book 23

Book 24 Chapter 01 - The Victorious Hundred Battle Sabre

When they reached Jade Orchid Brothel, Zongsun Long father and son are already respectfully awaiting and brimming with brotherly affections. Compared to their initial encounter, it was a world of difference.

This time round, the banquet lounge and the setting is far better than before as Zongsun Long had reserved the most luxurious courtyard Jade Orchid Brothel can offer. It naturally included the companionship of their eight top courtesans, which Lan Gongyuan is obviously part of. Even Madam Orchid had been specially engaged to oversee their gathering.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong who has resumed his original appearance, Lan Gongyuan personally welcomed him. Hooking his arm and leading him to his seat, she leaned towards his ear and whispered: “The last time round, I knew I had hit my mark. Why are you still alive and kicking?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that it was brilliant of her to use a casual remark to resolve their enmity into a round of flirting between a man and a woman. He smiled: “Why is Miss Yuan acting on the orders of Tian Dan? Is it because of Qi Yu?”

Lan Gongyuan plainly state: “As a citizen of Qi, Yuan Yuan must contribute my part to Great Qi. On a personal basis, I am full of admiration for Great General.”

Right now, Zongsun Xuanhua who was seated at the second table burst out laughing: “Tonight, Yuan Yuan is experiencing a change of heart and is only concerned with whispering sweet nothings to Great General. Do you think you deserved to be punished with a cup of wine?”

After lightly pecking Xiang Shaolong on the cheek, Lan Gongyuan’s pretty eyes glanced sideways at Xie Ziyuan who is behaving intimately with another gorgeous courtesan. She laughed in reply like a blossoming flower: “The one who is experiencing a change of heart is somebody else. The person who should be punished is Official Xie instead of me.”

Raising his wine cup and chuckling, Xie Ziyuan suggested: “Yes, yes, I deserved to be punished but Yuan Yuan cannot be spared too. However, she can sing instead of drink. Ha!”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused. Once he stepped into a brothel, Xie Ziyuan seems to be HIGH despite not taking any intoxicants and is behaving like a completely different person. Nonetheless, witnessing that he is not aroused by even a super beauty like Lan Gongyuan, Xiang Shaolong can deduce that he is just a playacting, harmless visitor and would never be addicted to lust, alcohol or other vice activities.

With reference to the three Famous Courtesans, he does not have an inkling of fantasy towards Lan Gongyuan. The reason is probably his constant deep fear of suffering at her cruel hands. After all, her entire gang of troupe members and fellow conspirators has lost their lives in Xianyang because of him. It would be surprising if she does not bear any hatred towards him.

While he was immensely tempted by Feng Fei, he can feel his attraction for her dwindling after discovering her numerous lies and attempted murder.

On the other hand, the unique and aloof beauty Shi Sufang has piqued his interest and curiosity.

Among the shrill laughter and cheers, everyone raised their cups and toasted one another.

Zongsun Long was seated opposite Xiang Shaolong and was surrounded by a bevy of beauties. After raising his cup and toasting Xiang Shaolong, he wondered: “Why is Second Prince late?”

As expected, no one could answer him. Xie Ziyuan recommended: “Why don’t we send someone to rush him?”

Zongsun Xuanhua immediately commanded a subordinate to handle this task. He then turned towards Xiang Shaolong: “I heard from Official Xie that Junior Martial Sister Rou will be sparring with Great General tomorrow. If Great General does not mind, can Xuanhua tag along and witness Great General’s amazing skills?”

Secretly annoyed at Xie Ziyuan’s big mouth, Xiang Shaolong has no grounds to object and could only reply: “My skills are mediocre and not befitting Brother Xuanhua’s proficiency.”

Zongsun Long merrily guffawed: “Great General is too modest!”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is aware that Zongsun Xuanhua has ‘invited himself’ to personally assess his prowess and calculate the probability of him surviving his Master’s sword. If Xiang Shaolong is proven incapable, they (Zongsun family) would have to make other plans because if Xiang Shaolong is slain, all their grand plans would evaporate into thin air.

Leaning towards his ear again, Lan Gongyuan quizzed: “Has Great General met Grandmaster Cao before?”

Xiang Shaolong will not be truthful to her and shook his head. When he was about to say something, three men strode into their lounge in huge steps. One of them was astonishingly Lan Gongyuan’s lover Qi Yu. The other two men are about the same age and were dressed in a warrior uniform and a scholar robes accordingly.

The warrior has a tall and burly frame that radiates with ferocity. With thick shoulders and neck, his face is pockmarked and his eyes are protruding. Coupled with a nose like a lion’s, he can be classified as an ugly man. Despite all that, he exudes an intense masculine aura.

The man dressed as a scholar is skinny and tall, with eyes that betray his intelligence. He somewhat resembles Tian Dan, allowing Xiang Shaolong to easily conclude that he is Tian Dan’s son Tian Bang, causing him a certain amount of shock.

This does not seem like an appropriate place for him to show up.

Zongsun Long and the others fell into a daze, not knowing how to react.

The courtesans are already kneeling down and paying their respects.

Tian Bang took the lead and cupped his hands together as a sign of respect. To Xiang Shaolong, he grinned: “After learning that Great General is here, Tian Bang specially came to have a look for myself. I hope Great General would not hold it against me for barging in.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up and returned his greetings. As he shifted his gaze to Qi Yu, the fella’s eyes flashed with a penetrating hatred. The corner of his mouth curling up to shape a cold smile, Qi Yu sniggered: “Seeing Brother Xiang after so many years, I hope you are doing well. I heard Lady (Zhao) Ya died in the foreign territory of Xianyang. This is truly lamentable.”

(For some Chinese, it is considered inauspicious or bad to die in a ‘foreign’ place. Example: overseas, on the roads or even hospital. Many prefer to die at home. Somewhat linked to their ego that they have a home to die in and not die in the wilderness. Therefore, family members usually arrange for their bodies to be sent home before burial or cremation. For Zhao Ya, a Zhao royalty to die in Qin, can be interpreted that she is a jinx.)

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that he intentionally brought up Lady Ya, reminding him the agony of having a loved one snatched

away by another man. For a brief moment, his heart was pricking with pain. Xiang Shaolong forcefully smiled and did not answer him.

The warrior's attitude is even more conceited than the other two. Cupping his fists, he bellowed: "I am Ma Chenjia and I have always desired to witness a display of Great General's swordsmanship. I wonder if I can have a taste of your brilliant skills before Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao?"

Zongsun Long father and son as well as Xie Ziyuan were instantly agitated. For Ma Chenjia to openly challenge Xiang Shaolong in this manner and demanding it to take place before Cao Cuidao's appointment, not only did he fail to account for their presence, he is also hinting that Xiang Shaolong would certainly perish at the hands of Cao Cuidao. Nevertheless, given the present circumstances, it is difficult for them to intervene.

Zongsun Xuanhua himself is not a noble gentleman too. He secretly swore that once Xiang Shaolong rejected the challenge, he would stand up at once and issue his own challenge to Ma Chenjia, going all out to take his life. Zongsun Long, on the other hand, has made up his mind that even with Tian Dan sheltering Ma Chenjia, he would still get his henchmen to break both his legs.

Within the courtyard, the tension in the air is electrifying.

While living in the 21st Century, Xiang Shaolong is already a troublemaker in his own right and has the habit of getting himself into bar fights. Now that he has 'matured', his temper has mellowed and no longer finds any meaning in these pointless

scuffles. That is why he refrains from fighting and it is absolutely not because of fear.

Now that Tian Bang, Qi Yu and famed Qi swordsman Ma Chenjia are gatecrashing their party with a bullying attitude, Xiang Shaolong can feel his blood boiling but at the same time, he is doing his best to calm down. He simply smiled: “Since Brother Ma is so keen, I can easily exchange some pointers with you. However, it is not a good time now, why don’t ...”

Qi Yu abruptly interrupted: “If Brother Xiang is expecting Second Prince, you can save your energy. Imperial Uncle and Official Han (Jie) just started a meeting with him. I doubt Second Prince can make the time to come over.”

Zongsun Long and everyone else were greatly traumatized. Isn’t this a clear sign that Tian Jian has decided to throw in his lot with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan? Only Xiang Shaolong is able to decipher the true picture, acknowledging that Tian Jian is concerned that he would succumb to the sword of Cao Cuidao, causing him to place his bet on the wrong man. Consequently, he is temporary evaluating the situation further and hence, chose to avoid this meeting. Presently, Lu Buwei and Han Jie must be using all their powers of eloquence to destabilize Tian Jian’s trust in his current allies.

Ma Chenjia chortled: “Since this is the case, why don’t Great General draw your sword now and let me have a taste of your prowess!”

Earlier, Xiang Shaolong has accumulated plenty of frustration

due to the betrayals of Han Chuang, Lord Longyang, etc. Now that he is faced with Tian Jian's indecisiveness, resembling grass on a wall that bends in whichever direction the wind blows, coupled with this frog in a well Ma Chenjia who is purposely stirring trouble, he is ready to erupt. He forcefully discarded his coat, revealing his sturdy built that is unquestionably more muscular than Ma Chenjia and snarled: "Since you are so persistent, let's do it!"

Among the crowd, no one anticipated his courageous demeanor and instant reaction to Ma Chenjia's provocation. They were stunned on the spot.

Observing his newly exposed wide shoulders, broad chest, slender waist and long legs forming an incredible physique, coupled with his awe inspiring and indomitable bearing, all the ladies were intoxicated and Lan Gongyuan is of no exception.

Xiang Shaolong is now gripping the handle of Hundred Battle Sabre as he took giant strides towards the centre of the lounge, cumulating into a terrifying and dominating pressure.

Tian Bang and Qi Yu were rattled and they clumsily retreated to the back, inadvertently enhancing Xiang Shaolong's daunting posture as if it was an aggressive dragon coming out of its cave.

Ma Chenjia did not expect him to make his move without the slightest indication. Stuck in the line of fire, he can sense the incoming threat Xiang Shaolong posing.

In this context, it is preposterous for Ma Chenjia to request Xiang Shaolong to back off and give him a break. Coldly grunting once, he took a step back to avoid the advancing menace.

With his rich battle experience, Xiang Shaolong knows that he has gained the first mover advantage and obviously would not let Ma Chenjia regain his footing. Noting Ma Chenjia stepping backwards, he faced the sky and laughed loudly. Concurrently, with a JIANG! sound, he pulled out Hundred Battle Sabre and continued pressing forward.

The moment the sabre left its scabbard, the entire hall became clogged with a chilling sensation, causing everyone present to be petrified.

Only now did Ma Chenjia remember that his opponent is not using a sword but a weapon which he is unfamiliar with. In his heart, he became even more fearful and had to take another two steps back to give himself the opportunity to assess Xiang Shaolong's attacking style.

Xiang Shaolong obviously would not miss this opening. Swiftly proceeding with steady footwork, he raised Hundred Battle Sabre above his head and simultaneously held the sabre with his left hand as well. He ferociously roared: "Draw your sword!"

In the same instance, Ma Chenjia felt as if he is being overwhelmed by a surge of attacking power and hastily drew his sword.

Xiang Shaolong darted towards his goal and by now, Hundred Battle Sabre has crossed its tipping point and is now a cold sabre flash chopping down on the tangled and disconcerted Ma Chenjia like a bolt of lightning.

If he is a smart man, Ma Chenjia should realize that the best way to resolve this predicament is to continue retreating or even retreat out of the room and reengaged the fight on the open grounds of the courtyard.

Unfortunately, he happens to be the aggressor and was passing condescending remarks earlier. Under the gaze of the crowd, he could not retreat like a cowardly turtle as this is only the first move. Gnashing his teeth, he raised his sword horizontally to ward off the strike.

Conscious that his opponent is defending in a state of panic and is only using one hand to hold his sword, Xiang Shaolong was secretly delighted and chopped down with his full strength

JIANG!

Ma Chenjia's long sword has been severed by the sabre. Amidst the sounds of screaming, Xiang Shaolong has retreated and his sabre has reentered the scabbard.

Ma Chenjia's expression is worse than that of a corpse. Still holding his broken sword, he stood in a daze at the same spot. A new blood scar is now running from his front hairline to between his eyebrows. As fresh blood began streaming down his face, it was

a horrifying sight.

Everyone knew that Xiang Shaolong had shown mercy. However, it is even more shocking to witness his precision and mastery of the sabre.

Who could have guessed that one sabre strike is all it takes to deliver a crushing defeat to one of Lin Zi's famed swordsman Ma Chenjia? Even Cao Cuidao himself may not necessarily be able to accomplish such a feat.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked his lucky stars. If he had been equipped with Bloodwave, it would have exhausted much more energy to resolve this issue.

For a short spell, the whole lounge is completely silent.

Ma Chenjia suddenly shouted incoherently and discarded his broken sword. Embarrassed beyond redemption, he wildly tore out of the room.

Zongsun Xuanhua stood up and raised his wine cup, sighing: "No wonder Great General's fame has penetrated every corner of Xianyang. Even my Master is stirred into issuing a challenge to you. Such superb sabre skills are rare indeed."

With horror written all over their faces, Tian Bang and Qi Yu were still staring at Xiang Shaolong with disbelief. Speechless, they were awkwardly standing there, not knowing whether to stay or

leave.

Scanning the crowd, Xiang Shaolong could tell that everyone is still reverberating in the earlier scene and that due to a nice coincidence, he had managed to showcase his prowess. Smiling broadly, he concluded: “Since Second Prince is not coming, why don’t we return home and have a early night!”

Barely stepping over the door ledge, Xiang Shaolong was summoned by Feng Fei.

At the upper loft sitting room of the main block, the stunning beauty was facing her zither and staring into space. Noticing his return, she then broke out of her stupor and pulled him to a corner before sitting down together. Feng Fei wondered in a slow and sad tone: “Han Jie came looking for me and sweet-talked me for a long time. However, my heart is already dead and I wasn’t moved at all. This is so strange. In the past, whenever I think of him, there would be this sweet fondness in my heart. Now, I only regard him as an empty shell with a handsome outlook. Why is there such a huge disparity in my attitude?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and is concerned that Feng Fei may have shifted her affections towards himself. He tested: “Mistress, what are your plans for the future?”

Her eyes shimmering with a pitiful glow, Feng Fei’s tone was remarkably calm. She gently professed: “For the time being, I only wish to live a peaceful and tranquil life. Can Great General please see to this arrangement?”

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a big burden has been lifted off his shoulders and heaved with relief: “After I settle Cao Cuidao, I would immediately escort you back to Xianyang. With my protection over there, there is nothing you need to fear.”

Feng Fei was taken aback: “I know you are an accomplished swordsman but in the eyes of Qi, Cao Cuidao is no longer considered human and is worshipped like a deity. Why are you still as confident as ever? Cao Cuidao’s sword is famed for being merciless. If anything were to happen to you, how do you expect me... how... Aye! Feng Fei does not wish to live too!”

Xiang Shaolong did not misinterpret her meaning, acknowledging that she does not wish to live because she would be helpless after losing him, her pillar of support and is thus having suicidal thoughts.

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not disclose to any Tom, Dick or Harry about his ten-strokes proposal. He simply smiled: “Cao Cuidao is merely an ordinary man whose sword skills happened to be better than his challengers! I am not trying to prove anything to anyone too. If I do not have confidence in preserving my life, I would have fled with you tonight!”

Half believing him, Feng Fei doubted: “You mustn’t be overconfident. Although the people of Qi often exaggerate their words, it is still an undeniable fact that Cao Cuidao’s swordsmanship has dominated the Six Eastern and Southern States.”

Her gaze trailing to his Hundred Battle Sabre, Feng Fei lightly revealed: “Han Jie is afraid that I would shift my affections to you and heavily criticized you, causing me to despise him even more.”

Xiang Shaolong had anticipated this behavior from Han Jie and is unaffected by this revelation. He chuckled: “Who can be loved by every person in the world? Let them jeer or criticize as much as they like. Yi! Mistress seems to be very interested in my sabre.”

Reacting to his teasing, Feng Fei broke out into a smile, lifting her face and kissing him on the cheek. She whined: “The people interested in your baby are Cao Cuidao and the other swordsmen of Qi. I am only interested in you as an individual. What is the fun in fighting and killing? Nevertheless, you men are the ones who indulged incessantly in it and even got us, the vulnerable women, involved. Before Han Jie left, he mentioned that you might not even survive to see Cao Cuidao but Feng Fei is not intimidated by him.”

Xiang Shaolong grinned: “Do you know who is Ma Chenjia?”

With a voice full of disdain, Feng Fei remarked: “Not only do I know who he is, I have even met him in person at Tian Dan’s Chancellor Residence. In terms of swordsmanship, with the exception of Zongsun Xuanhua and Dan Chu, he and Min Tingzhang are considered the best.”

She then frowned: “Why did you bring him up? This man is extremely annoying and his attitude is overbearing, giving me the impression that he behaves with disrespect. Additionally, he imagined himself to be very popular with ladies but personally, I

feel disgusted whenever I see him.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I did not know that your love or hatred for men can be so extreme. However, I am sorry to say that you would be unable to see this person in the near future. Earlier, he approached me for a duel and using one strike, I left an inerasable mark on his face.”

Feng Fei was thunderstruck: “Just one strike?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Little Brother has exaggerated a little. I did take a few steps too.”

Collapsing into his bosom, Feng Fei shrilly laughed: “I cannot stand your self-gratified and irritating demeanor. But you simply chose not to fall for me.”

Xiang Shaolong honestly declared: “I did fall for you. Aye! Who can resist falling in love with you? It is just that the burden of love is too much for me to bear. I already have three virtuous wives waiting for me at home and dare not get involved in new relationships.”

Feng Fei replied in a unhurried and melancholic fashion: “I already knew and understood where you are coming from. I am sure the passing of Lady Ya and Princess Qian dealt you a severe blow, right?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “How did you know about it?”

Feng Fei answered: "Of course somebody told me about it."

In his vast mind, the lovely silhouette of Lady Qingxiu began to materialize. Was she the one who told Feng Fei his past? If this is so, this beauty's heart is definitely in contrast to her external cold countenance whenever she faces Xiang Shaolong.

Stretching out her lovely hand and stroking his cheek, Feng Fei affectionately suggested: "Great General must be tired. Why don't you spend the night in Feng Fei's room!"

Xiang Shaolong was about to reply her when footsteps sounded on the stairs, startling the two of them who quickly separated from each other.

Little Ping'er voice resounded from the stairs: "Lord Longyang is here to look for Great General."

Recollecting his appointment with Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong icily sniggered to himself, wondering what excuse this old friend would cook up in order to terminate tonight's escape plan.

After Feng Fei uttered a reply on his behalf, she faintly pleaded: "No matter how late you return tonight, please remember to drop by my place. Feng Fei is not asking for any status or responsibility but only wishes for a night of passion!"

Book 24 Chapter 02 - Full Confidence

Recovery

Xiang Shaolong squirreled into the carriage compartment and the carriage began driving.

Lord Longyang could not hold back his emotions and leaned half of his 'petite frame' closer to Xiang Shaolong. With his 'pretty eyes' glowing, he cheered: "Using the excuse that I wanted to admire River Zi night scenery, I have laid my hands on a City Pass that allows me to leave the city. The minute we board the ship and raised the sails, cruising to the west, I guarantee we would be untouchable."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and frowned: "I heard the river route is still blockaded by ice and snow, can we still operate the ship?"

Lord Longyang assured: "I have already sent someone to check on this. Although the roads are still unfit for traveling, since yesterday the river has thawed and boats have begun arriving at Lin Zi from the east. Shaolong can put your mind at ease."

Hearing his description, Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Is Xiao Yuetan lying to him?

Logically speaking, if Lord Longyang and Han Chuang have joined hands to get rid of him, they should have aborted all their schemes and plans upon learning that Cao Cuidao has issued a challenge to him. Even if Xiang Shaolong had survived Cao

Cuidao's sword, it is not too late assassinate him.

But upon witnessing Lord Longyang's serious demeanor, it is as if he is indeed doing his best to help Xiang Shaolong flee away from Lin Zi. Moreover, the passion radiating from him is something that cannot be falsified. What in the world is going on?

With his friends, Xiang Shaolong is generally straightforward. He could not bear it any longer and questioned: "Isn't Your Lordship concerned about Han Chuang's blackmail?"

His 'tender physique' trembling violently and his face turning ashen white, Lord Longyang stammered: "How did Shaolong know about this?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly indicated: "So it is true."

After a short spell of silence, Lord Longyang sighed: "Marquis Chuang is forced by circumstances as one of his men leaked this piece of information to that traitor Guo Kai. However, now that Shaolong has declared your real identity, Guo Kai instantly degenerated into a state of panic and is at a loss, not knowing whether to proceed or not."

Scrutinizing Lord Longyang's body language, Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Does Han Chuang know about our plan to slip away tonight?"

Lord Longyang answered: "Of course he has no idea about it. I

have sacrificed everything and would never allow Shaolong to perish in the hands of Cao Cuidao. I have witnessed one of this old fella's fights and his sword skills are truly earth shattering and mind blowing."

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but put his arm around his 'fragrant shoulders, sighing: "Knowing that Your Lordship did not betray me, Little Brother is brimming with joy and my exhilaration cannot be expressed in words. However, I cannot implicate Your Lordship. Please tell the carriage driver to turn back."

Lord Longyang shuddered once and cautioned: "Shaolong need not put up a strong front. According to my sources, Han Chuang and company did meet up with Cao Cuidao in secret and advised him to kill you at all costs; otherwise, Qi will never enjoy days of peace. Thus, you must not assume that Cao Cuidao will show any mercy to you."

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: "I heard even the King of Qi is unable to influence Cao Cuidao. Who does that Han Chuang think he is?"

Momentarily stunned, Lord Longyang movingly declared: "I know Shaolong is worried about me but I have my own methods when dealing with Han Chuang. At the end of the day, he has many issues that requires my collaboration and would not dare to act recklessly."

He sighed with another breath: "I am not speaking up for him but he is in a difficult position as well. His friendship towards Shaolong is genuine."

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is not interested in fleeing anymore. He decided: "If I have to leave, I will leave after my bout with Cao Cuidao. In fact, I did exchange blows with him before and this precious Hundred Battle Sabre is what I robbed from him during that same encounter. Otherwise, how would I come to know that Han Chuang that fella has betrayed me."

Lord Longyang was incredulous: "You exchanged blows with him before?"

Xiang Shaolong gently persuaded: "Why don't Your Lordship order the carriage to turn back first? I shall furnish Your Lordship with the details after that!"

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, the sky is barely lighted.

Due to the frosty weather and him sleeping late last night, he does not feel like leaving his warm and comfortable bed and blankets.

Last night, he hardened his resolve and did not go over to Feng Fei's room because he does not want to lose perspective of the situation by getting involved in another relationship. His grand plan is to endure the ten strokes from Cao Cuidao and get Xie Ziyuan to arrange for him to slip out of Lin Zi. With regards to Feng Fei, he can rely on Zongsun Long father and son to safely escort her away. Based on his standing and that this is not Lu Buwei's territory, the other courtesans should not be in any danger.

Back in Xianyang, he would refuse to lead an army to participate in any battles. His only fantasy now is that Xiao Pan's identity crisis is not as bad as what he imagines. However, he acknowledges that this is merely his own positive wishful thinking.

Based on Lu Buwei's intelligence and such an obvious loophole, he cannot always rely on luck.

Out of the blue, the sound of noisy quarrelling can be heard from the front courtyard. Shortly, a man's painful scream resounded. Just as Xiang Shaolong was hugging his blanket and sitting up on his bed with shock, Shan Rou broke into his room and darted to his front. Slamming his chest and grabbing the front of his shirt, she vociferously scolded: "You lazy bum. Get out of bed at once. To think that you are still idling in bed despite knowing that you are facing Master three days later."

Hammered by Shan Rou until their faces are bruised and lips are swollen, Fei Chun, Lei Yun'er and other family warriors stumbled into his room in an extremely pathetic manner. Witnessing the magnificent Great General of Qin Xiang Shaolong wearing a helpless expression on his face while letting this shrew grab the front of his shirt, they were flabbergasted and froze on the spot, not knowing how to react.

With a bitter smile, Xiang Shaolong introduced: "This is Madam Xie whom even Cao Cuidao has troubling managing. The next time you see her, gentlemen should know what to expect."

Rooted to the ground with his mind and body united as one, Xiang Shaolong sliced at different angles with Hundred Battle Sabre, nullifying Shan Rou's fierce and agile attacks with every stroke, causing her to be unable to launch a series of combo attacks. Shan Rou's attack resembles using a sword to cut water into half; it can never be done.

Accumulating experience from the recent years of war, Xiang Shaolong's familiarity with his sabre skills had reached another peak and he now attacks with deadly precision.

After another ten more strokes, Shan Rou is unable to gain any advantage and finally retreated after exhausting herself. Holding her sword horizontally and standing still, she aggressively glared at him with her round, almond eyes.

The spectators of the fight include the band of family warriors, Feng Fei, her fellow courtesans and their waiting maids. Also present are Zongsun Xuanhua and his ten odd followers.

Everyone in the crowd suppressed their urge to clap and cheer for fear of earning the wrath of Shan Rou the super shrew.

Her beautiful face suddenly thawing, Shan Rou giggled with a 'Pu Ci' and laughed: "Kid, you did improve significantly. I shall let you win this time round! I am sure you can hold your ground against Master."

Xiang Shaolong is worried that she would leak out the ten strokes proposal and hastily cradled his sabre and paid his respects: "Many

thanks for Madam Xie's guidance!"

The crowd finally dared to cheer.

Drawing his personal sword, Zongsun Xuanhua stepped out to the front of Xiang Shaolong and smiled: "Xuanhua's hand is itching for some time already. Would Great General kindly grant some pointers."

Facing this ranked below Cao Cuidao and equal to Dan Chu Qi swordsman extraordinaire, Xiang Shaolong dare not be complacent. Brandishing his sabre horizontally to protect his front, he smiled: "Brother Xuanhua, after you!"

In trepidation of Zongsun Xuanhua's reputation, the spectators dare not even breathe loudly.

His bearing as calm as still water, Zongsun Xuanhua held his sword and took two steps forward. Xiang Shaolong instantly sensed a formidable sword aura emanating from his opponent and dare not waver. Raising his eyebrows, he moved his sabre backwards.

With his blazing eyes scanning Xiang Shaolong, Zongsun Xuanhua suddenly roared and executed a quick stab.

Xiang Shaolong is stirring with heavy emotions.

Zongsun Xuanhua's sword skills are not inferior to Guan

Zhongxie's but compared to Cao Cuidao, he is still light years away. It clearly demonstrates that Cao Cuidao's talent in swordfighting is a gift from Heaven for even his most outstanding disciple is only able to inherit his skills but not his cultivation.

With a JIANG sound, Xiang Shaolong deflected the blow with his sabre.

Reeling from the enormous impact from Hundred Battle Sabre, Zongsun Xuanhua is unable to execute his subsequent moveset and was forced to retreat.

Xiang Shaolong would not allow his opponent to recompose and prepare another attack. Flourishing Hundred Battle Sabre once, he advanced and attacked Zongsun Xuanhua like relentless churning of the ocean waves.

Zongsun Xuanhua is at a disadvantage because he is unfamiliar with the attacking style of Hundred Battle Sabre. In the meantime, he could only defend himself and took a step back every now and then.

The more Xiang Shaolong fought, the more he immersed himself into the fight, rotating between sweeping moves, narrow slashes, long strikes and short stabs. For a brief period, he even utilized close combat techniques with every sabre stroke forming a killing move, causing the audience to hold their breaths in awe and seemingly forgetting to exhale.

Between the clashes of the sabre and sword, the space between is

so minute not even a strand of hair can pass through. The ladies began to shriek and trembled in fear, having the impression that they are fighting for real and are going all out to kill each other.

Only an expert like Shan Rou could tell that Xiang Shaolong has gained full control of the initiative and is holding back some of his strength and prowess. Employing all the merciless moves, he is trying to carve an understanding of Cao Cuidao's swordplay through Zongsun Xuanhua's moves.

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is changing his attacking strategy. Although his moves are amazingly slow, Zongsun Xuanhua seems to be deflecting them with greater difficulty.

Presently, Xiang Shaolong has recovered all the confidence that Cao Cuidao had frightened away, attacking, defending, advancing and retreating with ease. Every time Zongsun Xuanhua tries to counterattack, he is able to swiftly negate it, limiting Zongsun Xuanhua's potential.

In the eyes of the crowd, including Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans who do not comprehend swordfighting, Xiang Shaolong's sabre moves are ever-changing and comprises of both hard and gentle blows, giving them the sensation that he is the king of the world, dominating all his subjects from high up above.

DANG! DANG! DANG!

Stepping forward, Xiang Shaolong launched three successive sabre strokes, every stroke flawlessly chopping on the same crack

of Zongsun Xuanhua's sword regardless of which direction Zongsun Xuanhua wields it. It is incredibly unbelievable to pull off a combo like that.

The long sword broke into two equal parts.

Returning the sabre to its scabbard, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Brother had the advantage of a superior weapon!"

Zongsun Xuanhua is a hero in his own right. Discarding the broken sword in his hand, he boisterously laughed: "Great General holds true to your fame. Little Brother can put his mind at ease."

Loud clapping can be heard from afar.

Feng Fei and Xiao Yuetan came up to them and Feng Fei cheerfully invited: "Feng Fei has prepared breakfast, offering our esteemed guests some hospitality. Shall we adjourn to the front hall?"

Everyone went on his or her way after breakfast is concluded.

Shan Rou is rushing home to tend to her sons while Zongsun Xuanhua, who has military duties, is off to attend to his responsibilities. Feng Fei and the courtesans resumed their rehearsal for the birthday banquet which is two days later, leaving the two men Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan in the hall to converse in secret.

In a low voice, Xiao Yuetan praised: “Cao Cuidao is truly a grandmaster and agreed to the ten strokes proposal without the slightest hesitation. However, judging by his appearance, it seems that he has discovered a way to defeat you within these ten strokes.”

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a heavy burden has been lifted off his shoulders. He grinned: “This is fantastic. Regardless of any circumstances, I don’t believe I cannot withstand merely ten strokes from him.”

His eyes flashing with a strange glow, Xiao Yuetan warned after some uncertainty: “You cannot afford let your guard down. Shaolong had better not sheathe your sabre the minute the ten strokes are over. For all you know, Old Ghost Cao may use this opportunity to launch another two more strokes.”

Xiang Shaolong light-heartedly laughed: “I don’t think so! Old Cao, after all, is a grandmaster and should be a man of his word. That night, he could only stare blankly as I slipped away. You can put your mind at ease.”

A flustered Xiao Yuetan is behaving as if he wanted to say something but could not due to certain reasons. He advised: “No matter what happens, you must promise me that you will exercise extreme caution. If possible, treat it like a Hundred Strokes Agreement or even a Thousand Strokes Agreement.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled: “Why is Elder Brother behaving as if you are certain that Old Cao will go back on his word?”

Xiao Yuetan dryly coughed once and gazed at him, honestly declaring: “All along, you have trusted me. Just trust me one more time.”

Xiang Shaolong may be completely baffled but never really doubted Xiao Yuetan. Changing the topic, he updated him about Li Yuan and Lord Longyang’s encounters. He also took the opportunity to enquire: “You did mention that the river route has been blockaded by ice and snow. Is it possible that you had made a mistake?”

With awkward and unnatural body language, Xiao Yuetan replied: “That is what I heard from other people. Maybe Lord Longyang’s news is more accurate than mine.”

Xiao Yuetan then changed the topic: “The entire Lin Zi city is now fervently discussing about last night’s incident when you defeated Ma Chenjia with one sabre stroke. Many of them who originally bet that you would lose to Cao Cuidao are now betting that you would win. The odds from one-to-thirteen have plummeted to one-to-five now. Looks like the odds are in your favour now!”

Remembering the gambling fever linked to Guan Zhongxie and his duel, Xiang Shaolong was amused to witness a reenactment in Lin Zi. He chuckled: “Paying five to one is a pretty good deal. Nonetheless, my victory last night was due to coincidence and luck. It is really strange. Whenever I grip Hundred Battle Sabre in my hands, I can feel my confidence swelling.”

Xiao Yuetan was delighted: “The way you chopped off Zongsun Xuanhua’s long sword earlier was truly exciting, even a miracle if I may say so. No wonder the gamblers of Lin Zi have bestowed the respected title: Sabre King, to you. The title is as glamorous as the title Sword Saint and both titles are on the same par.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I know myself best. I, Sabre King, is definitely not as skillful as Sword Saint. If not for the Ten Strokes Agreement, I would have fled within these two nights.”

His face flashing with a bizarre look once again, Xiao Yuetan solemnly counseled: “You must never think like this. Otherwise, you would succumb even before the ten strokes are up. Have you decided on your Lin Zi escape plan? In my opinion, Zongsun Long is more reliable.”

Unconcerned with Xiao Yuetan’s odd behavior, Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Relax! I believe I have attained a certain understanding of this Sword Saint. Although Zongsun Xuanhua is not as skillful as him, he can be considered a doppelganger, benefiting me to a huge extent.”

Pausing, he added: “I already made it clear to Xie Ziyuan and Zongsun Xuanhua last night that I am depending on them to arrange for me to leave Lin Zi after the duel.”

Satisfied, Xiao Yuetan reminded: “It would be great if you can engage Zongsun Long father and son to put Guo Kai and company under surveillance. We do not want to walk into an ambush because of our negligence.”

Secretly praising his vast experience and well-rounded thinking, Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement.

A servant happened to come in and reported that Boss Jin is here to look for him. Xiao Yuetan took this opportunity to excuse himself.

Xiang Shaolong personally went to welcome Boss Jin. When the latter caught sight of him, he happily chortled: "There I was, thinking that a new hero is born. Unexpectedly, it turned out to be our famed Xiang Shaolong of the northwest. Great General has deceived me thoroughly."

Xiang Shaolong apologized: "I was forced by circumstances and hereby seek Boss's forgiveness."

Boss Jin hooked Xiang Shaolong's arm as they strode into the hall together. He whispered: "When Great General destroyed Ma Chenjia's reputation with one sabre stroke last night, it has caused a loss of face for Qi. Within these two days, there may be some desperados who will come and create a scene. Great General must take some precautions."

He continued: "There are a band of warriors standing outside but they do not appear to be the soldiers of Qi. I wonder who sent them?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong recall that they are his personal escorts that Zongsun Xuanhua had dispatched. He answered:

“They are family warriors from Zongsun Residence. I did not know they had arrived.”

Once they got seated, Boss Jin warned in a serious tone: “Zongsun Long father and son are not the law-abiding kinds. Once Great General is no longer useful to them, they can simply turn their cannons towards Great General.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “With my prior experience with Lu Buwei teaching me an unforgettable and excruciating lesson, I know what I am up against. While everyone knows how to butter up to the rich, someone like Boss Jin lending a critical helping hand to the unfortunate is truly rare.”

His face turning red, Boss Jin explained: “Great General is giving me too much credit. This is simply my innate character and even if I suffer a loss in the process, I just cannot alter this habit. Oh yes! After Sufang learns about your genuine identity, she was quite upset and pleaded with me to invite you for a meeting with her. Since the last encounter in Xianyang, she retains a deep impression of you!”

Xiang Shaolong was bewildered. All along, Shi Sufang does not exhibit any interest in men. Why is she suddenly yearning to see him?

Back when they first met, it was due to Pu Hu (Po Hu error)’s arrangement. Now that Pu Hu has been executed for treason, it does not make any sense for her to get closer to him.

As per Xiao Yuetan's advice, he should not let his guard down. Choosing not to meet her sounds like a better choice.

Boss Jin added: "I understand that before Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao, you would need sufficient rest and inviting you to a banquet is inappropriate. Why don't we fix the appointment on the evening the day after Great General's triumph victory? What does Great General think?"

Conscious that he would have fled by then, he did not foresee any issues with temporary agreeing to the appointment. When the time comes, he would simply leave a message, asking for Shi Sufang's forgiveness. He agreed with a smile.

After some idle chatter, Boss Jin knowingly bid farewell to him.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was sending him out of the door, accompanied by Xie Ziyuan, Second Prince Tian Jian came by unexpectedly.

Book 24 Chapter 03 - Plagued By Gratitude And Hatred

Not knowing that Qi Yu had let the cat out of the bag, Tian Jian firstly apologized to Xiang Shaolong for missing last night's appointment, giving the excuse that his royal father is unwell. Of course Xiang Shaolong will not expose him.

Besides Xie Ziyuan, Zongsun Long father and son, an egotistic Qixia Tutor named Yan Xiang was tagging along.

Entering the hall and seated accordingly to their status, a few pleasantries were exchanged. Finally, Tian Jian, who was seated on the VIP table, praised: "Last night, Great General defeated Ma Chenjia with one sabre stroke; this morning, Great General utilized a special technique, breaking the precious sword of Xuanhua. Great General truly lives up to your fame and has earned our admiration."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand the reason behind him switching sides again. It is because he has proven himself to be somebody who is capable of defending himself against Cao Cuidao. He quickly uttered a modest reply while Zongsun Long and the others are praising him to the skies.

Unexpectedly, this Qixia Tutor Yan Xiang glared at him from the corner of his eye, interrupting: "Presently, in the large state of Qin, who is the real powerhouse?"

Xiang Shaolong intentionally acted surprised: "Of course it is

Crown Prince Zheng. Who else can it be?”

Yan Xiang confidently retorted: “But according to Qin’s Imperial Uncle, as long as Crown Prince Zheng is not coronated, his authority is not official. What does Great General think?”

Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel the entire length of his spine turning cold. This straight-talking and arrogant Qixia Scholar has accidentally spill the beans that Lu Buwei is indeed highly suspicious of Xiao Pan’s identity and is using this claim as a means to win Tian Jian to his side.

If it turned out that Lu Buwei had already sent someone to Handan in search of the couple who raised Yingzheng, it would be a disaster for he could easily topple Xiao Pan or use it as a bargaining chip to blackmail Xiao Pan.

Noticing his change of countenance, Tian Jian quizzed: “What is Great General’s opinion about this?”

His mind processing his thoughts at the speed of electricity, Xiang Shaolong recomposed himself and plainly state: “Mister Yan’s words has reminded me about the possibility of someone rebelling. However, the tragic consequences of Pu Bu and the others should be a wake-up call.”

Xie Ziyuan laughed: “Wake-up call? Hee. What an interesting description!”

Yan Xiang posed another question: “I wonder what is Great General’s impression of our Great Qi?”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling tormented as he is not used to flattering other people. He barely managed to describe: “Seeing that Mister Yan can speak in front of Second Prince without any reservations, it clearly illustrates the open mindedness of Qi’s rulers, which can be interpreted as valuing talent. I believe this is also the reason behind the thriving success of Qixia College. These are just my humble observations and I hope Mister does not mind my naive thoughts.”

Yan Xiang nonsensically articulated: “On the south of our Great Qi is Mount Tai, to the east is Langya Hills, to the West we have River Qing and finally Bo Ocean at the north. Thus, Qi is known as the Land protected by four passes. However, with an inefficient ruler, even if he is blessed with vast territory, millions of soldiers and supplies piling up as high as a mountain, he would still be a toothless tiger who is unable to conquer the world. After the passing of Henggong and Guan Zhong, Qi has opened up its communication channels and rewarded those who gave constructive feedback with carriages, exquisite clothing and money, signaling our intention to attract talent all over the lands. Our Great Qi’s present success is not due to pure luck.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is listening to a conceited scholar of Qixia making all the unrealistic comments and having a taste of his shameless boasting. Yan Xiang is apparently still intoxicated in the past golden era when the King of Qi Henggong was building the country from strength to strength. He further observed the burning brilliance radiating from Tian Jian’s eyes, demonstrating his pride in the words of Yan Xiang. Sighing to

himself, he pretended to nod his head in agreement.

Rotating his head (like scholars composing poems), Tian Jian complimented: “Great General is very sharp to note that the success or failure of our Great Qi is closely connected to the prosperity of Qixia College. In the past, Henggong posed this question to Guan Zhong: How can I rule the lands perpetually and how can I perpetually rule without being complacent? Guan Zhong replied: 黄帝立明台之议者, 上观于贤也; 尧有衢室之问者, 下听于人也, 尧有告善之挂, 而主不蔽也。Be cause of this statement, Qixia College was born.”

(like the songs, the above is some double triple poetic meaning words which I lack the depth to translate and will leave it as it is.)

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own emotions stirring. As royal descendants, they would more or less be fixated on a certain past glory. For example, the people of Qi would quote Henggong and Guan Zhong on a daily basis. Instead of living in the past, they should seek to improve based on their present conditions, creating a new future while keeping in mind the current trends and world developments. Although he mentioned the King of Qi is open to new ideas, it can similarly be interpreted that his authority is weak. During this era of wars, being able to consolidate power, dominate politics and conquer other States is the most critical characteristic a strong ruler must possess. The fake Yingzheng, Xiao Pan, is lucky to be free of these mental burdens of a typical royal descendant. Moreover, he is not restricted by family ties and can focus all his energy into seizing power in order to establish his own authority. Incidentally, he has become the most promising and wisest King of this generation.

It is no accident that Qin is able to annihilate the other six States and unite the lands. It is partly because no other ruler shares the same background and upbringing of Xiao Pan.

Zongsun Long interrupted: “It is a well known fact that Crown Prince Zheng relies heavily on Great General. Now that the various states are hostile and preparing for war, does Great General have any plans to assist Qi?”

Remembering Prince Dan and Xu Yizhe, Xiang Shaolong is feeling conflicted. Zongsun Long’s words are obviously hinting himself to provide the same guarantee that Lu Buwei is offering Tian Jian in order to wrest Tian Jian from the hands of Tian Dan.

On hindsight, no matter what he says, he can never change the course of history. But for Shan Rou’s sake, he must come up with a commitment.

Scanning the crowd and savoring the looks of anticipation from the eyes of everyone, he officially states: “Crown Prince Zheng is still a juvenile and will only be coronated next year. As a result, he is focusing his attention on internal politics. The construction of Zhengguo Canal is taking up the bulk of his time. With regards to external invasion, he has always adopted a passive stance. One of the agendas of my trip to Qi is to affirm the strong ties between our two States.”

Yan Xiang sarcastically pointed: “Ever since Yingzheng returned to Qin, Eastern Zhou has been conquered, followed by Han’s Munian City and Rongyang City. There is also Zhao’s Taiyuan City who was overwhelmed and became a new city of Qin. Lastly, Wei

lost thirty-seven cities to Qin too. These facts do not seem to tally with Great General's statement."

Xiang Shaolong had intentionally designed his words to trick him into making this accusation. He calmly replied: "We all know who is the perpetuator behind Eastern Zhou's military campaign. The other territories were captured by Meng Ao. I guess it is pretty obvious why Meng Ao is able to monopolize control of the Qin military." Instantly, Tian Jian's countenance changed faintly.

Xiang Shaolong's words are actually made up of half-truths. In terms of occupying territories, Xiao Pan, the future Qin Shihuang, is even greedier than Lu Buwei. Due to his adolescence, he could easily shift all responsibility to Imperial Uncle Lu Buwei who, in reality, has no authority despite such a grand title. The recent military maneuvers were indeed drafted personally by Xiao Pan but this information is not known to outsiders.

Yan Xiang is adorably honest and nodded: "Great General is right. Tian Dan is getting muddle-headed in his old age and has failed to perceive Lu Buwei's innate character. Second Prince should know who are your ideal partners by now."

Hearing this testimonial, Zongsun Long and the others are overjoyed. Tian Jian, on the other hand, was feeling awkward and dryly coughed once: "Speaking with Great General is truly enlightening. Hey! After Great General's duel with Grandmaster Cao, Tian Jian will host a banquet to honour Great General."

Since nobody else has anything to add, the meeting was concluded. After Yan Xiang and the others left, Zongsun Xuanhua

stayed behind and introduced Xiang Shaolong to Yao Sheng, one of the warriors that is in his escort team: “Yao Sheng is born and bred here. If Great General requires any errands to be completed, feel free to assign the task to him directly and you need not go through us at all.” After repeating the same instructions to Yao Sheng, he took his leave.

Scrutinizing Yao Sheng, Xiang Shaolong estimated him to be around thirty years old and has eyes that glow with wisdom. With a handsome face, he comes across as someone who can remain calm and steady in any situation. Hit by a brainwave, he instructed: “I wish for Brother Yao to keep Han Chuang and Guo Kai under surveillance and report their movements to me. You must not allow them to detect your presence.”

Yao Sheng respectfully bowed: “You can call me Yao Sheng. Great General has gained my admiration. This is a small issue and I will definitely accomplish Great General’s mission.”

Finishing, he left to execute the order.

Using this break, Xiang Shaolong returned to his room for a nap. After dozing for about two hours, he woke up and discovered that Han Chuang has been waiting for him for some time. He is certain that this ungrateful fellow must be up to no good again. On the other hand, he has to visit Xiang Shaolong sooner or later; otherwise, it would arouse suspicions about himself.

After he had washed up, he received Han Chuang in the front hall.

A significantly impatient Han Chuang is already pacing up and down the hall. Noticing Xiang Shaolong, he cheered: “Shaolong is finally awake.”

Observing that Han Chuang does not display the slightest sign of guilt, Xiang Shaolong was annoyed and coldly hissed: “No matter how long a dream is, one would have to wake up eventually. To think you still have the guts to come and see me.”

His face turning white, Han Chuang wondered: “What is this all about? Two days ago, Lord Longyang came and tested my loyalty. Today, Shaolong is mercilessly laying blame on me. What offence did I, Han Chuang, committed?”

Advancing to his front, Xiang Shaolong stared piercingly at him with his shining eyes, accusing: “If you don’t want to be caught, don’t do it. You are the only person who knows that I am going to Qixia College to steal my sabre...” At this juncture, he detected Feng Fei about to enter the hall from the corner of his eye. Gesturing with his hand, he bellowed: “Mistress, please excuse yourself. I am not through yet with this ungrateful fellow.”

Noticing the two men arguing heatedly, Feng Fei was shocked and her face was completely pale. She hastily retreated from the scene.

Xiang Shaolong continued: “If not for you letting the cat out of the bag, why would Cao Cuidao know about my burglary attempt and was using me to practice his sword moves?”

Han Chuang panicked: “This has nothing to do with me. Remember I was advising you not to go? Aye! How did this happen?”

Xiang Shaolong has to admit that his acting is fantastic. Originally, he wanted to apply the same deceit to Han Chuang, feeding him with lies and fabrications. However, upon seeing this ‘old friend’, he can feel his anger rising and lost control of his emotions.

Not willing to back down, he countered: “Would you have advised me to go instead? Putting this matter aside, why are you holding secret discussions with Guo Kai over the past few days? And even blackmailed Lord Longyang to get rid of me.”

His face drained of colour, Han Chuang stammered: “Lord Longyang told you?”

Xiang Shaolong coldly smirked: “None of your business. If you even try to lay your hands on him, when I get back to Xianyang, I will expose your Zhengguo Canal Grand Plan. The very next day, I will lead an army to raid your nesting place.”

Han Chuang shuddered excessively: “So you knew about everything; why did you hide it from Yingzheng?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Don’t you ungrateful fellas get it? Only by building this canal will the Qin military be tied down and unable to participate in any eastern campaigns for

the next eight to ten years. It is against my desires to watch my friends become stateless citizens, which is why I resisted exposing this matter and dealing Lu Buwei a blow. In return, how have you treated me?”

Han Chuang promptly broke down and collapsed onto his seat with hot tears sprouting out like spring water. He grieved: “I was forced by circumstances too. Someone has revealed my meeting with you to Guo Kai and he kept threatening me using hard and soft tactics. But I have tried my best and even hinted Lord Longyang to escort you out of Lin Zi. Shaolong, you must believe me! I have been doing everything within my power to obstruct Guo Kai and in fact, I came to see you today to warn you about him.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that it is impossible for him to trust Han Chuang like before because his acting is simply amazing. He sighed with another breath: “How then, do you explain the sabre theft tip-off?”

With a mixture of tears and snot on his face, Han Chuang wept: “If I was the one who leaked this information, may I die within a year! I am heavily indebted to Shaolong and no matter how heartless I, Han Chuang, am, I would never stoop to such a despicable act.”

Xiang Shaolong reflected: Could it be somebody else eavesdropping on their conversation and overhearing this exchange?

By now, his anger has been appeased and he sat down besides Han Chuang, castigating: “You are a grown man; can you stop

crying like a damsel in distress?”

Using his sleeves to wipe his tears, Han Chuang shook his head in a pitiful manner, wheezing: “Over the past few days, I spent all my waking hours locking horns with antagonists. The pain is almost unbearable. Now that Shaolong has given me a piece of your mind, I somehow felt much better.”

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong consoled: “You should go home! Both of us should spend some time in quiet contemplation.”

Han Chuang cautioned: “There is one thing Shaolong must never underestimate: Guo Kai is in cahoots with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan, going all out to prevent you from ever returning to Xianyang. Qi, after all, is Tian Dan’s playground. If you are negligent, you may fall into his ambush.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “As long as my friends don’t betray me, I can handle any situation. This matter is far from simple, you had better not get involved or Guo Kai may take you down as well.”

He then frostily grunted: “It seems like I, Xiang Shaolong, is a pushover in their eyes. Guo Kai this old thief must be tired of living.”

Han Chuang exhaled a breath of cold air and mused: “I finally had a taste of Shaolong’s unimaginable forbearance and magnanimous attitude. Before your match with Cao Cuidao, Lu Buwei and Guo Kai should be keeping their paws off you. But if you

happened to win, the situation will be entirely different!”

Seizing Han Chuang, Xiang Shaolong pushed him towards the main door and hinted: “Go back and tell Guo Kai, tell him that for the glory of Qin Swordsmen, I will definitely have a go with Cao Cuidao.”

Han Chuang was immensely shocked: “Aren’t you planning to flee the city before that?”

Pushing him straight out of the door, Xiang Shaolong smiled in return but did not offer a reply.

After tearing off Han Chuang’s mask, he felt much more peaceful. Lord Longyang is right. Although Han Chuang is no noble character, his friendship towards him is sincere. Greatly comforted by this fact, he was glad that human goodness does exist in everyone.

Currently, he can no longer differentiate between friend or foe. Except for Shan Rou and Xiao Yuetan, he would never place his full trust in anyone else, including Li Yuan and Lord Longyang. Who can guarantee that they may not have a change of heart or are simply lying to him from day one.

This is the first time in his life when he cannot distinguish between his allies and his enemies.

Barely stepping over the door ledge, he was welcomed by Feng

Fei. She quizzed: “What is going on between you and Marquis Chuang?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “It is nothing. It is now sunshine after the rain.”

Feng Fei slowly and sadly shot him a look, angrily interrogating: “Why didn’t you come over last night? Am I, Feng Fei, not worthy of Great General’s attention?”

Xiang Shaolong groaned: “It is the exact opposite. I am concerned that after relishing Mistress’s enticing body, I would lose control of my emotions. That will give rise to unforeseeable consequences while we are trying to escape.”

Putting on an air of disdain, Feng Fei admonished: “Will you stop linking every issue to that? The situation is very clear to me now. Even those who hate you to the core are unable to do anything to you. Since you do not love me, why don’t you simply say so!”

Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel the heavy thumping in his head. Pulling her sleeve, he led her towards the inner courtyard and changed the topic: “Aren’t Shuzen and the others rehearsing? How can they do a good job with you, First Mistress, giving instructions by the side?”

Feng Fei giggled with a ‘Pu Ci’. She chuckled: “You ah... Your best skill is skirting issues whenever they become too hot for you to handle. Now that I do not have a lover, I may lose control one night and slip underneath your blankets while you are in bed.

When that happens, I want to see how long you can hold out.”

Aroused, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Didn’t Mistress say your heart is dead? Why are you suddenly so passionate again?”

Curling her cute little mouth, Feng Fei coquettishly stared at him, censuring: “It is all your fault, trying to seduce me while acting gentlemanly, hugging me when you feel like it and giving me deep kisses whenever you are in the mood. Even your words are amorous and ambiguous. Feng Fei is just an ordinary lady and would naturally seek your love and attention after being stimulated by you on multiple occasions.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own urges rising but reminded himself that this rare beauty Feng Fei is better left untouched. Fortunately, all his desires for her would vanish straightaway whenever he thinks of her past affections for Han Jie.

He is no longer the same Xiang Shaolong who arrived in this era years ago. Growing out of the age of one night stands, he would now consider the consequences of his actions.

Suppressing his agitation with all his willpower, Xiang Shaolong solemnly explained: “Isn’t our present relationship perfect? Once we are physically involved, the gameplay would be totally different and in the future, you would abhor me for being a heartless man.”

By now, Feng Fei has arrived at the stone steps leading to her chambers. Halting her footsteps, her eyebrows tightened slightly to form an indistinct frown. Seconds later, she displayed a smile,

acknowledging: “Great General is right. Once you have obtained my body and yet do not marry Feng Fei, Feng Fei would certainly be resentful despite promising earlier that there are no strings attached.”

Seeing that she is so understanding, Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: “Why don’t we just limit ourselves to hugging and kissing, Ouch!”

Shoving him away with a push, Feng Fei glared at him viciously before breaking out into a sweet smile and proceeded to climb the stairs to the upper deck.

Xiang Shaolong had to summon every shred of his willpower to prevent himself from following her upstairs. Turning around, he left.

To avoid getting himself into trouble, Xiang Shaolong chose to spend his whole day within Tingsong Villa. Nevertheless, he could not avoid the provocation of the courtesans. Among his harassers, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen are obviously included and so are Xinyue and Yunniang who kept trying to get into his good books.

Fortunately, he has already made up his mind to run away from here once he managed to withstand Cao Cuidao’s ten blows. Otherwise, if these harassments were to continue, he may lose his inhibitions one day and fall into this beauty trap.

In the evening, Xiao Yuetan came looking for him and the two men headed to the garden for a stroll. After Xiang Shaolong described his encounter with Han Chuang to Xiao Yuetan, the

latter's face lost colour: "Shaolong should not have disclosed your knowledge about Zhengguo Canal; this may inadvertently force Han Chuang to kill you."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: "Are you sure? He was crying his eyes out and his nose was running. It was a genuine display of emotions!"

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "All human beings are made this way. In the heat of the moment, they would react emotionally but after careful consideration and weighing the pros and cons, they would cast aside all personal relationships for the sake of their country."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head: "Elder Brother's words always makes the most sense. Luckily, I need not depend on him. Zongsun Long and I are in a mutually beneficial partnership; he should be much more reliable!"

Xiao Yuetan bitterly smiled: "This is precisely why I came to look for you. Remember Zongsun Heji? He just gave me a fresh update, reporting that Han Jie brought Lu Buwei to pay a visit to Zongsun Long father and son. However, he is not aware about their meeting agenda."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "Doesn't Lu Buwei fear Tian Dan's wrath?"

Xiao Yuetan coldly sniggered: "Doesn't Shaolong understand this Old Thief by now? Tian Dan is getting on in years and is no longer the Tian Dan of the past. Due to his early contributions, the royal

family is still accommodating towards him. One of the reasons why the King of Qi stripped Tian Sheng of his Crown Prince title is because Tian Sheng approves Tian Dan's demands unquestioningly. Moreover, Lu Buwei is known for securing his objectives at all costs, even if it includes working together with his past enemies.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “I am conscious that Zongsun Long is no gentleman but presently, I am much more useful to him compared to Lu Buwei. I am confident that he would not switch sides.”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: “Do not underestimate Lu Buwei. For him to openly approach Zongsun Long, I am sure he has some compelling reasons. All you need to do is wait and see if Zongsun Long would take the initiative to tell you about Lu Buwei's visit. From there, you can determine if they are still loyal to you or not.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed, recalling Xiao Pan's identity crisis. If Lu Buwei is using this trump card on Zongsun Long father and son, it is possible that they may switch allegiance to Lu Buwei.

Another critical aspect is Han Jie's unique status. With him moderating the discussion and aligning their interests, it is possible for the impossible to happen.

At the end of the day, Zongsun Long is still hankering after Feng Fei. If he assumes Xiang Shaolong to be simply a paper tiger, this calculative bloodsucker may harden his resolve and commit himself to the unexpected.

Ultimately, the people of Qi share the mentality of the other five eastern States, regarding Xiang Shaolong as the number one enemy. Years ago, Qin General Bai Qi inflicted catastrophic damages upon them. Now that he, Xiang Shaolong, is widely acknowledged as the Bai Qi of today, who wouldn't wish to see him dead?

Based on these fresh developments, his grand plan is no longer viable and he has to reconsider the trustworthiness of his 'allies'.

Even if he is all alone by himself, most of his tasks are still accomplishable. The problem is that he cannot abandon Feng Fei.

Xiao Yuetan's voice sounded beside his ear: "For the next two days, we must brainstorm and formulate a plan to slip away without anyone's knowledge."

Xiang Shaolong realized that the situation must be really deplorable if even this wise and experienced friend is feeling the same helplessness as him. It looks like the best way out is for him to slip away first while imploring Xie Ziyuan to extend his protection to Feng Fei.

The golden question remains: Is Xie Ziyuan able to do so?

Book 24 Chapter 04 - Discovering A Shocking Conspiracy

That very night, Zongsun Xuanhua came to visit Xiang Shaolong. After opening the conversation with some unimportant topics, he quizzed: “Xuanhua is curious about one thing: When the Crown Prince was escorted back to Xianyang from Handan, there were rumours circulating that he was an illegitimate son of Lu Buwei. Even the royal family and court officials were aware of it. However, why did they continue to give him their full support?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly horrified and troubled. It is not Zongsun Xuanhua’s question that he was worried about but the agenda behind the question.

In the past, he was only suspicious but right now, he is fully convinced that Lu Buwei has grasped the Achilles’ heel of him and Xiao Pan. Given Lu Buwei’s prowess, he could easily employ several hard or soft tactics and ‘invite’ the foster parents of the real Yingzheng back to Xianyang from Handan. By then, he could effortlessly use these witnesses to blackmail Xiao Pan.

Thinking about this point, Xiang Shaolong could not help but secretly detest Zhu Ji. However, it is possible that she does not care if Xiao Pan is her own son or not. As a result, for her to reveal this secret is no big deal, which is why it is not surprising for her to disclose this fact to Lao Ai after being sweet-talked by him.

This is indeed the only way Lu Buwei can salvage the entire situation.

If this scandal is exposed, Xiao Pan and him, Xiang Shaolong, would be labeled as conmen. Everyone who is related to or supportive of them would receive the heaviest mental blow and suffer a drastic change of lifestyle.

Within Qin, Lu Buwei is already deep-seated in power. By forcing Zhu Ji to join hands and publicly stripping Xiao Pan of the Crown Prince title, he can then support an incompetent royal family member to succeed the throne, wielding full power over the country indirectly. By then, he can easily dispose Lao Ai, leaving his authority unchallenged.

Although history will remain unaltered, Xiang Shaolong is currently mired in the centre of it all and cannot take things for granted. It is like fate; until an event has factually happened, who can know for sure that it is due to fate? Therefore, his heart is filled with anxiety.

Lu Buwei must have leaked certain clues regarding the matter to Zongsun Long father and son, instigating Zongsun Xuanhua to specially approach him and test Lu Buwei's theories. Once tested, they can make up their minds to switch sides to Lu Buwei or continue to partner Xiang Shaolong.

On the surface, Xiang Shaolong naturally put on a leisurely appearance, concealing the horror within his heart. He replied with a tinge of surprise: "This matter has long been concluded. Years ago, to satisfy Lu Gong's suspicions, a blood test was administered and it is proven that Crown Prince Zheng and Lu Buwei are not related in any way."

Zongsun Xuanhua laughed mysteriously: “I heard the blood of Crown Prince was personally drawn by Great General!”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be astonished: “Brother Xuanhua knows about this too?”

With an unnatural body language, Zongsun Xuanhua replied: “This information was lifted off Tian Dan, provoking my curiosity about another question. It is rumoured that even Qin’s Empress (Zhu) Ji is uncertain whether Crown Prince Zheng is the son of Lu Buwei or the late King; why would Great General have the guts to administer the blood test? If it turns out that Lu Buwei is the real father, what would Great General do?”

Xiang Shaolong is already prepared for this question from him; in fact, it could be due to Lu Buwei egging him to make this inquiry on his behalf. If Xiang Shaolong displayed any signs of hesitation, Zongsun Xuanhua would know that Lu Buwei is telling the truth. It also meant that Lu Buwei could use this fact to topple Xiao Pan. Hence, they should cross over to Lu Buwei’s side of the fence and plot against Xiang Shaolong.

From Zongsun Long’s point of view, it would be ideal if Qin is plagued with infighting and subsequently declined from strong to weak, allowing Qi to have an opportunity to be the next dominant State.

Additionally, if Cao Cuidao happened to kill Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan would have lost a powerful ally and may consequently be

defeated by Lu Buwei.

Utilizing all his acting skills to put up a nonchalant front, Xiang Shaolong casually remarked: “It is simply a smokescreen created by Empress. During that period, Lu Buwei has a monopoly on power and fearing for the safety of her son, Empress deliberately created a confusing scenario. Without a doubt, Crown Prince is the son of the late King.”

Zongsun Xuanhua was contemplating for some time before suppressing his voice and asking: “There is something that Xuanhua wants to say but does not know if it is inappropriate. If I cause any offence, I hope Great General will not hold it against me.”

Xiang Shaolong could already guess what he wanted to say next and even deduced that it was Lu Buwei who instructed him to do so. On one hand, he could test his own reaction and on the other hand, he could distract him mentally, causing him to perish under Cao Cuidao’s sword because of emotional baggage. Xiang Shaolong pretended to laugh: “There is nothing to hide. Brother Xuanhua can speak your mind without any reservations.”

Zongsun Xuanhua tried to say something but the words never left his lips. After some time, he finally uttered: “We have a spy within Tian Dan’s residence. According to him, Lu Buwei told Tian Dan he has already gathered sufficient evidence: There is a couple who lives in Handan’s public housing and they can provide additional information on Crown Prince’s identity.”

Xiang Shaolong is even more convinced than before that this is

Lu Buwei's ultimate scheme. As his heart sank all the way down, his external expression was that of surprise, followed by loud laughter: "Lu Buwei is getting more and more muddle-headed. He must be referring to the foster parents who raised Crown Prince. A long time ago, Crown Prince has already arranged for them to move to Xianyang. However, this is a highly confidential issue and only a handful of people are aware of it. Has Lu Buwei gone mad?"

These words are simply brilliant. It is as good as telling Zongsun Xuanhua that even if there is a problem, the problem has already been solved even before it arises.

It is now Zongsun Xuanhua's turn to be greatly surprised. After a short daze, he laughed along: "My sentiments exactly. If I were Crown Prince, I would naturally fetch my foster parents back to Xianyang and allow them to retire happily in return for raising me for so many years."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, accepting the fact that he is not heartless enough to be a good politician. If it was someone else, he would have murdered that couple before leaving Handan, preventing a similar calamity from occurring today.

At that point in time, he did not even consider this aspect and even when he recalled this affair later, he simply brushed it off. This is also because only three individuals, him, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan knows about the couple's name and address. Unexpectedly, Zhu Ji leaked this information.

Losing the interest to speak further, Zongsun Xuanhua mentioned some unrelated topics before bidding farewell.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that he is going to rendezvous with Lu Buwei. Hit by a brainwave, he checked: “Will Brother Xuanhua see Official Xie tomorrow?”

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: “Do you need Xuanhua to pass a message to him?”

Xiang Shaolong made up a story: “I have something for him and have to trouble Brother Xuanhua to pass it to him on my behalf. Brother Xuanhua, please wait for a while.”

Finishing his sentences, Xiang Shaolong swiftly returned to his room and changed into dark coloured clothes and fitted his climbing apparatus. Concealing his new outfit with a coat, he went back to Zongsun Xuanhua and apologized: “I forgot that I have already sent the item to Official Xie’s residence. There is no need to bother Brother Xuanhua anymore.” Zongsun Xuanhua did not suspect anything and left after assuring Xiang Shaolong repeatedly that it is no trouble at all.

Pulling up his hood, Xiang Shaolong slipped out into the streets via a side door. He brisk-walked in the direction of Zongsun Xuanhua’s carriage.

Not only does Xiao Pan’s identity predicament affect his and Xiao Pan’s reputation, it encompasses the life and death of many other families. For the first time, he could understand the dilemma that Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and the others are facing. In the 21st century, only the criminal alone is being punished.

If he got into trouble during this era, not only will his wives and son receive the same punishment but the entire Wu Family Clan and even Teng Yi and Jing Jun's clans would be exterminated.

In conclusion, the more information he possess regarding this issue, the better can he handle this huge disaster.

Since the beginning of history, gathering intelligence is always the first priority for any army. Since there are no tapping devices for him to employ in this era, he could only personally venture out and hear for himself what are the schemes Lu Buwei is cooking up with Zongsun Xuanhua.

Fortunately, he has been through Special Forces training, making him a professional at sneaking into urban areas. Compared to the skyscrapers of the 21st century, the properties of this era are defenceless playgrounds in his eyes. As long as he can avoid detection by family warriors and guard dogs, he can trespass any residence at will.

Today, Zongsun Xuanhua is only engaging a small convoy, comprising of a single carriage and a handful of followers. As the roads are occupied by numerous carriages driving up and down, their convoy is hobbling along at a snail's pace. By increasing his pace, Xiang Shaolong easily overtook his carriage and is waiting for him at the front.

According to his estimates, Lu Buwei would not be meeting Zongsun Xuanhua at the Chancellor Residence where he is

currently lodging.

At the end of the day, Tian Dan and Zongsun Long father and son are at loggerheads with each other. Despite Lu Buwei's overbearing character, there is no way the meeting can be held right in front of Tian Dan's eyes.

Although it is not snowing tonight, the weather is still freezing. Compared to the earlier nights with snow flying all around, the temperature is definitely much more hospitable. Furthermore, the bone chilling winter wind has stopped blowing.

Due to the thriving economy, more and more politically savvy tycoons like Zongsun Long are emerging. His own Wu Family, Lu Buwei and even Qin Qing are shining examples.

In the midst of his thoughts, Zongsun Xuanhua's horse carriage made an unanticipated stop. Scrutinizing the courtyard in question, the entire length of Xiang Shaolong's spine turned cold.

It turned out to be Li Yuan's Tingzhu Villa which is two streets away from Tingsong Villa.

While the carriage is driving into the compound, Xiang Shaolong has already familiarized himself with the place and entered by climbing over a side wall.

These ten odd courtyards are used specially to host foreign dignitaries and are similar in design. Since he has memorized the

layout of Tingsong Villa, navigating Tingzhu Villa is child's play to him.

Demonstrating his dexterities and forte as a Special Forces member, with a mixture of quick darts and slow steps, he made his way across the side garden while avoiding the occasional family warrior on patrol. Ascending the main block which overlooks the front and back courtyard, he landed on the roof about the same time Zongsun Xuanhua entered the building from below, clearly displaying his incredible climbing skills.

Within seconds, Zongsun Xuanhua exited from the other side of the main building and took the corridor leading towards the Eastern Chamber. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly slid down the building with the aid of a grappling hook. Using bushes and trees as cover, he scampered to the west window of the Eastern Chamber. Underneath the translucent window where the illumination of a lamp is barely visible, he squatted down and began eavesdropping in silence. As it is bright inside the chamber and dark on the outside, his shadow would not shine into the chamber. Li Yuan's voice sounded: "Xuanhua, pray take a seat before speaking."

What followed were sounds of tea pouring and someone sitting down.

Xiang Shaolong reprimanded himself for not being thorough in his contemplation. When he first met Li Yuan here, he was conducting a secret discussion with Zongsun Long, clearly illustrating their intimacy.

In addition, Lady Qingxiu did warn him on two occasions to take

precautions against Li Yuan. However, Li Yuan managed to utterly deceive him with just a few sentences, gaining his full confidence again and again. It is also partly due to his habit of judging others with an overly positive perspective.

In fact, regardless of Li Yuan, Han Chuang or Lord Longyang, they are all true blue politicians who prioritize benefits and gains over relationships and emotions.

Lord Longyang is probably not as unscrupulous as the rest. But with regards to Li Yuan, it is obvious that he is able to cast aside his hatred towards Xiang Shaolong for snatching Ji Yanran away and work hand in hand with him in Shouchun. This clearly proves that he values power and status. Anything else is secondary.

If he had succumbed to his laziness and did not stalk Zongsun Xuanhua, he would probably die without knowing the truth behind his death.

Li Yuan is truly intelligent to reveal Han Chuang's betrayal, misleading Xiang Shaolong that he values his past contributions.

As the sound of footsteps of the dismissed servants faded away, it was replaced by sounds of sipping tea and wine.

From the noises generated, it seems like there is more than just Li Yuan and Zongsun Xuanhua in the room. As anticipated, Zongsun Long's voice sounded: "What explanation did Xiang Shaolong offer?"

Zongsun Xuanhua sighed with a breath of air: “The circumstances may be different from what the cunning old fox Lu Buwei has described. Not only did Xiang Shaolong didn’t show any signs of shock, he even mentioned that Yingzheng had fetched that couple back to Xianyang. Aye!”

Another man countered: “Didn’t Lu Buwei say that he has custody of the couple?”

Xiang Shaolong can sense his entire body shuddering. Besides being alarmed at these words, he was also shaken upon recognizing the speaker. It is none other than Han Chuang who had been cursing himself and crying his eyes out to him earlier today.

In an unhurried tone, another gentle and familiar voice sounded: “Xuanhua, why don’t you reiterate the full chronicles before we draw any conclusions and decide if Xiang Shaolong is lying or Lu Buwei is spouting nonsense.”

His heart sank all the way to the bottom for he could identify this speaker to be his nemesis Guo Kai.

Presently, he can confirm Lady Qingxiu’s implicit meaning and unspoken warning: Li Yuan, Guo Kai and Han Chuang are working together against him. However, he did not expect Zongsun Long to be involved too.

After delving on it, he is certain that Zongsun Long father and son joined their gang at a later stage, explaining their earlier sincere behavior. They probably entered this collaboration after

Lu Buwei's visit.

As his thoughts trained till this point, Zongsun Xuanhua had articulated the chain of events and he added: "Throughout the exchange, not only did Xiang Shaolong fail to exhibit any signs of agitation, inversely, he found the whole affair pretty hilarious. If I were in his shoes, I would definitely freak out."

Disappointed sighs echoed from the hall.

Guo Kai lamented: "If this is true, we would have lost a golden opportunity to topple Yingzheng. This kid is smart and formidable; his methods are deadly and devastating. With his overwhelming ambitions, we can forget about getting a good night's sleep if he officially becomes the King of Qin."

Li Yuan wondered: "Xiang Shaolong is a talent when it comes to faking reactions and he is blessed with quick reflexes. Could he be actually reeling in shock but was able to conceal it?"

Zongsun Long mourned: "If he hadn't chased away the men that I have bribed, we would be able to find out what is his after-reaction."

Han Chuang analyzed: "Judging from Lu Buwei's tone when he spoke to Master Long, he probably got the couple's Handan address from Lao Ai just as he was departing from Xianyang. Otherwise, Xianyang would have degenerated into chaos and he definitely cannot spare the time to come to Lin Zi. Therefore, I am certain that he cannot guarantee actual custody of the witnesses."

Zongsun Long grieved: “In this case, Xiang Shaolong is not lying.”

Guo Kai viciously declared: “No matter what, we must never let Xiang Shaolong return to Xianyang alive. Without him, Yingzheng is merely a toothless tiger and may perish under the hands of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. From then on, Qin would be riddled with internal strife and subsequently lack the means to invade eastwards.”

Zongsun Long quickly interrupted: “We need to discuss this further. Lu Buwei only wishes to blind him, letting him stay alive to answer treason charges when he returns to Xianyang.”

Petrified and infuriated, Xiang Shaolong can only listen on helplessly outside the window.

Han Chuang faintly sighed: “I rather he loses his life under the sword of Grandmaster Cao than to see him becoming a blind man.”

Li Yuan calmly reasoned: “The interests of the State comes first and personal relationships do not account for anything. Xiang Shaolong can only blame himself for becoming another Bai Qi of Qin. If he happened to die at the hands of Grandmaster Cao, so be it. Otherwise, we must step into destroy him. Because of his affairs, I haven’t slept well in days. Whenever I visualize tens of thousands of common folks and children of the Eastern States being trampled by the aggressive army of Qin, I cannot help but discard all my feelings of gratitude and friendship.”

Guo Kai warned in a scheming tone: “We must take precautions

against Lord Longyang. Unlike Chancellor Li and Marquis Chuang, I don't think he sees the big picture."

Zongsun Xuanhua cautioned: "We must execute our plans carefully. If Yingzheng eventually became King and Xiang Shaolong happened to die in Lin Zi, Qi would be in hot soup."

Guo Kai laughed: "We can simply frame Lu Buwei for it and let Yingzheng focus all his hatred onto Lu Buwei. While they are at each other's throats, we can raise our wine cups in celebration."

Li Yuan reminded Zongsun Long father and son: "Second Prince and Xie Ziyuan must not know about this; otherwise, there may be unforeseen developments. I have already gotten Lady Ning to hint Second Prince that his King father is unhappy with First Prince mainly because of his close ties with Tian Dan. Thus, Second Prince should know what to do and Xiang Shaolong is no longer of any use. Moreover, I did make it clear to Second Prince, telling him that as long as Tian Dan stays in power, Qi and Chu will never be allies. In fact, the outcome has been established. The King of Qi just relayed a new order, commanding First Prince to leave Lin Zi before the birthday banquet. I am sure it is as clear as day what the end result will be." Zongsun Long father and son hastily responded and professed their thanks.

Li Yuan additionally instructed: "The two of you must do your best to deceive Xiang Shaolong and gain his full trust, misleading him into thinking that Lu Buwei and Tian Dan are scheming against him. Try to arrange for his getaway after his duel with Grandmaster Cao and have someone ambush him along the way. It would be ideal if you can sacrifice some men during the ambush

and give him the impression that it is Lu Buwei trying to blind him. That would result in mayhem within the Court of Qin.”

Guo Kai supplemented: “Try to communicate to Xiang Shaolong that Lu Buwei wants to keep him alive in order to face criminal charges back in Xianyang. That would surely complicate matters between them.”

Pausing, he added: “We must keep this secret from Lord Longyang. If Xiang Shaolong learns about this, based on his unfathomable skills, he may clandestinely slip away first. With him alive, Master Long can forget about laying his hands on Feng Fei.”

It is now Xiang Shaolong’s turn to coldly snigger to himself. He has given up all hope on Han Chuang and Li Yuan while doubting that they can inflict any harm on him.

At this juncture, he knows that it is unwise for him to loiter around and he swiftly departed.

His biggest burden now is how to safely escort Feng Fei away. As he does not wish to implicate Lord Longyang, Shan Rou or Xie Ziyuan, the only confidante that remains is Xiao Yuetan.

Book 24 Chapter 05 - Unexpected Gains

Shan Rou wailed: “I quit!” Withdrawing her sword, she retreated.

Resting the back of the sabre on his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Despite raising two kids, Madam Xie can still pack a punch.”

Staring curiously at him, Shan Rou was amazed: “Stop bluffing. Why have you improved so much compared to yesterday? Every sabre stroke is beyond my anticipation.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that due to motivation from his predicament and hurt from his friends’ betrayal, he is now brimming with immense willpower and fighting spirit for the sake of his family and his own survival. He has decided to fully commit himself and discarded all non-related considerations. Treating this duel as a final showdown where he would be staring at the face of death, he managed to unleash his hidden potential.

As per his instructions, the huge crowd that was present yesterday is absent today. Exchanging blows with this beauty who used to be intimate with him, Xiang Shaolong is exceedingly alert.

Since his return last night, he surprisingly slept all the way till dawn. Before Shan Rou arrived, he had already practiced a round of Hundred Battle Sabre Play, explaining his remarkable familiarity.

He is no longer worried about Cao Cuidao's duel that is taking place two nights later. As long as this opponent keeps his promise of limiting the fight to ten strokes, he is confident that he will emerge unscathed.

Now that he is aware of Zongsun Long, Li Yuan and the others who are plotting against him, he is mentally prepared and knows what to expect in the future, increasing his conviction level.

Perhaps now that he has finally determined his friends and foes, and admitting that Xiao Pan's identity crisis cannot be solved by pure luck, all his doubts are cleared and the days of wild speculation are over, allowing him to sleep in peace.

It does not mean that he has found a way to counter Lu Buwei and Lao Ai but his gut feel tells him that history will not be altered and Xiao Pan will certainly become Qin Shihuang. There is no documentation of him, Xiang Shaolong, as a historical figure and naturally no record of him creating a fake Yingzheng. This clearly illustrates the ability of Xiao Pan to protect his legacy but there is no indication if he, Xiang Shaolong can preserve his life in this incoming onslaught.

Somehow, the more Xiang Shaolong thought about it, the more fearful he felt. Luckily, Little Ping'er came by at this juncture, announcing that Feng Fei has invited the two of them to her main building for breakfast. Feng Fei is still unable to comprehend the relationship between Shan Rou and Xiang Shaolong. By right, they should be newly acquainted but their mannerism is too friendly for her to stomach. To her, Shan Rou's lack of respect towards Xiang Shaolong is something exceptionally baffling. After all, Xiang

Shaolong is currently a powerful and popular Qin Great General.

Without Xiao Yuetan and Zongsun Xuanhua around, Shan Rou is even less inhibited. Squinting her eyes at Xiang Shaolong first, she then peeped at Feng Fei before enquiring from her: “This fella is very good at seducing ladies; have you become one of his women?”

Feng Fei was so embarrassed that even the root of her ears turned red in an instant, wishing that she could find a hole in the ground to hide her face.

Xiang Shaolong was mortified at Shan Rou’s broaching of this taboo subject. He chided: “How can Madam Xie ask such a question?”

With a ‘Pu Ci’, Shan Rou giggled: “Why is everyone afraid of telling the simple truth? Just answer Yes or No!” With her innocent schoolgirl laughter, it is truly impossible to get angry with her.

Enduring her bashfulness, Feng Fei resumed her well-versed calm demeanor and replied in a low voice: “The relationship between Feng Fei and Great General is prim and proper and we are definitely not an item. Madam Xie has wronged Great General; He is a true gentleman.” Pausing for a while, she inquired in return: “Are Madam Xie and Great General previously acquainted? It is rumoured that Madam Xie’s swordsmanship is comparable to Young Master Zongsun, gaining much glory for us females.”

Shan Rou was not the least flattered and asserted: “I am who I

am, why must I compare myself against men for glory? Hng! I have to go, I have some errands to run in the palace.” Raising her sleeve and using it to wipe her mouth, she left without even looking back.

Xiang Shaolong and Feng Fei stared at each other with a stunned expression before smiling with amusement.

Feng Fei state in a low voice: “I heard Madam Xie’s original surname is Shan and her family was destroyed by Tian Dan. However, she has now gained the affections of the concubines of the King and Princes who are all begging her to impart sword skills to them. In addition, Xie Ziyuan is highly regarded by the Court of Qi. Faced with her constant and direct insults, even Tian Dan has to bear with her.”

Xiang Shaolong finally learned about Shan Rou’s status in Lin Zi and understood why Zongsun Xuanhua is so accommodating towards her.

Feng Fei continued: “Are we leaving here the night after tomorrow? I am getting tired of Han Jie’s harassment and desire to leave this place as soon as possible.”

Xiang Shaolong wavered on the spot, unable to determine if Feng Fei can be trusted. The fluctuation of a woman’s affections is hard to grasp. Today, she can say that she hates Han Jie but tomorrow, she can leap back into his bosom. If she reveals his secrets, he would have to return to Xianyang as a blind man.

Noticing the change in his expression, Feng Fei had a shock and

questioned: “Is there something wrong with our plans?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Does Mistress wish to leave Lin Zi after the Qixia College performance?”

After a short daze, Feng Fei responded: “Since we are leaving, why do we need to wait another five days?”

Xiang Shaolong intentionally answered: “The main reason is for Second Mistress and the others. I would feel more at ease if we leave as a group.”

Feng Fei is truly sharp. Sighing with a breath, she observed: “Looking at you hesitating and carefully choosing your words, you must be withholding some grievances in your heart.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that if he chooses to deny, it would arouse her suspicions. Nodding his head, he professed: “I am concerned about Guo Kai. This man is a devil. If we successfully make our getaway, he may vent his frustration on Shuzen and the others.”

Feng Fei was astounded: “With Zongsun Long protecting Shuzen and the others, what is there to fear?”

At his wit's end, Xiang Shaolong firmly concluded: “Stop asking any more questions. To avoid any unwelcomed surprises, we will only leave together as a group after the Qixia College performance. Aren't you concerned about their welfare?”

Feng Fei kept quiet and mounted a silent protest.

Xiang Shaolong realized that his tone is too harsh. Shifting forward and hugging her fragrant shoulder, he gently apologized: “It is my fault. I beg Mistress’s pardon.”

Feng Fei softly exhaled: “Why is Great General is such a bad mood today? This is the first time Feng Fei has seen you getting upset for no rhyme or reason.”

Xiang Shaolong thought: How can I be in excellent spirits now? How I wish I could embark on a killing spree to vent the anger in my heart. He was about to utter a reply when Feng Fei admitted with a tinge of guilt: “Feng Fei knows that you no longer trust me because I went to meet Han Jie in secret yesterday. But since we are breaking up, we should at least formally communicate about it!”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect this amazing and accidental side effect from his moody temperament, coincidently getting Feng Fei to make a spontaneous confession about her meeting with Han Jie. Based on her words, she had initially wanted to hide it from him.

Staring at him with a melancholic expression, Feng Fei slowly hinted: “Does Great General want to know what did he and Feng Fei talk about?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Of course he would say things like you would meet a terrible ending if you choose to side with me!”

Her petite frame trembling violently, Feng Fei was horrified: “How did you know?” Observing her shyness, Xiang Shaolong decided to trick her: “Not only did I overhear your conversation, I even heard the two of you sharing a kiss.”

Feng Fei was embarrassed to the max. She protested: “He forced himself on me and I was the unwilling party. But it is daytime, where were you hiding?”

Xiang Shaolong continued fabricating: “Don’t you know that a human can easily conceal himself under a carriage?”

Assuming that he is telling the truth, Feng Fei pitifully wailed: “You should understand that I was only trying my best to appease him. Most of time, I was lying to him.”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong recollected Lu Buwei’s visit to Zongsun Long last night and connected it to Han Jie who had lifted the information off Feng Fei. He frowned: “But it is wrong of you to tell Han Jie that we are leaving Lin Zi in two days and are depending on Zongsun Long’s assistance. Doesn’t Mistress know that Han Jie and Lu Buwei are partners in crime?”

With these words from Xiang Shaolong, Feng Fei no longer has any doubts about him spying on her meeting with Han Jie. She explained: “Han Jie belongs to Lao Ai’s camp and he came all the way to Lin Zi because of me. Although he was not upfront with me about his liaisons with Zongsun Xuanhua, my heart did once belonged to him and we even planned a secret rendezvous. It is

very agonizing for me to sever this relationship so abruptly.” Shooting Xiang Shaolong a dejected look, she added: “Feng Fei had wanted to borrow Great General as a temporary substitute to forget him but Great General is reluctant to grant this favour.”

Acknowledging that Feng Fei will be an important factor in this tussle between him and his enemies, Xiang Shaolong is determined to win her to his side. He icily laughed: “Do you know that after Han Jie learnt about our relationship with Zongsun Long father and son, Lu Buwei and Han Jie visited them last night and persuaded them to work together?”

Her face whitening, Feng Fei stammered: “Is that so?”

Xiang Shaolong solemnly declared: “Believe it or not. If Mistress continues to feed information to Han Jie, not only would I, Xiang Shaolong, die without a burial place but even Mistress would not be able to escape a dreadful consequence. Han Jie’s feelings towards you may be true but a man like him who prioritizes benefits over everything else may painfully sacrifice you. It is impossible to find a magnanimous man among the followers of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai.”

A guilty Feng Fei admitted: “Feng Fei is not considered a magnanimous person too. What should we do now?”

Xiang Shaolong resolved: “It is better for us to leave as a group after the Qixia College performance. At Xianyang, you can fall in love with whoever you want but for the time being, you must never reveal any of our secrets.”

Feng Fei swore: "I understand. From this minute onwards, Feng Fei will only trust Great General and nobody else."

At this interval, Xiang Shaolong could not think of any use for Feng Fei yet. After dispensing further instructions, he stood up and left.

This can be considered an unexpected gain for Xiang Shaolong. He finally learned about Han Jie being a double-headed snake, in cahoots with both Lu Buwei and the Zongsun Family. If his estimate is accurate, Han Jie may be officially working as Lao Ai's right hand man but has been bribed by Lu Buwei a long time ago.

Additionally, his fidelity to Lu Buwei is not all-embracing. At the very least, he has been hiding his relationship with Feng Fei from this traitor.

How would Han Jie resettle Feng Fei in Xianyang without leaking her presence? He probably has no idea too.

Once a man and a woman are romantically involved, the complication between them are unfathomable and a clean break is often more tedious than it looks. His own relationship with Zhao Ya is a shining example.

Tomorrow is the day of the birthday banquet as well as the first performance. The courtyards are remarkably tranquil and the days of rehearsals have come to an end.

Despite being weighed down by several issues, Xiang Shaolong has to act casual and even engaged Fei Chun, Lei Yun'er and other friendly family warriors in idle chatter. From them, he learnt that Feng Fei had personally disbursed a generous amount of money to each of them as troupe disbandment benefits. However, the majority of them would stay behind and continue to support Dong Shuzen, who is considered more accommodating and approachable than Feng Fei.

Among the courtesans, only Xinyue has chosen to retire back to her hometown. Yunnian has not made up her mind and she is probably waiting for Xiao Yuetan's input.

One of them even hinted at the possibility of throwing their lot in with Xiang Shaolong but was flatly declined by him.

He can barely protect himself and does not wish for others to risk their lives with him. In addition, he would not want to weaken the protective forces of the Song & Dance Troupe. They may be powerless when it comes to behemoths like Zongsun Long but dealing with common thieves and robbers is a piece of cake to them.

Out of the blue, he received news that Zongsun Xuanhua is here and is asking for him. Xiang Shaolong was mentally prepared for this visit. As anticipated, upon meeting him at the main hall, Zongsun Xuanhua started the conversation off with some unimportant topics, such as Second Prince expressing his admiration for him, etc. Eventually, he proposed: "We have already prepared a top quality sailboat for Great General. Two

nights later, we would fetch Great General at Qixia College and set sail immediately. Would Mistress be leaving with Great General or would she stay behind and leave after the Qixia College performance?”

Feigning a troubled look, Xiang Shaolong groaned: “This is the source of my agony now. She insisted on leaving only after the successful conclusion of both performances. Without her, how can I leave with a peace of mind?”

Zongsun Xuanhua appears to have gotten wind from Han Jie, knowing that Feng Fei is leaving with Xiang Shaolong on the same night after the duel. He could not conceal his astonishment and exclaimed: “Haven’t the two of you come to an agreement?”

Xiang Shaolong is intentionally wedging a rift between him and Han Jie, sighing: “It was decided some time ago but she somehow changed her mind today. Hng. Does she think she can deceive me? On one hand, she is cozying up to me but on the other hand, she is seeing someone else. She may have her own spies but so do I.”

Zongsun Xuanhua apparently is still ignorant about the relationship between Han Jie and Feng Fei. Hearing Xiang Shaolong’s words, his face turned pale and he probed: “Who is her lover?”

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong apologized: “This is Mistress’s private affairs; pardon me for not being able to reveal him. Nonetheless, it is only a few days delay. I will leave after the Qixia College performance!”

Zongsun Xuanhua instantly freaked out and worriedly questioned: “Lu Buwei has decided to return home the next morning after Great General’s duel with Grandmaster Cao. Doesn’t Great General wish to leave before him?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is still trying his luck and testing himself. He reacted with bewilderment: “What’s the hurry? Moreover, I have dispatched a messenger to Xianyang, updating Crown Prince about my situation. I also told him that wherever I am killed, the State which owns the territory would surely be involved and implored him to take revenge for me. I do not believe Lu Buwei or Tian Dan would come personally for me. What they would do is instigate others to become their sacrificial lambs.” He then coldly grunted: “My Wu Family is packed with experts; whoever that wishes harm upon me had better be prepared to live as a fugitive for the rest of his life. Brother Xuanhua can put your mind at ease.”

With a guilty conscience, how can Zongsun Xuanhua maintain his calmness? Taking in those words, his face became drained of colour and he was dumbfounded.

Li Yuan and the others would not dare to openly assault Xiang Shaolong too. Like Lu Buwei, they are instigating Zongsun Long father and son to be their scapegoats.

Since the battle of Handan’s Wu Family Fortress, the fame of Wu Family Warriors has spread near and far.

If Zongsun Long father and son were exposed to be the perpetrators behind Xiang Shaolong's assassination, they would face punishment from the royal family of Qi. Furthermore, they can forget about having a good meal or a good night's sleep with the assassins of the Wu Family seeking revenge on them.

Xiang Shaolong would not let up the pressure on Zongsun Xuanhua. He analyzed: "If I were Lu Buwei, I would get idiots like Ma Chenjia to try and kill me. Once completed, I would purposely leak the information to the public. When that happens, Qin will officially demand Qi for Ma Chenjia's head. What do you think the King of Qi would do?"

Zongsun Xuanhua cannot help but shudder once, realizing: "This is truly a devious scheme of Killing with a borrowed knife."

Xiang Shaolong was amused, knowing that he has finally seen through Lu Buwei's façade of abandoning Tian Dan. It is actually Killing two birds with one stone. Firstly, get the father and son to kill Xiang Shaolong and secondly, using their crime to get rid of this father and son.

Using this example, they should know that if something were to really go wrong, Li Yuan and the others would push all the blame to them too.

Zongsun Long is not a fool, otherwise, he could not have amassed his present wealth and status. Due to his oversight that Yingzheng and Xiang Shaolong are in trouble, he has lost sight of his main goal and fell into this dilemma.

As Xiang Shaolong has heard of their disloyalty and even eavesdropped on their secret meeting last night, he was able to enlighten Zongsun Xuanhua that he has been used by Lu Buwei, Li Yuan and company, and even Han Jie in just a few sentences.

Zongsun Xuanhua is in a hurry to discuss these developments with his father and is not interested to carry on the conversation. With a panicky expression, he hastily scampered away.

Lifting his arms and stretching his back, Xiang Shaolong went in search of Feng Fei

Unless his guess is off the mark, Zongsun Xuanhua would definitely interrogate Han Jie, who will in turn press Feng Fei for details.

Since Lu Buwei is leaving in three days time, Han Jie has to leave too. Regardless of whether it is for himself or for Lu Buwei, he would not allow Zongsun Long to obtain Feng Fei.

But because of all these transitions, Xiang Shaolong knows that even if Zongsun Long is ten times more courageous, he would not dare to lay a finger on Feng Fei.

If Zongsun Long were to act against the interests of Xiang Shaolong, Feng Fei will become his incriminating evidence. It would seem logical that Zongsun Long is getting rid of Xiang Shaolong because of Feng Fei.

Out of the blue, light has appeared at the end of the tunnel.

Li Yuan and the others have deceived him thoroughly. He is now turning the tables and giving them a taste of their own medicine.

Feng Fei appears to have given up Han Jie entirely, obediently following each and every one of Xiang Shaolong's instructions. Their coordination was incredible. It was only when Xiao Yuetan came to look for him did Xiang Shaolong finally left the main building. In the side hall of the front courtyard, he detailed yesterday's and this morning's events to Xiao Yuetan.

Slapping his thigh, Xiao Yuetan sighed: "Xiang Shaolong is indeed Xiang Shaolong. With a small mistake by the adversaries, you are able to grasp the initiative. Zongsun Xuanhua is still inexperienced and bared his soul with just a few words from you." Pausing, he stared at Xiang Shaolong, quizzing: "Shouldn't Shaolong be worried that Lu Buwei may locate that couple who raised Yingzheng?"

Xiang Shaolong could recognize Xiao Yuetan's doubts about Xiao Pan too. However, besides Wu Tingfang and Teng Yi, even Ji Yanran who is so close to him has no idea about it. Indeed, this is a secret that mustn't be shared, and even Xiao Yuetan is of no exception. Putting on a frank expression, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly replied: "So what if he locates them? Unless Lu Buwei has bribed them to fabricate charges, there is nothing to be worried about."

Xiao Yuetan was stunned: “Actually, Elder Brother has always wanted to ask you this question. Among the letters that Manager Tu (Xian) writes to me, he did mentioned that you ganged up with the senior veterans of Qin Military to conduct a blood test for Lu Buwei and Crown Prince. After proving that they are not related, the Crown Prince and yourself are able to obtain the full support of these veterans in suppressing Lu Buwei. My question is, why is Shaolong so confident that Crown Prince is not the son of Lu Buwei?”

That was the same question that Tu Xian posed years ago and what Xiang Shaolong dreaded answering. Sighing with a breath, he confessed: “I did asked Zhu Ji the exact question face to face but even she herself is unsure who is the father. That means the chances are fifty-fifty that it is Traitor Lu’s son. Given the circumstances, if I were to reject Lu Gong’s recommendation, it would mean the loss of support from these Qin veterans. Therefore, I decided to stake everything in the gamble. Luckily, it was the right bet.”

Xiao Yuetan nodded in agreement: “With one-to-one odds, the gamble is worth it. Nevertheless, your present scenario is not very optimistic. Although Zongsun Long has been startled by you and would never become a murder weapon for somebody else, you still cannot rely on him.” Pausing, he added: “It is truly a blessing that nobody has discovered the relationship between the two of us; everyone simply regards me as a connoisseur of Feng Fei’s music. The only viable plan now is for you, Shaolong, to leave first. If you can successfully escape, Feng Fei and the others would be safe!”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: Feng Fei and the others can come under the joint protection of Shan Rou and Lord Longyang.

If the King of Qi is planning to announce Tian Jian as the new Crown Prince at the birthday banquet tomorrow night, Xie Ziyuan's status would be greatly elevated and Zongsun Long father and son would be doing their best to get into his good books. Simultaneously, Tian Dan would have to take additional precautions against him.

Li Yuan and the others would probably chip in to protect Feng Fei and company, granting Xiang Shaolong this favour. After all, maintaining a friendship is better than creating an enemy. If the Zhengguo Canal scandal is exposed, Han Chuang's great merit would instantaneously become his great disaster. As a result, it is crucial for him to return safely to Xianyang.

The ever-conniving Xiao Yuetan reminded: "This fella Han Jie is not a simple man. Born into the royal family of Han, he became a top disciple of Cao Cuidao. Appearing to be working for Lao Ai, he maintains a close relationship with Lu Buwei. Because of Feng Fei, he may become insanely jealous and undertake some risks. For example, he could gather the outraged swordsmen of Qixia and ambush you. This is something you must guard against."

Xiang Shaolong concluded: "After fighting off Cao Cuidao, I intend to run away as far as possible. It is wonderful that Qixia College is based outside the city, making it rather convenient for me."

Visualizing the snow skis he needed to make his getaway, Xiang Shaolong suppressed his voice: "Time is not on our side. Can Brother Xiao get his hands on a piece of premium wood for me? I need to construct a pair of snow traveling equipment. When the

time comes, you can bury it alongside some food provisions at a place near Qixia College, allowing me to make a swift escape upon retrieving them.”

Xiao Yuetan himself is an expert craftsman. Astounded at his requests, he pressed Xiang Shaolong for the details of the snow ski. When Xiang Shaolong finished sketching the snow ski and snowboard, he was so taken aback that he was gaping for some time before exhaling with amazement: “How did you ever think of something like that? This happens to be the theory behind snow sleds. Leave this to me. Elder Brother will start looking for the raw materials and manufacturing your snow skis immediately. I guarantee that it would be much more ergonomic than your design and they will be completed by the allotted time.”

Xiao Yuetan had barely left Tingsong Villa when Xie Ziyuan came a knocking. He exclaimed with enthusiasm: “If Great General is available, why don’t we take part in the festivities and watch Soft Boned Beauty rehearse Little Brother’s song and dance composition!”

Xiang Shaolong is initially uninterested but recollected that it is a critical strategy to give others a false impression. By behaving leisurely and occupying himself with performances, it further strengthens the notion that he has nothing to fear and nothing worthwhile for Lu Buwei to expose.

Pretending to be elated, he accompanied Xie Ziyuan out of the Villa.

Book 24 Chapter 06 - Separating Gratitude And Enmity

Aboard Xie Ziyuan's carriage and listening to his light-hearted whistling, Xiang Shaolong can realign his focus and reflect on the activities over the past few days.

When he first ran into Li Yuan at Zongsun Residence, Li Yuan is likely a well-meaning friend without any malicious intentions. When he could not bear it any longer and started communicating with Han Chuang, it eventually gave rise to the idea of getting rid of Xiang Shaolong, a potentially huge threat to their States. How Guo Kai came into the picture is anyone's guess.

They are aware that Xiang Shaolong has a special place in Lord Longyang's heart. Moreover, he had expressed regret at betraying Xiang Shaolong in the past. Therefore, they chose to keep Lord Longyang in the dark about this affair.

Lord Longyang only happened to run into him when he was actually looking for Feng Fei.

When Han Chuang visited him for the first time and learnt about his plans to steal his sabre from Cao Cuidao's Qixia College, he probably hasn't made up his mind to get rid of him or not.

But when Han Chuang mentioned this to Li Yuan or Guo Kai, it inspired them to make use of Cao Cuidao to kill him. When Cao Cuidao is unable to take his life, Han Chuang knows that he has become the main suspect. He chose to avoid Xiang Shaolong while

sending Li Yuan to make enquiries.

Li Yuan is truly clever, intentionally revealing Han Chuang and Guo Kai's partnership and earning Xiang Shaolong's trust. And he himself is silly enough to divulge Lord Longyang's plans to secretly whisk him away.

Lord Longyang is probably conscious that Li Yuan and the others are going to make things difficult for him but is unable to prove it, explaining why he is abandoning everything and leaving Lin Zi with him.

Instead, it was Xiang Shaolong who went back on his word and rejected his kind intention.

If not for him spying on their secret meeting yesterday, this chain of events would probably remain a mystery to him.

Surprisingly, he was feeling hurt but without a shred of hatred.

Because he understands that everyone is forced by circumstances.

At this point, Xie Ziyuan quizzed: "Are you acquainted with Xu Shang? He is originally from Shangcai and is very talented."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that Xu Shang had accompanied Lu Buwei to Qi. As they have not met each other here, he has cleanly forgotten about him. He nodded his head to

acknowledge their acquaintance.

Xie Ziyuan updated: “Presently, Qi Yu and him are locking horns over Lan Gongyuan. Lu Buwei appears to be rather lenient towards Xu Shang.”

Xiang Shaolong pondered: “If my guess is correct, Lan Gongyuan must have starting dating Xu Shang back in Xianyang years ago. Hey, are you aware that Lan Gongyuan once disguised herself as a serving maid and tried to assassinate me?”

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck: “Is that so? However, she did underwent special training and her skills are pretty remarkable.”

Xiang Shaolong might as well tell him the whole story. Once completed, Xie Ziyuan concluded with a serious expression: “That circus you are talking about must be Bian Dongshan’s Dongzhou Circus. All along, they have been touring and performing at the various States but suddenly, they simply vanished without any news. It looks like the circus members were completely annihilated at Xianyang.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Who is Bian Dongshan?”

Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Among the top four disciples of Cao Cuidao, Bian Dongshan is the best, followed by Zongsun Xuanhua, Han Jie and wifey. Bian Dongshan’s forte lies in his agility and parkour skills, and he is a first-rated assassin. He often carries out assignments for Tian Dan.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “He must have lost his life at Xianyang.”

Xie Ziyuan shook his head, advising: “A few months ago, I heard Zongsun Xuanhua saying that he has just met him. According to hearsay, he had traveled to the Capital of Yan to assassinate a Yan General. The people of Yan trembles with fear at the mention of his name. Great General may be highly skilled but an assassin’s methods are often undetectable. Great General must not be complacent.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “If he wishes to assassinate me, this is the best opportunity.”

Xie Ziyuan officially remarked: “On the contrary, while you are here, Great General can put your mind at ease. Bian Dongshan is fiercely loyal to Great Qi and would never do anything that will put Great King in a difficult position. However, it would be a different story if you leave the territory of Qi. The people of Yan nicknamed Bian Dongshan as The Assassin with a Hundred Faces. His art of disguise is unfathomable and unsurpassed. One cannot predict his next appearance or new identity.”

For the time being, Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered with Bian Dongshan. Recalling Zhang Quan’s theft of the song sheet, he shared the story with Xie Ziyuan too. He added that Feng Fei has composed a new song and even if Lan Gongyuan chooses to perform the stolen song, it would not affect Feng Fei.

Xie Ziyuan was infuriated: “It must be Qi Yu masterminding the theft. He tried to woo Feng Fei in the past but was rejected by her. Thus, he hates her to the core. I will take care of this. I, Xie Ziyuan,

would not condone these shameless acts by Yuan Yuan.”

The carriage is now entering Jade Orchid Brothel. At this time of the day, the brothel is not open for business yet and the gigantic courtyards are so peaceful they seemed like an isolated world away from the rest of the city. From the rear courtyards, hints of music can be heard.

The two men got off the carriage and started walking towards the exceptionally grand Performing Hall situated at the rear courtyards.

Xie Ziyuan whispered: “In the past, when the Great King is much healthier, he loves to frequent the Performing Hall for song and dance performances, saying that the courtesans here are much more lively. What does he expect? Courtesans who enter the palace may never get to leave. Firstly, they may unknowingly offend the King and be sentenced to death. Secondly, they may be retained by the King and after one night of passion, be relegated to a harem of forgotten concubines. In fact, there is no difference between the two outcomes.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: In comparison, Xiao Pan’s self control is admirable.

Xie Ziyuan sighed: “The Great King has a dream, which is seeing the Three Famous Courtesans performing simultaneously in front of him. He has tasked us with this mission and demands for it to be accomplished at all costs. This can be considered his only dying wish, which allows him to last till today. Otherwise he would have... Hey!”

Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended the intricacies behind this grand birthday celebrations. This clearly demonstrates the empty boasts of Qi as well as their culture of instant gratification.

With this laid back mindset, not only has this huge country failed to become the leader of the Eastern States, it has constantly disrupted allied talks which happens to be the only way to curb the aggressiveness of Qin.

At this juncture, a melodious tune filled the air. It was a group of courtesans singing in unison. With crystal clear voices and fantastic beats, Xiang Shaolong was drawn into the music.

Xie Ziyuan proudly proclaimed: “This was the composition I created at the lounge that night. It can be considered one of my best works.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “Does that mean that the rehearsal is ending?”

Xie Ziyuan burst out laughing and crossed the ledge into the Performing Hall.

At the heart of the Performing Hall, there were nearly sixty courtesans who are waving multicoloured dance ribbons, materializing into countless formations, resembling different clutters of coloured clouds encircling an elaborately dressed Lan Gongyuan who was singing and dancing in the centre. It was a mesmerizing sight.

By now, Lan Gongyuan was singing solo.

Witnessing her soft and flexible petite frame bending to fashion all sorts of extreme and enticing dance poses, coupled with the highs and lows, pauses and stretches in the song, it felt like a performance by heavenly maidens, causing the observers to experience the sensation of entering the heaven realm where immortals reside.

Arranged at a side were a group of forty musicians who were playing music and generating a delightful ambience within the Performing Hall.

Besides Qi Yu and a gang of ten odd Qi locals whom Xiang Shaolong does not recognize, the audience comprises of Xu Shang as well.

Once the song finishes, Qi Yu and the others broke out into applause and cheers.

Abandoning the rest of the crowd, Lan Gongyuan approached Xie Ziyuan and Xiang Shaolong. Smiling like the blossoming of a flower, she cajoled: “Why took Official Xie and Great General so long to come over?”

Probably concerned about the ‘Song Theft’ issue that Xiang Shaolong mentioned, Xie Ziyuan apologized before pulling Lan Gongyuan aside and speaking to her in private.

Qi Yu and the others started walking towards him while the courtesans were all paying special attention to him. Whispering and giggling among themselves, they are radiating with passion.

Xu Shang greeted Xiang Shaolong with a military salute as per the laws of Qin. He added with a serious tone: "I have not had the chance to officially pay my respects to Great General; I beg Great General's pardon for my tardiness."

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "This is not Xianyang; let's keep things simple."

With an apprehensive expression, Qi Yu peeped at an irate Xie Ziyuan who is speaking to Lan Gongyuan some distance away from them. With a distracted tone, he questioned Xiang Shaolong: "It has come to my attention that Great General is a music connoisseur. How would you rate the previous song?"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that it was Zhang Quan who told him about it. Guilt-ridden, he solemnly state: "Brother Qi must be kidding. In the field of music, Little Brother is just an amateur. However, even to a music newbie like me, I find the earlier song an exciting and unparalleled composition. It is somewhat able to evoke strong emotions in me."

A well-built and young warrior standing besides Qi Yu interrupted: "My name is Min Tingzhang. I hereby pay my respects to Great General."

Realizing that he is the acclaimed swordsman of Qi who shared the same skill level as Ma Chenjia, Xiang Shaolong replied that it is his pleasure to meet him while paying extra attention in assessing him.

Compared to Ma Chenjia, Min Tingzhang is much more approachable and has a cultured look. Overall, he is pleasing to the eye.

Noticing Min Tingzhang gazing at his Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong simply untied the weapon and scabbard, handing it to him for a closer look.

The famed swordsman was caught unaware by Xiang Shaolong. After receiving it, he analyzed and toyed with it as the other curious onlookers joined him. Gushes of admiration were expressed by each and every one of them.

The three men, Qi Yu, Xu Shang and Xiang Shaolong were left standing there in silence, leading to an awkward situation.

A few of the more courageous and captivating courtesans advanced towards them, greeting and paying their respects to Xiang Shaolong. After serving him a series of meaningful glances, they giggled and sashayed away.

Fortunately, Xie Ziyuan and Lan Gongyuan happened to rejoin the group. With a wronged expression on her face, Lan Gongyuan appears to have been reprimanded by Xie Ziyuan. However, judging from her body language, she appears to be willing to bear

the responsibility for this mistake.

Qi Yu winked at her enquiringly but Lan Gongyuan deliberately ignored him, seemingly venting her anger on him.

Moving to Lan Gongyuan's side, Xu Shang wondered: "Yuan Yuan, are you upset?"

Unexpectedly, Lan Gongyuan stared at Xiang Shaolong, checking: "Yuan Yuan has yet to pay my respects to First Mistress. Is Great General going directly back to Tingsong Villa?"

Except for Xie Ziyuan, the others were flabbergasted.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Xie Ziyuan have such a big influence over Lan Gongyuan. He nodded with a smile.

Lan Gongyuan questioned: "Can we leave immediately?"

Unable to comprehend the situation, Qi Yu and the others are baffled.

Overhearing their exchange, Min Tingzhang returned Hundred Battle Sabre to Xiang Shaolong with both hands, praising: "I heard this unique weapon is personally designed by Great General. It is truly a masterpiece and an eye-opening experience for us."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has won the respect of this usually

arrogant swordsman due to his one sabre stroke victory over Ma Chenjia. After giving a modest reply and getting ready to leave for Tingsong Villa with Xie Ziyuan and Lan Gongyuan, Min Tingzhang abruptly invited: “Tomorrow is Qixia College’s monthly Sword Meet. Would Great General honour us with your presence and give us, your juniors, some pointers?”

With a look of distress, Xiang Shaolong sincerely replied: “To be honest, meeting Grandmaster Cao under such circumstances is rather awkward.”

Another man cheerfully exclaimed: “For the past ten years, Grandmaster Cao has been absent from the Sword Meet; Great General can put your mind at ease.”

Unwilling to increase his commitments, Xiang Shaolong gave a superficial answer: “Let’s talk about it tomorrow!” Feeling curious, he probed: “Isn’t the Sword Meet held on the 1st? Why has it been postponed?”

Qi Yu explained: “It was postponed due to the Great King’s birthday celebration. However, this Meet would be even more majestic than usual. Great General must remember to come!”

Someone promptly informed him about the time and place of the Sword Meet.

Not thinking very much of it, Xiang Shaolong followed Lan Gongyuan and Xie Ziyuan out of the hall as Qi Yu and Xu Shang stared at him with jealousy.

Upon reaching the main courtyard, Xie Ziyuan indicated his desire to return to his workplace and cannot accompany them further. Leaving his carriage behind for them, he rode off on a horse.

Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate that he would be left alone with this Soft Boned Beauty. Raising his alertness, he suggested: “Miss Yuan can take the carriage. I will ride a horse.”

Shooting him a glare, Lan Gongyuan plainly state: “It has been some time since I rode a horse. Let’s give these horses some exercise for their legs.”

Yao Sheng and the others hurriedly gave up two good horses. Despite her elaborate costume, Lan Gongyuan nimbly flipped onto the horse like a fox, earning cheers from everyone.

Putting a leg over the back of the horse, Xiang Shaolong and Lan Gongyuan rode side by side out of Jade Orchid Brothel, instantly attracting the attention of everyone on the streets.

Yao Sheng sent four riders ahead to pave the way and divided the remaining riders to the two sides and the back, creating an awe-inspiring sight.

Riding closer to Xiang Shaolong, Lan Gongyuan teased: “Is Great General feeling uncomfortable? Despite all your attempts, you still end up riding and talking with me.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: A criminal reporting a crime. He beamed: “I have not forgotten that Miss Yuan once tried to take my life!”

After a short silence, Lan Gongyuan lightly described: “In this world, there are three persons Yuan Yuan is indebted to. Is Great General interested to know who they are?”

Xiang Shaolong conjectured: “The first one should be easy. Is it Official Xie?”

Lan Gongyuan was elated: “Talking to you is certainly easy, saving me the long explanations. Try and guess the second person. He perished under the hands of Great General.”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “No wonder you came to kill me.”

Lan Gongyuan nonchalantly disclosed: “Great General is such a lousy guesser! That person is Xiao Weimou. Yuan Yuan can be who I am today is all because he gave me to a man surnamed Bian who raised and trained me. If not, I would probably have starved to death on the streets.”

Xiao Weimou was actually beaten to death by Teng Yi but he obviously would not mention it. Inspired, he asked: “Is it Bian Dongshan? Now I know why you possess such remarkable skills. He should be the third person you are indebted to!”

Beyond his expectation, Lan Gongyuan gnashed her teeth and cringed: “It is the exact opposite. He is the person I hated the most. I never want to remember the disgusting things he did to me.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Aren’t you working with him during the Xianyang Mission?”

Lan Gongyuan simply articulated: “That is a pure business deal. As long as I act according to plan, regardless of success or failure, I would have nothing to do with Bian Dongshan anymore. Besides that, I am doing it to repay Xiao Weimou’s debt of gratitude. We do not owe each other anything anymore.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air: “It is true that everyone has a complicated story behind them. But the risk you took was too great. Hey, I never thought that Xiao Weimou could perform good deeds.”

Lan Gongyuan dismissed with contempt: “Both he and Bian Dongshan are only attracted by my good looks. Their morals are non-existent. Let’s not talk about them! Can Great General guess who is the third person?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, surrendering: “I cannot even guess Xiao Weimou. The third person would be even more difficult to guess. However, I probably knew this person, right? Could it be Tian Dan, or maybe Lu Buwei?”

Lan Gongyuan kept shaking her head and is grinning happily like a little girl. She concluded: “The guesses are incorrect.”

Xiang Shaolong is starting to find this Soft Boned Beauty quite an interesting character. He admitted defeat: “I give up!”

Covering her mouth as she giggled, Lan Gongyuan announced: “It’s Xiang Shaolong!” Xiang Shaolong shouted with disbelief: “What?”

All along, they have been suppressing their voices to keep the conversation solely between the two of them. With his abrupt outcry, Yao Sheng and the others turned towards them and stared with astonishment.

Lan Gongyuan gratefully articulated: “There is nothing illogical about it. It is really you. From the time of my assassination attempt until my successful departure from Xianyang the very same night, I was mentally prepared to be captured and executed by you. However, you chose to let me off. How can Lan Gongyuan not be indebted to you? Back then, Lu Buwei also mentioned that the City Guards are all under your command and even he is unable to protect me.”

Dazed for some time, Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “You need not feel indebted to me. Putting things in perspective, you are just a pawn who is being used by somebody else to kill me. Executing you does not make any sense to me.”

Lan Gongyuan solemnly declared: “Xiang Shaolong is truly Xiang Shaolong. Chancellor Tian and General Dan may view you as their enemy but they are full of respect for Great General’s integrity. On

the contrary, they are full of contempt for Lu Buwei's character."

Feeling his emotions stirring, Xiang Shaolong lamented: "Integrity is useless. Presently, who is not chasing after personal benefits? As long as I pose a threat to their welfare, people are using all sorts of despicable methods to get rid of me."

With a 'Pu Ci', Lan Gongyuan cackled: "It is not often that Great General speaks with this tone. I can tell that your opinion of Yuan Yuan has improved. Using a visit to Feng Fei as an excuse, I was actually creating an opportunity to speak with you privately. Great General must safeguard yourself against this bunch of Zongsun Family Warriors. They are originally a gang of ruffians and outlaws, specializing in collecting bad debts for Zongsun Long. Quite a number of my gambling addict sisters have suffered immensely at their hands. If you don't believe me, just take a closer look at them. Every one of them is focusing their ears on eavesdropping our secret conversation."

She purposely finished the last two sentences with an increase in volume, startling Yao Sheng and the others who automatically increase the distance between themselves and the two of them.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but experience her prowess.

The Three Famous Courtesans have their own unique points. Among them, Lan Gongyuan's mannerism is considered the most unbecoming. It could be due to her unhappy childhood, giving rise to a certain style of self-degrading behavior. Although she treats men like playthings, in her heart, she can differentiate between gratitude and enmity, earning Xiang Shaolong's respect.

Resembling the tingling of bells, Lan Gongyuan giggled non-stop. As she attracted more eyeballs to her, she rode closer to Xiang Shaolong and whispered: “Does Great General despise Yuan Yuan for dating Qi Yu and other loathsome scoundrels? Aye. How many good men are there in this world? At least Qi Yu is rather handsome and is an excellent sweet talker. Regarding the song theft, I was innocent. Qi Yu even lied to me, saying that it was his own creation.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “That’s the Lan Gongyuan I know!”

With Tingsong Villa in sight, Lan Gongyuan lightly advised: “Great General must not let down your guard against Shi Sufang. She used to be on good terms with Pu Hu and may classify you as an enemy!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I have room for more!”

Receiving Lan Gongyuan in the front hall, Feng Fei appeared to be friendly and approachable. If she is still upset with Lan Gongyuan over the stolen music score, there was no sign of it on her face.

As both ladies scrutinized each other, Xiang Shaolong is having an eyeful as well. As Lan Gongyuan is dressed in her elaborate performing costume while Feng Fei has also put on a nice outfit, he is able to draw comparisons between their beauty.

Despite the insignificant gap in their age, not only does Lan

Gongyuan appear younger looking but in front of the cultured Feng Fei who is of noble birth, she resembles a juvenile delinquent.

Xiang Shaolong is probably having this impression because Lan Gongyuan is here to apologise to Feng Fei. Despite her wrongful conviction, Lan Gongyuan was behaving in a modest and subservient manner, further earning his admiration.

Lan Gongyuan apologized: "Greetings to Senior Sister. Yuan Yuan is specially here today to ask for your forgiveness about the song theft. Yuan Yuan will have it destroyed later..."

Before she could go on, Feng Fei put up a hand to halt her conversation. She exhaled: "What's done cannot be undone. But today is a day of forgiveness. Now that Junior Sister has seen the folly of your ways, Feng Fei is more than satisfied. The birthday celebration will be Feng Fei's final show. With this work-related issue reaching a happy conclusion, there are no more regrets in Feng Fei's heart."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own emotions stirring. From an insider's perspective, it is amazing that Feng Fei has yet to suffer a nervous breakdown. Going to Xianyang must be the worst decision of her life. She must have met Han Jie during one of the official banquets and was smitten by his handsome looks and intellectual thoughts. Moreover, he is a royal descendant just like herself. Back in the earlier days, Lao Ai and Han Jie were plagiarizing the ladies of Han, therefore, their sweet talking skills and understanding of women psychology must be one of the best. If Feng Fei, Shi Sufang and Lan Gongyuan are the Three Famous Courtesans; Qi Yu, Lao Ai and Han Jie can be considered the Three Famous Playboys.

In Xianyang, an emotional Feng Fei made two life-changing decisions: fall in love with Han Jie and disbanding the Song & Dance Troupe. Currently, not only has she lost her affections for Han Jie, she will become a forgotten celebrity without her Song & Dance Troupe. The only positive outcome is that she no longer has to deal with lustful men trying to obtain her body. In addition, her fortune should be sufficient for a life of luxury.

Lan Gongyuan was touched: “Senior Sister is truly fortunate to go out with a bang. Yuan Yuan is full of admiration for Senior Sister’s song composition skill and the courage to move on at the peak of your career. What are Sister’s future plans?”

Glaring at Xiang Shaolong once, Feng Fei replied: “I intend to retire at a secluded and peaceful place. Great General is making the necessary arrangements.”

She added: “Among the three of us, I heard Junior Sister has the most tormenting childhood. For Junior Sister to accomplish so much despite life dealing you a set of bad cards, Feng Fei has nothing but respect for you.”

Not anticipating this comment from Feng Fei, Lan Gongyuan flinched. She professed: “Yuan Yuan has learnt that only you can give up on yourself. If you can make it past today, tomorrow would definitely be better. It is Yuan Yuan’s good fortune to meet Senior Sister and Great General today. Yuan Yuan has to go, as Jade Orchid Brothel is opening for business soon.”

With that, she mounted the same horse and left.

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After Lan Gongyuan departed, Feng Fei interrogated with disdain: “I heard she sleeps around. Is Great General interested in this kind of women?”

Xiang Shaolong is walking her back to the main building. Taking in her words, he retorted: “Since when did I express any interest in her? How is Shuzen doing?”

Feng Fei proudly proclaimed: “With Feng Fei personally instructing her, how bad can she turn out? Don’t change the topic. How did you get involved with her?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Can you not use the words: get involved? It is so demeaning! Little Brother and her are just platonic friends. She said she wanted to visit you and ask for your forgiveness; can I say no to that? Look at yourself. Earlier, you are so sweet and accommodating towards her, as if she is your own sister. The minute she left, you began criticizing her and portraying her as somebody without any good attributes.”

Covering her mouth as she giggled, Feng Fei warned: “This is how a jealous woman looks like. Since you chose to ignore me, I would not allow you to pay any attention to other women. Otherwise, you’ll get it from me.

By now they have arrived at the stairs of the main building. Xiang Shaolong was about to leave when Feng Fei held onto his sleeve and dragged him into the building. Turning around, she

threw herself into his arms, whispering: “Is Great General thinking of leaving Feng Fei behind and leaving by himself?”

Although Xiang Shaolong is embracing a fragrant and enticing body, his mind is brimming with bitterness. He did planned to make use of the snowboard and slip away first while getting someone to take care of Feng Fei and the others. Unexpectedly, this peerless beauty with her matching intelligence has exposed his secret. He could not bear to lie to her but feared her overreaction should he chose to confess the truth. What should he do?

Raising her exquisite face, Feng Fei pitifully squirmed: “You need not reply. Your expression has given me the heartrending answer.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Do you know that as long as I am alive, no one would dare to lay a finger on you.”

Feng Fei quizzed: “Didn’t you mention that Zongsun Long will protect us?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “The problem lies with your ex lover and his close relationship with the Zongsun Family. I just received news that due to Han Jie’s facilitation, Lu Buwei and Zongsun Long had a two-hour secret discussion. What do you think they are planning to do?”

Momentarily stunned, Feng Fei melancholically replied: “Since this is the case, why are you still abandoning me?”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong mused: “Why don’t you leave one day before me. I will meet up with you after that. Lord Longyang should be able to make the necessary preparations.”

Hugging him with all her strength, Feng Fei grieved: “Before knowing the result of the duel, how can Feng Fei leave Lin Zi? Fine! Do whatever you want with me. Feng Fei will leave my fate in your hands.”

Xiang Shaolong can fully comprehend her helpless feelings of being alone and deserted. Based on her beauty and talent, all the men in the world would be won over by her. Maybe Heaven is jealous of her accomplishments, letting her fall in love with a scoundrel and crossing paths with himself who is unwilling to fall in love with her, eventually breaking her heart into pieces.

Comforting her to the best of his abilities, Xiang Shaolong finally left for his own room after Feng Fei has recomposed herself. He had barely rested when Zongsun Xuanhua came to look for him.

Seating themselves in the Eastern Chamber, Zongsun Xuanhua started: “Does Great General know that Lu Buwei paid us a visit?”

Xiang Shaolong deduced that he has held a discussion with his father and advisors, deciding that Lu Buwei cannot be trusted and is trying to salvage the situation with him. He naturally would not bring Guo Kai, Li Yuan or the others into the picture.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Even if I did not see it personally, I could easily imagine it. What other new tricks can Lu Buwei come

up with? Moreover, Han Jie is your martial brother. Oh yes! What is the relationship between the two of you?”

Faced with Xiang Shaolong’s abrupt interrogation about his Achilles’ heel, Zongsun Xuanhua freaked out on the spot. He stammered: “Our relationship is not clearly defined but we are definitely acquainted.”

Xiang Shaolong openly declared: “Compared to Lu Buwei, Han Jie should be more eager to kill me. This is because Lu Buwei assumes that he has a trump card that would cause my complete downfall. Han Jie should be insanely jealous of me and an insane man would act without thinking twice about the consequences.”

Zongsun Xuanhua is no fool and he already guessed that Feng Fei’s lover is Han Jie; otherwise, why would he be so familiar with Feng Fei’s activities? His face losing colour, he lowered his head to conceal it. As he stared at the floor, he probed with a deep voice: “Has Great General decided on your departure date?”

Xiang Shaolong is highly amused, knowing that through his intricate scheming, he has caused both father and son to lose their bearings. He somberly remarked: “After careful consideration, I would officially bid farewell to your Great King and Second Prince. At the same time, I would request for soldiers to protect me and openly parade back to Qin. It is way better than sneaking around and becoming a lightning rod for rumours.”

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: “Xuanhua fully agrees. Great General can seek Official Xie’s assistance in relaying the message. I guarantee that everything will be well-arranged.”

With these sentences, Xiang Shaolong knows that Zongsun Long father and son would not dare to participate in any more anti-Xiang Shaolong schemes after weighing the pros and cons.

If Xiang Shaolong is sent home by Qi's official escort, both Li Yuan's team and Lu Buwei's team would lack the grounds to instigate Zongsun Long father and son to assassinate him.

Nevertheless, this is not an ideal outcome. The King of Qi cannot afford to dispatch an army to escort him. Moreover, there may be spies within the escort team. With these unknown factors, it would be a miracle if he can travel safely through Chu and the Three States.

The Qi escorts would not serve him wholeheartedly. If they run into trouble, they would scatter like mice.

But in Feng Fei's case, this would be an excellent arrangement. He made a mental note to approach Tian Jian about this. Hopefully, this would relieve him of this pressing issue.

Zongsun Xuanhua frowned: "Min Tingzhang came to see me earlier, saying that Great General has agreed to participate in the Sword Meet tomorrow. I have been doing my best to reject these meaningless appointments. Why did Great General give him your consent?"

Xiang Shaolong refuted: "I did not give him my consent. I only gave a perfunctory reply, saying that I will think about it!"

Zongsun Xuanhua was incensed: “This fellow is getting out of hand and even dared to overstep his boundaries. I must teach him a lesson.”

Xiang Shaolong assured: “Relax! There is no reason for me to go too.”

Zongsun Xuanhua swore: “Actually, there is no harm going. Whoever dares to cross Great General’s path would have to deal with me first. Xuanhua will warn all those frog-in-the-well fellows that whoever is upset with Great General, it is as good as being upset with me, Zongsun Xuanhua.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is trying to make up for his earlier mistake by flattering himself. He casually dismissed: “Let’s see what happens tomorrow!”

Zongsun Xuanhua suggested: “Tonight...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him: “It is not appropriate for me to indulge in night activities. Otherwise, I would lack the vitality to deal with Grandmaster Cao’s saintly sword.”

Zongsun Xuanhua can detect that Xiang Shaolong is no longer as friendly and trusting as before, recognizing that Lu Buwei’s issue has cast a shadow over their relationship. Stuck without a choice, he left dejectedly.

After carefully studying his options, Xiang Shaolong sent a messenger to invite Xie Ziyuan over. He went straight to the point: “Little Brother has something that requires Brother Xie’s assistance.”

Xie Ziyuan was overjoyed: “You can count on me. Brother Xiang can speak without reservations.”

Xiang Shaolong honestly explained the whole scenario, as he is concerned that any misunderstandings would result in unnecessary troubles. The only thing he held back was Zongsun Long father and son ganging up with Li Yuan and company. He only hinted that the people of Chu and the Three States are not reliable, for they are secretly planning to increase the hostility between Qin and Qi.

Exhaling a breath of cold air at the end of his lecture, Xie Ziyuan was disappointed: “Doesn’t Zongsun Long understand the intentions of the Great King and Second Prince? Even a fool can tell that Lu Buwei would have a terrible ending.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “On the surface, you must pretend that everything is normal. Privately, please inform Second Prince that I may leave without saying goodbye and beseech him to take care of Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the others.”

Patting his chest, Xie Ziyuan agreed: “You can count on Little Brother. After Brother Xiang’s departure, I will advise Second Prince to offer them temporary residence within the palace. Once everything has died down, I would send them over to Xianyang.”

His face revealing an expression of reluctance, Xie Ziyuan sighed: “Without Brother Xiang, life would be less exciting.”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Are you afraid that you cannot fool around anymore?”

His face turning red, Xie Ziyuan prayed: “Wifey is much more lenient with Little Brother now. It would be wonderful if she can maintain this attitude even after the departure of Brother Xiang.”

Several jokes and conversations later, Xie Ziyuan took his leave.

Next, Xiang Shaolong looked for Dong Shuzhen. After giving her the necessary instructions, the eyes of Dong Shuzhen began to turn red. In a flustered tone, she wailed: “Right now, we are so worried about your duel with Cao Cuidao two nights later.”

Xiang Shaolong can understand where she is coming from, as he seems to be reading out his will through the instructions that he gave her. By planning all their future activities, it sounded inauspicious. Luckily, he is confident that he would survive the duel with Cao Cuidao. With a smile, he consoled her: “Everyone would have to face different challenges in life. Your top priority is to train hard for your performances. In the future, you must come to Xianyang and perform for me.”

A grateful Dong Shuzhen leapt into his bosom.

Embracing her alluring body, this is the first time Xiang Shaolong could feel the absence of all sexual connotations. What he felt instead was an awesome borderless friendship that surpasses the kind of love between a man and a woman. Due to his past restraints, he was rewarded with this mind-blowing sensation.

Within his heart, an immense fighting spirit began to stir. For his loved ones and for himself, he would fight till the end, never giving up and never surrendering.

That night, everyone from the Song & Dance Troupe gathered in the main hall for a pre-celebration. Regardless of their status, every person is exhibiting their support and enthusiasm for the Troupe, unlike the fearful and selfish behavior that was witnessed earlier.

During the banquet, Xiang Shaolong officially announced that he would be inviting the Dong Shuzen-inherited Song & Dance Troupe to Xianyang for a performance. All expenses will be borne by his Wu Family, much to the delight of the crowd.

Although Feng Fei is no longer actively involved, she was enjoying herself too.

With Xiang Shaolong's support, it is the equivalent of providing the Song & Dance Troupe with a reliable backer. This is highly beneficial for the standing of the Troupe. The only shadow looming over the celebration is Xiang Shaolong's duel with Cao Cuidao two days later. Of course nobody dares to mention this.

Many people are wasted that night, including Feng Fei.

Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, did not touch a single drop of wine. After carrying Feng Fei back to her room, he went to the rear garden all by himself to practice his Sabre skills.

He can feel his cultivation of the sabre improving by leaps and bounds.

This was forced by Cao Cuidao.

After exchanging blows with this earth-shattering grandmaster swordsman, he caught a glimpse of an unimaginable level of martial arts that he never thought existed. With the mind and the sword combined as one united force, the pressure radiating from this stance is several times more powerful than one who is fighting with ferocity or kamikaze adrenaline.

In the past, Xiang Shaolong is able to overcome other swordsmen mainly because of his deep knowledge of Mozi Swordplay Meditation, on top of his physical health and innate strength. During the duel, he is able to maintain absolute calmness and display the essence of the swordplay.

Cao Cuidao has unknowingly aroused his willpower, confidence and an indescribable type of mental and physical strength combination. This newfound aura is critical to one's victory in battle.

That night, he meditated for an hour before retiring to bed. Sleeping all the way till dawn, he woke up fully rejuvenated and felt so powerful that he can kill a tiger with his bare hands. Proceeding to the garden, he did some warm up exercises before starting to practice his sabre once again.

Recalling that day when he scored victory with one sabre stroke, causing Ma Chenjia to discard his weapon and flee, he realized that besides mastering the precision of the attack, the main reason behind his success was that he was holding the sabre with both hands. By following a samurai attacking style, the strength of his blow would increase by several folds.

He can feel a sense of excitement surging within him, thinking that this may be the only way to counter Cao Cuidao's colossal strength.

Finding the appropriate time and method to execute it is vital to its success.

With a mere ten strokes, he does not believe he cannot withstand the blows.

Even if Cao Cuidao has three heads and six arms, he would be able to counter him with his sabre and scabbard combination. Moreover, the ten strokes will be over in a flash.

Remembering the earlier days when he was depressed and despondent, lacking confidence in even handling the ten strokes,

he could not help but feel amused. Deep inside, he was deeply grateful towards his good buddy Xiao Yuetan.

His earlier notions of fear and escape have disappeared without a trace.

Now that he has completed all his preparations, he looks forward to face Cao Cuidao tomorrow night with an undistracted mind. At the end of the duel, he would make use of the cover of the night to make good his escape, heading back to Xianyang to reunite with his wives and son.

With this formidable foe exerting pressure on him, Xiang Shaolong can literally feel himself unleashing his hidden potential as he practice his moves. With every strike, he can experience himself reaching another peak in his mind. It was a surreal sensation that he had never encountered before.

Out of the blue, he felt as if he is in the centre of a massacre. As his men collapsed one by one around him, followed by Zhou Liang tragically dying in front of his eyes and King Eagle attacking the enemy to avenge its master, his mind was crammed with feelings of grief and anger.

Recalling his friends who had betrayed or abandoned him due to differences in loyalty, he came to the conclusion that while all things may change, the Hundred Battle Sabre in his hand would forever serve as a trusty companion.

He released a weak slash.

Time seemed to have stopped still.

Shan Rou's voice sounded from his back: "I'm not fighting you today! You are becoming more and more powerful."

Returning the sabre back into the scabbard, Xiang Shaolong came to Shan Rou's side, jesting: "I thought Elder Sister Rou does not know the meaning of fear?"

Shan Rou elbowed an area near his waist, causing him to cry out in pain. She cursed: "To hell with your nonsense. Outside the Villa, Min Tingzhang and the others are awaiting your esteemed arrival, ready to escort you to Qixia College to attend the Sword Meet. If not for them, I would have kicked you all the way back to Xianyang."

Rubbing the painful bruise, Xiang Shaolong pleaded: "I have to trouble you to tell them that I am planning to stay indoors today, conserving my energy..."

Shan Rou interrupted him: "You are not allowed to back out. I am all excited and looking for someone to be my punching bag. Tell you what, you can tag along with me to join the festivities."

Before Xiang Shaolong can recover from his daze, Shan Rou is dragging him so hard that he stumbled along.

More than five hundred Qixia Swordsmen are performing the

opening formation named Sword Salute.

Their movements are well synchronized and neat, resulting in an awesome performance.

Xiang Shaolong is seated at the VIP seats of the college parade square. On his right is Tian Jian, followed by Lu Buwei, while Tian Dan is seated on his left. Shan Rou has somewhat disappeared into the crowds.

Each and every one of Lin Zi's rich and famous, officials, minsters and even the royal family were in full attendance. It was a grand and imposing sight.

There are plenty of warriors and commoners who are here to join in the festivities. With at least four thousand of them in attendance, they filled the four corners of the parade square to the brim.

At the end of the Sword Salute display, Tian Jian enthusiastically represented King Qixiang in reading out the rules of the Meet. A Qixia Tutor himself, Zongsun Xuanhua led a pack of several Tutors and swordsmen into the parade square, simultaneously conducting tests for swordsmanship, riding and archery. Min Tingzhang is a Tutor too and wasted no time in showcasing his abilities.

Seated on the other side of Tian Dan is Xie Ziyuan. Skipping Tian Dan who is in between them, he winked at Xiang Shaolong, indicating the smooth execution of his requests.

Lu Buwei who was chatting with Tian Jian suddenly leaned closer and proposed: “Let me escort Shaolong to Qixia College tomorrow evening! This matter concerns the glory of our Great Qin, we must have a decent entourage.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: You can come, but I would certainly slip away and make you lose face in front of your men. Smiling in return, he could not be bothered with him.

Unexpectedly, Tian Jian overheard this exchange and interrupted: “Let me and Imperial Uncle escort Great General together, giving him a boost of courage.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself and helplessly agreed.

On the other side, Tian Dan chortled: “By now, First Mistress should have entered the palace in preparation for tonight’s performance!”

Xiang Shaolong found it hilarious, recognizing that he is trying to make small talk. Muttering a reply, he turned his attention back to the parade square. Coincidentally, a warrior happened to hit the bull’s eye on a target two hundred steps away, earning a series of wild cheers.

Compared to the ambience of Qin’s Hunting Fair, the Qixia Sword Meet is much more inferior, illustrating the pathetic culture of martial arts in Qi vis a vis Qin.

At this juncture, someone came to Tian Dan's side and whispered a few sentences to him.

After the man left, Tian Dan faced Lu Buwei and chuckled: "There is a challenger who is interested in dueling Imperial Uncle's Shangcai Number One Swordsman. I wonder if Imperial Uncle is open to allowing Xu Shang to enter the ring and have some fun?"

Xiang Shaolong can smell a rat, deducing that it is Qi Yu instigating this fight, hoping to ruffle the feathers of his love rival.

After getting to know Soft Boned Beauty better, he is conscious that regardless of Qi Yu or Xu Shang, they would definitely end up with a huge disappointment if they thought that she would fall in love with them. Nonetheless, Xu Shang is an expert swordsman, almost as good as Guan Zhongxie. Even if it was Zongsun Xuanhua or Min Tingzhang taking the fight, they may not be able to overcome him.

Momentarily stunned, Lu Buwei quizzed: "With our super swordsman Great General here, why would the people of Qixia want to go for anyone else?"

Tian Jian officially replied: "My royal father has just issued a strict decree that nobody is allowed to challenge Great General before and after his duel with Grandmaster Cao. Ma Chenjia has already been punished."

Lu Buwei lightly sniggered to conceal the awkwardness and

unease in his heart.

Tian Dan's face darkened, as he is partly responsible for Ma Chenjia's case.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong applauded this decision and also knew that it is Tian Jian helping him in secret. He intentionally blurted: "Maybe it is Brother Qi Yu who wants to have some fun with Commander Xu."

Realizing that Xiang Shaolong has learnt about the two men fighting over Lan Gongyuan, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan started to fidget unnaturally.

Lu Buwei was about to say something when the crowd suddenly erupted into loud cheering.

As everyone turned their attention back to the parade square, the faces of Xiang Shaolong, Tian Dan and Xie Ziyuan had a change in expression.

Shan Rou was proudly walking to the centre of the square. She shrilly called out: "It is now the beginning of our dueling event. Shan Rou wishes to seek the guidance of Tian Bang."

Tian Dan violently shuddered once, knowing that Shan Rou is banking on her husband Xie Ziyuan's rising authority, openly bullying him and is now using his precious son as a revenge target.

Although Tian Bang's swordsmanship is above average, it cannot be compared to Shan Rou who happens to be one of Cao Cuidao's top disciples. Fighting her is as good as sending him to the slaughterhouse.

If Tian Bang were to reject her, he can forget about raising his head high up again. Moreover, his opponent is a female, exacerbating the situation.

Zongsun Xuanhua and the other senior disciples who are organizing the Sword Meet are thrown into disarray, not knowing how to resolve this kind of scenario.

Seated at the back of the grandstand, Tian Bang's face turned deathly grey.

If the challenger was an ordinary Qixia swordsman, he could send a representative. But his opponent this time happens to be the prestigious Madam Xie who asked specifically for him. By hook or by crook, he has to take her on in person.

Tian Jian guffawed: "Madam Rou is even braver than some of our men."

With this comment from him, no one would dare to voice any objection.

Tian Bang was about to stand up but Dan Chu, who was seated beside him, held him back. Standing up himself, he icily grunted:

“Since Madam Rou is in such high spirits, why don’t Dan Chu have a go first!”

This time round, it was Xie Ziyuan and Xiang Shaolong who flinched.

After all, Shan Rou has given birth to two kids and her physical stamina is a far cry from before. Against a master swordsman like Dan Chu, she may bear the brunt of the fight.

Left without a choice, Xiang Shaolong boisterously laughed before Shan Rou can reply: “My hands are itching too. Let Little Brother have this fight on behalf of Madam Rou!”

In a split second, the entire crowd exploded with deafening cheers, drowning out Shan Rou’s protest and objection.

Book 24 Chapter 08 - Goodbye Kiss

Dan Chu lingered on the same spot, not exhibiting the slightest intention to enter the ring while Xiang Shaolong remained in his seat. By now, the crowds have shouted until their voices are hoarse. Witnessing this strange phenomenon, the rowdy calls gradually came to a stop and the parade square is now completely silent.

Exchanging glances with the exasperated Shan Rou who is still standing in the middle of the square, Xiang Shaolong grinned to himself.

Before he offered to take Shan Rou's place, he already knew that Dan Chu would not dare to take him on.

This risk is not worthwhile for Dan Chu. Before leading his army to war victories and obtaining Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong is already a force to be reckoned with. The present Xiang Shaolong is definitely much more formidable, causing Dan Chu to lack the confidence in winning the fight. Moreover, Cao Cuidao will personally take him on tomorrow; there is no need to risk his life now.

As anticipated, Dan Chu politely state: "The Great King has issued a strict decree, forbidding anyone to duel with Great General. Grandmaster Cao is the only exception. How can I defy the decree?"

The spectators instantly jeered with disappointment.

Seated within vicinity of Tian Jian, Zongsun Long stood up and loudly roared: “Who dares to defy Great King’s decree!”

The crowd instantaneously subsided, feeling bizarre that Zongsun Long is the one showcasing his authority.

Shan Rou was pleased: “In this case, why don’t General Dan show me a thing or two!”

Dan Chu glanced pleadingly at Tian Jian.

Tian Jian understood his dilemma and laughed: “Everyone in Lin Zi stands in awe of Madam Rou’s swordsmanship. General Dan probably reacted in the spur of the moment. Although Great General has made his offer, the fight would be unlawful. Let’s annul this duel.”

These words are highly appropriate, hinting that Tian Bang is inferior to Shan Rou, preserving her prestige.

With this future King of Qi intervening, Shan Rou knows that the fight is over even before it begun. Shooting a vicious glare at Xiang Shaolong, she dejectedly returned to her seat.

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Shan Rou will not let him off. However, he is not worried at all because suffering under her fists and scolding is one of the happy events of life.

Xie Ziyuan glanced at him with gratitude in his eyes.

The Sword Meet progressed on and despite some duels, there was nothing worth cheering for the crowd. Before midday, it came to a close and nothing was further heard about Xu Shang's supposed challenge.

At Qixia College, Xiang Shaolong joined Tian Jian, Tian Dan, Lu Buwei and the others for lunch. Xiang Shaolong could not endure it any longer and used this break to question Zongsun Xuanhua: "Why didn't I see any emissaries from the other States? Didn't Brother Xuanhua invite them?"

Zongsun Xuanhua behaved as if he is very intimate with Xiang Shaolong. In a hush-hush secretive manner, he replied: "Two days ago, our Great King held a meeting with the emissaries of the other States. Due to differences in opinion, the meeting ended on a distasteful note. Today, they must have intentionally given us the cold shoulder; otherwise, the Sword Meet would be much more lively."

From his words, Xiang Shaolong was enlightened that their discussion must be concerning Qin resistance efforts. Since Qi is persisting in outdated methods of engagement, their negotiations with the other eastern States would surely end up in a deadlock.

He recalled that he himself was responsible for destroying two rounds of allied military campaigns. The first time, he employed a scheme. By releasing Wei Zhen back to his country and using him to arouse the Wei King's suspicions of Prince Xinling, he was able to deceive the King of Wei into recalling Prince Xinling from the

battlefield. Left leaderless, the coalition fell apart.

The second time, he personally led an army and defeated the allied forces soundly as they were en route to Xianyang, causing them to suffer heavy losses and eventually disintegrating.

In the eyes of the five eastern States, he can be considered their greatest enemy. No wonder Li Yuan and his other old buddies are turning their cannons on him, Xiang Shaolong.

Seated besides Tian Jian, Xiang Shaolong used this opportunity to tell him that Feng Fei's performance tonight will be her last and farewell performance before she retires. He hopes that Tian Jian can make an official announcement regarding this occurrence.

Tian Jian suggested: "My royal father has the highest admiration for First Mistress's performances. Getting him to announce it would be even better."

Xiang Shaolong praised: "That would be really wonderful! After I offer my congratulations tonight, I will return home earlier to rest in preparation for the duel tomorrow night. Please confer my thanks to the Great King on my behalf."

Tian Jian acknowledged and agreed to his requests.

Using this opening, Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and slipped away.

Back at Tingsong Villa, most of the Troupe members have entered the palace for the performance, leaving only a few maids and servants to watch over the premises. The ambience is now cold and uninviting.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to climb the stairs to the main hall, Yao Sheng caught up to him from the back, exclaiming: “Great General, your servant has something to report.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that he had instructed him to put Guo Kai and Han Chuang under surveillance. After he discovered Zongsun Long father and son secretly working with his enemies, and thinking that Yao Sheng is from Zongsun Family, he did not follow up with his progress.

Once the two men sat down at a corner, Yao Sheng narrated with a serious expression: “For the past two days, emissaries of the Three States, Chu and Yan were engaged in one meeting after another. The most frequent meetings occur between the two States of Zhao and Yan. After further investigation, my subordinates reported that swordsmen of both States have sneaked into Lin Zi City while posing as tourists or guests of the birthday celebrations.”

Xiang Shaolong asked his first question: “Did you tell Master Long or Brother Xuanhua about these information?”

Yao Sheng shook his head, declaring: “Young Master has given specific instructions, saying that as long as we are assigned to Great General, we need not report anything to them. Therefore, they have no idea about this.”

Xiang Shaolong praised: “Only people like you and your men who are familiar with Lin Zi and local issues are able to distinguish the real identities of these Yan and Zhao swordsmen.”

Suppressing his voice, Yao Sheng added: “Yesterday evening, Yan’s Xu Yizhe and Zhao’s Guo Kai went on a tour of Qixia College together. According to the observation of my stalkers, they seemed to be conducting some sort of site inspection.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization: Could Guo Kai and company be so intelligent to correctly guess that he would make his getaway tomorrow and is therefore laying an ambush for him?

Of course that would only happen after the duel with Cao Cuidao.

For the sake of their own States, everyone is resorting to ruthless methods; even Xu Yizhe is of no exception. If they can somehow impersonate themselves as Qi swordsmen and murder Xiang Shaolong in the territory of Qi, it would be a miracle if Qin and Qi can avoid going to war.

Yao Sheng updated: “Is Great General aware that Grandmaster Cao has requested the Great King to issue an imperial decree, stating that no one is allowed to view or disturb the duel between him and Great General. As a result, before the end of the duel, everyone must stay within the city and even we are not allowed to step into the perimeter of Qixia College.”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong grasped that while this is highly

beneficial for him who is planning a getaway, it too, provides great convenience for anyone who is trying to ambush him.

Frowning, he interrogated: “Does the report include details such as where they make special stops or spent an extended period of time?”

Producing a geographical map of Qixia College and its surroundings, Yao Sheng painstaking and clearly indicated the traveling path of Guo Kai and Xu Yizhe, where they stopped and how long was each stop.

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Your stalkers are truly meticulous!”

Yao Sheng cheerfully answered: “Your servant recognizes the importance of this matter and was personally involved in the stalking.”

From the bottom of his heart, Xiang Shaolong praised him and instructed him to keep this report strictly confidential.

Yao Sheng was hoping mad: “The people of Yan are scoundrels and it is so obvious to me that they are here with malicious agendas, trying to disrupt the friendly diplomacy between us and Qin. Why don’t Great General directly feedback this scheme to the Great King, beseeching him to send soldiers to protect Great General or specially allowing us to wait for Great General’s triumphant return at the bottom of Stargazing Platform?”

As Xiang Shaolong have other plans in mind, he would not accept his suggestion. Smiling as he patted his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “They would not dare to make any moves within the vicinity of Qixia College. In my opinion, they would probably lay an ambush on the road back to the city. Both sides of the road are thick, snow-covered forests, making it a perfect ambush location. Can you prepare a fire rocket for me? When I am on my way back to the city, I will light the rocket and summon you guys to me.”

Agreeing that this is the best way out, Yao Sheng could not help but ask: “Isn’t Great General angry with them?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Xu Yizhe and Guo Kai can be considered my acquaintances. Although we would surely meet on the battlefield one day, I hope I can avoid these petty clashes with them. Live and let live.”

With admiration written all over his face, Yao Sheng excused himself.

Sitting alone in the hall, his mind is once again filled with thoughts. Recovering from his short daze, he returned back to the rear courtyard.

As he strolled along, he can sense the cold and lonely aura of Tingsong Villa, feeling melancholic as it is now an empty nest with its occupants all gone.

But once he reminded himself that he is going back to Xianyang tomorrow night, his heart immediately warmed up and felt fuzzy

instead.

Back home, he must do his best to comfort his pretty wives and lovely maids. Recalling that year when he was returning to Qin from Zhao, Ting Fangshi passed away while pining for him. He could not help but start to feel helpless and frustrated again.

‘You rascal! I finally found you!’

As Xiang Shaolong turned around in shock, Shan Rou was racing towards him, ready to vent her anger on him.

With all his unhappiness chased away by this beauty, Xiang Shaolong opened his palms, challenging: “What does Elder Sister Rou plan to do to Little Brother?”

Grabbing his shirt at the chest area, Shan Rou glared at him with her almond shaped eyes and cursed: “How dare you spoil my fun! Who needs your help? Do you really think you are better than me?” Finishing her sentences, she could not help but burst out in giggles.

Xiang Shaolong cannot resist her allure and patted her smooth face, chuckling: “As a mother of two kids, you are still indulging in violence and fighting. Elder Sister Rou should spare a thought for Brother Xie and avoid getting into scuffles with others.”

Since they met in Lin Zi, this is the first time they are sharing such physical intimacy. Her face turning slightly red, Shan Rou

wailed: “Do you believe I will hack off your hand if you continue to touch me?”

Xiang Shaolong groaned: “I am leaving tomorrow night; let me take advantage of you while I can!”

Shan Rou was incredulous: “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “I just made up my mind. You must not tell anyone about this. After withstanding ten blows from your Master, I’ll be on my way.”

Revealing her concern for Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou checked: “Except for the river route that is passable, all road leading away from Lin Zi are all blockaded by snow. Tomorrow, you will be at the centre of everyone’s attention; how can you possibly sail away? Who is the person arranging your transport?”

Pulling her to the garden, Xiang Shaolong explained: “I have a safe and excellent traveling method; otherwise, how could I avoid the massive manhunt of the Three States? Do you want to pass a message to your two beloved sisters?”

With a ‘Pu Ci’, Shan Rou laughed: “Tell them I would definitely outlive Tian Dan. In fact, I am spending my days relishing his suffering and decline.”

Her face reddening again, Shan Rou bit her lower lip and suggested: “Since there is nobody around, why don’t we go into the

room and be intimate with each other!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and stammered: “How can we do this? Brother Xie is my buddy.”

Shan Rou retorted: “I purposely allowed him to fool around because I wanted to fool around with you too. That will equalize the score and it is very fair and just.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “You are wrong about Brother Xie. Only when he is in a brothel setting can his creative juices start to flow and allow him to compose new songs. He did not commit any shameful acts behind your back.”

Momentarily dazed, Shan Rou passionately leaned closer and offered her lips, declaring: “Then let’s share a kiss! Treat it as a kiss of encouragement for your duel and also a goodbye kiss for your trip!”

Shan Rou had barely left when Xie Ziyuan arrived.

Xiang Shaolong thought: What a close shave!

After scrutinizing him for a while, Xie Ziyuan heaved a sigh of relief: “Little Brother thought she would have given you a beating! Xuanhua told me that after she learnt that you had returned home, she hurried over here like a mad woman.”

With his fingers crossed, Xiang Shaolong remarked: “Sister in

law is not an unreasonable person. It is just that her temper is unbearable!”

Taking a seat, Xie Ziyuan observed: “Now that this place is deserted, I find it rather peaceful instead. We can speak our hearts without fear.”

Sitting down beside him, an astonished Xiang Shaolong probed: “What is on Brother Xie’s mind?”

Xie Ziyuan sighed with a breath of air: “You might find it unbelievable but I am thinking of quitting! However, Second Prince would not hear of it.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled: “Brother Xie is doing very well in your official career. Why are you suddenly thinking of retiring?”

Xie Ziyuan bitterly smiled: “As officials, most of us would have a terrible ending. The higher our ranks, the more enemies we have. When you are riding high, nobody could touch you but when you eventually make mistakes, others would start vying for your position. Besides managing your subordinates, you have to live in constant fear of offending your superiors. Such a life is truly meaningless. Wifey has always mentioned that I am ill suited for an official career as I am not vicious enough. For example, Zongsun Long father and son have disappointed me thoroughly. Till now, they have not told me about their secret meeting with Lu Buwei.”

Sighing along with him, Xiang Shaolong advised: “There is a

trick to quitting an official career. Just feign an illness.”

Enlightened by his words, Xie Ziyuan’s eyes began to glow. Slapping the table, he exclaimed: “Brother Xiang is wise indeed. That’s it. For all you know, I may be able to visit Brother Xiang in Xianyang in the near future; and not forgetting Talented Lady Ji. Hey! With Brother Xiang’s connections, I may even get to meet Widow Qin!”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is not aware of the relationship between Qin Qing and himself. Patting his chest, he swore: “You can count on Little Brother.”

Concurrently, his heart skipped a beat as he recollected Xiao Pan’s identity crisis.

Gazing at the sky outside the hall, Xie Ziyuan suggested: “I have to enter the palace earlier than usual. Later, allow me to get somebody to fetch Brother Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong politely rejected his offer and personally sent him off before returning to his room. Lying on his bed, he took out Yao Sheng’s map and began analyzing it.

If he was Xu Yizhe or Guo Kai, he would definitely place an ambush on both sides of the mile long official road between Qixia College and the City highway. If an arrow attack is launched under the cover of the thick and snowy forests on both sides of the road, the target would be unable to react in time and his death is guaranteed.

If he had pretended to walk back to Lin Zi City but suddenly run away in the direction of the snowy wilderness, how would the ambushers react?

The sound of knocking is heard and in came Xiao Yuetan.

Xiang Shaolong jumped out of bed and passed the map to him while repeating Yao Sheng's report.

Pointing to a southwestern mark outside Qixia College, Xiao Yuetan described: "Tomorrow, I will bury traveling clothes and the snowboard on top of a small hill over here. It will be at the top of a west facing slope, allowing you to conveniently slide down."

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: "Is it completed?"

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: "It should be completed after a night's work. I will be skipping the banquet tonight and at the same time, prevent Lu Buwei from identifying myself."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling bad: "Isn't it a waste?"

Xiao Yuetan nonchalantly state: "Entertainment accounts for nothing. Only when Shaolong has safely returned to Xianyang can we continue our campaign against Lu Buwei. You may not see me tomorrow. Elder Brother came here specially to bade farewell to you."

Stretching out his own hand and strongly gripping Xiao Yuetan's hand, Xiang Shaolong gratefully thanked: "The deepest gratitude lies beyond thanking. I do not know what to say to express the emotions in my heart."

Xiao Yuetan grinned: "I am sure these thoughts would change in the near future. Everything I do is for your own good. Help Elder Brother send my regards to Yanran and the others, tell them Elder Brother misses them terribly."

Xiang Shaolong was baffled: "Why is Elder Brother speaking like this? No matter what happens, I, Xiang Shaolong, would never blame you for anything."

Staring intently at Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan warned: "A man's heart is impossible to fathom. Do not keep thinking that you can get away with merely ten strokes. You must always take precautions in case he changes his mind due to aggravation."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "After making the mistake of trusting Li Yuan and Han Chuang, I am not as gullible as before."

Hearing his words, Xiao Yuetan became visibly relaxed. He further reminded: "If you can survive this difficulty and successfully return to Xianyang, your victory would be complete. Otherwise, all your previous efforts would have gone down the drain."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong knows that he still have to resolve Xiao Pan's identity predicament. Unfortunately, he cannot share

this burden with Xiao Yuetan. He solemnly swore: “I would not lose this fight.”

Xiao Yuetan was elated: “Shaolong has finally regained your confidence!”

Xiang Shaolong muttered to himself: “It is very mysterious. Having lost Hundred Battle Sabre and repossessing it later, I felt like a completely different person. I felt as if I did not suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of Li Mu. It was a full recovery from the period of time when I was utterly depressed.”

Xiao Yuetan stood up and bade: “There is no need to send me off. Please take good care of yourself. There may come a time in the future when we will head out to the borders together and turn our sights to the huge grasslands.”

His eyes trailing Xiao Yuetan’s back until he disappeared at the extreme end of the corridor, Xiang Shaolong suddenly remember the first time when he met Xiao Yuetan in Handan. After this talented and capable man finished their official discussions, he immediately requested a courtesan from the Wu Family to accompany him to bed, leaving him a bad impression of this man. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect Xiao Yuetan to be a righteous hero and even ended up as his soul mate.

The path of life is never a straight line.

Aye!

Since he is going to the birthday banquet, he might as well be early.

Since he became a fugitive, not a day goes by without him pining for his home. Only at home can he find the long awaited feelings of true happiness and peace.

Book 24 Chapter 09 - The Grand Banquet At The Palace Of Qi

On the way to the palace, Xiang Shaolong observed that the roads leading to the Small City where the palace was located was packed with numerous carriages and they were traveling at a snail's pace. He could not help but praised himself for making the excellent choice of riding a horse. Riding along the walkway or squeezing between carriages according the available road conditions with Yao Sheng and his team, they agilely and swiftly made their way towards the palace.

Wherever he rode, people started staring at him. Regardless of girls from rich families or the wives of officials, everyone pulled aside their carriage curtains to catch a glimpse of his elegant demeanor, wanting to see for themselves the appearance of this man who is able to win the heart of Talented Lady Ji.

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not disappoint them. With a warrior headband around his forehead, an exquisite inner shirt and a long and huge cape, he was particularly outstanding. In addition, his back is straight, his handsome features are well-defined and the corner of his lips is portrayed in a somewhat faint smirk. Coupled with the world famous Hundred Battle Sabre hanging around his waist, he exudes a mesmerizing charm that would overwhelm all the beauties under the sky.

Yao Sheng and the others share his glory too. With puffed chests and straightened backs, they are awe-inspiring in their own right.

Overtaking every carriage they met, they soon came to the

entrance of Small City. The Imperial Guards solemnly saluted Xiang Shaolong upon laying their eyes on him.

Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, is feeling as calm as still water, beyond the reaches of happiness or sadness.

Before he set off, he meditated for a full two hours before taking a shower and getting a change of clothes. He can feel his own alertness and energy level at a peak that he has never attained before. Brimming with hope and confidence, he can feel that he is in complete control of everything that is about to happen.

The troubles in life will repeat themselves endlessly.

Since he left Xianyang and took his first step into the battlefield, he has been living under immense stress and danger every second of his life. When he became a fugitive, he was forced to make life and death choices on an hourly basis. Up till this point when he was about to pit his skills against this behemoth of swordsmanship for a clear cut victory and trek through countless hills and cross numerous rivers to return to his warm and inviting home, he felt as if his entire life has accomplished an incredible sense of fulfillment.

He must always remind himself of this wonderful feeling. Although the sounds of people and carriages are conjured around him, he felt as if they are a long distance away from him.

Everything that enters his sight seemed to be surreal. The only genuine sensations he can experience are his own body and the

movement of the horse.

He is deeply entrenched in this amazing time travel dream, sinking to the innermost sanctum of it. There, he is beyond salvation, beyond redemption and cannot even wake up even if he wants to.

Out of the blue, someone called out: Great General, taking his out of his stupor.

Xiang Shaolong reduced his horse-riding speed and turned his head in the direction of the voice. Three carriages behind him, he noticed someone sticking his head out of the carriage window and is waving at him. It turned out to be Guo Kai.

The Zhao riders surrounding Guo Kai's carriage saluted him.

Xiang Shaolong held his horse on the same spot. After much difficulty, the carriage managed to catch up from the back. Guo Kai sighed: "I finally get to meet Shaolong. In Shouchun, we were facing each other but I did not recognize you. Now, we can officially talk with our real identities. Empress Jing has been pining for you!"

This crafty ghost Guo Kai has aged considerably, becoming so fat that his face is completely round, losing much of his past grandeur. Although Xiang Shaolong dislike him and knew that he is scheming against himself, he pretended to be intimate with this old friend, chuckling: "Chancellor Guo must be living a good life without worries and stress, causing you to put on weight. If we met

on the streets, I may not be able to recognise you!”

His gaze shifting to the Hundred Battle Sabre, Guo Kai emotionally remarked: “Back in the past, the late King made a wrong decision and placed his trust in Zhao Mu. Otherwise, not only would Shaolong and I still be best friends, we may even be partners working hand in hand to resist our common enemies.”

Adjusting his horse to match the slow speed of the carriage, Xiang Shaolong is rotating between occasional stops or sluggish canter. With Yao Sheng and his compatriots escorting him from the front and back, they are inadvertently drawing more attention to themselves.

Crossing into Small City, the celebratory aura in the air is even more prominent than before. Every household is lavishly decorated with lighted lanterns and red banners while the sound of firecrackers popping consistently invaded his eardrums.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Unfortunately, there is no ‘otherwise’ in real life. For example, after a man has died, he cannot be brought back to life. Even if you can re-experience a past moment of your life, things will still turn out the same way.”

Of course Guo Kai is unable to comprehend the true essence of his feelings. Continuing his previous topic, he added: “Reminiscing about the past, one cannot help but feel emotional. Nevertheless, an outstanding talent will shine wherever he goes. Shaolong is a fine example.”

Xiang Shaolong was restless, being able to sense that an emotional Guo Kai is exhibiting rare honesty, given his deplorable character, due to his knowledge about tomorrow's event. From his point of view, Xiang Shaolong would either perish under the hands of Cao Cuidao or the ambush that he has laid.

Why is he feeling so confident?

Did he really correctly guess that Xiang Shaolong is prepared to slip away tomorrow night?

Unless there is a spy within the Song & Dance Troupe who had told him that Xiang Shaolong has been delivering instructions in a manner that resembles a dying man reading out his will, an outsider should not have been able to make such a wise deduction.

At this juncture, his mind suddenly recalled Zhu Xiuzhen's personal maid Little Ning'er. He had suspected that she was the one who stole the song sheet for Zhang Quan but was unable to prove it

If Guo Kai managed to get in touch with Zhang Quan, they could easily track Xiang Shaolong's activities. All along, Guo Kai is a clever and scheming person. Observant and sharp, he is able to link small incidents to a bigger picture. Moreover, he is knowledgeable about Xiang Shaolong's character and it is not impossible for him to lay an inescapable ambush.

If this is proven to be true, the element of danger for tomorrow night would be significantly higher. Besides ambushing the road

back to the City, the Yan and Zhao attackers may extend their ambush to cover other areas. To make it worse, nobody else can help him. This has to be a solo battle.

Guo Kai was astonished: “What is Shaolong thinking about?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “I was thinking that if Chancellor Guo were to send someone to try and kill me, I would not bear any hatred against you.”

Guo Kai violently trembled: “But I would not feel good about it. If not for Shaolong sparing my life at Handan’s Hostage Residence years ago, I, Guo Kai, would not be able to accomplish what I have today. This development is truly regrettable.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to remember that incident and his goodwill towards him increased by a few notches. However, he did not know what to say for the time being.

Guo Kai suddenly questioned: “Back then, Lady Ni left a son after passing away. Did he follow Shaolong to Xianyang? Why didn’t I hear anything about him? Lady Ni is a good lady, someone worth commemorating. Unfortunately, Heaven is jealous of her beauty. Aye!”

Suppressing the tsunami erupting in his mind, Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lu Buwei’s willful spreading of Xiao Pan’s questionable heritage is akin to throwing a huge boulder into a pool of still water; throwing up many scenarios and questions. For example, Guo Kai is now suspecting that Xiao Pan is Yingzheng

himself.

This is no laughing matter. If Lu Buwei gets wind of this and matching the testimony of the couple he kidnapped from Handan, this would become a debate they cannot hope to win.

He instead replied: “Grieving for his mother’s passing, the kid refuses to eat or drink during the journey. Due to the harsh traveling conditions, he eventually succumbed to illness and death.”

Guo Kai acknowledged with an ‘Orh’, but his expression tells Xiang Shaolong that he had already anticipated this answer from him.

No longer keen to stick around him, Xiang Shaolong bid farewell and pushed the horse to go faster. Overtaking ten odd carriages in a row, he entered the palace.

The palace of Qi was extravagantly adorned and it was an imposing sight.

The throne and the VIP tables are located on the top of Henggong Platform, numbering close to a hundred. At the square below Henggong Platform, over a thousand tables were neatly arranged. They were assigned to the lower ranking civil and military officials, as well as the rich tycoons or educated scholars who are invited to the banquet.

The performing stage for the Song & Dance routine is the raised stage in the centre of Henggong Platform. The musicians are based on the lower level and facing the throne.

Within the palace, every available spot is crowded with people who are dressed to the nines. For the ladies, they cannot avoid competing with each other in terms of their dressing.

Covered with a blanket and lying down, the King of Qi is at Dianjiang Platform, the lower deck of Henggong Platform. With a delighted expression, he was busy receiving congratulations from his well wishers.

Tian Jian is even more enthusiastic than him. With his kingly future secured, everyone is flattering him nonstop and trying their best to get into his good books. Even those who didn't know what is going on would somehow have an idea that he would become an important figure of Qi.

After Xiang Shaolong offered his congratulations to the King of Qi, he noticed Zongsun Long fighting for Tian Jian's attention and sweet-talking him. Inversely, Tian Dan is standing at a side with a look of contempt on his face while chatting idly with Lu Buwei and Guo Kai. He could not help but think of Xiao Pan again.

Whoever that becomes King would certainly be corrupted by power and the flattery of officials, blinding himself to the truth in time to come. This kind of side effect has become the norm. Xiao Pan is visibly a changed man. How long can their mutual trusts last?

Li Yuan's voice sounded beside his ear: "Shaolong! Let's find a quiet place and have a chat."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Is there a quiet place here? Do we need to walk a few miles?"

Li Yuan laughed along and pulled him towards the door of the platform. As they walked past a group of concubines, the various ladies were staring intensely at the two of them.

Thinking of Lady Qingxiu and Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong scanned their faces but did not manage to pinpoint the two ladies among them.

Squeezing out of the overcrowded hall, the two men climbed to the top of Henggong Platform. There, palace maids are busying themselves by laying the tables as well as arranging delicious food and wine. It was a lively scene.

Making their way to a corner of Henggong Platform that was far away from the throne where one can see the wilderness and horizon over and beyond the city walls, Li Yuan leaned on a railing under the bright illumination of lanterns, checking: "When does Shaolong intend to return to Xianyang; are you open to traveling with Little Brother?"

Xiang Shaolong is unable to find any traces of hatred for him within his heart. He plainly answered: "There is no need to trouble you. Travelling through Wei would be faster and sailing is much

more comfortable.”

Li Yuan agreed: “You can save half the traveling time; however, are there any security concerns?”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “I will officially ask Qi to send a team to escort me home. Coupled with Zongsun Long’s protection and arrangements, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Li Yuan kept probing: “When do you plan to leave?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “I can only leave after the Qixia College Performance, otherwise, it would be hard for me to put my mind at ease.”

Li Yuan suppressed his voice: “Tomorrow night, you must take extra precautions. I am confident that Shaolong would survive your duel with Grandmaster Cao. However, the people of Qi would not take this lying down. I have heard rumours saying that the Extremists of Qixia are preparing to ambush you on the way back to the city should you emerge victorious from the fight. Why don’t I fetch you personally? You can use a fire signal to communicate with me.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised his formidability. If he does not know that Li Yuan is Guo Kai’s accomplice, it would be a miracle if he did not fall into their trap.

From his sentences, he could also be testing Xiang Shaolong to

see if he would slip away under the cover of the night.

With such ‘kind intentions’, it would be illogical for him to refuse. Xiang Shaolong promptly agreed and indicated the fire signals that he would employ.

He then intentionally brought up: “When you are back at Shouchun, please send my regards to your wife and Empress.”

A sensation of deep pain flashed past his eyes as Li Yuan suddenly grabbed Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder’s, stammering: “Shaolong...”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling agitated too but he calmly wondered: “Yes?”

Extracting himself from his emotional state, Li Yuan loosened his grip and shook his head, lamenting: “Nothing. Thinking that we would soon be separated from each other and may even meet on the battlefield, fighting for our right to live, I could not help but feel exasperated! It is really nothing.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself!

Han Chuang’s laughter filled the air as he approached them: “I didn’t know Chancellor Li and Great General were hiding here. Shaolong is truly remarkable, with the Three Famous Courtesans taking turns to ask me where is our handsome friend. Little Marquis is so jealous I feel like committing suicide!”

If not for their enmity, Han Chuang would definitely make an excellent partying companion.

Thinking that he should do his bit to stimulate the morale of the Song & Dance Troupe, especially Dong Shuzen who is taking center stage for the first time, Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Where are they?”

Arriving at the front of the two men, Han Chuang replied: “They are at the lowest platform, Cihuai Platform. Shall Little Marquis lead the way?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “I shall visit them and subsequently find an opportunity to leave early.”

Li Yuan understandingly agreed: “That’s the way. Sufficient rest is crucial. Let us accompany you!”

Walking between the two men, Xiang Shaolong took the chance to request: “Regardless of what happens between the various States, I hope that both gentlemen can grant me a favour: Take good care of Shuzen.”

Han Chuang sighed: “Relax! If we cannot even do something as simple as that, can we be considered human?”

Xiang Shaolong took his word for it.

Stepping into Cihuai Platform, Xiang Shaolong was stunned.

Originally, a gigantic hall, it was partitioned by cloth into three areas and it is swarming with people. The sound of ladies giggling and teasing each other sounded continuously.

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Let’s part ways here. I wish to meet them alone.”

With a heavy expression on their faces, Li Yuan and Han Chuang held his hands as a form of goodbye. Li Yuan offered: “Let us escort you out of the city tomorrow.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I’ll be fine! Lu Buwei and Second Prince have already informed me that they will be escorting me.”

Sitting alone in front of a bronze mirror, Feng Fei is receiving last minute touching up of her make up by Little Ping’er and Yunniang.

Xiang Shaolong was moved by her beauty. He acknowledged: “No wonder First Mistress is able to head the Three Famous Courtesans. With your beauty alone, it is more than enough to convince anyone that you are an angel from heaven.”

Feng Fei gave him a sweet smile but complained: “Without you appreciating at the side, being an angel is meaningless! After all, this is my last performance!”

The next second, she laughed: “Ignore my whining. Great General’s duel tomorrow night is critical. Be a good boy and go to

bed early tonight! Feng Fei will spend her whole day with you tomorrow.”

Keeping a lookout from the corner of his eye, Xiang Shaolong noticed Zhu Xiuzhen’s personal maid Little Ning’er making an excuse to get close to them. Confirming his suspicions that she plans to spy on their conversation, he intentionally declared: “After Little Brother’s triumphant return, I shall accompany First Mistress to go sightseeing.”

Feng Fei happily agreed.

Approaching Dong Shuzen, Xiang Shaolong inquired: “Are you feeling nervous?”

Standing beside Dong Shuzen, Zhu Xiuzhen giggled: “Second Mistress dare not speak the entire day for fear of spoiling her vocal cords. What does Great General think about her nervousness?”

Dong Shuzen secretly gripped his hand tightly and leaned towards his ear, whispering: “The night after tomorrow, I shall accompany you to bed.”

Xiang Shaolong left with a bitter smile. Touring one round within the partition, he observed that various Troupe members are highly spirited and do not require him to boost their morale. Feeling satisfied and fulfilled, he pushed aside a cloth partition in order to leave the area. Unexpectedly, he ran into Boss Jin who consequently dragged him to meet Shi Sufang.

Covered with a hooded cape, Shi Sufang is standing at one corner like a ghost, silently watching the other members of her troupe completing their assigned tasks. She appeared to be isolated from the rest of them and in the same context, no one dared to disturb her tranquility.

Boss Jin whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ear: "Since she was young, Sufang has always maintained her withdrawn character. Nevertheless, her talent cannot be denied. She cannot be bothered with anything but the minute she learns something, she would easily surpass her teachers. In her whole lifetime, she only respects Feng Fei and no other."

Xiang Shaolong could imagine that she does not have any regards for Talented Lady Ji too. Otherwise, why didn't she pay her a visit.

Leading Xiang Shaolong to Shi Sufang's side, Boss Jin softly called: "Sufang! Sufang! Great General is here to visit you!"

Hearing the Great General title, Shi Sufang's petite frame faintly shuddered and brilliance started to return to her hollow eyes. Turning her pretty head, she looked at the direction of Xiang Shaolong.

At this juncture, all her fellow courtesans and troupe workers stopped what they were doing and gazed at Xiang Shaolong with astonishment. When Boss Jin waved them off with a gesture, they unwilling continued their original work, such as applying make up or tuning their musical instruments.

Patting Xiang Shaolong, Boss Jin remarked: “The two of you should have a good talk!”

Visibly annoyed with the intermittent peeping by the other troupe members, Shi Sufang lightly invited: “Great General, please follow Sufang!”

Pulling a curtain behind her, it turned out to be a specially partitioned small area. The ground was covered by a mat and there are sitting cushions as well. A long bronze mirror and a rack full of costumes are present too.

Both of them sat on the floor.

Despite being surrounded by noise and the occasional tuning sounds from musical instruments, this enclosed area is surprisingly quiet and private.

With her pitiful-looking and mesmerizing eyes slowly scanning Xiang Shaolong, Shi Sufang then turned her gaze to a curtain by the side and plainly questioned: “Does Great General enjoy loneliness?”

After careful consideration, Xiang Shaolong gingerly answered: “Some of the time, I need my personal space and silence, which allows me to go into deep contemplation.”

With a melancholic tone, Shi Sufang inquired: “What do you contemplate about?”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “There is no fixed thought. It depends on what are the matters that are troubling me!”

Shi Sufang nodded: “You are very frank. In fact, among all the men that Sufang has met, Great General’s complete honesty and un-hypocritical character is rare indeed. Most of them love to boast about their own achievements, as if they are afraid that I do not recognize them for their talents. It is truly disgusting.”

Shifting her gaze back to his face and looking at him in such a manner than Xiang Shaolong can start to feel something for her, Shi Sufang divulged: “After our meeting at Xianyang, Great General has left a deep impression in Sufang’s heart. At that time, Sufang was thinking, is Great General someone I can confide in?”

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but utter: “I heard Mister Pu Hu is on good terms with Miss!”

Revealing bitter smile on her face, Shi Sufang lowered her gaze and calmly professed: “It is either A kill B or B kill A. Moreover, everyone has to die one day and become a star in the sky. What is there to be worried about?”

Xiang Shaolong quietly pondered on the meaning of her words and the negative connotation. For a period of time, he was dumbfounded.

Shi Sufang seems to be mired in her self-created dreamy state that she can never hope to exit. In a gentle voice, she described:

“Sufang’s only desire is to simplify my life and does not wish to have too many people or circumstances involved. Aye! More often than not, the people and situations in life are but a fleeting moment. Although they truly exist, they remained meaningless to me. How I wish I can become a tree, slowly and quietly growing up all by myself in the wilderness. All I need is sunshine, rainwater and soil.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “No wonder Miss enjoys the theories of Zhuang Zhou.”

Shi Sufang added: “And Li Er. For everything in life you can do with, you can also do without. A small state with an even smaller population, there is zero social interaction. What a thorough understanding of life! Fame and riches will only bring about inequality in society. The tussle between humans is never-ending. Great General, what are your views on this?”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong has seen someone from this era who loves to be left alone and with an anti-progression and anti-human advancement mindset. In addition, this person happens to be a female. He nodded: “Presently, the situation is not that bad. With a massive increase in population and the grasslands transforming into cities, and the resources of nature are being consumed nonstop until they are lacking, on top of animals having nowhere to reside because of urbanization, that would be scary.”

Shi Sufang vividly shivered: “Great General has more foresight than Sufang.”

Xiang Shaolong exhaled with a breath: “This development will

certainly materialize itself. From the beginning of time, human intelligence has been sitting on the opposite fence of nature. We are unlike plants and animals who coexist peacefully with our environment.”

After some thought and displaying signs of unhappiness, Shi Sufang quizzed: “When does Great General intend to return to Qin?”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Probably these few days. Hey! I need to make a move too.”

Nodding her head slightly, Shi Sufang did not reply and sank into deep contemplation.

Standing up, Xiang Shaolong left as quietly as possible.

Book 24 Chapter 10 - Farewell Letters

Feng Fei and the others got home around one am that same night. Everyone is behaving in a joyful manner, indicating that the performance is a great success.

Several of the courtesans quietly entered his room to check on him. Resisting the urge to get up, Xiang Shaolong pretended to be sleeping in response to their invasion.

When the rear courtyard has more or less resumed its tranquility, Xiang Shaolong sat down in lotus position and began meditating according to Mozi's teachings and rejuvenating breathing techniques. Before dawn, he took Hundred Battle Sabre to the garden for another round of practice.

He was glad that he left before the end of the banquet last night and is able to preserve the tiptop condition of his mental and physical strength.

Using both his hands to hold the sabre, he repeatedly maneuvered several moves, trying to simplify the process. Placing speed as his top priority, he fought an imaginary Cao Cuidao.

Fighting against this Sword Saint, even the ever-changing and incredible swordplay of Mozi became useless moves.

He can only gather the essence of scientific and modern attacks, merging it with his sabre play.

At that time, most of the other Troupe members are either dead drunk or still in dreamland. Delighted to be left undisturbed, he can focus his mind and concentrate on his warm up exercises.

He proceeded to the bathroom and enjoyed a cold shower. With his alertness at full capacity, he returned back to his room for another round of mediation. Shortly thereafter, Little Ping'er came to summon him.

At the breakfast table, the courtesans are in full attendance. Yunniang, the Head Musician cum Conductor, as well as several other accomplished musicians were present too.

For a start, Feng Fei represented everyone in expressing their gratitude for Xiang Shaolong. With her eyes full of reminiscence, she recounted: "At the end of Shuzen's song, Prince (Tian) Jian officially announced the retirement of Feng Fei. The standing ovation of the audience is something I can never forget."

Yunniang giggled: "Everyone who is present is honoured to have viewed First Mistress's last performance."

Zhu Xiuzhen enthusiastically described: "Last night, First Mistress's performance is simply fantastic and even we are intoxicated by her singing. No one is able to retain his or her senses at her spellbinding vocals. For a while, we were worried that Second Mistress may put up an inferior performance due to the pressure from First Mistress. Luckily, Second Mistress is able to deliver a spectacular song, cumulating in a breathtaking finale of

the Song & Dance presentation.”

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed: “Are you people trying to make me feel bad?” The ladies burst into shrill laughter at his teasing.

Dong Shuzen gratefully extended: “Li Yuan of Chu, Marquis Chuang of Han and Lord Longyang of Wei have officially invited us to perform at their respective States...”

Xinyue interrupted: “Only Great General of Qin has yet to officially invite us.”

The ladies began laughing again and the ambience is relaxing and friendly. This is also because the depressing mood of troupe disbandment no longer exists. Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “We are one big family right? When you people come over to Xianyang, it is as good as coming home. See, isn’t this better than an invitation?” The ladies burst out in giggles again.

Dong Shuzen wondered out loud: “What does First Mistress and Great General think of Fei Chun?” Both of them can tell that she is picking a new manager and praised her foresight.

After breakfast has concluded, Xiang Shaolong and Fei Fei went for a stroll in the garden. Both parties can feel a lump in their throats.

Feng Fei calmly state: “For the time being, I will not be going to Xianyang!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Where does Mistress intend to go?”

Gazing at a particularly large cluster of clouds floating in the sky, Feng Fei replied: “Feng Fei is thinking of following Lady Qingxiu back to Chu and staying there for some time. I have grown tired of the extreme cold weather and would like to experience the marvelous sights of the south.”

Xiang Shaolong made a wild guess that she wanted to avoid Han Jie and nodded: “It is good to have a change of environment. Xianyang’s winter is quite tormenting as well.”

Feng Fei shot him a look: “Do not think that you have gotten rid of me; maybe one day, I will come looking for you at your residence and refuse to leave.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that she is joking and loudly laughed: “This is something no man in his right mind would reject. Seriously speaking, First Mistress must not forget to come and visit Little Brother.”

With a melancholic tone, Feng Fei enquired: “Is Great General leaving tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong answered in a deep voice: “If I can survive the duel, it would be unwise for me to hang around here.”

Feng Fei cheerfully exclaimed: “Great General is finally trusting Feng Fei wholeheartedly. With this knowledge, I will no longer have any regrets in life.”

She added in a gentle voice: “Feng Fei will rather die than divulge Xiang Shaolong’s secret.”

Xiang Shaolong reminisced that both of them have progressed from mutual distrust to mutual scheming to this final stage of mutually regarding each other as a confidante and could not help but feel his heart brimming with delight and comfort.

One of the touching moments about life is that ugliness and beauty can coexist in the same dimension. The human nature is an uneven object; depending on the angle you are viewing from, you will get a different perspective every time.

For example, it is challenging for him to classify Li Yuan or Han Chuang as villains.

Every person has his or her principles. When there are benefits involved and others are forced to act against you, you would naturally get angry and regard them with hatred.

Feng Fei suddenly mentioned: “It will be sunset before you know it. Aye, it is truly heartrending when I do not know if I can ever see Great General again in the future.”

At this juncture, Xiao Yuetan came to look for Xiang Shaolong,

interrupting their farewell speeches. At the Eastern Chamber, Xiao Yuetan produced a stack of parchments and snickered: “I wrote these letters for you this morning. They are farewell letters to Lu Buwei, the King of Qi, newly promoted Crown Prince Tian Jian, Xie Ziyuan and not forgetting Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Zongsun Long. The letters to Li Yuan and Han Chuang are imbued with special meaning. After browsing through, do sign them if you have no issue with the content. After your successful departure, I will get Feng Fei to send them out on your behalf.”

Xiang Shaolong was worried: “Aren’t you concerned that Lu Buwei would recognize your handwriting?”

Xiao Yuetan assured: “I am well-versed in all kinds of handwriting and forgery; I guarantee that he would be unable to recognize it.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a praise: “Not harnessing the abilities of a talented man like yourself, Lu Buwei is as stupid as can be.”

Xiao Yuetan viciously reasoned: “He is purposely sacrificing me to divert suspicions away from himself. At the same time, he can use this opportunity to weaken the prowess of his Old Guard.”

Xiao Yuetan is a man who values relationships and is especially disgusted with Lu Buwei’s ungrateful behavior.

Right now, he is doing everything he can to assist Xiang Shaolong without any reservations is precisely because they are similar in

nature.

Xiang Shaolong casually selected one of the letters and opened it up for a look. The letter read: Greetings to Marquis Chuang. By the time Lord Marquis is reading this letter, Shaolong is miles away. For me to leave without saying goodbye, I am forced by circumstances and Lord Marquis should know better than myself. I trust that you will not blame Shaolong for being impolite. Life is full of happiness and sorrow; coming and going; love and hatred, friendship and enmity. Now that we have split paths once again, our next meeting remains an unknown. I pray that everything will go smoothly for Lord Marquis and may Lord Marquis live a life of longevity. Yours sincerely, Shaolong.

Holding the letter, Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “When Han Chuang reads this letter, he would be experiencing a hundred and one emotions simultaneously. He would have trouble expressing his difficulties.”

Xiao Yuetan proudly selected another letter and passed to him, remarking: “This is for Li Yuan.”

Xiang Shaolong held up the letter and read: “Chancellor Li, my respected elder brother. Life is unpredictable and full of gatherings and separations. Recalling the times when we fight side by side and watching each other’s back with no reservations, the memory is still fresh within me. Regrettably, times have changed and the past cannot be repeated in the present. It is painfully lamentable. Now that Little Brother is on my way home, I sincerely wish Chancellor every success in your career and may you never be toppled.”

Slapping the table, Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Can we add two sentences? However, the copywriting has to be done by Elder Brother. I really love the hot-cold sarcastic style of writing.” He proceeded to tell Xiao Yuetan about last night when Li Yuan offered to escort him back from Qixia College.

Readied with a brush and ink, Xiao Yuetan held his laughter as he added to the end of the message: Regarding Chancellor’s desire to escort me, pardon Little Brother for not taking it up. I will never forget your kind gesture.

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table again and praised his intellect.

The other letters to the King of Qi, Zongsun Long, etc were rather ordinary and there was nothing noteworthy about the dictation. The letter to Lord Longyang is the most polite-sounding and appropriate emotions were highlighted in the letter, demonstrating Xiao Yuetan’s creative writing talent.

Scrutinizing Xiao Yuetan’s eyes, Xiang Shaolong observed: “Elder Brother must have worked through the night and even had to write these letters early in the morning.”

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: “Skipping a night of sleep is no big deal. The most important thing right now is to ensure that there is nothing distracting you. These letters also serve as a means to boost your fighting spirit. If you somehow lost the fight, these letters would have to be burnt.”

Slapping the table and standing up, Xiang Shaolong faced the sky

and let out a long laughter: “Relax. I am current at the peak of my abilities. Be it a Sword Saint or a Sword Demon, I will give it everything I’ve got and would deny him victory at all costs.”

Stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan smiled: “I am going to disguise myself and leave the city, heading to the designated place to bury your escaping equipment for tonight. I will send out the letters for Shaolong tomorrow!”

After Xiao Yuetan’s departure, the newly promoted Manager Fei Chun approached him to show his appreciation. Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong instructed: “Get someone to secretly spy on Little Ning. If she left the Villa and meet up with an outsider before I leave for my duel, tell Miss Xiuzhen to terminate her employment but do not punish her.”

According to his observations, if Little Ning is a spy, she would surely have to provide a latest update about himself to the person who had bribed her. He added: “If nothing happened, take it that you never hear this from me.”

Fei Chun realized what is going on and acted on his instructions.

Stretching his back, Xiang Shaolong is feeling totally relaxed.

What appeared to be some challenging difficulties are eventually beautifully resolved. All that remains is Cao Qiudao’s challenge and avoiding the ambush of the Yan and Zhao swordsmen. With the snowboard, he has to speed back to Zhongmou before the snow melts. Once he reunites with Teng Yi and his other brothers, they

would return to Qin together and this horrible chapter would come to a close.

Of course Xiao Pan's identity crisis needs to be solved but for the time being, he can only trust that history will not be altered.

At least in the records of history, it was not mentioned that Qin Shihuang is born outside the royal family and he is definitely not documented as the son of Lu Buwei.

In the same aspect, he could not comprehend the obvious absence of an earth-shattering figure such as himself.

In the middle of this troublesome reflection, Lord Longyang came to him with two reddish eyes. Needless to say, Xiang Shaolong knew that he had had a sleepless night.

Coming to a small pavilion in the garden, Lord Longyang sighed with a breath. It seems like he has so much to say but didn't know how to begin.

Xiang Shaolong consoled him instead: "Life and Death are predetermined; Wealth and Poverty depends on Fate. If Heaven is not ready for my death, even ten Cao Qiyuans cannot lay a finger on me."

Lord Longyang grudgingly smiled: "Perhaps Shaolong believes that Cao Qiyuan is capable of showing mercy. Last night, I received news that Tian Dan had a two hour discussion with him; what do

you think Tian Dan is doing?”

Xiang Shaolong was unnerved, believing that since Cao Qiudao has given his word to Xiao Yuetan, no one would be able to influence his decision.

Patting the scabbard of Hundred Battle Sabre once, Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “If he wants to kill me, he has to ask my best friend first.”

Lord Longyang forcefully recomposed his spirit and clarified: “I am not trying to be a wet blanket but it is my desire to remind Shaolong not to underestimate the enemy. If you can fight, so be it. If you cannot, simply run away. He is an old man after all and I don’t think he can outrun you.”

Xiang Shaolong was not agitated at all. He mused: “At the end of the day, you are concerned that he may take my life.”

Staring intently at him for some time, Lord Longyang professed with astonishment: “Shaolong is truly extraordinary. If it was anybody but you, it would be impossible for him to remain unaffected when faced with such a formidable fighter.”

Xiang Shaolong honestly expressed: “Worrying is futile. I might as well apply the energy towards handling my opponent during the fight. Isn’t that a better strategy?”

Leaning on a railing, Lord Longyang lowered his head and

disclosed: “Li Yuan and Han Chuang...”

Interrupting him with a determined tone, Xiang Shaolong concluded: “Your Lordship need not go on. From now until I am done with Cao Qiudao, I do not wish to hear anything that concerns the two of them.”

Lord Longyang was visibly shaken. He uttered: “Shaolong... ..”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “You say it best, when you say nothing at all. Your Lordship should go home and have a good rest. Don’t think so much. I will speak with you tomorrow!”

Lord Longyang slowly stepped to his front and gave him a light embrace, commending: “Shaolong’s overwhelming confidence has convinced me that you will surely surmount all sorts of difficulties. Take care of yourself.”

Watching the back of Lord Longyang gradually disappearing under the cover of the trees, Xiang Shaolong felt immensely apologetic.

Under the leadership of Feng Fei and Dong Shuzen, every single Troupe member is assembled at the courtyard square, bidding farewell to their hero. Their eyes trailed his back until he boarded the carriage of Lu Buwei and the new Crown Prince Tian Jian.

With their flags fluttering in a grand appearance, scores of Qi soldiers neatly rode out of Tingsong Villa, paving way for the

carriage carrying the three men. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

With a team of one hundred Imperial Guards protecting them, they entered the highway. On both sides of the roads, people have gathered to send them off. It is not known if they are supporting Cao Qiudao or admiring Xiang Shaolong's 'act of valor'.

Including Xiang Shaolong himself, nobody can ever imagine Cao Qiudao losing a duel. The question is: Can Xiang Shaolong survive this catastrophe?

This carriage is especially wide and the seats are constructed near the tail end of the carriage. Due to the extra room, up to four men can sit side by side. As Xiang Shaolong is the main character for tonight, he could not reject and naturally had to sit in between Tian Jian and Lu Buwei.

In the recent years, it is rare for him to be so intimate with this great nemesis Lu Buwei. Feeling completely out of place, Xiang Shaolong prayed for the journey to end as quickly as possible.

He firstly congratulated Tian Jian for becoming the new Crown Prince and Tian Jian was chortling so cheerfully he could not keep his mouth closed. Lu Buwei interrupted: "Earlier on, Prince and I were discussing the best way to rule a State. Prince mentioned Guan Zhong's Book of People Governance and singled out the theory of: Through Education, everyone will know the laws; Well-fed and well-cloth, everyone is aware of glory and shame. This is a sign of true wisdom. With Prince Jian succeeding the throne, the prosperity of Qi is something we can anticipate."

Tian Jian is overwhelmed with happiness. He articulated: “A well-managed country is always prosperous while an ill-managed state will always remain poor. As every good king should know, we must first enrich the population before exercising our rule over them.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask: “How does Prince plan to enrich the population?”

After a short spell of silence, Tian Jian pondered: “A strong army and a rich State is inseparable. Without a strong army, the State is insecure. Without a rich State, the army cannot grow strong. This is an ageless truth.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself, recognizing that he did not have a good method to offer. By blindly regurgitating Guan Zi’s theory, it is just empty talk.

Although the time he spent in Lin Zi is limited, just by observing the existence of people like Zongsun Long, he can deduce that while Qi appears to be thriving, there is a huge divide between the rich and the poor. This is because the King has allowed members of the royal family to join hands with unscrupulous businessmen in setting up shady industries. Every day, they are competing with one another to open up gambling dens, brothels or loansharking companies. In addition, due to a lack of ordinary schools, the education level of the population is not unanimous, leading to this income disparity as well. However, Tian Jian chose to ignore this glaring truth and make baseless comments such as building a strong army and enriching the population. He is making a joke out

of himself.

Xiao Pan is far more successful than the other Kings because he is able to understand the sentiments of the population. With the brilliant advisor Li Si assisting him, his policies are practical and are not based on some empty debate.

Going all out to flatter, Lu Buwei praised: “Crown Prince’s assessment is not inferior to Guan Zhong or Qi Heng!”

Despite expressing modesty, Tian Jian is thrilled and accepted the praise wholeheartedly.

At this juncture, they are almost reaching the city gates and the crowds here are significantly thicker. Someone shouted out in a loud voice: “Grandmaster Cao will win! Grandmaster Cao will win!”

Within a short span of time, everybody caught on and began cheering wildly. With thousands of Qi citizens shouting simultaneously, it was an intimidating scene.

Revealing an unnatural expression on his face, Tian Jian kept his silence.

Lu Buwei secretly observed Xiang Shaolong’s countenance and noticing that his facial expression is as calm as a mirror, he grinned: “Shaolong, your nerves are like steel.”

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused.

This is exactly like a soccer team playing in an AWAY match. The host had gained the home ground advantage. If they could not withstand the sounds of booing, they would have lost the match before it even begun.

With a smile, he pointed: “If a swordsman’s fighting spirit is easily affected by external factors, how can he even qualify for the duel?”

Rolling his eyes, Lu Buwei acted as if he had forgotten something and suddenly remembered it. He articulated: “I nearly forgot to tell Shaolong something. After discussing with Empress and Little Ai, I have sent my men to look for that Handan couple who raised Crown Prince. I wish to invite them to Xianyang and allow them to retire without any worries. If everything goes according to plan, they should be in Xianyang by now!”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his hatred rising, knowing that Lu Buwei intentionally revealed this matter at this point in time to cause disarray to his mental state, hoping to distract and add to his worries, causing him to be unable to focus on handling Cao Qiudao’s saintly swordplay. There is no other scheme as ruthless as this.

Fortunately, Zongsun Xuanhua had told him about this matter when he was testing his reaction. Otherwise, this abrupt input which tallies with his speculation may really cause him to lose his bearings.

Tian Jian became more alert upon hearing this. In the past, someone must have brought this to his attention.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and declared: “I am sure Imperial Uncle did not communicate this intention to Crown Prince.”

Lu Buwei loudly chuckled: “It is Empress and my objective to give Crown Prince a surprise. That is why we kept him in the dark.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “If Imperial Uncle had consulted Crown Prince, you could have saved the effort. A long time ago, Crown Prince Zheng has already fetched that couple back to Xianyang. Regarding this matter, he kept a low profile so even Empress has no idea!” This time round, it is Lu Buwei who had a drastic change of countenance and was fidgeting with suspicions.

Among the cackling of firecrackers, the convoy drove out of the city gates.

Li Yuan, Han Chuang, Guo Kai, Xu Yizhe, Lord Longyang, Zongsun Long father and son, Min Tingzhang and a group of Qi officials were already gathered at a piece of barren land outside the city gates, forming a send-off party.

The carriage came to a halt.

Xiang Shaolong got off the carriage first and received the

blessings of the crowd. The officials of Qi would naturally avoid phrases such: A speedy victory or A successful combat.

After entertaining the crowd for a while, Xiang Shaolong rode towards Qixia College with Zongsun Xuanhua and Min Tingzhang accompanying him. Bearing lanterns to illuminate the way, eight other swordsmen dressed in warrior suits escorted them from the front and back.

With a solemn tone, Zongsun Xuanhua explained: “After escorting Great General into Qixia College, we have to return to the city at once, for the Great King has issued a strict decree according to the wishes of Master. Only when Master releases a fire arrow can we come back to Qixia College for a look.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Are you saying that there is nobody else at Qixia College beside Grandmaster Cao?”

On the other side, Min Tingzhang answered: “Exactly. According to esteemed Master, he made this special request because he is concerned that with a live audience, they would definitely cheer for him and affect Great General’s fighting spirit. Judging from the earlier scene, I guess Master’s consideration is not unwarranted.”

At this juncture, they have traveled to a ground of higher elevation. Entering their sights was Qixia College. Besides lanterns hanging at the main door and some illumination at the southeast corner, the entire area is completely dark.

With his horsewhip, Zongsun Xuanhua pointed to the lighted

area that was further away and informed: “That is Stargazing Platform. It is situated at an open square besides the East entrance and stands at three stories high. At the tip of it is a flat stage two hundred feet wide. Master will be waiting there respectfully for Great General’s arrival.”

His gaze focusing on the area that the lanterns are shining down on, Xiang Shaolong suddenly recalled Lord Longyang’s words.

If the fight didn’t turn out in his favour, he should just run for his life.

Book 24 Chapter 11 - Displaying All Talent

Xiang Shaolong flipped off the horse and started walking on a path leading into the snowy forest.

Recounting Cao Qiudao's innate mutant abilities, Xiang Shaolong has noticed his ability to walk energetically despite passing the age of forty. To flee away from him during a losing match is not going to be an easy task.

Furthermore, while fighting high up at the tall platform, it is not convenient to simply start running away. If Cao Quidao chooses to block the path leading down from the platform, it is as good as a cage fight.

Pondering on this, he had a brainwave. Since there is about an hour until the time of the duel, and with Cao Quidao as his senior who has a strong emphasis on status, he would definitely not be 'respectfully waiting' as per Zongsun Xuanhua's description. Therefore, he should have some time to reconnaissance the area and even arrange certain preparations.

He hurriedly injected more speed into his pace and tunneled through the forest via the footpath. A whitewashed and majestic platform that resembles Henggong Platform appeared in front of his eyes.

Since he has a plan in mind, he acted without the least hesitation and ran up the long flight of stairs on the north side of the platform within one breath. Except for the northern edge, the

remaining perimeter of the platform top was lined with stone hedges and every ten feet, a metal pole would protrude out of the hedge and would be having a lantern or a flag hanging at the top. Under the illumination of the lanterns, the platform is as bright as day.

Noting the absence of Cao Qiudao, he heaved a sigh of relief. Walking over to the stone hedge opposite the stone steps leading to the top of the platform, he removed his usual climbing rope and let it down towards the ground. Although the rope ends about ten feet away from the ground, based on his skills as a Special Forces member and with his waist hook, sliding down is a piece of cake.

Securing the other end of the rope to a section of the stone hedge, he camouflaged the area before sitting down in lotus position. Regulating his breathing, he entered a deep meditation state where both the outer world and the inner world cease to exist.

The sound of footsteps forming a peculiar rhythm jolted him out of his meditation. Opening his eyes, the first thing that came to his attention was millions of stars occupying the cloudless sky.

Xiang Shaolong was startled as he failed to notice this wondrous astronomy spectacle when he first arrived. With his mind currently cleared of distractions, he was moved by the captivating night sky.

He thought: Humans and events are ever-changing but the universe will exist forever. If everyone can recognize this fact, countless unnecessary wars can be avoided.

At this point in time, the silhouette of Cao Qiudao's massive frame gradually emerged near the stairs.

Getting on his feet, Xiang Shaolong clasped his hands together as a form of respect.

With his long hair spreading over his shoulders as usual, Cao Qiudao is now wearing a grey warrior suit with wide sleeves that resembles wings, causing his already-substantial body build to appear even more tall and intimidating.

Cao Qiudao returned the greetings: "The last round, I had a taste of Great General's excellent skills, leaving me with the fondest memories. Tonight, I implore Great General to not be stingy about displaying your skills."

Xiang Shaolong let out a long laugh: "I am someone who had succumbed to the sword of Grandmaster Cao; I am not worthy of these brave-sounding words. I beseech Grandmaster Cao to show mercy to me."

His expression as icy as the frosty snow and not revealing any traces of his emotions, Cao Qiudao calmly reasoned: "The one who has lost the fight is me instead. That fateful night, Great General is not using your most adept weapon. I have just lucky to be able to defeat Great General."

Xiang Shaolong is baffled. Judging from his tone, Cao Qiudao sounded as if he is unable to defeat Xiang Shaolong within ten

strokes. Is he planning a friendly match? In a solemn manner, Cao Qiudao added: "Once my sword leaves its sheathe, I never show mercy and will fight as if it is a life and death situation. Only by fighting in this fashion can a swordsman express the necessary respect towards his sword. Does Great General have a name for your sabre?"

Breathing in deeply and raising his heroic spirit, Xiang Shaolong retrieved Hundred Battle Sabre from his waist. With his left hand holding the scabbard and the right hand holding the sabre handle, he smiled: "The Sabre is named Hundred Battle. Awaiting instructions from Grandmaster Cao."

Staring intently at the sabre in his hand, Cao Qiudao nodded his head in succession. He plainly state: "For the past ten years, except for one man, nobody else can stand in front of me without the slightest waver. A worthy adversary is priceless. Does Great General understand the exhilaration in my heart?"

JIANG! The long sword is now in his hand.

Xiang Shaolong is confident that the man he was talking about is Guan Zhongxie's master, a superb swordsman whose name contained the word Zhai. He himself has totally forgotten the full name and wondered if their duel was also held at night. Reminded that it was a night fight, he suddenly had an inspiration and glanced at his scabbard.

Stroking the edge of the sword with a finger, Cao Qiudao alerted in a low voice: "This sword is personally forged by me and it is named: Executioner (of) General. Great General be forewarned."

With a trick up his sleeve, Xiang Shaolong remained motionless and simply requested: “Grandmaster Cao, please make the first move.”

Facing the sky and laughing loudly, Cao Qiudao chuckled: “Well, someone has to attack first. Watch it!”

As the words ‘Watch it!’ rang out, the entire platform is instantly stifled with a gruesome and murderous aura. It looks like impact is imminent.

Cao Qiudao is already pressing towards him and when his boots hit the ground and produced ‘sha sha’ noises, they cumulated into an overbearing stance and it is hair-raising to the max.

Xiang Shaolong consolidated his focus and pinned all his attention on this opponent.

He acknowledged that Cao Qiudao will try to score a victory within a few strokes. As a result, repelling these ten strokes is not going to be an easy task.

The last round, he had the advantage due to his unique weapon. However, his opponent is, after all, a martial arts grandmaster. With their previous exchange, he probably comprehended his sabre play and would not be handicapped like before.

Xiang Shaolong was not complacent when he allowed Cao Qiudao

to make the first move. It was because he had a brilliant scheme.

To someone like him who comes from the 21st century, a battle strategy is more important than anything else. If he can win through intellect, he would not resort to force or mindless bashing.

Cao Qiudao's footwork is awesome and full of intricacies, causing Xiang Shaolong some confusion in estimating his advancing speed and time.

Xiang Shaolong's mind became as calm as still water and entered a realm of clarity. With the absence of happiness and sorrow; past and future, his mind is now free.

Out of the blue, Cao Qiudao increased his speed and pressure. With Executioner manifesting into a huge burst of sword flashes, the actual sword suddenly materialized into a horizontal slash at the speed of lightning. It was an astounding and unmatchable strike.

Xiang Shaolong can sense the opponent's Executioner somewhat sealing all possibilities of an attack route by his Hundred Battle Sabre and Scabbard, leaving blocking as the only option.

He already had a taste of Cao Qiudao's incredible strength. If he forcefully parried the incoming blow which carried the full strength of his opponent, it would be a miracle if the centre of his palm can remain un-fractured. Needless to say, the fight will be over.

Nonetheless, he did not experience a single tinge of fear. By tilting the angle of the scabbard, the scabbard reflected the lantern's light into the eyes of Cao Qiudao.

Just like Cao Qiudao who displayed a spread of sword brilliance in order to confuse him, Xiang Shaolong is achieving the same effect by using the scabbard to reflect light.

However, the effort put in by both parties varies by a large extent.

By just twisting his hand, Xiang Shaolong has accomplished his motive.

No matter how superb is his swordsmanship, Cao Qiudao is still an ordinary man made up of flesh and blood. He is outstanding because he possess more swordfighting talent compared other people and is able to harness his potential at a deeper dimension.

As the light of the lantern fire penetrated his eyes, Cao Qiudao unconsciously squinted as his eyes could not withstand the abrupt increase in brightness compared to the level of lighting on the platform that they are used to. For a brief moment, he was blinded.

Although the spilt second is insufficient for Xiang Shaolong to overcome his enemy and gain victory, it is more than enough for him to avoid this maelstrom attack and un-blockable strike. Concurrently, he grabbed the initiative and counterattacked, destroying Cao Qiudao's strategy to attain victory within a few

strokes and severely disrupting his brimming confidence at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong skirted to the weakest spot of Executioner and firstly utilized the scabbard to deflect the enemy's sword. Simultaneously, he swiftly chop down with Hundred Battle Sabre in his right hand

DANG! A loud clashing sound filled the air.

Twisting his sword and nearly causing Xiang Shaolong to lose his grip on the scabbard, Cao Qiudao could retract his sword in time and parried his Hundred Battle Sabre.

Cao Qiudao may have successfully defended against Xiang Shaolong mountain-crushing attack but he could sense that something is amiss. He intended to shift aside to regain his momentum in order to grasp the initiative once again. But before he could react, Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battle Sabre has begun its wave of attacks.

With every sabre chop, it was perfectly matched with his amazing footwork.

The angle and strength applied in each strike is different, varying between light and heavy blows. Mainly engaging in chopping attacks, the moveset comprises of unfathomable entangling, sticky and slow variations, unleashing the full unique potential of the sabre.

Alarming, every blow is delivered without the slightest reservations and is fixated at maintaining the hard-won initiative. The chops are relentless and Xiang Shaolong appears to be fighting with complete disregard for his life.

This is exactly the strategy that Xiang Shaolong has chosen to employ a long time ago, banking on his youth against Cao Qiudao's matured years. He plotted to exhaust Cao Qiudao's stamina as soon as possible and prevent him from manipulating the fight within the ten strokes, which was what happened during their initial encounter.

When they first fought, Xiang Shaolong was in constant fear of Cao Qiudao's aura and was at a disadvantage. This time round, he is deploying a ruse to weaken Cao Qiudao's aura and putting him at a disadvantage instead.

For someone of Cao Qiudao's caliber, any handicap will only be temporary. When confronted by Xiang Shaolong's three successive chops, he dodged to the left and right accordingly. While receiving the fourth chop, he discovered an opening within the sabre strike and used this opportunity to counterattack. When his sword is about to pierce Xiang Shaolong, the attack was deflected by his scabbard. Continuing the momentum, the sabre formulate into a low attack, forcing Cao Qiudao to retrieve his sword to block, resulting in a stalemate.

His eyes blazing with a cold sensation, it appears that Cao Qiudao is getting angry for the first time. With his tongue and throat growling like thunder, he released a rumbling roar. Parrying the offensive scabbard, he slashed down at a vacant spot.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling bewildered at his move, Cao Qiudao's Executioner sword has changed its sword path halfway, with a top slash evolving into a frontal whisk. As if it has a life of its own, Executioner was stabbing towards his throat in a flash. This sword move is absolutely mind-blowing and simply unbelievable.

Xiang Shaolong tilted his scabbard and made use of the reflection of the gemstones on the scabbard to once again refract light into Cao Qiudao's deadly eyes.

By the time Cao Qiudao realized he is slicing empty air, Xiang Shaolong has darted to his left side. Flexing his arm, he delivered another three chops.

Cao Qiudao stepped sideways to evade and served a circle of sword flashes in return. The circumference of the circle happened to clash with Xiang Shaolong's first chop.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the centre of his palm shaking violently, acknowledging that his opponent has picked up his moves and is negating his attacks in a better way.

DANG! DANG! Xiang Shaolong has successfully chopped twice on the same spot of the opponent's sword and wanted to repeat his feat by striking the same spot a third time. However, contrary to his desire, it failed to materialize.

Nevertheless, eight strokes have been exchanged.

Only two strokes remain.

Although the fight is not turning out in his favour, Cao Qiudao's aura is as steadfast and unyielding as usual. Till now, Xiang Shaolong cannot detect any weakness that he could exploit.

Out of a sudden, Cao Qiudao began spinning on the spot. Like a porcupine with its back full of spikes, he is radiating with countless sword flashes instead as he approached Xiang Shaolong like a swirling tornado.

Xiang Shaolong instantly knew that he cannot relent from this attack, otherwise, he would certainly lose within the next two moves.

In the same instance, he discarded all his sabre skills and strategies from his mind. As Cao Qiudao is spinning at an inconceivable speed, using the scabbard to reflect light into his eyes is now inapplicable. Xiang Shaolong can only rely on his genuine ability and sharp instincts to repulse this unrivalled sword stance.

Resembling a hare and a crane crossing paths, the two men brushed past each other. In the blink of an eye, two strokes were exchanged.

A trail of blood appeared on Xiang Shaolong's left arm after Executioner carved a two-inch blood scar. Luckily, it is a minute flesh wound.

On the other hand, his Hundred Battle Sabre has neatly sliced off a portion of Cao Qiudao's flying hair due to his spinning motion. In the space between the two men, the hair gently flew in a scattered manner due to the wind and progressively landed on the ground.

Cao Qiudao was drastically stunned. Halting the fight, he laughed boisterously: "That's a fine sabre indeed. I have yet to face such an gratifying weapon."

Assuming that the duel is over, Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: "I am truly not Senior's match. Now that the ten strokes are over, we can call it a day!"

His two eyes blazing with fury, Cao Qiudao coldly grunted: "You must be joking. What ten strokes are you blabbering about? Great General is the number one enemy of our Eastern States. Do you think that I, Cao Qiudao, will allow you leave this place alive?"

Xiang Shaolong fell into a daze as his original respect for Cao Qiudao dissipated into thin air, cursing him for being a despicable cad who does not honour his agreements and is certainly not worthy of the title of Sword Saint.

However, now is not the time for deep contemplation. With a flicker of his silhouette, Cao Qiudao has transformed into a new attacking stance and is bearing down on him expeditiously like a tsunami wave.

Xiang Shaolong maneuvered Hundred Battle Sabre around

himself and barely managed to parry three sword strikes from Cao Qiudao within a fraction of a second. By the fourth strike, his arm is so badly shaken it is beginning to turn numb, causing his movement to become slightly sluggish. He therefore tried to use the scabbard in his left hand to block, fighting for a break to catch his breath. Unexpectedly, his reaction coincides with Cao Qiudao's anticipation. By Cao Qiudao twisting his sword to manifest an entangling move and coupled with the additional impact from his body making a half turn, Xiang Shaolong's injured left arm could no longer maintain its grip on the scabbard. The scabbard flew out of his hand and landed somewhere behind him.

In this life and death scenario, Xiang Shaolong unlocked his adrenaline and launched a downward slash, forcefully clashing with Cao Qiudao's sword that was making a horizontal stab at his unguarded left arm.

DANG! The clashing sound rang out in their ears. Cao Qiudao did not envisage Xiang Shaolong to execute this bizarre move in the face of danger and helplessly retreated.

He let out a long laughter: "Without the scabbard, let's see what other tricks do you have in your bag?"

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that it is now either do or die. If he allows Cao Qiudao to unveil another string of attacks and grab the initiative, he would perish on this platform within the next ten strokes.

Without the slightest delay, he advanced so rapidly towards Cao Qiudao that his shadow could barely form a complete outline. In

the same breath, he switched from a one-hand grip to a two-hand grip. Raising the sabre high above his head and with a dance-like footwork, he swiftly positioned a chop at the head of Cao Qiudao.

Cao Qiudao halted his retreat and icily snorted: “You are asking for death!” As he was brandishing his sword and leaning forward, Xiang Shaolong unpredictably leaped up and gathered all his strength, chopping down with all his might.

With gravity on his side and a two-hand grip on the sabre, his stance is invincible and the strength behind this blow is way above his usual limit.

Swishing through the air, Hundred Battle Sabre was humming a piercing sabre whistle that screeched through the atmosphere.

With Cao Qiudao’s ability, he could easily retreat and avoid the onslaught. But this would injure his ego and only serve to increase Xiang Shaolong’s dominating aura. Furthermore, it would be a huge challenge to suppress the increase in aura.

Gnashing his teeth, Cao Qiudao leapt up as well to receive the impact with his sword.

Two bright and crisp clashing sounds reverberate and echoed throughout the mountains and valleys, ringing at every corner of Qixia College.

Even Lu Buwei and company who are watching the fight from the

top of the city wall a far distance away could hear them.

As a matter of fact, whenever the two men exchanged blows, the sounds of clashing between the sword and the sabre could be faintly discerned but none of the sounds are as clear and loud as these two.

The two men had switched places.

The panting noises of Cao Qiudao were picked up by Xiang Shaolong's ears.

Xiang Shaolong's weakening strategy is finally taking effect. Twirling around with Hundred Battle Sabre firmly grasped in his hands, he employed a rotating momentum and supplemented additional strength from his waist, ferociously discharging a slanted slash at Cao Qiudao from his left shoulder.

Judging from his countenance, Cao Qiudao is as emotionless as ever. Flourishing his sword to counter the sabre strike head on, he shifted to one side to reestablish his footing.

Beyond his anticipation, Xiang Shaolong is already trailing him like a shadow and powered a backhand thrust towards his back.

Cao Qiudao cannot imagine Xiang Shaolong to be capable of such a flabbergasting switch in stance. Demonstrating traces of perturbation for the first time, he was forced to retrieve his sword in order to deflect Hundred Battle Sabre.

Gaining the upper hand, Xiang Shaolong was devoid of mercy. Among his wild roars, his hands ceaselessly performed one strike after another, with every strike beginning from high above his head and ending in either a straight chop or a side slash. Despite knowing that Cao Qiudao is impregnable, at least he could force him into a purely defensive position.

DING! DANG! The sounds of clashing consistently invaded his eardrums.

Although Cao Qiudao is physically stronger than Xiang Shaolong, the gap between their strength is marginal. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is now using both his hands to wield the sabre. Besides the strength of his wrists and arms, the strength of his waist was added as well and his waist strength alone formed the main bulk of the force. Additionally, every attack is a downwards hack from the top. Simply put, every hit carries the impact of a devastating and unstoppable avalanche, compelling Cao Qiudao to keep stepping back with each encounter.

The best part is, Xiang Shaolong intentionally kept a distance away from him. Ten strokes later, at least six strokes were inflicted near the tip of his sword, which also happens to be the weakest part of the sword.

This highlights the wisdom of Xiang Shaolong.

In terms of sword moves and intricacies, he is way below Cao Qiudao.

By engaging in wide hacks and giant chops, he is able to harness the advantages of the sabre while exposing the vulnerability of the sword.

Overwhelmed by the sabre strikes, Cao Qiudao could only maintain his defensive role.

But this strategy cannot be sustained in the long run.

Initially, every hit is able to force Cao Qiudao to take one step back but Cao Qiudao gradually improvise his defenses and regained his stability. It wasn't too long before Xiang Shaolong had to exert additional strength in order to push him back by another step.

With this in mind, Xiang Shaolong swiftly dealt three successive and all-out strikes when he noticed that Cao Qiudao is no longer retreating and is readying himself for a counterattack.

TING! A new sound is heard.

Executioner (of) General sword cannot withstand the blitzkrieg and a two-inch section of the sword tip finally broke off.

Having suffered immensely at Xiang Shaolong's continuous rampage, Cao Qiudao's enormous frame was vibrating aggressively. Erupting into a raging howl, he exercised his sword in a wild flurry of stabs. Forgetting that his sword tip was gone, even his furthest pierce was only able to touch the surface of Xiang

Shaolong's shirt at the chest area, allowing Xiang Shaolong to escape death by the smallest of margins.

Feeling exhausted too, Xiang Shaolong quickly retreated and created a distance of thirty feet between the two of them. Behind him, his escape rope is merely five feet away.

Lowering his head and scrutinizing his precious sword, Cao Qiudao shook his head and sighed: "Even with a broken sword, it is good enough to take your life."

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that due to his earlier frenzy, he has expended most of his energy and cannot recover his earlier vitality.

Of course he would not display his weakness on his face. Taking a deep breath, Xiang Shaolong warned: "Grandmaster Cao, please reconsider. Earlier, it is not impossible for me to conclude the fight with a lose-lose double KO scenario."

Cao Qiudao plainly remarked: "Using my life in exchange for Great General's life is a beneficial bargain."

Xiang Shaolong hinted with sarcasm: "But the decision lies with me, not Grandmaster Cao."

Cao Qiudao angrily grunted once and frostily laughed: "Do you think you can use mere words to agitate me? Let's see what else are you capable of."

Lifting his tip-less sword, he swings it around in a figure of eight and synchronously stepped forward, pressing towards Xiang Shaolong.

Flaunting his sabre and pointing it at Cao Qiudao, Xiang Shaolong regulated his breathing as he stepped further back.

As one man advances and the other man retreats, in the blink of an eye, Xiang Shaolong has arrived at the edge of the stone hedge.

Xiang Shaolong vociferously roared: "Hold it!"

Cao Qiudao was astounded: "What do you want?"

Cupping his hands and the sabre in front of him, Xiang Shaolong paid his respects: "Many thanks for Grandmaster Cao's pointers. Little Brother has to go."

Realizing his intention, Cao Qiudao wielded his sword and dashed forward.

With a somersault, Xiang Shaolong disappeared beyond the stone ledge.

Book 24 Chapter 12 - Safely Back At Xianyang

The minute Xiang Shaolong touched the ground, he immediately plastered himself to a dark corner of the wall. He could hear Cao Qiudao's faint footsteps, guessing that he must have blown his top and is descending the stairs in pursuit.

Scanning his surroundings, he caught sight of his Hundred Battle Scabbard lying a short distance away from his feet. Hastily picking it up and tying the sabre to his back, he exerted a huge amount of energy by climbing back to the top of the platform via the grappling rope.

Cao Qiudao is obviously no longer on top of the platform.

Prostrating on the floor, Xiang peeped down and observed Cao Qiudao running past the bottom of the platform. At the same time, he detected rustling of leaves and branches on his right and left, a sure sign of ambush. His assassins must be in a state of confusion after failing to discover his whereabouts.

He counted his blessings for the close shave. If he had logically walked away from the grappling rope, he would have stepped right into their trap.

His plan to return back to Stargazing Platform is a brilliant stratagem. Not only can he spy on the enemy deployment, he could take a breather and bandage his wound.

Minutes later, he abseiled down the southeastern corner of Stargazing Platform. Recovering his grappling hook and rope, he borrowed the cover of the vegetation and scampered to the south wall of Qixia College.

He is well versed with the surrounding terrain of Qixia College and is aware that a thick forest exists beyond the wall. The forest provides a favourable condition for his getaway.

By now, he has recuperated some of his stamina. While it is insufficient for a proper fight, it is more than enough for him to make his escape

Somersaulting over the high wall, he used this opportunity to shoot the fire arrow that was meant to signal Li Yuan to him.

Subsequently, he raced at full speed towards the predetermined point where Xiao Yuetan had left the snowboard.

This is a distraction ploy, intending to lure the enemy to the place where the arrow was fired. He wanted to mislead the enemy into believing that he was injured and immobile, and was forced to ask for reinforcements.

Running nonstop for a hundred feet, his knees suddenly buckled and Xiang Shaolong fell flat on his face.

It turned out that the ground is still covered with snow that runs

a few feet deep, making it extremely arduous to walk. Though Xiang Shaolong is fitter than the average man, he just fought a strenuous duel and suffered an injury with major loss of blood a week ago. Unable to catch his breath, he was seeing stars for a few seconds before nearly blacking out.

The freezing snow splattered on his face reignited his senses. Glancing around, he saw total darkness everywhere.

Fortunately, far behind him, he could decipher the lantern light from Stargazing Platform. Like a lost sailor who has found his guiding lighthouse, he was pointed to the right direction.

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to climb back to his feet and staggered along the snow to a nearby bush. Diving into the clump of greenery, he collapsed and sat down to rest.

The starry night is simply enchanting but Xiang Shaolong is in a state of panic. With his worn out and tired body, there is no room for appreciating these wonders.

Closing his eyes, he resisted the urge to pass out due to a lack of oxygen. Gritting his teeth, he strained to stay awake.

After much difficulty, he managed to harmonize his breathing. But when he opened his eyes, he instantly knew that he is in trouble.

Under the illumination of the bright moon and the twinkling

stars, the footprints left by his staggering is completely visible. It was truly shocking to see the footprints accurately leading to his present location, clearly identifying his hideout to his pursuers.

At this juncture, he could barely keep himself from fainting. Standing up is totally out of the question.

Despite the chilling winter season, his entire body is covered with sweat.

His ears picked up the sound of footsteps approaching.

More than ten human silhouettes emerged at the edge of the dense forest several feet away. Moving their feet high and low to trespass the deep snow, they are advancing towards him.

By simply following his footprints, they can walk straight to his hiding spot.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that it is game over for him as he watched the enemies come closer and closer while there is nothing he can do.

By just traveling another three hundred feet through a sparse forest, he would be able to reach the hill where the snowboard is hidden.

It is truly excruciating to lose at the edge of victory.

Even if he could force himself to start walking, the enemies would quickly catch up due to his feeble legs. He would rather reserve his strength to take out as many assassins as he could to vent the anger in his heart. With this notion, he untied the two flying daggers around his calf and hid them in his hands.

If not for the enemies' refusal to light a torch, they would have seen him by now.

The sound of hoof beats suddenly arose.

The assailants were taken aback.

A lone rider appeared out of nowhere and loudly bellowed: "Who are you people?"

Recognizing Cao Qiudao's voice, Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. Keeping his flying daggers, he tried standing up.

With Zerk! Zerk! sounds, the group of attackers unexpectedly started to shoot arrows at Cao Qiudao.

Cao Qiudao let out an angry snarl and unleashed a flurry of sword brilliance. Broken arrows rained down around him, demonstrating their uselessness against his skills.

Xiang Shaolong finally managed to regain his foothold and began

jogging towards his prize.

Behind him, tragic cries filled the skies. Apparently, an incensed Cao Qiudao has embarked on a killing spree.

Baffled by his sudden burst of energy, Xiang Shaolong actually made it into the forest before collapsing again.

Noting the sounds of running and galloping all jumbled up, Xiang Shaolong deduced that the ambushers are running their lives in multiple directions.

Xiang Shaolong can finally put his mind at ease, thinking that with the enemy swordsmen running all over the place and leaving their footprints, his own 'virgin footprints' would not be as obvious as before. Lying prone on the ground for some time, he slowly got back on his feet before proceeding forward once again.

Out of the blue, hoof beats can be heard approaching towards his back.

Petrified, Xiang Shaolong squatted down behind a tree.

Within the sparse forest, it is pitch dark and it is not as open as the space outside. There is no fear of someone noticing his footprints.

It appears that in his rush, Cao Qiudao must have forgotten to bring his fire stick. Otherwise, now would be a good time to light a

branch or a torch to see his way.

Xiang Shaolong dare not breathe loudly because in this instance, Cao Qiudao has arrived at the other side of the tree where he is hiding. Riding a horse, Cao Qiudao was panting heavily.

If this Sword Saint had traveled on foot instead of riding a horse, he would have collapsed beside the tree.

CHA!

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself, realizing that he had made a wrong guess, for this is the terrifying sound of the lighting of a fire stick.

Xiang Shaolong dared not waver. Pulling out a flying dagger, he leapt out and threw it towards the neck of Cao Qiudao's horse.

The horse uncontrollably neighed and broke out into a frenzy of jumps, throwing Cao Qiudao off its back. The fire stick flew out of his grasp and landed somewhere far away as the forest was enveloped in darkness once again.

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: "You are trapped! Watch out for my flying dagger!" Sounds of a person rolling on the forest ground can be heard as a disconcerted Cao Qiudao scrambled to find a hiding place.

Aware that his ruse has succeeded, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly

summoned his remaining energy and climbed towards his targeted hill as quietly as he can.

In terms of his stealth ninja skills, even ten Cao Qiudaos cannot match his agility.

Gradually recovering his strength, Xiang Shaolong has left the sparse forest and is presently scaling the eastern face of the slope. When he was about to reach the summit, Cao Qiudao's angry howls reverberated behind him.

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated. Picking up a ten kg rock that happened to be beside him, he weakly threw it towards Cao Qiudao who was hot in pursuit.

After flying for five feet, the rock simply landed on the slope and began rolling down.

Cao Qiudao dodged to a side and successfully avoided the rock. However, due to the wet and slippery slope, he stumbled and lost his balance. Rolling straight to the bottom of the slope, he was a pathetic sight.

Xiang Shaolong thought: It is high time you have a taste of dirt on your face. Continuing his ascent, he barely reached the top when a pair of beautifully crafted snowboard and snow skis entered his sight. Lying beside them is a neat and full backpack.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong dedicated his thanks to Xiao Yuetan

and Heaven. Using all his muscles, he sprinted to his resources and swiftly inserted his feet into the leg openings that Xiao Yuetan had fashioned with thick rope. It felt as if he was putting on a pair of tight fitting boots.

As Xiang Shaolong was slinging the haversack over his back, Cao Qiudao happened to appear behind him and he thundered: “Where do you think you are going?”

Standing up, Xiang Shaolong cheerfully laughed: “Back to Xianyang of course! Little Old Fella Qiudao, let’s never meet again!”

Cao Qiudao is now only ten feet away from him. Arching his body and powerfully digging the ski pole into the snow, Xiang Shaolong propelled himself off the hilltop and zoomed down the slope like a gust of wind. When he turned his head back, he saw Cao Qiudao’s massive frame standing in a daze at the top of the slope, losing all his desire to continue the chase.

Xiang Shaolong kept skiing as the wind whistled in his ears. In a matter of seconds, he is miles apart from the abandoned Cao Qiudao who is still surrounded by darkness.

In his heart, he was deliriously happy. Although his body is aching all over, his heart was singing a song that was either composed by Xie Ziyuan or Feng Fei, which he could not specifically recall.

Except for Xianyang, he does not hold any responsibilities

towards anything or anyone.

Beneath the brightening sky, Xiang Shaolong bent over a stream and swallowed several mouthfuls of water. Feeling much better, he sat down on a huge boulder beside the stream and opened up the backpack that Xiao Yuetan had prepared for him, wishing to obtain some food to fill his empty stomach.

Inside the backpack was a map with directions to Zhongmou and some money for traveling expenses. There were also food, clothing, medicine for wounds, fire starters, etc, showcasing Xiao Yuetan's thorough thinking in packing everything that he would need on this journey.

While opening the map, a roll of parchment was discovered. The parchment is filled with words and it was unsigned. It read: By the time Shaolong reads this letter, you should have defeated Cao Qiudao and safely left the boundaries of Lin Zi. Elder Brother has a secret that I can only reveal at this point in time. The ten strokes agreement between Shaolong and Cao Qiudao is something that I made up; that letter never reached Cao Qiudao. If not for this ploy, Shaolong would not dare to fight. If you chose to flee and skip the duel, the damage to your reputation is far worse than losing your life at the hands of Cao Qiudao. Shaolong would have lost the most critical factor in the campaign against Lu Buwei: Your confidence. In the heart of Crown Prince, you would no longer be the hero who chooses death over injustice. Of course Shaolong would not hold it against me if you are able to read this letter. Otherwise, there is nothing worth saying. Elder Brother would rather see you die under Cao Qiudao's sword than to be labeled as a coward and a weakling. See you soon.

Reading the letter, his whole head turned numb, not knowing whether to find it amusing or petrifying.

Actually, several loopholes have been spotted. For example, Xiao Yuetan is constantly reminding himself that Cao Qiudao may dishonor the ten-stroke agreement whenever they talked about it. In addition, he would be having a peculiar expression on his face.

It can be considered that Xiao Yuetan is using Xiang Shaolong's life as a gambling chip. Fortunately, he won.

Although he did not really defeat Cao Qiudao, at least he didn't lose the fight too.

Even Cao Qiudao had to admit that it is possible for them to end up in a double KO scenario.

Filling up his tummy, he took a nap before speeding along the stream in a southwesterly direction.

In the evening, he found himself a decent cave and started a fire to keep himself warm. After a good night's sleep, he would continue his journey the next morning. This soon became a standard routine and five days later, Xiang Shaolong found himself in the territory of Wei en route to Zhongmou.

At this juncture, he has arrived at the northern shore of the Yellow River where the river water is beginning to thaw. In his heart, he knew that by sailing up north the river, he would reach

Zhongmou in a day's time.

Presently, his greatest concern is that Teng Yi and the others have retreated from Zhongmou. If this is true, he would have to continue his arduous journey to Xianyang itself and he may run out of provisions.

The fact is that snow is melting around him, leading to extreme temperatures that he finds unbearable despite piling on all his clothes. A person with a weaker constitution would surely fall ill.

In the middle of his worrying, three large ships were seen sailing against the sunset.

An agitated Xiang Shaolong prone himself behind a massive boulder and eyed the ship.

After identifying the flag on the main ship, Xiang Shaolong leapt out with delight. Standing on the most prominent rock he could find, he lighted his flare and began signaling the ship with Qin's military signal.

The Qin sailors on board the ship were instantly alerted and started crowding at the bow while shouting at him.

The three ships sluggishly drew closer to a part of the muddy riverbank that has a gentler gradient.

Xiang Shaolong was mad with joy, feeling like a wanderer who is

seeing his relatives again after leaving his household since he was a kid. Kicking the snowboard away and discarding his ski poles, he ran towards the shore like a lunatic.

The first of the colossal ships is nearly reaching the shore. More than ten planks were lowered and pushed against the bank to prevent collision.

A crisp and powerful voice rang out from afar: “Shaolong, Shaolong, it is us!”

Xiang Shaolong was so shaken he fell flat on his face; he could recognize Teng Yi’s familiar voice.

Beyond his wildest imagination, his ears also picked up the shrieking and crying sounds of Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi. Lord Changping is also shouting his name out loud.

An exhausted Xiang Shaolong kept his face buried in the mud. He was finally home.

Turning back, the enormous ships sailed against the current. In the main hall of the ship’s hull, Xiang Shaolong has changed into a new set of clothes and is surrounded by everyone like a superstar celebrity.

Due to their pining for him, Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi have grown thinner. Till now, they are still smiling among their tear-ing, a picture of both happiness and sorrow.

Sipping the hot tea served by his wives, Xiang Shaolong faced Teng Yi and Lord Changping, articulating: “I finally understood the meaning of: Worlds apart. It did cross my mind that I would never see you guys again.”

Throwing herself into his bosom, Zhao Zhi wept even harder, frightening Xiang Shaolong into consoling her with kind words.

Ji Yanran had better self-control than Zhao Zhi and had recomposed herself by now. In a melancholic tone, she updated: “We did consider committing suicide to prove our dedication to you. Fortunately, we heard about your arrival in Lin Zi and the entire family went crazy with delight. Yanran and Sister Qing cast aside our duties and seek an audience with Crown Prince, beseeching him to send a force to fetch you from Qi...” A restless Lord Changping interrupted: “The Crown Prince is more anxious than anyone else and immediately commanded Little Brother to drop everything at hand and depart for Lin Zi without delay. To our anguish, the trip was postponed because the river had turned into ice. Actually, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Otherwise, we may have missed each other and it would be a wasted trip.”

Teng Yi added: “Although we received the report from Jing Village, there was still no sign of Third Brother and we feared for your safety.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “How are the others doing?”

Lord Changping replied: “We have come to an agreement with Zhao and our forces have retreated from Zhongmou. Presently, Jing Jun and Huan Qi are holding the fort at Tunliu. Shaolong’s army has quelled the chaos caused by Pu Hu and ruffled the feathers of Zhao. Your accomplishments are admirable.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “If my accomplishments are truly admirable, Zhou Liang and my other brothers need not die in a foreign land.”

Teng Yi reasoned in a deep voice: “Wars are made this way. Regardless of victory or defeat, injury and death is inevitable. Third Brother need not blame yourself. Aye, Li Mu is really formidable.”

Lord Changping wondered: “Didn’t Lu Buwei travel to Lin Zi as well? He probably did not know you were there too.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “The exact opposite is true. Not only did we drink wine at the same table, he even personally escorted me to my duel with Cao Qiudao.”

The crowd went hysterical: “What?!”

Xiang Shaolong gave a detailed description of what transpired in Lin Zi, causing everybody present to be tongue tied and shocked beyond their senses.

Of course he did not divulge anything about Xiao Pan’s identity

crisis.

Her curiosity aroused by his story, Zhao Zhi forgot to cry but her body is still plastered to his chest. When she heard about the part that Shan Rou has settled down, she sat up and noisily wailed: “Why would Sister Rou get married and keep us in the dark?”

Xiang Shaolong quickly explained that Xie Ziyuan is an ideal partner and Shan Rou had made an excellent choice. However, Zhao Zhi remained doubtful.

Ji Yanran was inquired: “You didn’t see Godfather around? He must have...”

Xiang Shaolong continued telling his amazing story with all the twists and turns. Once completed, he stretched his back and decided: “For the time being, all I wish for is a good night’s rest. I hope to wake up and find myself already in Xianyang.”

Xiang Shaolong has changed into a military uniform and is standing at the bow of the ship. Standing beside him are Lord Changping, Teng Yi and Jing Jun who joined them on the way back.

From afar, nearly a hundred battleships were lined alongside the river in an awe-inspiring formation.

Two hours later, they will dock at Xianyang.

The white, snow-covered environment is gradually being replaced by signs of the spring's arrival.

The fluttering clouds, the raging waters, the lush greenery of willow trees that lined the two sides of the shore.

Staring intently at a long-tailed blue bird that was eventually startled by his passing ship, he recalled the months of living life as a fugitive, which is in total contrast to his current state. With the limitless ocean and sky for him to roam free, he feels like an uncaged bird.

The only issue plaguing him is: What is the outcome of Xiao Pan's identity crisis?

Xiang Shaolong used this break to question: "Recently, are there any major developments?"

Lord Changping answered: "The King of Han just passed away and he is succeeded by Prince An, who subsequently sent a peace emissary to us. In return, Crown Prince has asked Han's King An for Han Fei to come over to Qin. Han's King An has yet to give us a reply."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Crown Prince has always shown his appreciation for Brother Han Fei's theories of governance. If Brother Han Fei can put his talents to good use in Qin, that would be a good thing."

Ji Yanran sighed with a breath instead but kept her silence.

Xiang Shaolong pressed him for more details. Lord Changping suppressed his voice and added: “The Empress favours Lao Ai even more than before and promoted him to become Marquis Changxin. After the promotion, Lao Ai shares the same rank and salary as Lu Buwei, causing him to behave in an arrogant and insufferable manner.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: This is the year of Xiao Pan’s coronation and it will mark the end of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. It is just too bad that the two of them have no idea about what’s coming.

Quietly pondering on this, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Zhu Ji and Lao Ai are even closer to each other because of two reasons.

Firstly, Zhu Ji is suspecting that Xiao Pan is not her real son; secondly, she thought Xiang Shaolong is dead.

Be it mentally or biologically, Zhu Ji does require a man to fulfill her needs.

Jing Jun jested: “Now that Third Brother is returning to Xianyang in one piece, I bet some people will be pretty disappointed.”

Zhao Zhi cheerfully added: “Hubby has been away for nearly two years. You would be surprised at how much Bao’er has grown!”

Ji Yanran joyfully chirped: “If not for Bao’er, Sister Wu would surely join our expedition. Little Zhen and Little Feng are unable to come along too and because of this, they did weep for several days.”

Xiang Shaolong made enquiries about Wang Jian.

Lord Changping whispered: “Let’s talk about it after meeting Crown Prince!”

As Xiang Shalong glanced at Lord Changping with astonishment, the latter winked at him, forcing Xiang Shaolong to bear with the temporary ignorance.

Xiang Shaolong longingly exclaimed: “I am finally home!”

Xiao Pan has received news of his homecoming and personally left the city to welcome him.

This future Qin Shihuang is finally a grown man and even kept a short beard. With a broad chest and thick back, his every gesture carries the aura of an earth-shattering Emperor. At his first glance, Xiang Shaolong had the impression that he is facing a total stranger.

Lord Changwen, Li Si, Guan Zhongxie, Wu Tingfang, Qin Qing and several high-ranking officials are in full attendance, leading to a lively and grand atmosphere. Lao Ai, however, is missing.

Among the booming drums, cackling of firecrackers and music playing, Xiang Shaolong disembarked his ship and step onto shore under the escort of his companions.

Taking the lead, Xiao Pan stepped out and supported Xiang Shaolong who had kneeled down to pay his respects. Scrutinizing his skinny complexion, he sighed: "It has been hard on Great General!"

Within Xiang Shaolong arose a bizarre feeling; it is as if their previous intimacy is gone with the wind.

Besides Xiao Pan not displaying sufficient agitation at seeing him again after so long, Xiao Pan's eyes seemed to be concealing something he could not decipher.

The other officials separately came up to offer their congratulations.

Without any reservations, Wu Tingfang leapt into his bosom. Qin Qing obviously could not do the same thing in front of the public. However, her eyes are blazing with passion, setting Xiang Shaolong's heart aflame.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong are riding side by side, receiving the cheers of Qin citizens who have lined up both sides of the street to welcome him. Xiao Pan grinned: "After we received news of Great General's disappearance, every household began praying to Heaven, wishing for Great General's safety and successful return.

Their wishes have finally come true.”

Xiang Shaolong had wanted to tell him about Lu Buwei’s grand scheme but realizes that it is inappropriate to discuss this top secret at this point in time. Holding back his words, he questioned instead: “Is Lu Buwei back?”

Xiao Pan icily smiled: “Of course he must rush back to Xianyang before Great General. Great General’s duel at Lin Zi is truly spectacular and has achieved the utmost glory for our Great Qin. After you left, Cao Qiudao personally begged the King of Qi for pardon, admitting that he is unable to overcome you. Is Great General aware that once the King of Qi hears about this, he was so upset he fell sick that very day.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Since Lu Buwei is back, then... Aye, Let’s continue talking in the palace!”

The corner of his mouth revealing a deep and unfathomable smirk, Xiao Pan waved in response to the crowd’s cheering as he plainly state: “Everything is under my control; let’s talk later!”

Xiang Shaolong is having that bizarre sensation once again.

In a matter of two years, Xiao Pan’s prowess has increased significantly and is even more unpredictable. It is totally opposite from the past when he was a kid and he would plead ‘Master, save me’.

Back in the palace, they conducted a military parade inspection at the main square before Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan retreated to the Imperial Study for a secret discussion.

When the topic of Handan's Zhang couple surfaced, Xiao Pan's royal eyes glowed chillingly as he cursed: "How dare he. This traitor actually had the audacity to leak this information to outsiders. Even if he dies ten thousand times, he cannot atone for this crime."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "Crown Prince is behaving as if you are prepared for this."

Xiao Pan sniggered: "Lest you forget, I have planted Mao Jiao the spy within Traitor Lao's camp. His every move cannot escape my detection."

Feeling an enormous weight lifted off his shoulders, Xiang Shaolong was elated: "Crown Prince must have executed some countermeasures."

Xiao Pan proudly declared: "If I sent my men to Handan after receiving this information, it would be too late. Fortunately, years ago, I did consider this issue and have resolved it."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sense of overwhelming fear. In a deep voice, he questioned: "Why didn't Crown Prince tell me about it?"

Avoiding his stare, Xiao Pan simply brushed off: "Back then,

Great General was far away from Qin and it must have slipped my mind.”

Xiang Shaolong continued to probe: “How did Crown Prince deal with that couple?”

Showing signs of impatience, Xiao Pan remarked: “Of course I rewarded them with plenty of money and relocated them to another place, preventing anyone else from finding them.”

Xiang Shaolong’s sixth sense told him that Xiao Pan is lying but if he continues to pursue the matter, it would only increase the unhappiness between the two of them. Thus, he kept quiet.

It soon led to an awkward silence.

After some time, Xiao Pan broke the silence and sighed with a breath: “Is Master upset?”

This ‘long-awaited’ word ‘master’ caused Xiang Shaolong’s heart to soften. With considerable agitation, he expressed: “You have changed a lot.”

With his dominating and sharp eyes turning to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan looked at him in the eyes briefly before nodding: “I cannot afford to remain the same. To maintain my seat on this throne, I definitely must make the change. But to Great General, I am always a kid.”

Pausing, he asked after much difficulty: “Except for Great General, is there anyone else who knows about this secret of mine?”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that he has always wanted to ask this question but could only ask given the present circumstances.

After a quick thought, he replied: “Except for Tingfang, not a third person knows about this.”

Of course he would not reveal Teng Yi’s awareness.

Exhaling a breath of air, Xiao Pan leaned back on his throne. Raising his head and staring at the ceiling beams, he gently painted: “Bad news travel faster than good news. With rumours flying all over the place, they better not let me hear about it. Otherwise, not only will I kill him regardless of his status, I will also exterminate his clan. Let’s see who else would dare to bring this up. Hng, Lu Buwei, Lao Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly shocked. Although these words are not directed at him, it felt like Xiao Pan is hinting him, warning him not to disclose his secret to a third party. He instantly felt uneasy.

Without further explaining himself, Xiao Pan leaned forward and whispered: “I have secretly summoned Wang Jian back. He should arrive in Xianyang within two months.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “You meant you did not consult Empress about this?”

His eyes flashing with a chilling aura, Xiao Pan spat with disgust: “Since she no longer regards me as her son, why should I bother to consult her. At Yongdu, she behaves without any inhibitions and her relationship with Lao Ai is now an open secret. Under the skies, who is not regarding this as a joke? It has brought countless shame to our Great Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that he hates Zhu Ji for divulging the whereabouts of the Zhang couple. He sighed with a breath: “Crown Prince should remember what you have promised me.”

He was referring to the promise that Xiao Pan would not harm Zhu Ji no matter what happens.

An incensed Xiao Pan glared at him and indignantly demanded: “Up till now, Great General is still speaking up for her?”

His own eyes brimming with an icy aura, Xiang Shaolong stared back at him and insisted: “Yes. After all, she did love you and supported you wholeheartedly and you also treated her as your real mother. If you had put yourself in her shoes, you should understand that the things she does do not benefit her at all. She is simply being human.”

Xiao Pan appears to be slightly afraid of him and shifted his gaze away to the reports and documents that were piled on his desk. He quizzed: “Most of the reports here are more or less related to

Zhengguo Canal. Recently, I received news, saying that Zhengguo was in fact sent by the King of Han. What is Great General's opinion on this?"

Noting that Xiao Pan had deliberately changed the topic and refused to engage him with Zhu Ji's affairs, Xiang Shaolong suppressed his anger and replied in a deep voice: "Your subordinate is very tired and wishes to return home for a rest."

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath and bitterly smiled: "Grand Tutor is offended. There are many things I do not wish to do but at the back of my mind, I knew I had to do it. Grand Tutor should also try putting yourself in my shoes."

By using another official title to address Xiang Shaolong, he immediately increased the intimacy between the two of them.

His anger slightly mellowing, Xiang Shaolong formally asserted: "This July, Crown Prince will officially be crowned King. By then, all power would lay in your hands and Empress can no longer interfere with your decisions."

Sinking his face down, Xiao Pan slowly pronounced one word at a time: "Does Great General knows that that slut has given her seal of authority to Lao Ai, allowing him to use it at his disposal, causing me endless nights of trepidation?"

Xiao Pan has really transformed into a different person and his relationship with Zhu Ji is obviously beyond repair.

Otherwise, why would he use the term slut to describe her, stunning Xiang Shaolong speechless.

PONG! Slamming his wide and thick palm heavily on the table, Xiao Pan gritted his teeth and cursed: “That slut has bore two bastards for Lao Ai. One is named Lao Zheng and the other is named Lao Long. What does Great General think about this? If not for Traitor Lao and Lu Buwei in cahoots and posing a formidable threat, I would have tore him to pieces way before July.”

Pausing for a while, Xiao Pan’s furious expression slowly subsided. With mock amusement, he laughed: “Does Great General know that Lao Ai is labeling himself as my ‘fake father’ and even commented that my, this ‘fake son’, days are numbered and the coronation will not be mine but his. Ha. This fool can even dream with his eyes open. I can’t wait to witness his terrifying demise.”

Xiao Pan may be laughing as he articulated these words but the genuine hatred in his heart is what Xiang Shaolong finds bone-chilling.

Out of the blue, he felt extremely exhausted. Dealing with Xiao Pan is much more draining than dealing with Lu Buwei. How was he to know that this would happen after he decided to bring Xiao Pan to Xianyang?

end of Book 24

Book 25 Chapter 01 - Unpredictable Xiao Pan

Surrounded by his buddies such as Li Si and Lord Changwen, Xiang Shaolong returned back to Wu Residence. Seeing the Tian Sisters again, the three of them were ecstatic beyond words.

Xiang Bao'er just turned six and he is much stouter than the average kid. Clinging onto Xiang Shaolong, he asked one question after another and was pretty talkative, causing Xiang Shaolong to swell with fatherly pride.

Leading the entire clan, Wu Yingyuan prayed to their ancestors. That night, a banquet was hosted and the residence was decorated with numerous lanterns and red banners. It was a lively scene.

After drinking until his ears are red, Lord Changwen who was sitting opposite Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "The invincible Cao Qiudao is no longer invincible. After the duel at Qixia College Stargazing Platform, there is Shaolong the Sabre King who is evenly matched with Sword Saint. Let's see what else are the Six Eastern States capable of?"

At this juncture, Ji Yanran and Qin Qing led all the female members of the family in a toast, demonstrating their indebtedness for Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the other men who had served Qin by going into war. Xiang Shaolong and his men hurriedly returned the toast.

Noticing Zhou Wei, who had married Wu Guo, among the ladies,

Xiang Shaolong was reminded of her brother Zhou Liang and King Eagle who died serving the country. He grieved: “At pity that Brother Zhou Liang...”

Zhou Wei’s countenance turned grey. Lowering her head, she gently consoled: “Late Brother’s greatest wish is to successfully train a King Eagle and deploy it in battle, assisting the army in securing victory. Now that his dream has come true, he would have died without any regrets. Great General need not bear any grudges for his death is certainly a peaceful one.”

Finishing her sentence, her eyes began to turn reddish.

Everyone is conscious that Xiang Shaolong emphasizes a lot on relationships and hastily tried to change the topic. Jing Jun’s wife and the mother of their daughter, Lu Dan’er quizzed: “Is Great General staying in Xianyang or leaving for the farms?”

Li Si joked: “Madam Jing must be really forgetful. Others may address Shaolong as Great General but you should address him as Third Brother or Third Brother in law instead.”

The crowd breaking out into laughter, Lu Dan’er vented her anger on Jing Jun. Viciously glaring at him, she scolded in a low voice: “It’s all your fault!”

Her words triggered even more laughter and the entire hall was filled with happiness, effectively diluting the earlier ambience of sorrow.

At the end of the banquet, the guests bade farewell and subsequently took their leave.

After their departure, the leaders of the Wu Family gathered together in a secret room for a meeting.

During Xiang Shaolong's absence, all the external matters of the Wu Family were actually handled by the wise Ji Yanran. She inadvertently became the only female participant.

Tao Fang started the ball rolling: "It is wonderful to have Shaolong back. After several rendezvous with Tu Xian, it is ascertained that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were in cahoots and their apparent enmity is staged. Additionally, with Empress supporting them from behind, their prowess is significantly boosted. Due to Lu Buwei's incitement, Lao Ai is spending most of his time at Yongdu. His resident palace, clothing, carriages and lifestyle is comparable to that of a King. Moreover, any document that requires Empress's Seal of Authority will have to be vet by these two traitors.

Ji Yanran nodded: "Due to the influence of Empress, Yongdu is as good as the territory of Lao Ai. With Lu Buwei as an inactive partner, they are forming secret gangs that are made up of desperados from different States, preparing to create chaos during Crown Prince's July coronation. This is a troubling development."

Xiang Shaolong reassured: "Some time ago, Crown Prince has planted the capable Mao Jiao as a spy within Lao Ai's camp. Thus, he possesses full knowledge of his traitorous activities. Moreover, he has secretly summoned Wang Jian back to Xianyang and is

preparing for a showdown with Lao Ai.”

Teng Yi violently shuddered: “Now that Shaolong is back; why did he summon Wang Jian?”

Xiang Shaolong fell into a daze as this thought never crossed his mind. His own heart began to turn cold.

Everyone is now gazing at him.

Jing Jun wondered: “Since Crown Prince personally informed Third Brother about this, there shouldn’t be a problem right?”

Her pretty eyes flashing with a complicated look, Ji Yanran melancholically sighed with a breath. She cautioned: “Whenever it comes to a power tussle or brothers fighting for the throne, all family ties are discarded. Hubby poses a threat because you are able to win the hearts of the people; just by witnessing the citizens of Qin celebrating your homecoming by cheering at the two sides of the street at your return, it is as clear as day.”

Wu Guo furiously recapped: “If not for Young Master fighting hard and protecting this country, Crown Prince will not be who he is today. How can he...”

With a dry cough, Wu Yingyuan interrupted him: “Stop your nonsense. Wu Guo, you never learn your lesson, do you? After the ungrateful treatment by Zhao, you are still as naïve as ever. Right now, Shaolong is as good as another Bai Qi. Do you still remember

how Bai Qi ended up!”

Pausing, he added: “Fortunately, years ago, we had already decided to move to the borders and build our own kingdom. We are at the last leg of our preparations. Once we kill Lu Buwei, we will leave Qin immediately. Shaolong shall be our overall chief in charge.”

Tao Fang dryly coughed too: “Recently, there is an unknown group spreading rumours, asserting that Crown Prince is neither the son of the late king or Lu Buwei but someone Shaolong that Shaolong has secretly manifested. Hey, this is truly absurd.” Glancing at Xiang Shaolong with a strange expression, Ji Yanran lowered her lovely face and her body language became unnatural. Teng Yi, who knows the real truth, wondered out loud: “Are the people convinced by these rumours?”

With a serious expression, Tao Fang professed: “Within Qin, unless they are having an ulterior motive, everyone believes that Crown Prince is the rightful and authentic son of heaven. These preposterous rumours cannot shake their beliefs. I am only concerned that this will cause Crown Prince some discomfort!”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “As per Father in Law’s comments, we, the Wu Family, can no longer allow our fate to be determined by other parties. We must hold the key to our own destiny.” Following that, they analyzed several details on how to fully retreat from Qin before everyone retired to their bedrooms.

Ji Yanran instead pulled Xiang Shaolong to the garden for a stroll. This gorgeous beauty with matching intelligence quizzed:

“Does Hubby feel that Crown Prince has changed a lot over the past two years?”

Admiring the bright moon, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “As the leader of a State, who can afford to stay stagnant?”

Ji Yanran praised: “Well said! Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Isn’t this your famous warning mantra? Now that Crown Prince’s authority is growing day by day, his character has become even more unfathomable and unpredictable. Aye! Li Si has changed a lot too and is no longer as close to our Wu Family as before. If Shaolong were to treat other people with the same frankness as before, it will be very easy for you to get cheated.

Xiang Shaolong was still in a daze when Ji Yanran lowered her head and confessed: “It was Tingfang who told us!”

Xiang Shaolong gawked at her with amazement.

With a wronged expression, Ji Yanran shot him a look and acknowledged: “Back then, we just received news about your defeat in battle and subsequent disappearance. In her anxiety, Tingfang told me about Crown Prince’s secret and is certain that Crown Prince will do his best to save you because of it. Therefore, you should not blame her. Aye! I did not expect you to keep me, your wife, in the dark.”

His face beginning to change colour, Xiang Shaolong demanded: “Who else knows about this?”

Ji Yanran replied: “Of course Zhi Zhi knows about it too but I have instructed her to keep it strictly confidential. Shaolong ah! If not for this matter, regardless of all the rumours, it will not affect the relationship between you and Crown Prince. However, it is an entirely different situation now. Shaolong cannot afford to let your guard down.”

Shaolong nodded: “I appreciate Yanran’s reminder. All along, I was mentally prepared for this. It’s late. Let’s return to our rooms and sleep!”

The next day, the three men Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun woke up before dawn in order to attend morning court. Arriving at the Court of Qin, Xiang Shaolong noticed Lu Buwei around and even Lao Ai had rushed over from Yongdu to be present. He instantly smelled a rat.

Spotting Xiang Shaolong, several officials come over to him and exchanged greetings. They were fidgeting restlessly, as if they wanted to say something but eventually chose to hold back.

Squeezing to the side of Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai pulled him to a corner for a private conversation. He commenced: “Empress and I are so worried after hearing that Shaolong met with a disaster.”

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew that he is lying and cannot be bothered to expose him. Acting grateful, he thanked: “I appreciate Brother Lao’s and Empress’s concern.”

Out of the blue, Lao Ai moved closer to him and whispered in a

suppressed voice: “Over the past few months, there is an unknown group spreading rumours, claiming that Crown Prince is not the son of the late king but someone that Shaolong had created. As a result, I approached Empress to verify this. After further discussion, we decided to search for the couple from Handan who had raised Crown Prince and invite them to Xianyang in order to clear the air.”

Putting up an air of indifference, Xiang Shaolong yawned: “And what’s the outcome?”

His eyes glowing frostily, Lao Ai stared at Xiang Shaolong and continued: “We discovered that one and a half years ago, the Zhang Li couple and dozens of their neighbouring households were burnt to death in a huge fire. Regardless of age or gender, four hundred lives were lost and no one from that district survived the inferno. This case has taken Handan by the storm and is now classified as one of their mystery cases.”

Xiang Shaolong’s hands and feet instantly turned cold and his mind went blank. Momentarily, he did not know what to think or do or say.

Lao Ai’s voice seemed to be reverberating from afar: “Earlier, I brought this up to Imperial Uncle and he mentioned that Shaolong told him about Crown Prince fetching the Zhang Li Couple back to Xianyang for a blissful retirement. But how did matters turned out like this?”

Even with his quick wits, Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Luckily, the court bell rang and the various officials hurriedly

scampered to their seats. With a 'How strange!' reply, Xiang Shaolong hastily slipped away.

Perching high up on his dragon throne, Xiao Pan received the respects paid by his numerous civil and military officials. Xiang Shaolong is still in a state of apprehension as his mind is occupied with Lao Ai's earlier shocking revelation.

He did guess that Xiao Pan would murder the Zhang Li couple, as dead men tell no tales. But never in his wildest dreams would he expect the entire district to be burnt to the ground. From this episode, it clearly demonstrates Xiao Pan's ruthlessness in preserving his secret and Xiang Shaolong would not find it surprising if the arsonists are killed by Xiao Pan after their successful mission.

In the heart of Xiao Pan, only Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang know about his authentic background. Will he cast aside his gratitude towards them and seal their lips with death in order to tie up all the loose ends once and for all?

After being betrayed by his group of buddies in Lin Zi, Xiang Shaolong has gained a deeper understanding of human psychology.

Xiao Pan is definitely different.

Xiang Shaolong came to this conclusion as he witnessed Xiao Pan sitting on his dragon throne and glaring at his officials with a condescending attitude as he praised Xiang Shaolong for resolving the chaos caused by Pu Hu.

By his opening address for the morning court, Xiang Shaolong can tell that Xiao Pan has learnt the art of utilizing his dominance and the use of compliments to win the hearts and minds of his officials.

Following the speech, Lu Buwei presented his lengthy report about his Lin Zi trip. Halfway through, Xiao Pan gestured for him to stop. Frowning, he interrogated: “What kind of person is Tian Jian? After his appointment, can Tian Dan maintain his hold on power?”

His long thesis being harshly disrupted by Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei’s face revealed a look of annoyance. In a deep voice, he answered: “Tian Jian and Tian Dan are not worthy of our attention. Our only fear is an alliance between Qi and Chu. Tian Jian is able to secure the title of Crown Prince because the people of Chu are secretly backing him. Therefore, I...”

With an impatient tone, Xiao Pan interrupted him again: “Is Tian Jian an ambitious and striving person or is he another weakling who indulges in greed and pleasure?”

Xiang Shaolong is filled with admiration.

Xiao Pan has truly changed, changing to a man who seeks truth from facts and do not entertain empty talk. Based on his words, Xiao Pan gave everyone the impression that he is only interested in the stark reality.

Momentarily stunned, Lu Buwei frowned: “This matter requires further observation.”

Shifting his gaze to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan’s tone became gentle and respectful. He checked: “Can Great General solve this puzzle for Guaren(me, your ruler)?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. With just a few words from him, the fate of Qi would be sealed. And it would naturally comprise the fates of his beloved Shan Rou and his good friend Xie Ziyuan.

However, he could not avoid this question, especially during this period when his relationship with Xiao Pan is an ambiguous one. Inhaling a deep breath, he solemnly described: “Currently, Tian Jian can be considered as the acting King of Qi because he has the ultimate say in everything. Of course he would wish to accomplish something notable during his reign; however, he is deeply influenced by Qi’s culture of empty talk and is blinded towards the pressing issues of the State. He is eager to maintain good ties with us and no longer possess the mindset of Henggong’s ‘Nine Marquis Collaboration to rule the world’.”

Slapping the armrest of his dragon throne with considerable might, Xiao Pan sighed: “Great General’s analysis had sufficed well. Where is my Chief Officer?”

Li Si muttered a reply and stepped forward. Holding his scepter, he kowtowed and proclaimed: “At your command!”

Xiao Pan decreed: “Proceed without delay. Get Guaren an eloquent speaker and select a troupe of pretty and talented song & dance courtesans. Send them to Lin Zi for Tian Jian as a form of congratulations for his new title of Crown Prince. At the same time, add some congratulatory words on Guaren’s behalf.”

Li Si accepted the assignment and returned to his seat.

Xiao Pan let out a long laughter: “Since the coming of Henggong, Qi and our Great Qin has always been locking horns with each other. The Three States, Chu and Yan are either fighting alongside us against Qi or fighting us alongside Qi. This matter must come to a conclusion sooner or later. Of course we will only take them on after conquering the Three States and Chu.”

Under the leadership of Wang Wan, the officials of Qin broadcasted their endorsement.

Their faces frozen with terror, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai kept quiet.

Xiang Shaolong could comprehend the situation. Xiao Pan is intentionally showcasing his authority and foresight to the officials, reminding them who is the genuine ruler of Qin. Concurrently, he is publicly causing Lu Buwei to lose face, indirectly coercing him and Lao Ai to swell with rebellious thought.

At this juncture, Lu Buwei suddenly winked at Lao Ai who is sitting beside him and the latter consequently made a secret hand gesture at a civil official named Qian Zhi who was sitting several

seats away.

Qian Zhi wavered on the spot for some time before stepping forward. He kowtowed and avowed: “Subordinate has something to report to Crown Prince.”

The Court instantly quietened.

Seated beside and one level higher than Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping leaned towards his ear and whispered: “He works for Lao Ai. Due to Empress’s backing, he rose from a lowly official to senior civil official within one promotion.”

With much tolerance, Xiao Pan calmly approved: “Official Qian, please speak!”

His lips trembled twice before Qian Zhi enunciated in a fearful voice: “Recently, there are rumours spreading around Xianyang which contains illogical nonsense that are aimed at damaging the prestige of Crown Prince. After subordinate’s inspection, I established that these bewitching slanders to be rather detrimental and therefore, subordinate seeks Crown Prince’s permission to conduct a investigation...”

Xiao Pan icily interrupted him: “What slanders are Official Qian referring to? Guaren does not comprehend.”

His face swiftly drained of blood, Qian Zhi kneeled down on the floor and forcefully kowtowed, begging: “Subordinate dare not say

it.”

Xiao Pan heatedly bellowed: “You don’t even have the guts to tell me the rumours; how can Guaren trust you to manage the affairs of the State?”

Sensing that the situation is becoming unfavourable, Lao Ai gave Lu Buwei a nudge.

A helpless Lu Buwei secretly cursed Qian Zhi’s incompetence and dryly coughed once. When he was about to say something, Xiao Pan already hollered: “Nobody is allowed to speak up on behalf of this nincompoop. Quick, tell Guaren the truth about the rumours.”

By now, Qian Zhi has kowtowed with so much strength that his head is broken and bloody. In a quivering voice, he stammered: “The rumours claimed that Crown Prince is not the son of the late king... ... Subordinate deserves death.”

Breaking out into laughter, Xian Pan derided: “I see.”

His royal complexion darkening the next second, Xiao Pan resentfully admonished: “Rumours vanished in the presence of the wise. The six eastern States are terrified of us and intentionally generated this slander in order to defame Guaren. Qian Zhi, how dare you assume these rumours to be true and even claim that it is affecting our citizens?”

Qian Zhi was frightened out of his wits and tragically cried:

“Subordinate did not believe these rumours. Subordinate... ..”

Xiao Pan exploded: “Get this fool to the palace gate and behead him at once. His clansmen shall be conscripted to the border army and his clanswomen shall become prostitutes for the official brothels.”

Under the horrified expression of the officials, a wretched Qian Zhi continued to beg nonstop for mercy as he was inhumanely dragged out by the fierce and emotionless palace guards of Lord Changwen, leaving only a pool of blood from his broken head at the centre of the Court.

The look on the faces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai is exceedingly dreadful.

Within the Court, one can hear a pin drop as everyone was flabbergasted at Xiao Pan’s unpredictable illustration of authority.

In a few months time, Xiao Pan will officially be coronated as the King of Qin. No one would dare to offend him at this point in time.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the entire length of his spine tingling with fear.

Xiao Pan’s makeover is truly overbearing.

Recomposing himself, Xiao Pan plainly questioned: “Now that these baseless rumours have found their way to our Court, what

does Imperial Uncle think we should do to manage it?”

Lu Buwei has calmed down as well. In a deep voice, he suggested: “Crown Prince is right. Rumours vanished in the presence of the wise. By simply ignoring them, the slanders would eventually cease to exist.”

Xiao Pan shook his head faintly, indicating his disagreement with Lu Buwei’s proposal. To the crowd, he enquired: “Is there any other good recommendations from my officials?”

Seated at the side of Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping uttered: “Showtime.”

Stepping forward, he advocated: “In subordinate’s opinion, this matter must be swiftly nipped in the bud. I propose Crown Prince to issue a decree, forbidding our citizens to propagate this slander either publicly or privately. The clan of the offender shall share the same guilt and any whistle blowers shall be generously rewarded. These measures would certainly herald the end of these fabrications.”

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened, recognizing that Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Changping and other intimate officials had secretly arranged for this scenario, planning to employ heavy-handed methods to quell these falsifications in a quick and efficacious manner.

Xiao Pan cheerfully granted: “Subordinate’s proposition sits well with me. Guaren is due for coronation. Thus, whoever that discusses this issue, regardless of official post, will be deemed as

troublemakers and will be beheaded without pardon.”

Successively, he stridently thundered: “Court dismissed!”

The scores of officials briskly kneeled down on the floor, respectfully sending off this Crown Prince whose influence is rising rapidly.

After Xiao Pan’s departure, Xiang Shaolong was about to leave when Lord Changping held him back, stating: “Crown Prince wishes to see you.”

Book 25 Chapter 02 - Preparing For A Rainy Day

With his hands behind his back, Xiao Pan was standing in front of a large window in the study. With his back facing the door, Xiao Pan plainly state: “Guaren wishes to speak with Great General in private. The others can wait outside the door.”

Li Si and Lord Changping obediently acknowledged his order and retreated from the room. Upon their exit, the attendant closed the study door at the back of Xiang Shaolong.

Without paying his respects, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly strode over to the back of Xiao Pan, enquiring in a low voice: “Is Crown Prince the mastermind behind the Great Fire of Handan which killed a few hundred people?”

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath of air: “Guaren didn’t have a choice; otherwise, right now, it wouldn’t be Guaren executing someone but someone executing the both of us.”

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to counter him.

From a practical point of view, Xiao Pan’s cruel method is indeed necessary and effective. Even he himself could not think of a better or cleaner way to wrap this up.

Xiang Shaolong felt directly responsible for the hundreds of lives lost.

If he did not get Xiao Pan to impersonate Yingzheng, perhaps this calamity can be avoided.

He is now deep-seated with regrets!

Maybe this is fate.

This is the first time he is feeling remorseful for personally grooming this one in a million Qin Shihuang.

Xiao Pan gently coaxed: “Presently, Master is my only kin. Please do not be upset with me. Without Great General’s support, Guaren will be so lonely.”

By addressing Xiang Shaolong and himself as Master and me, followed by Great General and Guaren, Xiao Pan has unconsciously generated an extremely dramatic effect.

Within that split second, Xiang Shaolong experienced Xiao Pan’s astounding development from a mischievous kid to the earth-shattering Qin Shihuang, causing his mind to turn turbulent.

Activating his immense willpower to suppress his churning emotions, Xiang Shaolong openly declared: “Today, subordinate is here to say goodbye to Crown Prince. Later in the day, subordinate shall return back to the farms and await patiently for the coronation ceremony.”

Xiao Pan violently quivered: “Till now, Great General is unable to comprehend Guaren’s difficulties?”

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Why would I blame you? In fact, on the political stage, you have done much better compared to all the kings in the past. Under the sky, who can hold a candle to you?”

Exhaling a heavy breath of air, Xiao Pan turned around and his royal eyes were glowing with a never-seen-before aura. In a frantic tone, he insisted: “There is four months to go before I will be officially crowned. If Master is willing to forgive me, then please assist me in getting rid of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai’s factions.”

His heart softening, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “With Wang Jian around, am I, Xiang Shaolong, still needed?”

The corner of his mouth curling to form an attractive and charming smile, Xiao Pan shook his head and clarified: “Master is mistaken. I summoned Wang Jian back because it is time to have him back anyway. Moreover, should Master meet with misfortune in Qi, Guaren can instantly get Wang Jian to avenge Great General.”

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong explained: “Subordinate wishes to return to the farms because I wish to get some respite and also spend time with my wives and son. Crown Prince can refrain from thinking otherwise.”

Xiao Pan was amused: “In this world, only Great General has the

guts to tell Guaren to refrain from thinking otherwise. If it was somebody else, he would not have the courage to say so.”

Subsequently, he interrogated with a serious demeanor: “Is Great General intending to migrate to the northern borderlands after Guaren’s coronation?”

Suspiciously eyeing the overbearing aura radiating from Xiao Pan’s royal eyes, Xiang Shaolong maintained in a deep voice: “This is subordinate’s greatest dream. Crown Prince had better not get in my way.”

Xiao Pan bitterly laughed: “Great General is the only person Guaren dare not offend. What else can Guaren say? For the time being, Guaren only has one request: I want you to get rid of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai for Guaren.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “All right! Subordinate shall return to Xianyang in one month’s time and begin preparing for a showdown with them.”

With Jing Jun and Teng Yi accompanying him, Xiang Shaolong rode to the top of the tallest hill overlooking the farms. Varying his gaze from near to far, he relished in the scenery of Spring.

Wherever he looked, it was as beautiful as a painting. Camels, horses, cows and goats are roaming freely on the vast grasslands, contentedly consuming the bountiful, thick grass and clear water the fertile soil provides.

Slightly obscured by the thin mist that forms every dawn, the outline of the faraway mountains is faintly discernable. Coupled the rising and falling landscape of the nearby hills and valleys, on top of their lush greenery, it resembles some kind of 3D effect. Once a while, a waterfall is sighted in between the hills and their cascading water breathes even more life into the picturesque view.

Peering at a flock of birds flying across the horizon, Teng Yi sighed: “They are finally coming home.”

Gazing at Ji Yanran, Lu Dan’er, Shan Lan and the other ladies riding horses and having fun below them with Xiang Bao’er and the other children, Xiang Shaolong was comforted: “Venturing out to war this time round, my biggest takeaways are not the accomplishments on the battlefield but it was learning two important lessons of life.”

An enthusiastic Jing Jun probed him to go on.

Xiang Shaolong begun: “Firstly, I have learnt how to make peace with defeat. Just when you thought victory is in your grasp, the unexpected can always happen and reward you with defeat instead.”

Still feeling apprehensive, Teng Yi agreed: “Li Mu is truly the God of War. With him around, our armies can forget about invading Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “On the battlefield, Li Mu is invincible and even Wang Jian may not be his match. Nonetheless, an open

attack is easy to defend but a hidden weapon is hard to guard against. There will come a day when he will meet his demise at the hands of his own muddle-headed king and traitorous officials. Such is the never-changing end result for generals who have achieved the most merits for their kingdoms.”

Teng Yi was incredulous: “Shaolong seems to be speaking with a great deal of emotion. Can you enlighten us further?”

Xiang Shaolong added: “That is exactly what I learnt from my Lin Zi trip and also the second lesson. In politics, there is no code of brotherhood. For the sake of one’s survival and State, even the best friends and buddies can be betrayed.”

An expression of deep contemplation was revealed on the faces of Teng Yi and Jing Jun.

Xiang Shaolong advised: “As a result, we must make preparations for a rainy day. Otherwise, when disaster strikes, we would end up losing all our hard-won possessions due to our state of confusion. The circumstances are ever unpredictable and life is full of ups and downs. It is better to be safe than sorry.”

At this juncture, a lone Ji Yanran was riding up the hill to join them and coincidentally overheard the last two sentences of Xiang Shaolong. She praised: “Hubby’s two sentences are truly thought-provoking and comprise deep connotations. Yanran can put my mind at ease after hearing it!”

His heart swelling with limitless tenderness, Xiang Shaolong

looked over to Ji Yanran who is approaching his side. With his heroic aura increasing by leaps and bounds, he swore: “We must finish our last fight with a bang. Not only must we take out Lu Buwei, we must also extract ourselves from here in one piece and proceed to the borderlands, living in tranquility for the rest of our lives.”

Teng Yi cautioned: “However, if Crown Prince has the intention to get rid of us, he can do so without any reservations. Countering him is not going to be easy.”

Jing Jun was flabbergasted: “Is there really such a possibility?”

To Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran guided: “I think Hubby should honestly tell Little Jun why this is a possibility! Otherwise, Little Jun may not comprehend the actual danger and it may give rise to unforeseen danger.”

His face losing colour, Jing Jun stammered: “In this case, the rumours must be true.”

Xiang Shaolong slowly nodded his head and told him about Xiao Pan’s heritage. He instructed at the end: “You must preserve this secret at all costs. Little Jun must not breathe a word of it to anyone else, including Dan’er.”

Exhaling a breath of cold air, Jing Jun recounted: “Thinking of that day when Crown Prince angrily beheaded Qian Zhi, I am more than convinced that he will sacrifice anything in order to maintain his hold on the throne.”

In a deep voice, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “For my entire life, people have been constantly deceiving me and I suspect Crown Prince is guilty of that as well. Have the three of you heard of the story: Cunning hares gone, dogs are cooked?”

Even Ji Yanran who is well versed with all kinds of literature does not know about the story. In a daze, she asked: “What is it about?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly scolded himself for divulging too much of his modern knowledge. He explained: “When all the wild hares have been hunted and devoured, the hunter would have nothing to hunt and would cook the hunting dogs to satisfy his hunger. Presently, we are embroiled in a similar situation. When the factions of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are annihilated, we would become the hunting dogs. To make it worse, we are the ones who knows about Crown Prince’s secret background and will pose a threat to the stability of his rule.”

Teng Yi nodded: “Hearing these thoughts of Third Brother, I, Second Brother, can put my mind at ease. Should we try to leave earlier? Without us, Lu Buwei will still meet a terrible ending.”

Xiang Shaolong disagreed: “If we were to leave at once, I guarantee none of us will be able to meet Big Brother alive.”

The three of them were instantly stunned.

Shifting his gaze to the faraway horizon, Xiang Shaolong bitterly

smiled: “I personally raised him and no one knows about his willpower as much as I do. Back when he was just a teen, he hatched a plan to kill Zhao Mu with his own hands and afterwards, he would still brag about it. If I am not mistaken, within our Wu Family, there must be someone who cannot resist the temptation and has agreed to become his spy. As a result, none of our activities can escape his detection.”

His eyes blazing with a chilling aura, Jing Jun cursed: “If I discover who is the traitor, I will kill him at once without any hesitation.”

Ji Yanran suggested: “Deceit can run both ways. If we manage to find out who is the spy, we can use him to mislead our enemy.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “The best time for us to run away is the heaven-sent day when Crown Prince is away in Yongdu fighting against the rebels. After that day, trying to escape will be much more challenging.”

Teng Yi burst out laughing: “My sentiments exactly.”

Xiang Shaolong deliberated: “Crown Prince’s main concern is me as an individual. As long as I am here, he would not obstruct the others from leaving. Let’s exploit this circumstance and send most of our people away to the borderlands, including Tingfang and Bao’er. Crown Prince will find it hard to disagree because at least, on the surface, he has promised to let me leave.”

Ji Yanran frowned: “But when it is time for us to leave, it would

not be so easy.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned Jing Jun: “How many warriors are we left with in the Wu Family?”

Jing Jun replied: “Adding the men from my village and subtracting those who perished on the battlefield, we have about two thousand and one hundred men. We will require substantial manpower to protect the women and children on the way to the borderlands. There won’t be much warriors left!”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “The more men we have, the harder it is to flee. Three hundred men will suffice. However, they must be the cream of the crop and their loyalty must be above question. Second Brother and Fifth Brother, please see to it! If our forces are limited, Crown Prince may lessen his guard against us.”

Ji Yanran muttered: “Hubby, did it cross your mind that when dealing with those rebels, Crown Prince would certainly activate the fierce army of Qin and completely surround the perimeter of Yongdu and Xianyang? With our limited numbers and faced with unanticipated changes, how can we hope to successfully exonerate ourselves?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly rationalized: “If Crown Prince wishes to kill me, he has to do so himself. Do you think he can simply instruct Fourth Brother, Lord Changping, Huan Qi or the others to come after me? What would be his excuse? The only way is to push the blame to Lu Buwei or Lao Ai. For example, he can get Mao Jiao to indirectly get rid of me as he is supposedly working for Lao Ai. When left with no other choice, he would personally lead an army

after me. After taking me down, he can easily falsify a criminal act on me.”

Teng Yi warned: “Third Brother’s analysis is very thorough. However, if Crown Prince is bent on killing us and we have a spy among ourselves, we will be at a serious disadvantage.”

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: “Can we arrange some secret preparations around the farm? In case of contingencies, we could retreat here and hide ourselves before finding another way to leave? Firstly, we can avoid the ambush of the Qin military and we can also trick Crown Prince into thinking that he can secretly kill us over here.”

Ji Yanran sighed: “Digging a tunnel is the best way to escape. The problem is, how do we keep it a secret?”

Suddenly, her petite frame lightly shuddered: “Yanran has found a way.”

The three men joyfully look at her.

Pointing to the southeast corner edge of the farm where there is a mausoleum which houses the tablets of Lady Ni and the others ladies. Ji Yanran proposed: “Using renovating the mausoleum as an excuse, we can secretly build a tunnel as long as we only engage the men from Little Jun’s village as well as the followers of Yanran. Except for the deities and spirits, no one would be wiser.”

Xiang Shaolong was troubled: “The problem is, Crown Prince is aware of our brilliant strategizing skills. If he were to position scouts at the nearby hilltops before attacking us, they could easily spot and catch up to us. Moreover, there is only four months until the coronation and there is insufficient time to build a tunnel that is really long and useful.”

Jing Jun offered another plan: “This is easily resolved. In the past when I was still a kid, we would hide in a cave whenever we lose in a fight against the kids from the neighbouring village. In the same context, after we come out from the tunnel, we can hole up in a secret hiding place for a few days. Once the invading army has retreated, we can quietly slip away. You can count on me to take care of this.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “Please act on it at once.”

That afternoon, under the leadership of Wu Yingyuan, a top level Wu Clan meeting was conducted. After finalizing all the details of their retreat, Xiang Shaolong emptied his mind and indulged himself in a lifestyle of happiness with his family.

His unfortunate encounters over the past two years felt like a dream.

Nevertheless, he is still in dreamland because whenever he thought of himself in the 21st century, he felt as if he is trapped in this amazing dream.

Three days later, Qin Qing came to visit.

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and hugged her firmly in his arms to compensate her for her longing and pining.

Qin Qing was shy by nature and with Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Ji Yanran and the Tian sisters peeping at the side, it exacerbated the situation. Unable to struggle out of his bear hug, she was so embarrassed even the roots of her ears turned red.

Ji Yanran and the others understandingly left the inner hall and allow the two of them to have a chance to speak in private.

Releasing the enchanting beauty from his hold, Xiang Shaolong pulled her to a corner and sat down with her. Stroking her in an affectionate manner, he observed: "Sister Qin has grown thin!"

Qin Qing lowered her head: "I came specially to look for you because I have something important to tell you."

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze: "What is so important?"

Batting her eyes once at him, Qin Qing put on a serious demeanor and articulated: "Recently, Crown Prince got his trusted follower to select a courtesan and began tutoring her in court etiquette. The entire process was extremely secretive. It was only pure coincidence that led me to discover it when I came across the royal tailors sewing new clothes for her."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "What is so special about that?"

Her face revealing an expression of fear, Qin Qing broke down in a quivering voice: “In terms of appearance and figure, this courtesan closely resembles Empress. Ah! Shaolong, I am so frightened!”

Xiang Shaolong opened his arms to envelope Qin Qing who is leaping into his bosom. His only reaction is a chilling sensation throughout his nervous system.

He instantly knew what is on Qin Qing’s mind.

Xiao Pan has decided to kill Zhu Ji but no matter what, Zhu Ji is still his birth mother in the eyes of the public. Killing her is neither a filial nor righteous act. Thus, he had to make a switch and replace the real with a decoy. In the future, he can simply confine her substitute within the palace and easily conceal this horrifying truth from the citizens of Qin.

Qin Qing is shocked out of her wits because she did not know that Zhu Ji is not the real mother of Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan is no longer the Xiao Pan of the past. He has evolved into a brutal and merciless Yingzheng who will not hesitate to exterminate anything that stands between him and his goal.

Back then, he did promise he would not harm Zhu Ji. He is obviously reneging on his word.

What can he, Xiang Shaolong, do?

He still harbours immense feelings of guilt and emotions towards Zhu Ji.

Given the present scenario, what can he do?

Qin Qing lamented in a melancholic voice: “Crown Prince has changed a lot.”

Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: “How does he treat you?”

Qin Qing answered: “He still treats me well and often chats me up. Nonetheless, I can sense a shift in his attitude towards you. In the past, he loves to talk about you in our conversations but ever since you came back from Lin Zi, he no longer brings you up in our discussions. Aye! Whenever he maintains his silence, I really cannot fathom what is going on in his mind.”

His heart turning colder than before, Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Does he know that you are coming to the farms to look for me?”

Qin Qing groaned: “It is impossible to conceal anything from him. He even instructed me to bring some cakes to you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I would rather die than eat his food.”

Qin Qing forcefully sat up with her back straightened. Her face losing colour, she probed: “Will he dare to harm you?”

Holding onto her fragrant shoulder, Xiang Shaolong gently consoled: “Don’t panic. The cakes are not poisonous. Tell me, if I am leaving for the borderlands, will you come along with me?”

Diving into his bosom again, Qin Qing wrapped her arms around his waist, declaring: “Even if you, Xiang Shaolong, has decided to go to the edge of the earth, Qin Qing will still want to be by your side. I will never have any regrets.”

Tightly hugging her curvaceous and aromatic body, Xiang Shaolong’s soul flew past countless rivers and mountains, finally stopping at the faraway fascinating and delightful vast grasslands.

Only there can he finally enjoy days of happiness that he has been waiting for for the past ten years.

Book 25 Chapter 03 - Xianyang Happenings

After residing for three days, Qin Qing returned to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong is now fully conscious of Xiao Pan's mindset: To protect his throne, he has no qualms about killing all that stands in his way.

Although it is uncertain if Xiao Pan will eventually come after himself, Xiang Shaolong decided to assume the worst after his Lin Zi experience.

He kept the habit of waking up every morning before dawn to practice his sabre play and even added archery to his training regime.

From the warriors of the Wu Family and Jing Village, he selected three hundred men which naturally include top experts like Wu Yan Zhe and Jing Shan. After specially arming them with chromium sabres and strong bows that were forged by Uncle Qing, Xiang Shaolong even went to the extent of imparting his flying needles skill to them. Day and night, they practiced nonstop.

In the meantime, Wu Yingyuan and the others started to leave the farm in batches. When it was time for Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Zhou Wei, Shan Lan, the Tian Sisters, Lu Dan'er and Xiang Bao'er to leave, everyone was filled with reluctance and the separation was an emotional one.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran accompanied

the convoy for three days before returning back to the farm, which is now an uninviting and foreboding empty shell. They felt uneasy at this change of environment.

At dinnertime, Teng Yi remarked in a deep voice: “Wu Yingen should be the spy.”

The others were stunned.

Wu Yingen is the third younger brother of Wu Yingyuan. Although he is against abandoning the life of luxury in Xianyang, no one would have expected that he would become the spy for Xiao Pan.

Ji Yanran wondered: “All along, I have paid extra attention to this man. However, why is Second Brother so confident that he is the spy?”

Teng Yi explained: “I was able to come to this conclusion because he insisted on staying behind to manage the farm and only leave with the last batch of personnel. This behavior contradicts his usual greedy and cowardly nature. Therefore, I placed him and his followers under surveillance and found out that he would secretly dispatch messengers to Xianyang. I informed Master Tao about it and instructed him to send stalkers after the messengers. True enough, the messengers would enter the palace by a hidden entrance to make their reports.”

Jing Jun aggressively cursed: “I’ve never liked him.”

Xiang Shaolong was comforted: “Fortunately, we took early precautions. But with him around, it is quite troublesome for us to carry out our plans. Is there any technique that we can use to chase him and his men away?”

Ji Yanran contemplated: “He has merely been deceived into becoming a pawn for somebody else. Due to his craving for wealth and a materialistic lifestyle, he committed these acts of stupidity! If we can exploit his weaknesses and employ scare tactics, such as hinting him that by spying for Crown Prince, it is as good as making it easier for Crown Prince to attack us, I guarantee that he will wake up and realize what a fool he was.”

Teng Yi frowned: “You must exercise caution and don’t exacerbate the situation. If he were to report this to Crown Prince, Crown Prince would know that we are guarding against him.”

Her lovely eyes flashing with brilliance, Ji Yanran shrilly snorted: “If we send his wives, concubines and children away, what can he do besides obeying us? Leave this to Yanran.”

Noting that Ji Yanran is personally handling the affair, Xiang Shaolong can put his mind at ease. He checked: “We have to return to Xianyang tomorrow. Who is staying behind to oversee the farms?”

Ji Yanran bitterly laughed: “Let Ji Yanran stay back! Otherwise, Wu Guo may not be able to stand up to Third Master.”

Xiang Shaolong is most unwilling but also recognizes that this is

the best arrangement. Time is running out and Xiao Pan will be coronated in three month's time. All their preparations will come to fruition on that day.

Back at Xianyang, Xiang Shaolong's first move is to enter the palace and seek an audience with Xiao Pan.

As per normal, Xiao Pan received him in the Imperial Study and Li Si is present too.

After accepting Xiang Shaolong's paying of respect, Xiao Pan commanded: "Subordinate Li, give me your report on the happenings of Xianyang."

Li Si seems to be afraid of coming into contact with Xiang Shaolong's gaze. Lowering his head and flipping the documents in front of him, he narrated in a deep voice: "Lu Buwei is spending most of his time outside Xianyang. Using the excuse that he is supervising the last leg of Zhengguo Canal's construction, he was actually meeting up with the local officials all over Qin, trying to garner support from them in preparation for turmoil within the Court of Qin."

Xiang Shaolong intentionally tested him: "What about Guan Zhongxie?"

Still not looking in his direction, Li Si kept his head low and responded: "Guan Zhongxie was freshly dispatched by Crown Prince to the region of Han in order to pressurize them. Unless he disobeyed his orders, he should be far away from here during

Crown Prince's coronation.”

Xiao Pan plainly added: “This man's archery skills is too amazing. With him around, Guaren cannot eat or sleep in peace. Guaren has planted spies around him and should he do anything out of the ordinary, someone will kill him immediately with Guaren's secret decree.”

Li Si quickly peeped at Xiang Shaolong once before lowering his head again, broadcasting: “The entire Yongdu has more or less landed in the hands of Lao Ai. With his thirty thousand followers, they have occupied every single official post in Yongdu.”

Xiao Pan sniggered: “Guaren is purposely allowing him to grow without any restrictions, indirectly numbing him to the real sense of danger. Afterwards, I will exterminate him and his cronies once and for all. Humph! I'll just tolerate his willful lifestyle for a few more months!”

Looking directly at Xiang Shaolong for the first time, Li Si enlightened: “According to Crown Prince's estimate, Lu Buwei will take advantage of Crown Prince's trip to Yongdu and stage a rebellion simultaneously with Lao Ai, thereby gaining control of Xianyang. As the Imperial Infantry is still commanded by Xu Shang and Lord Changwen's Imperial Guards would have to escort Crown Prince to Yongdu, it is possible for Lu Buwei to succeed in his endeavor.”

Xiao Pan added: “Both traitors Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are carrying the Seal of the Empress. Among the confusion, it is likely that some righteous officials would be misled by them and

unknowingly end up as their accomplices.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Leave Xianyang to me. I guarantee that Lu Buwei will end up in failure.”

Xiao Pan and Li Si exchanged looks of surprise.

After a long time, Xiao Pan insisted in a deep voice: “Without Great General at the side of Guaren, how can Guaren be at ease? We can place Xianyang under the care of the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Great General must accompany Guaren to Yongdu.”

Xiang Shaolong had anticipated this reaction from him. Sighing to himself, he pretended to be unaffected and accepted: “Subordinate dare not disobey Crown Prince’s order.”

Frowning at Xiang Shaolong for some time, Xiao Pan then turned to Li Si and instructed: “Guaren wishes to speak privately with Great General.”

Not daring to look at Xiang Shaolong anymore, Li Si retreated from the room.

The study is now filled with an awkward silence.

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath of air: “Is Great General dissatisfied with Guaren? There are many occasions when Guaren is left without a choice and was forced by circumstances to undertake such extreme measures.”

Staring unblinkingly at Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong felt as if he is looking at a complete stranger. He lightly checked: “How does Crown Prince plan to deal with Empress?”

Without backing down at all, Xiao Pan matched his stare. Hearing his question, his eyes started to glow with a chilling aura as he icily hissed: “Till today, Great General is still speaking up for this wanton and corrupted lady who has destroyed the reputation of the Qin royalty?”

His own eyes glowing with a chilling aura too, Xiang Shaolong continued staring and frostily reminded: “This is subordinate’s sole request for Crown Prince. I don’t care who else you are going to kill but I hope you will take into account Empress’s past relationship with you and let her off.”

A flash of killing intent sparkled once in the royal eyes of Xiao Pan but it is unclear if it was directed at Zhu Ji or him, Xiang Shaolong. Recovering his tranquility, Xiao Pan decided in a deep voice: “If she stays in the palace and no longer intervene in State affairs, Guaren will not treat her shabbily. Is Great General satisfied?”

If not for Qin Qing leaking out the information of a Zhu Ji replacement, Xiang Shaolong may have believed his words. But right now, all he feels is a sense of disappointment.

If Xiang Shaolong is single and without any dependents, he would straightaway expose his lie in a full counteroffensive.

But remembering the lives of Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Ji Yanran, Wu Family and Jing Village all resting on himself, he had to swallow this ball of anger.

Serving a king is like walking with tigers. If one is not careful, it could result in personal death and clan annihilation.

This future Qin Shihuang is not easy to get along with.

His tone softening, Xiao Pan gently inquired: “Master do not trust me?”

Brimming with emotions, Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air before asserting in a deep voice: “Crown Prince is well prepared against the forces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. Why do you need me around? I might as well leave tonight!”

Xiao Pan thundered: “No!”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart was shaken as well.

He was using these words to test Xiao Pan’s response. At this moment, he has finally drawn a conclusion, and it is the most bone-chilling conclusion of all.

Xiao Pan inhaled a deep breath: “Master had promised to leave only after watching me become King. How can Master go back on

your word.”

He sighed with the same breath: “Don’t you wish to kill Traitor Lu with your own hands?”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that if he keeps persisting along this path, he can forget about leaving the palace alive. Pretending to be mentally and physically drained, he bitterly smiled: “If I keep my word, will Crown Prince keep yours too?”

Xiao Pan was annoyed: “Since when did Guaren fail to keep my word?”

Xiang Shaolong thought: The changes within these two years are really drastic. Xiao Pan and himself can no longer communicate with complete honesty and trust. Now, both of them have to resort to mutual scheming and lying.

Of course Xiang Shaolong is not so stupid as to expose Xiao Pan’s plan to create a fake Zhu Ji. He smiled: “If Crown Prince has nothing more to say, Subordinate wishes to return home for a rest.”

Stepping out of the study, Li Si is still standing there. He saw Xiang Shaolong departing and whispered: “Let me send Great General off.”

Xiang Shaolong guessed he has something to tell him and walked by his side. Surprisingly, Li Si did not say a single word during the

long walk to the square.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong, Jing Shan and the others brought his horse over.

Li Si suddenly whispered: “Shaolong! Get out of here!”

He then left with a helpless expression on his face.

Inside his heart, Xiang Shaolong can feel a tsunami of emotions rising and they are unlikely to subside anytime soon.

Li Si is now the closest and most trusted official of Xiao Pan. Based on his intelligence, he should have a good grasp of Xiao Pan’s intentions. As a matter of fact, from the clues that have popped up, it is not impossible for him to deduce Xiao Pan’s real background and the genuine relationship between Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong. From these assumptions, he could foresee that Xiao Pan will eventually seek the extermination of him, Xiang Shaolong.

Without Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can preserve his Yingzheng identity forever.

Besides Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, anyone else would not be as convincing or exert the same amount of influence.

Just as Xiang Shaolong rode out of the palace, someone called his name from behind.

Turning back, he saw Lord Changwen chasing up to him from the palace gate. Lord Changwen suggested: "Let's talk as we ride!"

Xiang Shaolong was incredulous: "What is it regarding? Don't you have to work?"

With a heavy expression, Lord Changwen interrogated: "Is Shaolong really leaving for the borderlands?"

Xiang Shaolong simply responded: "I am ill suited to be here, because I cannot stand acts of war and violence. You have known me for some time and you should have a clear idea of what kind of person I am."

Lord Changwen was quiet for a short spell, as if he wanted to say something but could not bring himself to say it. He finally disclosed: "Crown Prince doesn't seem too happy with your decision, saying that it will affect the morale of the military."

His heart aching once, Xiang Shaolong affirmed in a low voice: "You need not persuade me any more. My only regret is not leaving two years ago. If I did, my recollections of Great Qin shall be the fondest as I race my horse across the vast grasslands."

Completing his sentence, he squeezed the horse's belly to increase his pace and sped away from a stunned Long Changwen who had reined his horse to a stop, leaving him far behind in a blink of an eye.

Ten over riders galloped like the wind, overtaking every horse or carriage that they encountered, racing down Xianyang's highway at full speed with the sunset as a backdrop.

In this instance, Xiang Shaolong has given up all hope on Xiao Pan.

He has one major concern in his mind right now: How can he save Zhu Ji from the murderous clutches of Xiao Pan.

Ever since he came to this ancient warring period, he has to face all sorts of challenges on a daily basis, inadvertently training his willpower to be stronger than anybody else. Even when his opponent is Qin Shihuang, he does not possess the slightest nuance of fear.

But he would never underestimate Xiao Pan because he is the only person in this time period to have full knowledge of Xiao Pan's fearsome character. In the annals of history, Qin Shihuang utilizes heavy-handed methods to exercise his authority throughout his empire. At the end of the day, the whole of China will bow down at his feet.

Ironically, this heavyweight historical character was personally fashioned by Xiang Shaolong himself.

Xiang Shaolong wished he could face the sky and shout with all his might in order to vent frustration in his heart.

But he would not do that.

Only by trudging on can he stay alive and travel to the borderlands to enjoy a new lease of blissful life.

If Zhu Ji is willing to follow him, Xiang Shaolong would definitely bring her along, using this opportunity to compensate her for his lies and years of guilt.

With just one leg stepping inside Wu Residence, Tao Fang had already begun pulling him towards the inner hall. Curious, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “What is it?”

In a secretive hush-hush manner, Tao Fang snickered: “Your old buddies are here!”

At this juncture, he was entering the inner hall and saw Teng Yi engaging two guests in a conversation. They turned out to be Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan.

A thrilled Xiang Shaolong ran towards them. Holding the hands of both men, he was so overwhelmed with happiness he was momentarily speechless.

His eyes turning red due to a burst of strong emotions, Tu Xian clarified: “I did not know that Yuetan is coming over to Xianyang so I did not inform you guys in advance.”

With the groove of his eyes wet as well, Xiao Yuetan grinned: “Elder Brother used Shaolong’s life as a gambling chip in Lin Zi; I trust Shaolong will not blame Elder Brother, right?”

Teng Yi laughed: “Since we won the gamble, of course!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Elder Brother’s confidence in me is even greater than the confidence I have in myself. Fortunately, I managed to run away fast enough from Cao Qiudao. Otherwise, I would not be able to hold hands and chit-chat with both of you today. This is called: Among the thirty-six stratagems, running away is a top stratagem.”

Everyone broke out into laughter.

Tu Xian sighed: “Well said. Running away is a top stratagem. Earlier, we were analyzing a plan to try and leave this forsaken place.”

Tao Fang chuckled: “Let’s sit down and discuss further!”

Once everyone is properly seated, Xiao Yuetan narrated: “My purpose in coming back to Xianyang is to witness Traitor Lu’s downfall with my own eyes. But after speaking with Brother Teng, I realized that Shaolong is in an unfavourable situation too.”

Laying his eyes on Xiao Yuetan, all the grievances in Xiang Shaolong’s heart has disappeared without a trace and was replaced by a heroic aura. He cheerfully laughed: “A true hero is someone

who can continue to stand tall in the face of trouble. With Brother Xiao assisting me, all my worries are gone with the wind.”

Tu Xian was pleased: “Looking at Shaolong’s overwhelming confidence, we are happy for you too. Regardless of the danger, we shall maintain our high morale. Now that Traitor Lu’s destruction is certain, our only problem is how to safely reach the borderlands and enjoy the rest of our days in peace!”

Tao Fang added: “Earlier on, Manager Tu has made a detailed analysis of Traitor Lu’s situation. The forces at his disposal include the Imperial Infantry, Guan Zhongxie’s team, fifteen thousand family warriors and his partner-in-crime Lao Ai’s camp. Although there are several officials who are in cahoots with him, they are of no use when real trouble strikes. If we plan our strategies and deployments well, we could force him to a corner and exact revenge on him.”

Xiao Yuetan solemnly state: “The crux of the problem is: How can we take down Lu Buwei while guaranteeing a safe retreat.”

Xiang Shaolong beamed: “Initially, I was troubled over this but now that Elder Brother is here, it is a different story altogether!”

Xiao Yuetan bitterly smiled: “Don’t become over-reliant on me. For all you know, I may fall below your expectations.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Does Elder Brother have the confidence to create another Xiang Shaolong?”

Everyone was stunned on the spot.

Xiang Shaolong gleefully explained: “Wu Guo is very talented when it comes to masquerading. In addition, his body build is quite similar to mine. If Elder Brother has a way to change his face to look like mine, I am sure we can deceive everyone and launch a stealth attack on our enemies.”

As everyone gazed at him with anticipation, Xiao Yuetan contemplated for a short while before concluding: “This would be the greatest challenge for me, Xiao Yuetan. Despite the significant difficulties, I can guarantee that I will not disappoint Shaolong.”

Slamming his palm on the table, Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “With these words from Elder Brother, the circumstances have improved dramatically. The first person we must kill is Guan Zhongxie. With him dead, Lu Buwei is as good as a toothless tiger and his evil influence will be contained.”

Teng Yi nodded his head in agreement: “That’s right! If this man picks up his bow and arrows, we can expect heavy casualties.”

Tao Fang reminded: “However, our main concern is not Lu Buwei but Yingzheng.”

Xiang Shaolong simply clarified: “That is precisely why I needed another Xiang Shaolong.”

The corner of Xiao Yuetan’s mouth revealed a trace of a smile.

Exchanging looks with Tu Xian first, he then laughing sighed: “Shaolong is truly formidable; you have deceived us thoroughly.”

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong realized that Xiao Yuetan and Tu Xian had already inferred that Xiao Pan is not the real Yingzheng.

And it is also because of this reason that Xiao Pan is going all out to kill himself.

For those in the know, they would have guessed that Xiao Pan is acting this way because of a particular reason.

Only when Xiang Shaolong is dead can Xiao Pan solve the root of the problem and not live in constant fear of another identity crisis.

The showdown between him and Xiao Pan has long been decided by fate. Nobody can prevent this from happening.

Book 25 Chapter 04 - Hard To Differentiate Between Real And Fake

Over the next ten days, Xiang Shaolong attended Court as per normal but politely declined all entertainment engagements. Instead, he devoted all his time and energy in training his team of three hundred elite 'Special Forces' members.

Their equipment can be considered the best this era can offer, incorporating his modern 21st century design and was further improvised by Uncle Qing, the head of Yue's blacksmith association, allowing them to become the living examples of the martial arts experts illustrated in Wuxia novels. Besides being proficient in all types of normal and hidden weapons, they are able to climb any wall and trespass any property, becoming what we would know as stealth ninjas.

On this evening, Ji Yanran and Wu Shu came over from the farms and they brought good news.

The gorgeous Talented Lady exclaimed: "Under my mixture of soft and hard tactics, Wu Yingen finally confessed that he has been supplying information to Crown Prince. However, he insisted that he was doing this for the sake of the Wu Clan as Crown Prince has instructed him to try and persuade us from leaving for the borderlands!"

Teng Yi icily smiled: "A traitor will always have his excuses!"

Ji Yanran explained: "Yanran did believe his words, because

when Yanran pointed out that due to Hubby's incredible accomplishments, influence and prowess, it is possible for Crown Prince to view Hubby as a threat and a target for extermination, he was so terrified his face turned green and his lips turned white. In the end, he disclosed the identity of the person liaising with him."

Xiang Shaolong interrogated in a deep voice: "Who is it?"

Ji Yanran replied: "His correspondent is a man named Yao Jia. Does Hubby know him?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "He is the assistant of Li Si and he is responsible for communicating with the various States. He just came back from Qi and I would classify him as a very wise man."

Ji Yanran added: "Third Master En has now recognized the severity of the situation and promised to cooperate fully with us. To be safe, Yanran has sent all his family warriors and followers to the borderlands, just in case Yao Jia has bribed them individually."

Xiang Shaolong determined: "Wu Yingen's greatest usefulness is that through him, we can dupe Crown Prince into thinking that we will only leave for the borderlands after everything has been completed."

In a deep voice, Teng Yi reminded: "If I am this ungrateful brat, I will have you killed at Yongdu by the hands of Lao Ai. When that happens, I can use the excuse of avenging you and fully annihilate the forces of Lao Ai, killing two birds with one stone."

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “No matter what, we must mislead him into believing that we will only leave after killing Lu Buwei.”

Turning to Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong proposed: “Yanran’s thinking is much more thorough than we, the two brothers. Can you try to fake some story and reveal it bit by bit to Yao Jia before the coronation? It would be good to make the story obscure, letting him slowly deduce and piece the jigsaw puzzle before guessing the final message that we want to pass to Crown Prince.”

Ji Yanran batted her eyes once at him, answering: “No need to flatter Yanran, I’ll just do my best!”

Teng Yi probed: “We would need to leave for Yongdu in two months time. Has Third Brother thought of a plan to kill Lu Buwei and simultaneously make a safe retreat?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “I want to see Zhu Ji before confirming the details.”

The two persons, Ji Yanran and Teng Yi were utterly shocked.

Teng Yi advised: “Lao Ai is now regarding you as a thorn in the flesh. If you go to Yongdu, you may get into trouble. Moreover, if Crown Prince knows about it, he would be more determined to kill you than ever.”

Ji Yanran also spoke up: “Empress is no longer the Empress of the past. She may even assume that you killed her real son in order

to make the switch. It is really not appropriate for you to see her.”

Xiang Shaolong did not consider these points. His heart becoming uncomfortable, he turned speechless.

Patting his shoulder, Teng Yi consoled: “As long as we act with a clear conscience, it does not matter how others judge us!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I wanted to see Zhu Ji and try to prevent her from getting killed is precisely because it is weighing on my conscience.”

To Ji Yanran, he implored: “Can you invite Sister Qing over? Through her, I can meet Zhu Ji in secret.”

Her exquisite face darkening, Ji Yanran furiously reprimanded: “Once you have decided on something, you would stubbornly follow it through. Zhu Ji has mothered two bastards for Lao Ai, do you really believe she will abandon her two sons and leave with you? Presently, we can barely fend for ourselves and here you are, trying to increase our burden. When Tingfang and Zhizhi are leaving, they did instruct me to watch over you and not let you participate in any dangerous activities. If you insist on meeting that lady, Ji Yanran seeks a divorce!”

Ever since Xiang Shaolong got to know Ji Yanran, this is the first time she is so fierce and upset. Petrified, he shuddered and dare not defend himself anymore.

Teng Yi nodded: “Today, Second Brother is not going to help you, especially when this concerns the life and death of the entire clan. No matter what, Third Brother has to listen to Yanran.”

A helpless Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to agree.

Only then did Ji Yanran’s anger subside.

Over the next few weeks, besides giving his full attention to training the three hundred men team, Xiang Shaolong also instructed Wu Guo on the finer tips of impersonating himself, for he must succeed in deceiving Xiao Pan, Li Si and the others who know Xiang Shaolong very well.

The only loophole is his voice. Luckily, Ji Yanran has an excellent idea: At a suitable time, Xiang Shaolong will start faking an illness. Therefore, even when his voice becomes deeper and hoarse, it will not arouse any suspicions. On top of that, he can do away with speaking less, thereby killing two birds with one stone.

That night, Xiao Yuetan came back from the farms and borrowed a set of Xiang Shaolong’s official robes. Locking Wu Guo and himself inside a room, he has everyone patiently waiting outside, eager to find out how Wu Guo will eventually turn out.

Until now, everyone is still puzzled over Xiang Shaolong’s decision to have Wu Guo masquerade as himself. Unable to tolerate the suspense, Jing Jun posed the question to him.

Xiang Shaolong responded: “Firstly, I want to deceive Lu Buwei. Crown Prince has decided to leave Xianyang under the care of Lu Buwei. Based on Lu Buwei’s character, he would use this opportunity to get rid of Second Brother and Fifth Brother, leaving me... YI!”

Ji Yanran, Teng Yi and Jing Jun were stupefied, staring at Xiang Shaolong whose face is suddenly drained of colour.

With a skeptical expression, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “Do you think Guan Zhongxie would employ the same technique and slip back to Xianyang? We are one month away from the coronation day and the current time frame is a critical period. Would he be contended to remain stationed far away?”

Teng Yi rationalized: “Without Brother Xiao’s talented hands, how can they create a fake Guan Zhongxie?”

Ji Yanran debated: “If Lu Buwei has the intention, it is not difficult to find someone who resembles Guan Zhongxie. By getting people to provide additional cover, like mistaking fish eye for pearls, it is highly possible for Hubby’s hypothesis to be right.”

To Tao Fang who had just arrived, Xiang Shaolong told him about his conjecture and added: “Please inform Manager Tu and ask him to pay special attention to this matter. If we can track Guan Zhongxie’s movements, he’ll be the first to go down, followed by Han Jie and the rest.”

Jing Jun quizzed: “Earlier, does Third Brother mean that he

wishes to hoodwink Lu Buwei into thinking that Third Brother has accompanied Crown Prince to Yongdu but is actually staying behind in Xianyang to counter him?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “That is the main reason. In addition, I can carry out my plans without Crown Prince looking over my shoulder.”

Teng Yi reviewed: “Nevertheless, we must be extra meticulous in our deployment and find a way to get Wu Guo out of Yongdu. Otherwise, this kid may end up in a life-threatening situation.”

The voice of Xiao Yuetan resonated: “That’s the brilliant part of the plan. By simply reverting back to his original appearance, it will be quite easy for Wu Guo to make his getaway.”

As everyone looked over to the open doors of the room with anticipation, Xiao Yuetan and another ‘Xiang Shaolong’ slowly strode out, earning cheers and exclamations.

With the appearance of Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo faced the crowd and sang an opera tune before striking a pose. Pretending to grab the hilt of an imaginary Hundred Battle Sabre, he roared: “Traitor Lu, on your knees! I, Xiang Shaolong, have been waiting for seven long years to finally cut off your smelly head!” Amazingly, even his tone and voice is quite similar to Xiang Shaolong’s.

The crowd instantly broke out into wild laughter and Tao Fang was laughing so hard he bent over and held onto his tummy.

Ji Yanran shrilly giggled: “This is impossible. How can the resemblance be so striking?”

Wu Guo stared at Ji Yanran with a surprised expression. He mocked: “Wifey, you are so muddle-headed you cannot even recognise your hubby? Don’t blame me if I dump you.”

His teasing naturally got the entire hall laughing all over again.

Panting from her laughter, Ji Yanran threatened: “If you dare to dump me, I’ll kill you with a single sword slash.”

Watching the scene unfolding, Xiang Shaolong can feel his emotions stirring. For the past two years, the Wu Residence has not seen such a carefree and happy ambience that was filled with joy and laughter.

Putting on a frightened look, Wu Guo relented: “Wifey is so fierce. Hubby shall give in and apologise.”

Unwilling to continue the banter with him, Ji Yanran faced Xiao Yuetan and questioned: “Mister Xiao is truly the world’s number one make up artist. How did you create this miracle?”

As he lovingly admired his own handiwork, Xiao Yuetan lightly articulated: “It took me five days to sculpt Shaolong’s bust from wood. Afterwards, I concocted a skin mask using a special recipe to recreate the fake face. Finally, I touched up the colouring to the smallest details. Thereafter, another Xiang Shaolong is born.”

Jing Jun praised: “In the future, I would not dare to believe the outer appearance of anyone.”

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: “Without Wu Guo, even if I have three heads and six arms, my talents would be inapplicable. This fellow’s body figure is almost the same as Shaolong, except that his shoulder is not as broad. Thus, I have added padding to his clothes to conceal this loophole.”

Facing the sky and laughing out loud, Wu Guo took huge strides up and down the hall, mimicking Xiang Shaolong’s body language. It is really difficult to tell them apart.

The two men Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan are sitting within the hall. Admiring the beautiful, star-studded sky, they were overwhelmed with emotions.

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “Life is really baffling. Last time round, we were in Lin Zi, busy handling all sorts of people and dangerous situations. This time round, although we are back in Xianyang, we are again faced with the same scenario of trying to flee for our lives. But of course this round can be considered the last and final round. How wonderful!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “With Elder Brother giving pointers by the side, I am extremely confident that we will be able to reach the borderlands safely and enjoy the life that we have been pining for so long.”

After a deep contemplation, Xiao Yuetan questioned in a serious tone: “We already knew that Yingzheng will not let Lu Buwei have a good ending and by staying back, we have to put up with a certain amount of risk. Should we make plans to leave before the coronation instead? Wouldn’t that save us plenty of trouble?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “I did consider this too but discarded the notion because of two reasons. Firstly, the retreat of the entire clan would take some time to be completed. Secondly, I am concerned that Yingzheng has made secret preparations. If I displayed any signs of leaving, he would cut me off along the way and simply kill me while telling the world that I have left for the borderlands. As a result, we have to wait for the best window period, which is the day when Yingzheng is away in Yongdu for his coronation. And to further safeguard ourselves, we must attack Lu Buwei proactively; otherwise, we will die without a burial place.”

Xiao Yuetan nodded in agreement: “Shaolong’s thinking has covered all the angles.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “My thinking powers are inferior to Elder Brother’s. I can outshine you presently because nobody understands Yingzheng’s capabilities and callousness better than me. If we are not careful, we will all perish like a sinking ship on the open sea.”

Xiao Yuetan wondered: “How do you plan to deal with Lu Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong officially state: “I was about to seek guidance from Mister.”

Supporting his bearded chin with one hand, Xiao Yuetan grinned: “Master Tu should be the correct person to consult. Besides him, no one has a clearer picture of Lu Buwei’s actual strength and schemes. He has been patiently serving him for so many years in anticipation for this day to arrive.”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “In this case, I shall depend on the two of you to come up with the appropriate plans and strategies. The rest of us shall await your orders like soldiers.”

Raising his head to gawk at the enchanting night sky, Xiang Shaolong fantasied: With Tu Xian’s years of experience and Xiao Yuetan’s wisdom, he would soon be able to view the same night sky from the borderlands.

The next morning, even before the sun has appeared, the warriors of Wu Residence are already up and assembled in the garden, practicing their martial arts. Xiang Shaolong himself is patiently guiding Wu Guo in using a replica Hundred Battle Sabre that Uncle Qing has specially forged.

Although the chromium used in this sabre is not as good as the original, the sabre is already one of the best weapons that Uncle Qing has forged.

Being a martial arts exponent himself, regardless of bearing or aura, Wu Guo is able to fashion himself after Xiang Shaolong.

Using the Mozi Sword, Teng Yi engaged him in a duel. After more

than a hundred moves later, Wu Guo exhibited signs of losing.

Wu Yan Zhe, Wu Shu, Jing Shan and the Guardians clapped and cheered for him.

Beckoning Wu Yan Zhe to his side, Xiang Shaolong advised: “Among the Guardians, you are the wisest and most steadfast. During the trip to Yongdu with Wu Guo, you must remember that safeguarding your lives is the top priority. Whenever the circumstances become unfavourable, use the grappling hooks and escape back here.”

Wu Yan Zhe acknowledged: “Master Xiang, you can put your mind at ease. Two years ago, Master Tao has already stationed some men at Yongdu. Not only can we gain a good understanding of the situation, certain preparations have been put in place. In cases of emergency, they can offer shelter to us.”

Standing beside them, Ji Yanran comforted: “This fellow Wu Guo is full of devious ideas. During any confrontations, he is always the one who walks away with the better deal. Ambushing him is easier said than done. Shaolong, you can put your mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong has full conviction in Wu Guo’s abilities; otherwise he would not have allowed him to take this risk. He specifically reminded Wu Yan Zhe who is now opposite him: “Crown Prince would wait for the best opportunity before launching a secret assault on me. That would be the time when he and Lao Ai are clashing head on. Otherwise, he would not be able to frame Lao Ai for my death.”

Ji Yanran interrupted: “If there is a way to secure the mask on a corpse with the same body build as Hubby, we may be able to temporarily deceive Crown Prince.”

His eyes lighting up, Wu Yan Zhe was thrilled: “Let’s see what happens! I am certain it can be arranged.”

At this juncture, a breathless Wu Guo came up to the three of them. With a proud air, he smirked: “How is my Hundred Battle Sabre Play?”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Look at you. Does your Master Xiang pant and gasp for air after a fight?”

Wu Guo cheekily laughed: “Don’t forget that I have not fully recovered from my sickness. Some wheezing is considered normal.”

Ji Yanran nodded: “You are good. I nearly forgot about that point.”

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, she recommended: “Hubby had better look for Mister Xiao and get him to put some make up for you, giving you a sickly appearance. When Crown Prince sees your face, it would be easier for you to fake your illness later on.”

Wu Guo added: “At the beginning, you should act tired. As time passes, you can gradually increase the signs of illness. That would

be a perfect cover.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: This is called two heads are better than one. When he was about to speak out, he saw Tao Fang leading a man and walking briskly towards them. As the crowd looks towards him in astonishment, everyone erupted with delight.

The man turned out to be the long-absent Wang Jian, Qin’s indomitable and legendary general.

Book 25 Chapter 05 - Reunion After A Long Split

Compared to the past, Wang Jian is more tanned and muscular-looking. As a matter of fact, he has transformed into someone with a powerful and masterful aura. The most striking were his sharp and electrifying eyes, radiating an impressive sensation despite his calm demeanour, truly befitting the characteristic of this celebrated general.

With a sincere smile hanging on his face, Wang Jian gave Xiang Shaolong a bear hug before releasing a long sigh: “Does Third Brother know how much Little Brother has yearned for all of you?”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun leapt into their arms. As the four sworn brothers shared a group hug, it was such a touching and tear-jerking scene.

Wang Jian happily laughed and hugged Teng Yi and Jing Jun individually as a form of love. He observed: “Shaolong has lost some weight but you are much more awe-inspiring compared to the time when I left Xianyang.”

Turning to Ji Yanran, he smiled: “Third Sister in Law is much prettier too.”

The rest of the men started to swarm over, taking turns to shake hands and salute this renowned general.

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “When did Fourth Brother come back? Have you seen Crown Prince?”

Wang Jian mused: “Judging by my ordinary attire, you should have guessed that I came back secretly. Somehow, I felt that it is better for me to visit you guys first before paying my respects to Crown Prince.”

As everyone was stunned at his words, Ji Yanran probed: “Why would Fourth Brother in Law possess such a mindset?”

In a deep voice, Wang Jian divulged: “To be honest, I had arrived three days ago but chose to endure the inconveniences and stayed in a secret place outside the city. In the meantime, I sent my men into the city to seek out information as I am concerned that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai had summoned me back by using a fake decree. Beyond my anticipation, I got wind of some alternative news. It seems like Third Brother and Crown Prince are not on good terms.”

Teng Yi questioned: “What updates did Fourth Brother receive?”

Wang Jian revealed: “Firstly, Crown Prince appears to have given permission for Third Brother and your clan to leave for the borderlands and secondly, Crown Prince and Third Brother are not as close as before. Unlike the past, Crown Prince no longer discuss his private affairs with Third Brother.”

Jing Jun sighed: “Fourth Brother’s spies are really proficient.”

Making up his mind, Xiang Shaolong invited: “Let’s enter the hall before we discuss any further!”

Sitting themselves in the inner hall, Wang Jian coldly grunted: “This time round, I have brought thirty thousand crack troops back with me. They are the best of the best and every single one of them is willing to die for me, Wang Jian. Fighting against these mere rebels? I only need to point my finger and I guarantee their absolute destruction.”

He then sighed with a breath of air: “However, I am worried about Crown Prince and the possibility of him trying to harm Third Brother. As Crown Prince matures with age, he has become more and more formidable.”

Everyone can easily deduce that Wang Jian must have received news about Yingzheng’s questionable heritage and is therefore making this assumption. To prevent Xiang Shaolong from being awkward and also as a sign of trust in Xiang Shaolong, he did not directly confront him.

The news of Yingzheng beheading Qian Zhi has taken the entire State by the storm. There is no reason for Wang Jian to be ignorant about it.

The ten eyes of Tao Fang, Ji Yanran, Jing Jun, Teng Yi and Wu Guo are all focused on Xiang Shaolong, letting him decide his explanation to Wang Jian.

Xiang Shaolong broke out into a wide smile: “Fourth Brother is

truly worthy of the title: Qin's Top General. You had barely come back and your intelligence of Xianyang is so comprehensive."

He is indirectly affirming Wang Jian's presumptions.

His eyes shimmering with brilliance, Wang Jian professed: "My enemies are the dim-witted Xiongnu while Third Brother is contending against the allied forces of the five eastern States. Since when did I, Wang Jian, become the top general?"

Pausing, Wang Jian went straight to the point: "Whatever Third Brother wants me, Fourth Brother to do, I will do exactly as per your instructions. You can speak without any reservations."

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing. Stretching his hands and grabbing Wang Jian's broad shoulders, he cheerfully exclaimed: "I want Fourth Brother to cleanse our State, wiping out all traces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. And assist Yingzheng in uniting the lands and build the Great Empire of Qin. In the process, Fourth Brother shall become the most illustrious general in the records of history."

At this point in time, Qin has two Great Generals and they are Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian. From the perspective of the Court of Qin, both men enjoy the highest respect and accolades internally and externally. Within the military, their standing is even more prominent.

If the two of them choose to work together, they will definitely pose a viable threat to Yingzheng.

However, Xiang Shaolong chose to simply reject Wang Jian's suggestion and thereby preventing a Qin's internal strife.

Of course the others do not know that Xiang Shaolong had already understood this fact from history: Nobody can hope to overcome Qin Shihuang. As a result, he dared not even harbour any thoughts of staging his own rebellion.

Unconsciously, he won Wang Jian's praises of admiration but Xiang Shaolong modestly expressed: "Fourth Brother is giving me too much credit. There are many areas that I would have to rely on you."

In a solemn tone, Wang Jian described: "In the history of our Great Qin, Crown Prince can be considered our wisest and most scheming ruler, while Li Si's capabilities is not inferior to Shang Yang. But if we are talking about meeting on the battlefield, I, Wang Jian, fear nobody except Third Brother and Li Mu. In terms of scheming, you can never be safe against underhand methods. What are Third Brother's plans?"

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Is Fourth Brother aware of Crown Prince's military deployment?"

Wang Jian unabashedly shared: "The main strength of Crown Prince lies mainly in the Imperial Palace Guards and the Imperial Cavalry. Lately, the Palace Guards have been actively recruiting personnel and their strength has been boosted to fifty thousand. Regardless of training, equipment and remuneration, they are far

better off compared to the other forces. In addition, they are fiercely loyal towards Crown Prince. They are the ones Third Brother have to guard against.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled that day when Lord Changwen chased up to him from the palace and advised himself to give up his plans to leave for the borderlands. Unfortunately, he was rejected unreservedly by Xiang Shaolong.

After all, Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are members of the royal family. Blood is thicker than water. In case of a dispute, they would definitely side with Xiao Pan.

Wang Jian added: “Against these rebels, Crown Prince should have logically summoned Huan Qi back. Instead, he summoned An Guxi all the way back from the Qin-Chu Border. Based on this point alone, I am certain that he has the intention to confront Third Brother.”

Teng Yi was thunderstruck: “An Guxi is back? Why are we kept in the dark?”

In a deep voice, Wang Jian established: “This is Crown Prince’s secret attack force. However, I have yet to determine the size of his army. I only know that he has left the border and is camped somewhere between Xianyang and Yongdu. Upon receiving the royal decree, he can reach Xianyang or Yongdu within a day.”

Like Lord Changping and Lord Changwen, An Guxi is a member of the royal family and would definitely support Yingzheng in

times of trouble. No wonder Wang Jian could speculate that Yingzheng is having unfavourable thoughts about Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong solemnly swore: “I don’t give a hoot about his deployments. As long as Fourth Brother can secure the fake Xiang Shaolong’s departure from Yongdu, we have the ability to handle the rest.”

Wu Guo smiled: “It is true that we have to depend on Master Jian to take good care of my measly little life.”

As Wang Jian stared at Wu Guo with a flabbergasted expression, Ji Yanran swiftly explained their ruse in her melodious voice.

Wang Jian bitterly laughed: “If your ruse is exposed, Third Brother would be found guilty of deceiving the King!”

Teng Yi grudgingly smiled: “This is a risk we have to undertake. If Fourth Brother has seen Wu Guo in action, you too, would feel confident that we can pull this through.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Additionally, your Third Brother will be faking an illness, making it easier to proceed with the impersonation.”

Wang Jian suggested: “If the switch can be made halfway through the journey, it would be perfect!”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “With Fourth Brother supporting at

the side, it has increased our conviction drastically. Meanwhile, it is not convenient for Fourth Brother to stay for too long.”

After finalizing their future secret communication methods, Wang Jian furtively slipped away.

Xiang Shaolong left in search for Xiao Yuetan and found him sitting in front of a bronze mirror and disguising himself as an old man. He promptly updated him about Wang Jian’s collaboration.

Xiao Yuetan nodded: “Judging from his bearing and appearance, it is unmistakably clear that this man places heavy emphasis on brotherhood and is not someone who will cower to the rich and powerful. With him secretly providing assistance, the odds of our success have increased by several folds.”

Turning puzzled, he quizzed: “Don’t you need to attend morning court?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “That is why I am looking for you. I have to trouble Elder Brother to apply some make-up for me and give me a sickly appearance.”

With an amused expression, Xiao Yuetan scoffed: “Shaolong has underestimated Yingzheng. If he learns about your sickness, he would surely send a royal physician to treat your disease and concurrently investigate the truth about your illness claims. Shaolong’s fraud would be exposed by just a simple diagnosis.”

Xiang Shaolong was horrified: “What should I do?!”

Glancing at the sky, Xiao Yuetan calculated: “Fortunately, there is still time, because Yingzheng can only send for the royal physician after the morning court session. I shall leave at once and gather some herbs for you. After consumption, these herbs will trigger your pulse to become unstable without any side effects. We can then deceive Yingzheng and prevent him from growing suspicious towards you.”

With regards to Xiao Yuetan’s knowledge and skills, Xiang Shaolong has nothing but respect and admiration. He was secretly gratified that Lu Buwei has tried to harm Xiao Yuetan, forcing him to switch sides. Otherwise, Xiao Yuetan would probably become his most feared enemy right now.

That very afternoon, as Xiao Yuetan had forecasted, Xiao Pan sent two Imperial Physicians to attend to Xiang Shaolong’s medical condition. Even Lord Changping was also here to see him.

After the two doctors felt his pulse, both unequivocally diagnosed that Xiang Shaolong’s has over-exerted his physical body and has therefore caught the flu bug.

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong gingerly lead them on, causing them to believe without a doubt that root of his sickness was due to long exposure to snowy wilderness during his fugitive days.

Once the Imperial Physicians retreated out of the room, Lord Changping sat down on his beside. With a heavy expression, he

sighed with a breath, appearing to be in a dilemma over what he wants to say to Xiang Shaolong.

Putting on a feeble act, Xiang Shaolong muttered: “What is troubling Your Lordship?”

Lord Changping sighed: “Aye! My mind is in a quandary. On one hand, I wish Shaolong can remain sick and bedridden but on the other hand, I wanted Shaolong to recover in due time. Aye!”

Xiang Shaolong can feel the warmth in his heart. Strongly gripping Lord Changping’s hand, he whispered: “I understand everything. Your Lordship need not speak any further.”

An agitated Lord Changping stammered: “You... ..”

Revealing a bittersweet smile on his face, Xiang Shaolong pondered in a deep voice: “Serving a king is like walking with tigers; this is an age old truth. Let’s not talk these things anymore. Is Ying Ying happy? How is Duanhe treating her?”

His eye sockets filled with hot tears, Lord Changping decisively declared: “Our prosperity and attainment today is all thanks to Shaolong’s endorsement and patronage. If we, the two brothers, can sit by and do nothing while Shaolong is in trouble, can we be considered humans? Crown Prince is obviously the one at fault.”

Xiang Shaolong is touched. He gently advised: “Regarding these matters, there is no right and wrong. Please do not bear any

grudges towards Crown Prince. Little Brother has a way to preserve my life.”

Wiping his tears with his sleeve, Lord Changping divulged after a short contemplation: “Shaolong must guard against this man named Wei Liao. He hails from Daliang, Capital of Wei. After arriving in Qin, he has become a resident advisor under Crown Prince and is highly regarded by him. In fact, there are several matters that Crown Prince would consult him instead of us. This man is extremely shrewd and talented in military maneuvers. He authored the military manuscript ‘Wei Liao Strategies’, driving the main concept: Attack small to grow big; one to rule them all, which largely coincides with our Great Qin’s ambition to unite the States. Crown Prince is probably influenced by him and is pushing the agenda for conquering the other States. Whoever that opposes his grand plan of uniting the lands are mercilessly beheaded.”

Xiang Shaolong understood his predicament.

Lord Changping is hinting him that Xiao Pan is going all out to get rid of him in order to preserve his kingly authority and wishes for him to remain sick in bed. Indirectly, he is insinuating that if Xiang Shaolong were to accompany Xiao Pan to Yongdu, certain death awaits him.

Noting that this Wei Liao is not holding an official post, Xiang Shaolong is convinced that he has been specially selected by Xiao Pan to deal with himself. This is because the talented officials under Xiao Pan are all hardcore buddies of Xiang Shaolong. To get rid of himself, Xiao Pan has to engage an ‘outsider’.

Lord Changping added: “Did Shaolong notice that Li Si has changed a lot? We no longer adore him like before; he is too desperate for power and authority.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling moved again, recognizing Lord Changping’s intention to warn him about Li Si. Nonetheless, only he can truly comprehend Li Si’s situation. In reality, Li Si is even more passionate about pursuing the dream of conquering all the States and uniting all the territories; it is his ultimate goal in life. As a result, he was forced to do whatever he can to please Xiao Pan. Li Si, after all, did risk his own life to advise Xiang Shaolong to flee for his life, clearly demonstrating the genuine friendship that exists in his heart.

Patting Lord Changping’s hand, Xiang Shaolong grinned: “Go back and make your report to Crown Prince! Tell him I will definitely accompany him to Yongdu.”

As Lord Changping is still reeling from shock, Xiang Shaolong winked at him several times. Although he does not have a clue about his plans, Lord Changping got the message after identifying Xiang Shaolong’s look of confidence and left him as it is.

For the next three days, Xiao Pan continued to send Imperial Physicians to attend to him.

By now, it is only ten days until the trip to Yongdu. Xiang Shaolong pretended to recover slightly and entered the palace to seek an audience with Xiao Pan with lesser ‘sickly’ make up.

After being informed of his arrival, Xiao Pan personally received him at the palace entrance, putting up a good show of respect.

Concluding a round of pleasantries, Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong adjourned to the Imperial Study to begin their secret meeting.

This future Qin Shihuang heaved with a sigh of relief: “It is a blessing that Great General is able to recover in time. Otherwise, without Great General beside Guaren providing pointers, stratagems and countering the rebels, it would be disastrous.”

Xiang Shaolong carefully scrutinized this King of Qin whom he had personally raised. Momentarily, his heart is overwhelmed with countless emotions clashing with one another and he could no longer differentiate between love and hate. As instructed by Xiao Yuetan, he queried in a hoarse voice: “Is everything ready?”

Xiao Pan nodded: “We are all set. Wang Jian is back and he had brought along an army of thirty thousand crack troops, every one of them a brave and experienced war veteran. Guaren has assigned him to a location near Yongdu as per our deployments.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “What are your plans?”

With a tinge of awkwardness, Xiao Pan articulated: “According to Mao Jiao’s spy reports, Lao Ai is planning to activate his forces and begin the rebellion on the night of the coronation when everyone is drunk and asleep from all the celebrations. When that happens, Wang Jian will besiege Yongdu with his men, trapping Lao Ai and his accomplices.”

Xiang Shaolong deliberately put on an air of displeasure: “Since Wang Jian is back, why didn’t he come to visit me?”

Xiao Pan hurriedly explained: “It is Guaren who had prohibited him from entering the City. Great General must not misjudge him.”

Xiang Shaolong interrogated: “Any news from Lu Buwei’s camp?”

His royal eyes turning icy, Xiao Pan frostily hissed: “In the meantime, what can he amount to? However, it will be a different story when Guaren lead my civil and military officials to Yongdu.”

Seemingly afraid of meeting Xiang Shaolong’s gaze, Xiao Pan lowered his head and continued in a deep voice: “After the departure of Guaren and Great General, Advisor Wei Liao will remain behind in Xianyang and assume command of the City. To deal with Lu Buwei, he shall be bestowed with Guaren’s Tiger Seal and he has complete autonomy to deploy the three armies of Xianyang. Guaren shall announce this tomorrow morning during the Court session.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger mounting. Despite his nice sounding words, Xiao Pan is actually relieving Teng Yi and Jing Jun of their military command.

At the end of the day, the Qin military is fiercely loyal to the royal family. If Teng Yi and Jing Jun are unable to deploy the

Imperial Cavalry, Xiang Shaolong would be handicapped in the showdown between him and Lu Buwei.

To make it worse, Wei Liao would have complete jurisdiction over any killings.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, disagreeing: “This arrangement is illogical. Presently, the Imperial Infantry is controlled by the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. Wei Liao is a fresh face and lack battle accomplishments. Not only would he be unable to win the respect of the soldiers, it would dampen the morale of the Imperial Cavalry. This proposal is impractical. Would Crown Prince please reconsider?”

Xiao Pan still retains some fear of Xiang Shaolong and on top of that, he has a guilty conscience. After a short contemplation, he clarified: “Essentially, Guaren’s strategy is strictly aimed at Lu Buwei. If he tries to manipulate the deployments of the Imperial Cavalry, we can charge him with treason. With reason on our side, Wei Liao can simply exterminate him and his followers. Hey! Of course we would require the collaboration of the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun.”

Though Xiang Shaolong’s deep-set eyes are flickering with a chilling sensation, he plainly concluded in a calm tone: “You can simply promote Wei Liao to become the Imperial Infantry Commander!”

Xiao Pan was perplexed: “But this is a pointblank offensive against Lu Buwei; that Traitor would never give his consent.”

Xiang Shaolong stated with indifference: “In this case, Crown Prince can simply hand your Tiger Seal to Teng Yi. Once the coronation hour has passed, Crown Prince shall become the King of Qin. Without Empress’s approval, Crown Prince can control the armies of Xianyang at will. Isn’t it better than causing unnecessary alarm?”

He is convinced that Xiao Pan needed to coax himself to Yongdu and would not clash with him at this point in time. Since Xiao Pan is evidently inferior in terms of courage, Xiang Shaolong used this golden opportunity to ask for the sky and watch how Xiao Pan would respond.

In reality, Xiao Pan cannot be bothered with the Imperial Infantry and had wanted to regain control of the Imperial Cavalry. But of course he could not say it outright.

After a lengthy pause, Xiao Pan finally relented: “Since you say so, I shall stick to the original military appointments. Wei Liao will encamp outside Xianyang City with his forces and whenever necessary, he shall supplement the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly humoured. Even if Wei Liao has three heads and six arms, he would not know that Xiang Shaolong is the real mastermind behind Xianyang’s deployments and is bound to be at a disadvantage.

No longer interested in idle chatter with Xiao Pan, Xiang

Shaolong used his lingering sickness as an excuse to return home.

Book 25 Chapter 06 - Thick Clouds Of War

Back at Wu Residence, Xiang Shaolong learnt that Qin Qing is here and found her with Ji Yanran in the hall, whispering secretively to each other. Both ladies wore a heavy expression on their faces and forcefully mustered a smile at the sight of him.

A bewildered Xiang Shaolong sat and questioned: “Why are the two of you in a state of anxiety?”

Ji Yanran explained: “Crown Prince has officially decreed Sister Qing to accompany him to Yongdu in order to assist him with the coronation procedures. Sister Qing is feeling distressed over this. She cannot afford to disobey the decree and yet, it is not ideal for her to go to Yongdu.”

Xiang Shaolong violently trembled: “No one knows me better than Yingzheng. He has hit me at my Achilles Heel.”

With a frantic expression, Qin Qing dismissed in a melancholic tone: “Just leave without me. I don’t think he has the guts to vent his frustration on me. After the dust has settled, I will look for you people at the borderlands!”

Recomposing himself, Xiang Shaolong shook his head decisively and declared: “No! If we are leaving, we will leave together. Otherwise, the heart wrenching pain of pining for each other will torture me to no ends.”

Listening to Xiang Shaolong’s emotional outburst, Qin Qing is so

touched her lovely eyes begin to turn red.

Ji Yanran suggested: “Yanran can disguise myself as Sister Qing’s personal maid and can react to any unforeseen circumstances.”

Briefly dazed, Xiang Shaolong agreed: “That’s a good plan and the enemy would not anticipate it. If necessary, I can get Jing Jun to personally fetch both of you at Yongdu. In terms of ninja climbing skills, who can hold a candle to him?”

Qin Qing wondered: “I would like to learn about Hubby Xiang’s ninja climbing skills. Are you willing to teach me?”

Hearing her words, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran stared at each other with a flabbergasted countenance. Qin Qing is such a civilized, prim and proper beauty. If she were to pick up the climbing skills of the Wu Family Special Forces, how would she eventually turn out?

That night, Xiao Yuetan leisurely strolled back.

Everyone quickly gathered in the secret room for a discussion.

Xiao Yuetan started: “If not for Master Tu keeping Traitor Lu under secret surveillance, as we walk down the path of reincarnation, we would remain as muddle-headed ghosts.”

Everyone flinched and swiftly pressed him for details.

Xiao Yuetan clarified: “Lu Buwei is now facing a shortage of reliable talents and had no choice but to assign heavy responsibilities to his pioneering family warriors which Master Tu headed. Hence, Master Tu is able to comprehend the finer details of Traitor Lu’s schemes.”

Ji Yanran exposed: “Of late, Lu Buwei has kept a low profile and appeared to be vulnerable and in a state of decline. So it is just an act.”

Jing Jun antagonistically cursed: “This time round, we must tear him to shreds.”

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: “We have neglected Lu Buwei’s last trick in the bag: His allies from the Six Eastern States. Among the Kings of the six States, each and every one of them views Yingzheng as a savage beast that will devour everything in its path. In order to topple Yingzheng, they are willing to pay any price. In their opinion, if Lao Ai can end up as the King of Qin, it would be even better.”

Xiang Shaolong’s face turned pale: “Would he have the audacity to open up the passes and simply allow the allied army to pass through?”

Xiao Yuetan chortled: “Even if he possesses the guts to do so, it would be futile. The soldiers of Qin love their country and would not carry out the order. In addition, the Three States, Chu and Yan are severely handicapped by Shaolong’s assault. Even if we open up

the passes, their armies would not have the conviction to proceed with the invasion. Nevertheless, the six States has dispatched four teams of kamikaze desperados, each of them a highly skilled fighter who is able to fight off a hundred men. At an opportune moment, they will execute their well-planned assassination attempt. Their four targets are Yingzheng, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping and Li Si.”

Of course Yingzheng and Xiang Shaolong would be among the chosen targets.

Lord Changping and Li Si are the top military and civil officials of Yingzheng. If they are out of the picture, the hundreds of civil and military officials would be leaderless, giving Lu Buwei a chance to take charge.

Xiang Shaolong thought: The person they should really try to assassinate is Wang Jian. However, Lu Buwei is probably still in the dark about Wang Jian’s return.

Presently, the State of Qin is undergoing a critical period in its evolution. The minute Xiao Pan ascends the throne; the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will perish without a burial place.

Tao Fang enquired in a deep voice: “Are these men in Xianyang?”

Xiao Yuetan answered: “To conceal their presence, they are holing up in the nearby mountain caves and forests while their food rations are provided by Master Tu. Ladies and Gentlemen, you should realize what a favourable arrangement this is.”

Ji Yanran inquired: “Is Manager Tu aware of their plans and details?”

Xiao Yuetan disclosed: “With regards to this, Imperial Infantry Commander Xu Shang is the one with all the information. As long as we can capture him alive, I would be able to force a confession out of him.”

Teng Yi professed: “If Xu Shang steps out of the City, we would be able to capture him alive for Mister’s interrogation. But if he stations himself within the Command Centre, we are powerless unless we chose to attack him head on.”

Xu Shang himself is a master swordsman and is a resident of Imperial Uncle Residence. Wherever he goes, he would be escorted by a sizable entourage of bodyguards. Within the Command Centre, it is a concentration of his men and influence. Killing him might be workable but capturing him alive is going to be an incredible feat.

From his bosom, Xiao Yuetan produced a roll of parchment. Spreading it across the table, he narrated: “This is a complete blueprint of Imperial Uncle Residence, including all the defensive traps and hidden rooms. If we employ certain strategies instead of brute force, it is quite possible for us to assassinate Lu Buwei and kidnap Xu Shang.”

Pausing, he added: “Master Tu has prepared a powerful anesthetic; if we put it in the drinking wells of Imperial Uncle

Residence, its consumers can forget about waking up within three days.”

Jing Jun cheered: “That’s brilliant!”

Xiang Shaolong probed: “Since Senior Tu did participate in Lu Buwei’s confidential meetings, did he manage to learn about his complete scheme?”

Xiao Yuetan icily grinned: “Even if Master Tu did not participate in the meetings, Traitor Lu cannot pull the wool over his eyes. Traitor Lu’s plan is to unleash two simultaneous attacks. When Lao Ai is staging his rebellion at Yongdu, he would launch his own uprising at Xianyang and kill everyone who opposes him.”

Pausing, he continued: “It is imperative to successfully assassinate Yingzheng. With Yingzheng dead, Lu Buwei can use the excuse of attacking Lao Ai and obtain full military control of Qin.

Tao Fang frowned: “If Lao Ai failed in his rebellion, wouldn’t Traitor Lu’s beautiful dream end up in smoke? And he would be labeled as a stinking insurgent.”

Xiao Yuetan enlightened: “That’s why Traitor Lu has instructed Guan Zhongxie to proceed to Yongdu to meet up with the experts from the six States and oversee their assassination maneuvers. Based on his remarkable archery skills, he has a decent shot at success. At the end of the day, Yingzheng is not familiar with layout of Yongdu.”

Everybody is in a state of agitation. If they do not act first and get rid of this man, he would become a most fearful threat.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “We did suspect this move from Lu Buwei; unfortunately, it turned out to be true. Is there any way to pinpoint Guan Zhongxie’s location?”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: “This is the Old Thief’s last and most powerful weapon. Except for himself, nobody else knows about Guan Zhongxie’s movement. The success or failure of Traitor Lu is resting on the deciding death of Yingzheng, and he does have a fair chance of victory.”

Ji Yanran pointed out: “Wouldn’t Wu Guo be in an extremely dangerous position?”

Wu Guo’s face is completely drained of blood. However, no one will blame him for being frightened after taking into account Guan Zhongxie’s supreme archery skills.

Stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan guffawed: “Dear all, this is called thinking too much. Actually, Guan Zhongxie is not absolutely untraceable. After all, his first target has to be Yingzheng. An alternative is assaulting the four targets simultaneously in order not to raise the alarm and lose the element of surprise.”

Wu Guo instantly heaved a sigh of relief.

Ji Yanran deduced: “In this sense, the assassination attempts

should be concentrated in Yongdu. Only in this instance can they frame Lao Ai for the murders.”

She went on with a smile: “Those well versed in warfare will overcome their enemies by strategy instead of numbers. The biggest weakness of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai’s collaboration is their mutual distrust and mutual scheming. According to Yanran’s estimate, it is likely that Lu Buwei did not reveal to Lao Ai about his assassination plans and has planted spies among the followers of Crown Prince. If we manage to leak the assassination plans to Lao Ai, we may gain some unexpected benefits.”

Xiang Shaolong is not the least worried about Xiao Pan’s royal life; otherwise, history would not have records of this person known as Qin Shihuang. In the same context, he is not worried about Lord Changping and Li Si too.

At this point, Teng Yi commented: “The best way is to kill Guan Zhongxie beforehand and indirectly safeguard ourselves. If anything were to happen to me and Little Jun, Traitor Lu can simply seize control of the Imperial Cavalry.”

Guan Zhongxie is gifted warrior and an astute strategist. With him masterminding the assassins from the six States, who would dare to be complacent.

Xiao Yuetan suddenly proposed: “With Wu Guo disguised as Shaolong, Shaolong can concurrently impersonate Wu Guo. That would be a perfect scenario.”

Everyone was full of praise and cheers.

Tao Fang wondered: “Is there enough time?”

Xiao Yuetan happily laughed: “When I was making the first mask, I already thought of this and made both masks instead. That’s why I ended up taking so much time!”

Everyone took turns in commending Xiao Yuetan for his brilliance and is full of admiration for his wisdom and foresight.

Subsequently, they discussed the details of their deployments and decided that their utmost priority is to track down Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, they made special provisions in case of unforeseen circumstances.

That night, Xiang Shaolong had a very good rest and intentionally appeared during the morning court session, allowing Lu Buwei and the others to witness his sickly appearance and hear his hoarse voice.

The court session that morning was mainly centered on the affairs of the approaching coronation.

Lu Buwei actively persisted on staying behind and guarding Xianyang while Xiao Pan pretended to lose the debate and accepted his proposal with reluctance.

After the morning court session, the five men Xiao Pan, Xiang

Shaolong, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and Li Si adjourned to the Imperial Study for their private meeting.

Lord Changping and Li Si submitted their reports first and both their reports are concerning the Yongdu coronation process.

At the end of their submission, Xiao Pan narrated: “Officials (All of you) should know that this is the last opportunity for the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai to topple Guaren. In this aspect, what propositions would Officials recommend?”

Lord Changwen reported: “Your subordinate has made detailed preparations with regards to this matter. First of all, the ships sailing to Yongdu shall be similar looking and all of them will bear the royal flag, making it difficult for the enemy to pinpoint the actual ship that Guaren is sailing on. In addition, several mini battleships shall pave the way for us. Lastly, there will be elite soldiers lying in ambush in all the critical parts of the shore, guaranteeing a safe journey.”

Xiao Pan nodded his head and praised his work before reminding: “Nonetheless, the main danger would lie in Yongdu. For many years, Lao Ai has been making preparations just for this one day. We cannot afford to be complacent.”

Lord Changping added: “Guxi will first lead ten thousand elite soldiers into Yongdu and secure all the exits and entrances. Subordinate has confidence that Lao Ai would not dare to challenge him.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “When did Senior General An come back?”

Xiao Pan dryly coughed once and explained: “As Great General is at home and recuperating, Guaren dare not disturb and thus, did not tell Great General about his return.”

Li Si and the other two men lowered their head and kept their silence.

Xiang Shaolong furiously state: “Crown Prince is well-prepared and certainly do not require subordinate’s presence and advice. Why don’t subordinate remain in Xianyang and continue my recuperation?”

The heads of Li Si and the other two sank even lower.

Without any signs of fluster, Xiao Pan corrected: “Great General, you must not jump to conclusions. Guaren is now seeking your advice.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “If you do not make known to subordinate about your deployments and the available soldiers, be prepared to fail.”

Including Xiao Pan, the four men were taken aback.

Xiang Shaolong thought: This is called: I don’t usually speak, but when I do, you can expect some nerve-racking words. After

receiving the precious intelligence reports from Tu Xian, he is much more confident in fighting this double war; the first war is against the gangs of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai; the second war is against the heartless fellow Xiao Pan.

With a serious demeanour, Xiao Pan questioned: “What does Great General mean?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew that Xiao Pan places a heavy emphasis on the meaning behind his words. Moreover, since he was young, Xiao Pan has always regarded himself as an infallible immortal. In addition, Xiang Shaolong has assisted Xiao Pan in resolving many of his difficulties and his standing in Xiao Pan’s heart is irreplaceable.

If it was somebody else, be it Wang Jian or Li Si, they would not have the same chilling effect on this future Qin Shihuang.

Instead of answering, Xiang Shaolong plainly interrogated: “How many men did Senior General An brought back from the Qin-Chu border?”

After some hesitation, Xiao Pan helplessly replied: “Fifty thousand.”

Scrutinizing the expression of the others, Xiang Shaolong is convinced that Xiao Pan did not lie to him about this matter. Without the slightest hint of surprise, he probed: “Where are the other forty thousand men stationed at? Who is in charge of them?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong is well aware that the huge army is not solely here to get rid of Lu Buwei; they would be used to attack Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Wu Family Warriors as well but he intentionally forced Xiao Pan to confess so.

Xiao Pan appears to be afraid of facing Xiang Shaolong's glare and pretended to flip through several documents on his table. With an air of nonchalance, he responded: "They are the reserve army which I prepared for cases of emergency. With Wei Liao at the helm, they can swiftly supplement the forces of Yongdu or Xianyang by taking the river route."

Subsequently, he reminded with some impatience: "Great General has yet to answer Guaren's question."

Under the sky, only Xiang Shaolong would dare to speak with Xiao Pan in this manner.

Li Si and the others dare not interrupt.

Xiang Shaolong simply rationalized: "However brazen they can be, the gangs of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai would not throw eggs at stone by staging an open rebellion. Therefore, I am convinced that they will try to employ a secret assassination attempt. If they can successfully get rid of Crown Prince, chaos will descend and the traitors can reap benefits from the state of disorder. They will end up as the biggest winners."

Lord Changping cannot help but interject: "We already thought of that and have implemented appropriate countermeasures."

Xiang Shaolong articulated in a deep voice: “Imagine a scenario whereby the head of the assassination team is Guan Zhongxie and the participants are top assassins from the other six States, each of them painstakingly chosen from thousands of candidates and has undergone vigorous training. On top of that, Crown Prince has to expose himself to the public during the coronation ceremony and there are also spies within the Palace Guards aiding the assassins. Is Your Lordship as surefooted as before?”

Including Xiao Pan, everyone’s countenance underwent a drastic change.

Years ago, on the way to Deshui for the Spring Sacrifice, Xiao Pan’s entourage was ambushed. Luckily, the decoy carriage was attacked but the memory of the incident is still fresh in their minds. With the deadly marksman Guan Zhongxie involved in the latest assault, who can guarantee that everything will be fine.

Lord Changping was thunderstruck: “According to the messengers, Guan Zhongxie is still in Han territory, locking horns with the people of Han.”

Xiang Shaolong dismissed: “That’s a sham. In this critical juncture, there is no reason for Lu Buwei to not summon his beloved son-in-law back. This is called: Feeding an army for days, unlocking their value in one battle.”

Xiang Shaolong’s words are highly persuasive and plausible; no one doubts his theory.

His royal eyes flickering, Xiao Pan glared at Xiang Shaolong and grilled: “Where did Great General get your information from?”

Xiang Shaolong has already anticipated this question from Xiao Pan and replied with a smile: “Lu Buwei has friends in the six States and so does subordinate.”

Xiao Pan stared blankly at him for a short spell and nodded: “What solutions do Great General advocate?”

Taking full advantage of his superior bargaining position, Xiang Shaolong demanded: “For a start, Crown Prince has to grant subordinate your Tiger Seal, giving subordinate the ability to deploy the military at will. Only then can subordinate find a remedy to this problem.”

This is Xiang Shaolong’s most astounding move and there is no basis for Xiao Pan to reject him. For the different ranks of commanders and generals, they are presented with a different Tiger Seal that reflects their rank and identity. In the same context, the Tiger Seal will limit the amount of soldiers they can bring into battle.

For those who are ranked Senior General and above, there is no limit on their army strength. Wherever they may be, they can recruit or deploy soldiers at will.

After every war and upon their return to Xianyang, the generals and commanders must surrender half of their Tiger Seal to the

Court. The soldiers will be re-assigned back to their original barracks and the generals will be left with their personal soldiers. The personal soldiers of each general will vary based on their ranks. At the end of the day, the control of the military will reconsolidate in the hands of the King.

Being one of the two Great Generals of Qin, if Xiang Shaolong possess the complete Tiger Seal, he is as good as the Chief Commander. When that happens, except for Xiao Pan, no one can retract his authority.

As a result, with both halves of the Tiger Seal, Xiang Shaolong wields absolute authority over the soldiers of Qin. If Xiao Pan wishes to harm him, he cannot utilize Wei Liao who is a new and lowly ranked commander. The only possibility is for Xiao Pan to attack Xiang Shaolong in person.

This clearly demonstrates the importance of the Tiger Seal.

For three reasons, Xiang Shaolong is confident that Xiao Pan will acquiesce to his request.

Firstly, Xiao Pan is under the impression that Xiang Shaolong is always by his side. After arriving in Yongdu, Xiao Pan can easily demand the return of the Tiger Seal. It is not as if Xiang Shaolong is fighting a distant battle and can choose to disobey Xiao Pan's decree.

Secondly, Xiang Shaolong had deliberately painted this scenario, forcing Xiao Pan to accede to his demands in order to placate and

continue deceiving Xiang Shaolong.

Thirdly and best of all, Xiao Pan's trust in Xiang Shaolong's capabilities are deep-rooted. Furthermore, Xiao Pan fully believes that Xiang Shaolong would not bear to harm him.

As a result, Xiang Shaolong is not anxious about Xiao Pan's decision. Additionally, Xiao Pan cannot make enquiries about his plans, as it is tantamount to distrust.

As anticipated, Xiao Pan was briefly dazed before nodding his royal head in agreement: "As per Great General's request!"

Suppressing his overwhelming exhilaration, Xiang Shaolong plainly swore: "The day of Crown Prince's coronation shall be the day subordinate presents the head of Guan Zhongxie. If I fail in my duty, Crown Prince can punish me according to the military laws."

An extremely complicated look flashed past the eyes of Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself and took this opportunity to retreat.

Book 25 Chapter 07 - Unorthodox Interrogation

Lord Changwen chased up to Xiang Shaolong from the back. Riding side by side, their horses unhurriedly galloped along the road while the Guardians and Lord Changwen's bodyguards carefully scrutinized their surroundings for any signs of danger. Armed with human-sized shields and holding their bows, they kept a strict lookout for possible assassins. It was a tense atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong casually checked: "Don't you need to attend to Crown Prince?"

Lord Changwen shook his head and probed: "What are Shaolong's plans against the rebels? Can you share some information with me? I may be able to lend you a hand."

With an air of indifference, Xiang Shaolong grilled: "Was it Crown Prince who ordered you to chase up to me and ask these questions?"

Revealing a stunned look, Lord Changwen is unable to answer him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You can save it. I understand your difficulties."

His face darkening, Lord Changwen shamefully implored: "Can Shaolong help me out?"

Xiang Shaolong narrated: “You can report to Crown Prince that I have laid my hands on a bunch of clues, allowing me to take down Guan Zhongxie and the assassins of the six States in one fell swoop. Nevertheless, I would need to operate under full secrecy for my strategy to succeed. Therefore, with lesser people aware of my plans, the better it is for me.”

Lord Changwen hastily enquired: “What’s the purpose behind Shaolong’s request for the Tiger Seal?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: Of course it is a life preservation tactic. Instead, he answered: “Because I would need to deploy thirty thousand Imperial Cavalry soldiers in my quest to exterminate these trespassing invaders.”

Pausing, he asked in return: “What is Wei Liao’s present rank?”

With a look of dilemma on his face, Lord Changwen lowered his head and responded: “I am not very sure.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Ultimately, Lord Changwen is inferior to his elder brother in terms of brotherhood loyalty. Sharing weal is easy; sharing woe is a different story.

Thinking about this, Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered with his company.

With a “Please return!” Xiang Shaolong and the Guardians sped

away. Back at his Command Centre, he immediately summoned the three men: Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Guo. After updating them about the Tiger Seal incident, he asserted: “Presently, we are considered untouchable. Unless Yingzheng personally leads an army against me, nobody else can lay a finger on us.”

Teng Yi frowned: “However, Yingzheng can issue a decree to confiscate Third Brother’s military authority.”

Xiang Shaolong grinned: “That’s the best part. To make sure that I get rid of Guan Zhongxie, Yingzheng would not recall the Tiger Seal before the coronation. By the time he wishes to act against my interests, he would discover my absence at Yongdu. During that period, we could enjoy a few days of complete freedom and focus all our energies on countering Lu Buwei.”

Wu Guo nodded: “In this case, I must make my getaway before the end of the coronation ceremony.”

Jing Jun wondered: “Are we really going after Guan Zhongxie?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Just take it that we are giving Yingzheng a huge farewell present before our departure!”

Teng Yi agreed: “We must do it; otherwise, if Traitor Lu happens to succeed in his scheme, we can forget about enjoying our days in peace.”

Xiang Shaolong proposed: “As long as we can capture all the

members of one of the assassination teams that are concealed in the mountains or wilderness, and with Tu Xian concealing this development from Lu Buwei, we could execute our torturous interrogation methods and discover the location of Guan Zhongxie.”

Wu Guo was puzzled: “I am still confused; instead of using the opportunity to head to Yongdu, why are the assassins still loitering near Xianyang.”

Jing Jun questioned: “Three days later, Yingzheng shall proceed to Yongdu. When does Third Brother plan to strike?”

Revealing a self-satisfying and self-confident smile, Xiang Shaolong simply decided: “Tonight! Let these men have a taste of our well-trained and seasoned Wu Family Special Forces.”

The three men stammered in shock: “Special Forces?”

Xiang Shaolong contentedly nodded.

Because of his 21st century scientific knowledge, Xiang Shaolong is able to recreate this ancient Special Forces team that employs the best battle techniques, allowing him to accomplish many missions that were originally insurmountable. Out of the blue, he can feel his chest swelling with infinite fighting spirit.

Under the brilliance of the bright moon, Xiang Shaolong who was disguised as Wu Guo is in a prone position with Ji Yanran

beside him. They are waiting patiently on a cliff about six miles south of Xianyang City.

Armed with foldable crossbows, they are dressed in light jungle clothes. Underneath their clothes is a special armored vest, something similar to the 21st century bulletproof vest.

Now lying on the soft grass of the cliff, Xiang Shaolong reached out and patted the thigh of Ji Yanran who is sitting beside him. He softly remarked: “I hope Wu Guo don’t screw up.”

Tonight is the first time Wu Guo is entering the limelight with his Xiang Shaolong disguise. Accompanied by Teng Yi, they are meeting Xu Shang for a discussion, analyzing how the Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry can work hand in hand when Yingzheng is absent from Xianyang.

This tactic is to allay the suspicions of Xu Shang.

If Xu Shang learns that Xiang Shaolong has left the City, it will set off alarms in his head.

Lightly whining and brushing off Xiang Shaolong’s invading hand, Ji Yanran frowned her brows: “Don’t touch me. With your Wu Guo disguise, I forbid any intimacy.”

Xiang Shaolong was humoured: “Outer beauty is deceptive; inner beauty is genuine. Even our Talented Lady doesn’t realize this?”

Ji Yanran faintly sighed: “It is easier said than done. How many people can really forgo one’s appearance? If a choice is available, who would choose ugliness over beauty.”

At this juncture, Jing Jun crept towards both of them and whispered: “The enemies numbered between twelve to fifteen men and they have set up camp in the forest. Their only defense is a sentry. I have casted sky-wide nets (chinese idiom 天罗地网), guaranteed to capture each and every one of them.”

This time round, it is truly a case of using sky-wide nets. The outstanding hunter, Jing Jun, has specially crafted dozens of large nets that can be placed on the ground or casted from the trees above.

These assassins who have sneaked into Qin are the elite warriors of the six States. Without a good strategy, killing them is easy but capturing them alive is going to be a challenge.

Jumping to his feet, Xiang Shaolong commanded: “Do it!”

Jing Jun sneaked away.

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran ascended the summit of the hill and prostrated themselves among the thick grass, overlooking the huge stretch of thick forests that lie below them.

If not for Tu Xian’s accurate information, even with a massive army combing the area, it would be impossible to corner their

targets like the present situation.

Out of a sudden, the sound of hoof beats can be heard about a mile away. It gradually became louder and louder, signaling its approach and is advancing towards the forest from far. Of course Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran are not the least surprised, for it is part of their scheme to force the enemies to run in the opposite direction towards the ensnaring nets.

As anticipated, the enemies reacted instantaneously. By observing the stationary birds suddenly taking flight due to the commotion, Xiang Shaolong deduced that they are fleeing in the southeast direction where the nets are.

Continuous cries of astonishment and exclamation can be heard from the forest. Minutes later, the forest resumed its natural silence.

Exchanging a smile, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran knew that they had succeeded. Now, all they have to do is wait for Xiao Yuetan's interrogation methods.

Altogether, thirteen men were captured. Despite their varying appearances, all of them are tall and strapping characters. In an open skirmish, Xiang Shaolong and his men may suffer injuries or even death. But with their clever tactics against these unprepared criminals, no losses were reported and the entire operation was a piece of cake.

The apprehended men obviously had a pre-arrangement, with

each person holding his tongue and radiating a strong determination as if death is nothing.

After smuggling them back to Wu Residence, Xiao Yuetan gave instructions to lock them up separately. Concluding a round of observation, he chose one of the assassins to be his interrogation target. To the crowd, he explained: “This man is rather handsome looking. I am sure his lifestyle is much more enriching than the others and he would certainly enjoy the attention of many ladies. For a person like him to be willing to risk his life for this mission, I am positive he is doing it for the money and also to win the affections of a beauty. Needless to say, he is somebody who treasures his body and life.”

Ji Yanran complimented: “Mister is truly an expert in human psychology. No wonder you are Manager Tu’s most capable assistant.”

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: “I am just someone who uses my brain more often! It’s really nothing.”

He then pleaded in a low voice: “Can Yanran excuse yourself?”

Ji Yanran realizes that he is up to something that is unsuitable for a female spectator. Despite her unwillingness, she could only compliantly retreat from the room.

When the room is only left with the three men, namely Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and Xiao Yuetan, two Wu Family Warriors escorted the selected assassin in.

The lanky and fine-looking man is in the prime of his youth. Currently, his face is portraying a ghastly look and his body is exuding an air of despondency. With mud all over him, several parts of his clothes are torn and tattered. His hands are bounded behind him and his feet are locked together by an iron chain.

The three pairs of sharp eyes are scanning his face, keeping a lookout for any changes in his facial expression.

Xiao Yuetan lightly snickered: “The person beside me is the earth-shattering figure Xiang Shaolong. Since Brother has the guts to come here, you should know what kind of person he is.”

The man peeped at Xiang Shaolong once. Initially exhibiting a strange look, he then slowly nodded his head.

In their hearts, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are full of admiration for Xiao Yuetan’s choice of interrogation suspect. The other men would probably remain immobile. Since this person is willing to nod his head, there is a good chance of a confession.

Xiao Yuetan gently questioned: “How do I address Brother and where are you from?”

The face of the suspect revealed traces of an internal struggle and obvious signs of distress. Eventually, he vehemently shook his head once, indicating his refusal to speak.

Xiao Yuetan burst out laughing: “Let me show you something first. Afterwards, you can decide if you want to cooperate with us or not. Strip him.”

Receiving his order, the two warriors jumped into action. In the blink of an eye, the man is standing there in his birthday suit and his face is carrying a horrified expression.

At this moment, even the two men Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun cannot predict Xiao Yuetan’s next move.

Xiao Yuetan gave another order and from outside the door, the sound of a trolley wheeling can be heard. There are also bizarre ‘ji ji’ noises, sending shivers down the spine of Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun.

Entering their sight was two Guardians pushing a huge, six feet by six feet iron cage. Inside the cage is about a hundred rats of all sizes, busily scampering around and making the ‘ji ji’ cries.

Jing Jun exclaimed: “Oh boy!”

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong can literally feel all his hair standing on their ends and nearly wanted to excuse himself.

Blood fully drained from his face, the man’s legs softened as he kneeled down on the floor. Simultaneously, his body started trembling all over as he visualized his looming torture.

Xiao Yuetan casually remarked: “Without my explanation, Brother should have guessed the purpose of these rats. I heard these rats are especially good at digging holes. Ha!”

With a wheezing sound, the suspect nearly fainted.

Lowering his head, the good-looking man asked in a quivering voice: “Are you telling the truth?”

Xiang Shaolong challenged in an unfriendly voice: “Have you ever heard of one incident when I failed to keep my word? Nonetheless, we must be able to prove that Brother is not lying to us before we will set you free.”

The man submissively nodded: “I confess.”

After obtaining precious information from the suspect, Wu Guo, Teng Yi and the other Guardians happened to return. In the highest of spirits, they must be feeling gratified at successfully deceiving Xu Shang.

Wu Yan Zhe commended: “Elder Brother Guo is brilliant indeed; whenever he gets stuck in the discussion, he would start coughing. With one hand supporting his head and a bitter expression, the resemblance is uncanny.”

Having excused herself earlier, Ji Yanran stepped into the hall and frowned: “Make sure you do not overdo it.”

Teng Yi assured: “You can set your mind at ease. Even I had to keep reminding myself that he is not Third Brother. Their only difference is the glow in their eyes. Fortunately, others will attribute it to Shaolong’s lingering sickness and will not think much of it.”

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he inquired: “How is the interrogation?”

Xiang Shaolong cheerfully flashed the ‘Victory’ sign.

The Guardians and Wu Guo shouted and cheered in unison, nearly bringing the house down.

Jing Jun updated: “Luckily, we have Mister Xiao heading the interrogation, scaring that fellow into cooperating with us obediently. He even revealed details and answers that went beyond our questioning. It turns out that this is not some secret collaboration between the six States; it was Tian Dan masterminding the assassination all along. All the warriors are from Qi and some of them are impersonating as assassins from the other five States. Their leader is Bian Dongshan, Cao Qiudao’s top disciple and he reportedly has learnt the essence of Cao Qiudao’s skills. Lan Gongyuan was personally trained by him and he is currently residing at Yongdu.”

Xiao Yuetan supplemented: “This man is a master assassin. We cannot afford to be negligent.”

Teng Yi wondered: “I thought Guan Zhongxie’s Sect and Qixia

Sword Sect are sworn enemies? Why would he collaborate with the disciple of Cao Qiudao?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Of course there is Lao Ai’s powerful henchman Han Jie who is linking and mediating between the two parties. This man is likely to be receiving bribes from Lu Buwei and has become Traitor Lu’s spy within the camp of Lao Ai.”

Ji Yanran probed: “Right now, what are Hubby’s plans regarding Guan Zhongxie?”

Remembering Lu Niangrong, Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. In a deep voice, he declared: “Given the present circumstances, where it is kill or be killed, I have to chop him down with Hundred Battle Sabre before he has the chance to pick up his giant steel bow.”

Xiao Yuetan quizzed: “When does Shaolong plan to strike?”

Xiang Shaolong seriously enquired: “Can we get our hands on two ordinary fishing boats? It must be secretly acquired.”

Tao Fang answered: “Leave this to me. When does Shaolong want the boats?”

Xiang Shaolong avowed: “Tomorrow! The earlier the better! I want to cut off the head on his neck before he receives any updates and present it to Yingzheng as our farewell gift.”

Everyone cheered in response and their morale was sky high.

Book 25 Chapter 08 - Surprise Attack

Early next morning, while disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun led fifty specially selected Wu Family Warriors in boarding the fishing vessels in a stealth manner. Against the current, they sailed towards Yongdu.

Because the Guardians have to escort Wu Guo, who is impersonating Xiang Shaolong and has to accompany Xiao Pan to Yongdu, they cannot participate in this mission.

Ji Yanran has to escort Qin Qing and cannot come along too.

Meanwhile, Teng Yi is responsible for leading the Imperial Cavalry in securing Xianyang and exterminating the other three teams of assassins.

With thick clouds covering the skies, it was drizzling non-stop.

Wearing their raincoats, the two men Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are sitting at the bow of the vessel and discussing the details of their assault.

Xiang Shaolong professed: “We only have one full day and one full night to carry out our plan. If we cannot kill Guan Zhongxie within this time frame, there will not be a second chance.”

Brimming with conviction, Jing Jun suggested: “After sneaking into Yongdu, we will immediately place Guan Zhongxie’s hiding

place under strict surveillance. When it gets dark, we shall move in and take his life.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “However, I cannot decide if I should approach An Guxi for assistance. It may alert Lao Ai to our plans.”

Jing Jun proposed: “Why don’t we seek Fourth Brother’s help instead!”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “I do not want Yingzheng to learn about this. Moreover, it will affect Fourth Brother’s career development.”

Jing Jun exclaimed: “In this case, let’s depend on ourselves. With careful planning, we can simply vanish after the deed. By then, Lao Ai would still be unaware that Guan Zhongxie is back and even perished in his territory of Yongdu.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Nonetheless, Han Jie would quickly realize that something is amiss. To make things worse, this is Han Jie’s territory. If we are planning to kill him as well, our risk will increase by several folds. That is why I am in a state of indecisiveness.”

Jing Jun belittled: “So what if he knows! Would he dare to tell Lao Ai about it? Furthermore, if he wishes to send word to Lu Buwei, it can only happen two days later. Even so, his messenger may be intercepted by Second Brother.”

According to their plans, when Xiao Pan leaves for Yongdu with his civil and military officials, Teng Yi's Imperial Cavalry will set up blockades on the river route and traveling roads between Yongdu and Xianyang, carrying out checks on all the travellers going in and out of the city.

Xiang Shaolong agreed: "I guess that's the best we can do."

That same evening, Xiang Shaolong and his men discarded the two boats and climbed ashore about two miles away from Yongdu. Slipping past the river security checks, they approached Yongdu on foot.

Using falsified identification papers, they impersonated Qin citizens from other parts of the country. In different batches, they entered the City while posing as men from varying occupations.

Once they managed to contact the Wu Family Warriors whom Tao Fang had planted in Yongdu two years ago, Xiang Shaolong and his team concealed themselves in a common household near the south of the city. From there, they started their surveillance work.

Yongdu is Qin's first capital city in the Guan Zhong district. Situated at the merging point of River Wei and River Zhi, it is a melting pot for the cultures of Guan Zhong, Ba Shu and Si Gen.

The location of Yongdu is strategic, with roads leading to Long Nan, Han Zhong, Ba Shu and many others.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the Duke of Qin selected Yongdu as his capital precisely because of this factor. On top of fortifying the area of Guan Zhong, he can set the stage for world domination.

In the future, Yingzheng's success in uniting the lands of Hua Xia is due to Yongdu and Guan Zhong's strategic and critical location.

Although the capital of Qin has relocated to Xianyang, the ancestral temple of the royal family is still based in Yongdu. For all grand ceremonies, they must be held in Yongdu's ancestral temple.

As the last line of defense for Xianyang, Yongdu plays an irreplaceable role since the founding of the State.

Yongdu is home to several majestic palaces. Among them, Dazheng Palace and Qinian Palace are the most magnificent.

Presently, Dazheng Palace has become the residence of Zhu Ji while Qinian Palace is designated to be Xiao Pan's temporary residence for his coronation trip.

Arriving at Yongdu, Xiang Shaolong is able to have a first hand experience of Lao Ai's grandeur.

The soldiers of Yongdu are dressed in military uniforms with a golden band around their collar, portraying an air of extravagance. Besides dressing differently from the usual simple-looking Qin soldier, the Yongdu guards are behaving in a brazen,

condescending manner.

An Guxi's garrison has obviously failed to gain control over the entire city. For the time being, only the South Gate near River Wei, the road leading to Qinian Palace and Qinian Palace itself is under his jurisdiction.

With Zhu Ji backing Lao Ai and before their open confrontation, even Xiao Pan is powerless against this 'fake father'.

Of course the situation will be totally reversed when the indomitable and master general Wang Jian enters the City. Regardless of their self-glorifying titles, Lao Ai's thirty thousand rebels will be like cows being sent to the abattoir.

The only viable threat is Guan Zhongxie's secret assassination team.

And Xiang Shaolong's current mission is to move one step ahead of them, uprooting and annihilating them before they could carry out their plot.

Furthermore, he has to complete his mission without alerting Lao Ai. Otherwise, he would be collateral damage.

It is nearly 7pm and the sky is still drizzling when a report came in: Disguised as a commoner, a lone Guan Zhongxie has just left his hiding place.

Guan Zhongxie and Xiang Shaolong share a common drawback. Irrespective of their disguise, the observant would be able to identify them from their aura.

Xiang Shaolong decisively gave the order to begin their mission.

With Jing Jun and the fifty warriors, Xiang Shaolong disembarked at a quiet and lonely alley near the selected residence before removing their outer coats that is concealing their equipment and night suits.

The fifty warriors swiftly divided themselves into ten teams of five. Borrowing the cover of the walls and nightly shower, they snuck into the residence. The activities of the residence are limited to the occasional strongman traveling along the corridor. None of the faces are familiar to Xiang Shaolong or Jing Jun.

This particular residence is divided into five parts. In the centre, there is a sky well and sheltered walkways provide the link between them.

Once everyone is in battle position, Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and two teams of warriors cloaked themselves among the flower bushes beside the main hall.

The illumination of lanterns and human voices are transpiring from inside.

A warrior crept to the window and stole a peep before tiptoeing

back and reporting: “There are five men inside the hall and two of them are armed. They are clustered on a mat at the east side of the hall, sitting rather close to the window.”

Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: “Are there any womenfolk?”

Another warrior who had peeped into the hall replied: “I noticed two female maids.”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly troubled. Originally, he had wanted to kill every living soul within this dwelling. In this kill or be killed scenario, there is no room for compassion.

But how could he bear to kill these defenseless women?

He sighed with a breath: “Kill all the men. Capture all the women. We will deal with them afterwards. Tell everybody to wait for my signal.”

Four of the warriors left to execute his command.

Within a minute, Xiang Shaolong’s instructions have been communicated to everyone. They will act once they hear Jing Jun’s pre-arranged three continuous birdcalls.

On the first wave of birdcalls, Jing Jun and the warriors rapidly dived out from the flower bushes and stationed themselves at their allocated window or door.

The birdcalls are broadcast again.

Sounds of door breaking and windows shattering reverberated throughout the residence.

For the main hall, Jing Jun was the first to break through a window. Before he even landed on the ground, he unleashed a flurry of arrows around him, heralding the start of a close combat sequence.

An arrow pierced the throat of a man near the window and he collapsed at once. As the other men scrambled to their feet in horror, they were simultaneously hit by at least three arrows, tragically dying on the spot. It is not known if Bian Dongshan is one of them.

From the rear courtyards, dreadful shrieks were heard but they are quickly replaced by silence.

Minutes later, ten warriors escorted a lady who is carrying her baby son in her arms and four female maids who are shocked out of their wits to Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun who are standing in the centre of the hall.

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun exchanged a look. The lady turned out to be Lu Family's Third Mistress Lu Niangrong.

Although there is no trace of blood on Lu Niangrong's face, her

eyes are brimming with determination and blazing with extreme hatred. In her arms, the child is peacefully playing with his own collar, completely oblivious to the oncoming catastrophe.

Clenching her teeth, she viciously swore: “Go ahead and kill us! Dad will definitely avenge us.”

Never in his wildest dream did Xiang Shaolong anticipate the presence of Lu Nianrong. Momentarily, he was stunned into silence. After all, he is still feeling apologetic towards Lu Nianrong and would not extent his hatred for Lu Buwei onto his daughter.

Jing Jun icily smirked: “Revenge! Humph! Your father can barely fend for himself, how can he hope to protect you? If you are feeling unjustified, you can only blame it on yourself for being his flesh and blood.”

Lu Nianrong furiously challenged: “Shut up! Who gave you the right to speak to me like that?”

Xiang Shaolong extended his hand just in time to prevent Jing Jun from slapping Lu Nianrong. Softening his tone, he examined: “What brings Third Mistress here?”

Lu Nianrong coldly grinned: “My affairs are none of your concern.”

The Wu Family Special Forces members instantly flared up and

grunted menacing. Once Xiang Shaolong gave the green light, they would hack her to pieces. Simultaneously, the eight legs of the four maids turned into jelly and with a series of ‘ku dong’ sounds, the maids collapse onto the floor and one of them was so shocked she fainted on the spot. The baby started to cry with a high pitch.

Signaling his men to hold their ground, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Putting aside all other matters, isn’t Third Mistress worried about the infant in your arms?”

Lowering her head to pacify her treasured baby, Lu Niangrong’s face is streaming with hot tears. In a pitiful tone, she grieved: “If Zhongxie is dead, life has no more meaning for us, mother and son.”

At this juncture, someone reported: “Target is reaching the residence soon!”

Lu Niangrong resolutely raised her head and faced Xiang Shaolong, her pretty eyes radiating with a pleading expression. In fact, Xiang Shaolong’s anguish is not inferior to hers. He had promised Xiao Pan that he will present Guan Zhongxie’s head to him at the coronation ceremony. Now that he is facing Lu Niangrong mother and son, he cannot harden his heart.

Xiang Shaolong has promised Xiao Pan that he will present Guan Zhongxie’s head to him at the coronation ceremony. Now that he is facing Lu Niangrong mother and son, he cannot harden his heart.

He does not have the luxury of time to slowly contemplate the situation. Xiang Shaolong ordered: “Miss Lu, please take a seat.”

To Lu Niangrong, he added: “Should Third Mistress try to shout a warning, Brother Guan will certainly die tonight. Aye! Do you trust me, Xiang Shaolong?”

Hearing his words, Lu Niangrong was taken aback while Jing Jun frowned with disapproval. Struggling to say something, he eventually kept quiet.

Under the light drizzle and night breeze, an unprepared Guan Zhongxie stepped over the ledge into the courtyard. By the time he realizes something is amiss, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun had mugged him from the left and right, overpowering him in an instance.

Recognizing his prowess, the warriors disarmed him. When they are about to bind his hands, Xiang Shaolong motioned them to stop. He enquired: “Why didn’t Brother Guan inform Little Brother that you are back.”

From his voice, Guan Zhongxie realized that he is Xiang Shaolong. He demanded in a deep voice: “Where is Niangrong?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Sister in law and your son are safe and sound. Let’s talk inside!”

Noting the capture of Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niangrong instantly

broke down and wept incessantly.

Glancing bitterly once at the mother and son, an exasperated Guan Zhongxie sat down at a faraway corner as indicated by Xiang Shaolong. Crestfallen, he surrendered: “Although I, Guan Zhongxie, is unwilling to admit defeat, I must say that I am certainly not your, Xiang Shaolong’s, match.”

Subsequently, he lowered his head and pleaded: “Can you let them off? I only ask for an honorable death.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling touched. For the first time, he can feel this formidable nemesis treating Lu Nianrong mother and son with true love, explaining his subservient and begging tone.

Furthermore, this is definitely not an appropriate time but still, Lu Nianrong risked her life to meet up with Guan Zhongxie, clearly demonstrating their loving relationship.

As Xiang Shaolong pondered, Jing Jun interrupted: “Third Brother! I wish to have a word with you.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Let’s talk later! I understand your concern.”

Turning to the vulnerable Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong grilled: “Brother Guan should recognize the fact that your Father in law’s days are numbered and Lao Ai cannot amount to much. Brother Guan, what are your plans?”

Guan Zhongxie shuddered once. Lifting his head to face Xiang Shaolong, his eyes glowed with utter disbelief.

Jing Jun panicked: “How are we going to answer to Crown Prince?”

Regaining his composure, Xiang Shaolong plainly decided: “I know what to do. Brother Guan, you have yet to tell me about your plans?”

Guan Zhongxie exhaled once: “Brother Xiang is not afraid that I may send word to Imperial Uncle or Lao Ai?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “That is why I must get Brother Guan to promise me that you will not do so. Anyway, I will escort Sister in law and Brother Guan separately from Yongdu. Both of you shall sail to Chu. By then, even if Brother Guan wishes to send word, it would be too late. Without anyone working with you, Brother Guan is like a single hand that cannot clap; all your efforts will be futile.”

Looking once at his wife and son at another corner, Guan Zhongxie’s eyes started to shimmer with unbounded tenderness. Shifting his gaze back to Xiang Shaolong, he stretched out his giant hand.

Xiang Shaolong reached out and gripped his hand firmly. In a sincere tone, he wished: “Brother Guan, bon voyage.”

His two eyes turning slightly red, Guan Zhongxie lightly thanked: “Even though we have always been enemies, Brother Xiang is the man I, Guan Zhongxie, admire most. Thank you!”

That night, the residence where Guan Zhongxie is hiding erupted into a sea of inferno. After the fire has been put out, more than thirty male corpses were unearthed. To Lao Ai and his men, it is a complete mystery.

Only Han Jie knows the truth. Scared out of his wits, he deserted Lao Ai and fled Yongdu. Since then, there is no news of him.

Early next morning, accompanied by Jing Jun, Xiang Shaolong who is disguised as Wu Guo finally contacted An Guxi. Together, they await the arrival of Qin’s Crown Prince, who is currently traveling along the Yellow River and will subsequently be coronated three days later.

Book 25 Chapter 09 - The Cruel Truth

Comprising of more than a hundred large, three-mast ships, the colossus Imperial Fleet is sailing commandingly against the current towards the southern harbour of Yongdu.

Ahead of the fleet, two battleships unloaded a hundred Palace Guards which rapidly assembled to form a protection squad, exhibiting a fearsome and serious ambience.

Leading the officials of Yongdu, Lao Ai formed a welcoming party at the harbour.

Disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun remained at the side of An Guxi, viewing the enormous fleet from a distance.

Jing Jun leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and whispered: “Take a closer look at Lao Ai; I am certain he did not sleep well last night.”

Not knowing that Han Jie had flown the coop, of course Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are puzzled over Lao Ai’s lethargic appearance.

The royal ship of Xiao Pan rumbled as it begins to approach the shore.

Jing Jun was restless: “If that fellow Wu Guo failed in his impersonation and is escorted down the ship with ropes tied around him, what should we do?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “The only way is for me to confess to Yingzheng that we are trying to confuse the enemy. Nonetheless, our scheme will fall apart.”

At this juncture, An Guxi turned to Jing Jun and cheered: “It has been a long time since I laid my eyes on Third Brother. In my heart, I have been pining for him. Come!”

Patting his horse, he rode forward.

The two men hurriedly followed him.

As the gangplank slide down the side of the ship, from the shore, Lao Ai ordered the musicians to play a welcoming song.

First off the ship are three hundred Palace Guards who formed a three layer human wall on the left and right while maintaining a ten feet gap in the centre. Their well-synchronized movements are neat and pleasing to the eye.

An Guxi and the others jumped off their horses and kneeled at the side of the horse.

Taking large strides, Lord Changwen took the lead in coming down the gangplank. Behind him are twenty elite palace guards who are responsible for clearing the traveling path of obstructions. The first two palace guards are bearing the royal flag and clan flag respectively.

Hot on their heels are ten palace attendants bearing gifts and prayer accessories. Behind them are another twenty palace guards before the appearance of the future Qin Shihuang Xiao Pan and his Crown Princess. Surrounding Xiao Pan and his wife are various important officials such as Lord Changping, Wang Guan, Li Si, Cai Zhe, Qin Qing with a head veil and of course, Wu Guo who is disguised as Xiang Shaolong. Together, they alighted from the ship.

Beyond the barrage of Palace Guards, tens of thousands of Yongdu dwellers instantly exploded into earth-shattering cheers and calls of 'Your Majesty'. Kneeling down to pay their respects to Xian Pan, it was a highly robust scene.

Seeing that Wu Guo is 'unmolested', Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun heaved a sigh of relief.

Xiang Shaolong stole a glance at Lao Ai who is a distance away from him and noticed his face darkening at the welcoming cheers of the crowd. He inwardly sighed: You are just a gigolo who managed to obtain your current official position through nepotism. In terms of military might, popularity vote and image, you are simply no match for Qin Shihuang.

With an expressionless face, Xiao Pan acknowledged Lao Ai's congratulations. With Crown Princess, he boarded the royal carriage. Under the protection of Lord Changwen's Palace Guards, the carriage drove towards the city gates while An Guxi and his forces provided additional security along the road, guaranteeing a flawless journey. Seizing an opportunity, Xiang Shaolong and Jing

Jun boarded Wu Guo's carriage. Both Xiang Shaolong and Wu Guo swiftly removed their masks and clothes before switching their attires.

Wu Guo proudly proclaimed: "Fortunately, I am good at malingering; otherwise, it is really hard to handle all the socialization."

Xiang Shaolong probed: "Did Crown Prince approach you?"

Wu Guo answered: "He merely sent the Imperial Physicians to check on me. He did mention that after landing in Yongdu, he requires that I accompany him to Dazheng Palace to pay his respects to Empress."

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "What?"

At this moment, An Guxi finally found the time to ride to their carriage. Xiang Shaolong hastily sat on Wu Guo's earlier seat and smiled: "Greetings to General."

An Guxi appears to be ignorant about the friction between him and Xiao Pan. He chuckled: "Shaolong can simply address me as Guxi like before! Shaolong is truly remarkable and is a pillar of our Great Qin."

Xiang Shaolong engaged An Guxi in an uninteresting conversation. When the convoy is entering the city, An Guxi excused himself and speedily attended to his affairs.

Leaning on the back of his chair, Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief.

The first part of his plan has reached a successful conclusion. The remaining plan is to try and survive Xiao Pan's hidden attack and flee back to Xianyang.

With Crown Princess and a large group of officials, Xiao Pan disembarked from his carriage in front of Dazheng Palace's main hall.

Noting that Xiao Pan is accompanied by numerous officials, Xiang Shaolong began to relax. He secretly thought: It would be disastrous if Xiao Pan and himself were the only ones who are meeting Zhu Ji.

After Ji Yanran's reminder, he excruciatingly forced himself to face the stark reality: Zhu Ji is beyond redemption and it is impossible for her to forsake Lao Ai and leave with him.

Is there a way to protect her from the impending massacre?

There is some hope.

But after losing Lao Ai and her sons, and realizing that Xiao Pan is not her own flesh and blood, what is the point of living? She would be passing her days like a lifeless zombie.

At this interval, Mao Jiao came out of the hall. After kneeling down to pay his respects, he announced: “Today, Empress is not feeling well and does not wish to face a large crowd. She specifically asks for Crown Prince and Great General only.”

Everyone was taken aback.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances. Both of them were having the same thought: If there were soldiers ambushing them from within the hall, wouldn't the two of them end up as mincemeat?

Lord Changwen insisted: “General (I) has to escort Crown Prince at all times.”

Standing beside them, Lao Ai cheekily remarked: “Empress is merely against a huge number of visitors. Of course the Head of the Palace Guards must accompany Crown Prince!”

Xiao Pan suddenly declared: “It's all right! To enter the palace and pay my respects, Guaren only requires Great General's company.”

Noting Mao Jiao secretly signaling Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended Xiao Pan's abrupt display of bravery.

Gesturing at Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan boldly ascended the stairs to the hall. Xiang Shaolong hastily chased up to him.

Without turning his head back, Xiao Pan whispered: “In your opinion, what is that lady thinking of?”

Xiang Shaolong whispered in reply: “She probably wants to clarify matters and from our meeting, she will decide whether she wants to support Lao Ai whole-heartedly or otherwise.”

Without the least hint of surprise, Xiao Pan coldly hissed: “This is called: Making one mistake after another.”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to make a last ditch attempt to remind Xiao Pan to keep his promise. But he is also fully aware that his effort would be in vain. Therefore, he suppressed the urge to talk about it.

Perched high up on her Empress throne, Zhu Ji is alone in the hall. As their boots stepped on the floor of the massive hall, the sound of footsteps somewhat produces a chilling sensation.

The empty and spacious hall is cold, lifeless and uninviting

Although Zhu Ji is slightly chubbier, she is still as attractive as ever and there weren't any signs of aging. The only distinguishable factor is some haggardness in her features. Frostily eyeing the two men bowing to her, Zhu Ji plainly state: “Royal Son, Great General, please have a seat.”

Both men sat down on the first two seats to her right. Xiao Pan simply followed the palace protocol and commented: “Witnessing

Empress Mother radiating with even more brilliance than the past, Royal Son is filled with joy.”

Zhu Ji sighed with a breath: “How long has it been since I laid my eyes on Royal Son? I believe it is at least three or four years! Sometimes, I felt as if I never gave birth to a son like you.”

His eyes flashing once with a killing aura, Xiao Pan quickly faked an air of reverence: “Empress Mother is mistaken. Royal Son is fully occupied with matters of the State and on top of that, I do not wish to disturb Empress Mother’s recuperation. Royal Son still loves and care for Empress Mother just like before.”

Xiang Shaolong stared blankly at the space in front of him. In his heart, he wished he was dreaming, for the truth is simply too unbearable.

Remembering the earlier days in Handan when Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan are loving each other to bits, they have come to a stage when both parties are lying through their teeth and mutually scheming against each other.

Her gaze landing on Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji’s voice became gentle as she acknowledged: “I have yet to congratulate Great General on your triumphant return!”

Staring intensely at her, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart being overwhelmed by immense and genuine sensations of guilt and affections. He sighed: “It was due to luck that I managed to preserve my life! It is not worthy of Empress’s commendation.”

Her delicate eyes turning chilly, Zhu Ji interrogated: “Recently, the rumours surrounding the heritage of Crown Prince is spreading like wildfire. What counter strategies do Great General propose? I hope you can say something to calm my nerves.”

Xiao Pan icily interrupted: “Royal Son has issued a State-wide decree, prohibiting anyone from discussing this matter. I hope Empress can understand my position and put your doubts to rest.”

Zhu Ji blew her top: “As your natural mother, am I barred from discussing it too?”

Xiao Pan replied with indifference: “Royal Son dare not. However, Great General is not permitted to violate the decree.”

Zhu Ji started laughing in an unnatural way. She pitifully observed: “It nearly slipped my mind. Three days later, Royal Son will be officially crowned; naturally, you cannot be bothered with me, Empress.”

Xiao Pan plainly state: “Empress Mother is mistaken about Royal Son. At the end of the day, the slanders that Empress Mother heard are deliberately cooked up by evil villains who wishes to disrupt the relationship between us, mother and son.”

Subsequently, he stood up and declared: “Empress Mother’s health is far from ideal; it is not good for you to get agitated. Royal Son is taking my leave. At a later date, I shall pay my respects to Empress Mother again!”

Up till now, Xiang Shaolong did not have a chance to speak out.

He could only sighed to himself. Even if Xiao Pan did not have the intention to kill her, based on Zhu Ji's words, she has basically sentenced herself to death.

To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong is incapable of saving her.

This is because Zhu Ji no longer treats him with goodwill. The goodwill has been replaced by the bitterest hatred of all.

She has already jumped to the conclusion that Xiang Shaolong had deceived her, and may even assume that Xiang Shaolong has killed her real son.

Given these circumstances, what can he do?

Qinian Palace.

In the Imperial Study, Xiao Pan received the giant steel bow of Guan Zhongxie that Xiang Shaolong had presented to him. He burst out laughing: "Official Guan, if you did not end up as a muddle-headed ghost, you should have realized that you made the worst mistake of your life by choosing to collaborate with Lu Buwei years ago."

Standing on Xiao Pan's left and right are Li Si, Lord Changping,

Lord Changwen, An Guxi, Wang Guan and several other officials. One by one, they congratulated Xiang Shaolong for drawing first blood.

As if a huge burden is lifted off his shoulders, Xiao Pan placed the steel bow on his table and motioned for the officials to take a seat. With a thrilled smile, he faced Xiang Shaolong and commended: “It is a pity we are unable to secure Zhongxie’s head, nonetheless, Guaren fully agrees with Official Jing’s actions: By destroying the bodies and other physical evidence, we would not alert the rebels to our presence.”

Pausing, he added: “Over the next few days, we must be very careful with our food and drink. Or else, we may fall prey to Lao Ai’s venomous hands.”

Lord Changping cheerfully replied: “Crown Prince can put your mind at ease. Officials (We) will be extra cautious.”

Scanning the faces of everyone in the study, Xiao Pan’s gaze eventually landed on Xiang Shaolong. In a gentle voice, he inquired: “Is Great General feeling better?”

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “While fleeing for my life at the borders of Han and Wei, I have overexerted my body. Back then, I can force myself to endure the agony. Unexpectedly, after my return, I suffered countless relapses. The amount of medication I am taking is enough to strike fear into my heart. ”

Xiao Pan appreciated: “In this case, over the next few days, Great General must have a good rest and refrain from participating in strenuous activities!”

Subsequently, his royal eyes turned frosty as he icily rumbled: “It has been ascertained that Lao Ai and his gang will begin their rebellion during the royal dinner banquet, which is taking place the same day after the coronation ceremony. Does Great General have any bright ideas?”

Xiang Shaolong simply remarked: “He who moves first gain the initiative; he who moves later loses the initiative. Such is the timeless truth.”

Slamming his palm on the long table in front of his dragon throne, Xiao Pan sighed: “With this proverb alone, our victory is assured.”

Wang Guan frowned: “Pardon subordinate’s incomprehension but didn’t we decide earlier to wait for the rebels to make their move first before charging them with the act and consequently launching our counterattack?”

Xiao Pan compellingly chuckled: “Earlier decisions are based on earlier circumstances; Present decisions are based on present circumstances. Regardless of the methods employed, victory is our top priority. We shall make our move before the royal banquet and catch him with his pants down.”

Li Si commented: “The atrocious traitor Lao Ai will probably die

without even realizing what is the cause of his downfall.”

Of course Li Si is referring to Mao Jiao the super spy. Because of his meticulous efforts, Xiao Pan is fully conscious of Lao Ai’s manpower, preparations and rebellion timing, allowing him to plan his moves accordingly.

Appearing to be brimming with confidence, Xiao Pan nonchalantly articulated: “Two hours before the royal banquet, Senior General An shall take my decree and seize military control of the city. All the entrances and exits must be secured and no one is allowed to leave. This would surely provoke Lao Ai into commencing his rebellion at an earlier timing. Concurrently, the Palace Guards shall seal off Qinian Palace. On one hand, they can safeguard our officials. On the other hand, they can arrest enemy spies within our cohort according to the name list.”

Pausing, he added: “Simultaneously, Great General Wang and his massive army shall enter the city and decimate every single insurgent while Great General Xiang and Guaren shall move in and attack Dazheng Palace. Hng! Guaren is interested to know what will be Lao Ai’s final consequence.

Everyone expressed praises and approval.

Only Xiang Shaolong can recognize the inkling in his words; if he does not come up with a good solution, Dazheng Palace shall be his final resting place.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his designated courtyard at the rear

of Qinian Palace. His immediate neighbour Qin Qing and Ji Yanran who is in the guise of a maid have sneaked in and are chatting with the two men Jing Jun and Wu Guo.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong, the two ladies are especially delighted.

Sitting down, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Did you manage to contact Fourth Brother?”

Jing Jun nodded: “While Third Brother is off to Dazheng Palace, I used the opportunity to meet up with him.”

Ji Yanran probed: “What did Zhu Ji say?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “The situation is dreadful. Her relationship with Crown Prince is irreparable.”

After answering, he turned to Jing Jun and enquired: “What did Fourth Brother say?”

Jing Jun reported: “Fourth Brother mentioned that Crown Prince has ordered him to barricade Yongdu with immediate effect. Unless they have a special travel pass, no one is allowed to leave or enter.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Crown Prince is lying to me again. Minutes ago, he mentioned that the barricade will only be set up after the coronation and before the royal banquet.”

Qin Qing was terrified: “What should we do?”

After contemplating, Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “It would be easy for me to leave. I can officially propose to Crown Prince that I am sending some men back to Xianyang to increase the fighting prowess of Second Brother. Disguised as Wu Guo, I can simply walk out of Yongdu unchallenged. It is not difficult for Wu Guo too. By resuming his original appearance and with Fourth Brother assisting him, his getaway is assured. My main issue is Sister Qing. In the name of security, Yingzheng would definitely send men to keep you under strict surveillance. What can we do to counter this?”

Ji Yanran wondered: “Has Hubby decided on your departure schedule?”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “By right, Jing Jun and I should leave for Xianyang tomorrow. Aye! But how can I leave the two of you behind? Crown Prince knows me too well.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Then let’s leave together!”

Everyone stared at this gorgeous Talented Lady with amazement.

Qin Qing cheered: “Yanran, stop beating around the bush. What brilliant strategy did you come up with?”

Ji Yanran elatedly narrated: “I was inspired by Hubby’s earlier

words; we shall exploit the ambiguous relationship between Empress and Crown Prince. Think about it, if Empress asks for our Grand Tutor Qin to keep her company in Dazheng Palace, how would Crown Prince react?”

Everyone was full of praises for her ingenuity.

Qin Qing joyfully proclaimed: “In this aspect, I can apply some trickery and make it impossible for Crown Prince to reject.”

Everyone knows that Qin Qing is extremely familiar with the intricacies of the palace’s affairs. To her, it’ll be a piece of cake.

Ji Yanran added: “Additionally, this tactic would give Crown Prince the false impression that Hubby no longer wishes to flee. Unknown to him, before our Grand Tutor Qin arrives at Dazheng Palace, she would have vanished en route.” Wu Guo asked: “And when should I, this imposter Great General, start to make my getaway?”

Xiang Shaolong cautioned: “Basically, you have to react to the ever-changing conditions. Notwithstanding, preserving your life is of utmost importance. You must remember to leave before the beginning of the coronation. Or else, by then, Yingzheng would not let you out of his sight.”

Ji Yanran suggested: “You should probably leave on the night before the coronation! With a two days window, we should be able to take down Lu Buwei.”

Jing Jun reminded: “Do not loiter around Xianyang; get back to the farms as soon as possible. After we have reassembled, we can then make our final escape according to our plans. That would be our grand finale.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “After years of hardship, it is time for Heaven to grant me days of leisure and a mind free from worries!”

The eyes of everybody were lost in a series of flashbacks. In their ears, they could somewhat hear the hoof beats of a vibrant horse galloping freely across the green prairie of the borderlands.

Book 25 Chapter 10 - The Takeover of Xianyang

That very night, Xiang Shaolong sought an audience with Xiao Pan, indicating his desire to send Jing Jun and his troops back to Xianyang in order to reinforce Teng Yi against Lu Buwei.

Without any grounds to deny his request, Xiao Pan agreed on the spot, giving Xiang Shaolong the opportunity to openly and fearlessly make preparations for shipping and logistics.

Early next morning, Qin Qing paid Xiao Pan a visit too, professing that she has received Empress's invitation to stay in Dazheng Palace for a few days.

Not suspecting anything and coupled with Qin Qing's insistence, Xiao Pan gave his permission.

Disguised as Wu Family Warriors, Qin Qing and Ji Yanran were escorted by another eight authentic Wu Family Warriors. Together, they unabashedly strode out of Qinian Palace. Along the way, they rendezvoused with Xiang Shaolong and they jointly concealed themselves among the entourage of Jing Jun. After hiding their carriage in an inconspicuous location, they immediately left the city and boarded their ship. Sailing along the current and aided by a favourable wind, they arrived at Xianyang in half a day's time. Landing at the predetermined shore, they waited for an hour before Teng Yi, Tao Fang and Xiao Yuetan came to pick them up. Noticing the presence of Qin Qing and Ji Yanran, the welcoming trio is exceptionally thrilled and their morale is boosted to a higher echelon.

Teng Yi chuckled: “Everything is prepared and we are simply waiting for Great General’s leadership and instructions.”

Xiang Shaolong laughingly threw a punch at Teng Yi’s beefy shoulder, declaring: “Even Second Brother is making fun of me; I’m sure you are feeling really happy. Presently, we only have a two-day window. Thus, we must act at once.”

Ji Yanran questioned Xiao Yuetan: “Any news from Manager Tu?”

Xiao Yuetan answered: “Master Tu, his family and his three hundred loyal brethren are prepared and in position. Once we give the word, they’ll drug the water.”

Teng Yi advised: “It is critical to time our attacks well. As Manager Tu is doping the wells, we have to simultaneously seize control of Xu Shang’s Imperial Infantry. This is to ensure a safe passage for Manager Tu’s family and followers. In addition, it will prevent Old Traitor Lu from eluding our capture.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “This is precisely the limitation of the anesthetic. Due to its strength, the drug will take effect almost immediately. The only way to maximize its effect is to apply the drug at dinnertime. Nonetheless, it is difficult to tell how many would fall prey to it.”

Jing Jun proposed: “If we secretly besiege Imperial Uncle Residence, Lu Buwei will surely fall into our clutches.”

Xiang Shaolong checked: “Is Manager Tu aware of the secret tunnels of Imperial Uncle Residence?”

Xiao Yuetan explained: “During the construction of Imperial Uncle Residence, Master Tu is undergoing the lowest point in his career. Merely responsible for purchasing building materials, he does not possess the slightest knowledge about this aspect.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “In this case, we have to deploy some signaling outposts outside the city. Aye! Unless we have Crown Prince’s royal decree, we are unable to prevent him from leaving the city. Furthermore, it would arouse the suspicions of our Imperial Cavalry lieutenants. As a result, it is better for us to pursue him with our own forces.”

Turning to Qin Qing, Xiang Shaolong instructed: “Sister Qing can now proceed to your residence under the escort of Master Tao. After selecting your followers, the rest of your staff should be fittingly dismissed. Upon completion, you should head to the farms at once and await patiently for our good news.”

Affected by the calm before the storm, Qin Qing bit her lower lip and nodded once.

As Xiang Shaolong’s heart is flooded with tenderness, Ji Yanran questioned Teng Yi: “Recently, did you uncover any traces of the adversaries?”

When she mentioned ‘adversaries’, everyone knew that Ji

Yanran is referring to Wei Liao and his army of forty thousand soldiers. All the eyes are now centered at Teng Yi.

With a bewildered expression, Teng Yi remarked: “I am equally baffled as there is no indication of their existence.”

Xiao Yuetan made a guess: “Presently, we are in a race against time. In my opinion, Wei Liao and his forces should be camping further upriver. Once he receives Yingzheng’s decree, he can easily sail to Xianyang within a short span of time. If we move fast enough, we can depart Xianyang long before the arrival of Wei Liao.”

Not giving a hoot, Xiang Shaolong excitedly hailed: “It’s showtime.”

Everybody enthusiastically affirmed his words.

Still disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong entered the city and headed to the Imperial Cavalry Command Centre. Resuming his original appearance, he simultaneously summoned the lieutenants of Imperial Cavalry and Palace Guards who had stayed behind to fortify Xianyang. Displaying his Tiger Seal, he proclaimed that he is acting on the orders of Crown Prince to return to Xianyang in order to regain control of the three armies of Xianyang and guard against any potential uprising.

Of course the lieutenants are aware of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai’s working partnership. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong has always been Crown Prince’s confidante and his personal standing is

unmatchable. Coupled with the appearance of the Tiger Seal, they are fully convinced and pledged their willingness to fulfill their duties even at the cost of their lives.

Once he completed his deployments, Xiang Shaolong and his companions raced towards the Imperial Infantry Command Centre.

At this time, the lanterns are in the process of being lighted. Within the city, the ambience is tranquil and there is nothing out of the ordinary.

First of all, Xiang Shaolong ordered the Palace Guards and Imperial Cavalry to barricade the Command Centre before personally barging in with Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Ji Yanran, Xiao Yuetan and his other compatriots.

Before the sentries could sound the alarm, they are overwhelmed by Xiang Shaolong and his men.

At this juncture, Xu Shang was having a discussion with his lieutenants in the main hall. Caught unprepared by Xiang Shaolong's gatecrashing, he did not even have the chance to react when his life is already threatened by more than ten crossbows.

The countenance of Xu Shang and his lieutenants changed at once.

This Shangcai number one swordsman did not even have the

opportunity to pull his personal sword out of his waist sheathe as this invasion is simply unforeseeable. Especially when Xiang Shaolong should logically be at Yongdu.

Maintaining his coolness, Xu Shang demanded in a deep voice: “Great General, what do you mean by this?”

After his men have disarmed Xu Shang and his lieutenants, Xiang Shaolong displayed the Tiger Seal and broadcasted: “General (I) is acting on Crown Prince’s orders. From this second onwards, the Imperial Infantry shall fall under my jurisdiction. Who dares to disobey?”

Witnessing the Tiger Seal, Xu Shang realizes that he is stripped of his military authority and is now a powerless commoner like before. The lieutenants stared at Xiang Shaolong with a dumbfounded expression.

Noting that he has the situation under control, Xiang Shaolong directed: “Except for Commander Xu, escort the others to prison.” When Xu Shang is alone, Xiang Shaolong took the main seat and ordered Xu Shang to sit down at a side. After retrieving Xu Shang’s Imperial Infantry Seal, Teng Yi and Jing Jun left the hall to begin their takeover of the Imperial Infantry. Xu Shang bitterly smiled: “You have won!”

His words carrying a double meaning, Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “This is predetermined fate. I, Xiang Shaolong, am just acting my part! Ever since Lu Buwei poisoned and murdered the late king, that traitor is destined to suffer a terrifying demise. The problem is; is Brother Xu concerned about your personal

consequence?”

His eyes flashing with hope, Xu Shang wondered in a deep voice: “Will Great General be willing to let me off?”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “Brother Xu should know that I am not a ruthless killing machine. Even Guan Zhongxie and Third Mistress have been spared by me. Right now, they should have arrived in Chu. Brother Xu, what future would you choose for yourself?”

Learning that Guan Zhongxie has failed and has fled for his life after being released by Xiang Shaolong, Xu Shang broke down. He sighed: “Great General is truly peerless. What do you want from me?”

Xiang Shaolong negotiated: “Once Brother Xu reveals Lu Buwei’s emergency escape route, I will immediately escort Brother Xu and your family out of the city.”

Whilst Xu Shang is contemplating and hesitating, Xiang Shaolong prompted: “If Brother Xu still wishes to hear Lan Gongyuan’s angelic voice, you must come to a quick decision.”

Ji Yanran gently reminded: “Even if Lu Buwei manages to flee from Xianyang, certain death awaits him. Brother Xu had better not let this opportunity slip by.”

Xiao Yuetan plainly announced: “I am Xiao Yuetan; Brother Xu

should have heard of me!”

Xu Shang stared at Xiao Yuetan with amazement: “Didn’t you die a long time ago?”

Xiao Yuetan viciously snarled: “If I did not fake my death; do you think Lu Buwei will allow me to live till today? Do you really believe that Lu Buwei appreciates you and your talent? As a subordinate of Lu Buwei, you are nothing but a pawn that he can kill or abandon at will, do you understand?”

Xu Shang finally conceded. He disclosed: “Inside the bedroom of Imperial Uncle, there is a secret passageway that leads to a huge mansion along Bai Tong Street, near the south of the city. That’s all I know.”

Xiang Shaolong eagerly stood up. After waiting for nearly ten excruciatingly years, the time is finally ripe to take the life of his arch nemesis Lu Buwei.

As Xiang Shaolong and his men lay siege to the passageway exit, every single one of them is feeling perplexed.

Four hours ago, when Tu Xian led Jing Jun, Teng Yi and their troops into Imperial Uncle Residence, they discovered comatose individuals strewn all over the property. However, they are unable to locate Lu Buwei. He has evidently made his escape through the secret tunnel.

Furthermore, there are no reports of Lu Buwei leaving the city; could he be hiding in Xianyang?

That does not make sense.

Jing Jun proposed: “Let’s conduct a complete sweep of the city. We’ll definitely trace him.”

Tu Xian advocated: “Why don’t we search this empty residence first? If my presumption is correct, there must be another secret passageway from this residence to another property or warehouse near the city wall. From there, a final tunnel will lead to an exit outside the city.”

Teng Yi immediately gestured to his troops and they rapidly began searching.

Ji Yanran sighed: “If this is true, we have lost the game by merely one move. Unfortunately, our signal outposts are only paying attention to the travellers leaving Xianyang City.”

Xiao Yuetan suggested: “Traitor Lu cannot bear to part with his treasures and valuables. Additionally, traveling through tunnels is much slower than traveling on roads. Why don’t we take a gamble? Let’s assume he has left the tunnels and is traveling by foot towards the borders. I am making this conjecture because Xianyang’s river routes are under our control.”

Xiang Shaolong decisively ordered: “Cease the search. Let’s leave

the city at once.” Xiang Shaolong, his companions and two hundred over Wu Family Special Forces members rode swiftly out of the city and in the direction of Zhao. In the blink of an eye, they discovered footprints about one mile away from Xianyang City. Some of the footprints are very deep, indicating a heavy load on its owner.

Xiang Shaolong and his followers are ecstatic.

Jing Jun frowned instead: “Judging by the footprints, there are more than two thousand of them. Their strength is way above ours.”

Teng Yi scoffed: “For someone on the run, he is surely lacking in courage. In addition, part of their group is made up of women and children. There is nothing worth fearing.”

In a serious demeanour, Xiang Shaolong indicated: “Within the family warriors of Lu Clan, there is no shortage of experts. If we were to catch up to their tail, they may learn about our strength and engage us in a fight to the death. Although we may not lose, death and injury cannot be avoided. It is not a feasible plan.”

Ji Yanran recommended: “If we can somehow estimate Lu Buwei’s flight path, we can take advantage of our horses and speed to overtake them. From there, we can ambush him and confront him head on. As this technique will not betray our strength, the odds are more favourable.”

Tu Xian is best acquainted with Lu Buwei’s affairs. He deduced:

“Judging from the direction of the footprints, they should be fleeing towards Wu Chang City, a developed City that is situated downriver from Xianyang. The city mayor is Lu Buwei’s trusted confidante. From there, they can board a ship and sail towards the east. Otherwise, with their mere feet, how far can they run?”

Teng Yi enthusiastically cheered: “En route to Wu Chang is a valley named Windstorm Valley. To reach Wu Chang, they must travel through it. With our horses and including a detour, we can easily make it to the valley within four hours. Why don’t we wait there for the esteemed arrival of Imperial Uncle!”

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “You reap what you sow. If not for Master Tu ‘taking care’ of Old Traitor Lu for so many years, we would be the ones leaving with our hands empty.”

Tu Xian chuckled: “It’s nothing. General Teng, please lead the way.”

With sky-high morale, the two hundred odd riders raced off like a gust of wind.

Book 25 Chapter 11 - Exacting Sweet Vengeance

At the darkest hour before dawn, a long procession of nearly three thousand human beings is entering Windstorm Valley in silence. Their only source of illumination and guidance is a few torches.

From the appearance of the procession, it is evident that these refugees are in a state of panic and disorder. Intermittently broken up into several sections, each batch of travellers are moving in an uncaring manner. Leaving the women and children to their own devices at the back of the procession, no assistance is rendered to the fallen.

Although everybody detests Lu Buwei to the core, they are filled with sympathy at the sight before their eyes.

Xiang Shaolong pondered: “I only wish to take the life of Old Traitor Lu. Is there a way of singling Lu Buwei out from so many people?”

Xiao Yuetan coldly chortled; “Given Old Traitor Lu’s self-seeking character, he would definitely be at the head of the pack.”

Pointing to the front of the convoy, he indicated: “There are a few human-pulled carts. Old Traitor Lu must be inside one of them.”

Xiang Shaolong instructed: “In this case, once the first batch of hundred odd individuals exit the valley, we can seal the valley with wood and stones. It’ll be easier to capture him this way! Except for Old Traitor Lu, the others can go free!”

The minute Lu Buwei and his immediate group of hundred-odd refugees left the mouth of the valley, several tree trunks and countless giant boulders came crashing down suddenly from the top of a cliff. Momentarily, the area was engulfed by a huge cloud of dust and the booming noises of the falling objects shocked everyone out of their wits.

The wood and rocks that are pushed off the cliff instantly separated the procession in the most heartless manner. Falling into disarray, the refugees on both sides of the obstruction fled for their lives in opposite directions among the cries and shouts for help.

Some of them naturally fell down and were trampled all over by their fellow travellers. It felt like the apocalypse.

For those who managed to leave the valley, they are blindly running away when scores of torches are being lighted. As two hundred Wu Family Warriors rode towards Lu Buwei from all directions, they did not harm any of the porters and followers. They simply encircled the wretched-looking Lu Buwei who is presently protected by ten odd bodyguards.

In a split second, Lu Buwei is completely surrounded and he has reached the end of his tether.

Standing in the centre of a protective circle formed by his family warriors, Lu Buwei's face is deadly pale and he is panting nonstop.

Together with Tu Xian, Xiao Yuetan, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong rode out from the crowd. Perched high up on his horse, he thundered: "Lu Buwei, years ago when you ambush my forces and murdered my wife and maids, did it ever cross your mind that there will be a day like today?"

Noticing Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan, Lu Buwei was bristling with anger and hatred. As his body shook uncontrollably, he pointed his finger at them and bellowed: "Well done! To think that I, Lu Buwei, have been treating you two with benevolence, how dare you conspire with outsiders against me."

With a 'pui', Tu Xian spat a glob of saliva on the ground. Clenching his teeth, he cursed: "Shut your smelly mouth. I should be the one using these words against you. Despite my unwavering loyalty, you chose to sacrifice my bosom buddies in order to direct suspicions away from yourself. You are not fit to be human."

Xiao Yuetan scorned: "In the face of death, you are still incorrigible and full of shameless nonsense. Today, I am personally here to witness your demise because I want to prove the justice and righteous ways of Heaven. How dare you dispute the truth and make willful accusations?"

Lu Buwei was briefly dumbfounded. Noticing the hundreds of arrows aimed at his heart and waiting to be released, he lost his tongue.

In her shrill voice, Ji Yanran admonished: “The late King has always treated you with kindness. However, you cold-bloodedly poisoned him to death. Lu Buwei, you are worse than a beast.” Teng Yi roared: “The deaths of Xu Xian and Lu Gong were all because of you. Heaven must be blind for keeping you alive for the past few years.”

Jing Jun instead bellowed: “You bunch of fools, are you thinking of accompanying him to his deathbed? Throw down your weapons at once and scram as far as your legs can carry you.”

The family warriors exchanged glances with one another. After the first weapon is discarded, everyone disappeared in a flash. What’s left is a freshly betrayed-by-his-men Lu Buwei standing alone in the centre of their encirclement.

Xiang Shaolong and his companions leapt off their horses and advanced towards Lu Buwei.

JIANG!

Xiang Shaolong unsheathed Hundred Battle Sabre.

Within a second, his mind has experienced countless flashbacks of the most heart-wrenching moments of his life, and they are all triggered by Lu Buwei.

Chunying and her fellow maids, his trusted subordinates, one by

one, they started bleeding and eventually collapsing on the ground; in the prime of her youth, Zhao's Third Princess turning into a lifeless corpse in his arms; the look of grievance in King Zhuangxiang's eyes as he passed away; Lu Gong dying with his eyes wide open, these images simultaneously recurred in his vision.

Feeling as if a huge boulder has been casted into his tranquil, mental lake, he is now overwhelmed by turbulent waves of grief.

Out of the blue, he discovered the Hundred Battle Sabre in his hand has penetrated the abdomen of Lu Buwei.

It was Lu Buwei's body that suddenly lunged forward and pierced itself against his Hundred Battle Sabre. Actually, Lu Buwei was smacked in the back by Teng Yi's Mozi Sword, causing him to stumble forward. In the ears of Xiang Shaolong, he could hear Teng Yi praying: "Princess Qian, this is for you. May your soul in heaven be appeased."

By the time Lu Buwei slumped against the body of Xiang Shaolong, he has turned into a lifeless corpse. All the fame and fortune of the world has nothing to do with him anymore.

Although Xiang Shaolong personally killed his nemesis, his heart is feeling empty. His mind totally blank, he did not experience any joy from exacting sweet vengeance.

He has grown to detest the mutual killings of humans.

The sky is finally brightening.

After three days and two nights of continuous riding, Xiang Shaolong and his followers could not withstand the fatigue anymore. Pitching tents, they took a break.

They are one day's journey away from the farms.

During their voyage, Xiang Shaolong is extremely quiet.

That very night, the weather is excellent. Accompanied by a new crescent moon, the sky is star-studded. Spreading over the entire horizon, the stars are twinkling in clusters of varying sizes.

Leaving the campgrounds, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran ascended a small hill. Leisurely sitting back to back on a turf of grass that is tall enough to reach their knees, they soak in the ambience of genuine and deep love as husband and wife.

Xiang Shaolong started to relax. Presently, Lu Buwei's issue seems to be miles away and the threat of Xiao Pan is literally non-existent.

He suddenly recalled a movie about Qin Shihuang that he watched in the 21st century. Lu Buwei certainly did not die the way he did.

After being implicated for recommending Lao Ai into officialdom, he was stripped of his Premiership by Yingzheng and

exiled to Shiyi, Henan Province.

Nonetheless, still bearing malicious intentions, Lu Buwei remains in cahoots with the rich and powerful of the six States. Eventually, he was forced by Yingzheng to move to Zhuo Jun and was served with a warning letter.

Knowing that he cannot escape the gallows, Lu Buwei chose to commit suicide by drinking poisonous wine.

However, Xiang Shaolong was obviously the one who killed Lu Buwei with his sabre. Did he unconsciously change the course of history?

In the midst of his wild reflections, Ji Yanran's shrill voice sounded beside his ear: "Hubby, a penny for your thoughts?"

In the spur of the moment, Xiang Shaolong nearly wanted to make a full confession of his 'background' to his lovely wife. Ultimately, he suppressed the urge and bitterly smiled: "Even I do not know what I am thinking about."

Ji Yanran comforted: "Yanran understands Hubby's emotions. Human beings are really bizarre. Sometimes, we spare no effort and go all out to achieve a goal but once we succeeded, we would feel so empty and lost inside. Fortunately, this is not the trend for everything. For example, friendship between humans will get better with time and deeper as the days go by. Of course, there are also friends who would become your enemies!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head: “Listening to Yanran speaking is one of the greatest pleasures of my life. Being able to grow old together with Yanran at the borderlands, what more can I ask for?”

Snaking into Xiang Shaolong’s bosom and using his shoulder as a pillow, Ji Yanran gazed intensively at the flickering stars in the sky with her pretty eyes. She faintly remarked: “Yesterday is the day Yingzheng becomes the official King of Qin. I wonder if Lao Ai and Empress are still... Aye... Yanran should not have brought this up.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “My virtuous wife, I do not mind it one bit. In fact, I have come to terms with it. With our limited abilities, we can only achieve so much; we cannot possibly accomplish everything we set out to do. Concerning Empress, it is beyond my powers to protect her. For the time being, my only wish is to find Wu Guo and the others safe and sound when we arrive at the farms.”

Ji Yanran sighed: “Yanran also wishes to leave this place as soon as possible and never come back.”

First thing next morning, everybody packed their tents and resumed their journey. Following a predetermined secret route, they rode in the direction of the farms.

As evening approaches, the farms can be sighted from afar.

Riding at the head of the convoy, Jing Jun suddenly turned back. The expression on his face is horrendous.

Knowing that something is not right, everyone started to panic.

In a deep voice, Jing Jun reported: “The farms are surrounded by multiple layers of enemies.”

Under the limited glare of the moon and stars, the land is dimly illuminated. Perching on a higher elevation, they scanned the environment.

Entering their sights were tens of thousands of Qin soldiers who are laying siege at the perimeter of the farm. They are located outside the arrow firing range of the farm battlements.

Surprisingly, the battlements are in good condition. It is evident that the enemies have yet to launch an attack.

The Wu Fortress is completely dark, resembling a ferocious beast that is fast asleep.

From the side of the Qin troops, sounds of chopping wood and felling trees can be heard. Unmistakably, they are constructing war machines that are meant to attack the fortress.

In a fierce tone, Teng Yi wondered: “Logically, they should fake an attack in order to deplete our supply of arrows and wear us out physically. Why are they completely immobile instead?”

Remembering Qin Qing and the limited warriors within the fortress, Ji Yanran bit her lower lip in agitation, causing a trickle of blood to emerge. In a deep voice, she explained: “Wei Liao is waiting for our return. Luckily, they are not familiar with the terrain and did not expect us to use this secret path.”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong added: “That is not the main reason. Most importantly, he is waiting for Yingzheng to personally attack us in secret. This is the only way to prevent news from leaking out.”

After careful scrutiny, Xiao Yuetan confirmed that the entrance of the secret tunnel is situated far away from the enemies’ tents and war machine construction yard. Heaving a sigh of relief, he declared: “Before Yingzheng’s arrival, we must fully utilize whatever precious time that remains. Using the secret passageway to return to the fortress, we must immediately grab everyone and depart at once.”

Of course no one will object to his suggestion and everybody quickly jumped into action.

An hour later, they have entered the fortress without being detected. By the time Xiang Shaolong embraced Qin Qing’s petite frame, it felt as if an entire lifetime has passed by.

As the warhorses have been trained to pass through the tunnels, no noises were generated and the enemy is still in the dark about their presence.

Out of the blue, Teng Yi stammered: “What? Wu Guo and the rest are not back?”

Xiang Shaolong is badly shaken. Lightly pushing Qin Qing away, he muttered in shock: “This is impossible.”

Initially speaking with Teng Yi, Tao Fang sadly conveyed: “Looks like Wu Guo is in trouble.”

Pausing for a while, he added: “Last night, the enemies abruptly appeared at the perimeter of the farms. In fact, they have surrounded us and advanced towards us from all directions. Fortunately, they did not harass us; otherwise, we would be in a dilemma: Should we defend the farms with our lives or simply flee?”

With a heavy expression, Xiao Yuetan asserted: “We must retreat at once, for they will discover the secret tunnel sooner or later. When that happens, we would be trapped.”

Xiang Shaolong decided: “Let’s leave in batches. No matter what, I must stay put until the last minute and leave only when the enemy is finally attacking. Zhou Wei has already lost her only kin, her elder brother. I cannot allow her to lose her beloved husband too!”

Tu Xian burst out laughing: “If we must leave, let’s leave together. Let this be a test of Heaven’s goodwill.”

Mounting the fortifications, Xiang Shaolong and the others examined the enemy formations that are spread before their eyes like a tree of fireflies.

The difference in their strengths is mind-blowing. Any resistance would be futile.

Furthermore, Xiang Shaolong and his team have been riding for days and nights. In their weakened state, engaging the adversaries can only result in defeat.

Teng Yi analyzed: “Judging from the battle formation, Wei Liao is truly a military genius.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “Yingzheng is thoroughly prepared for this assault. By deploying these border guards who are not related to Shaolong, I believe they themselves are unaware that they are attacking Wu Fortress.”

At this juncture, Jing Jun ran up to them and announced: “We are all set. Shall we bring the horses to the secret cave? With them, it would be easier to make our getaway.”

Ji Yanran proposed: “Why don’t we place the horses near the entrance of the secret tunnel? Take it as our last effort to assist Wu Guo and the others. After all, it is better than being surrounded and without a means of escape.”

Everybody kept quiet and stared at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged the wisdom of his pretty wife.

If they wanted to transport six hundred people, horses and provisions through the passageway in complete silence, they would require at least four hours.

He reluctantly agreed: “All right!”

Jing Jun left to execute his order.

Out of a sudden, Teng Yi violently shuddered: “Yingzheng is here; Wu Guo and the rest are finished.”

Reeling with shock, the rest of the group followed his gaze. Together, they witnessed a never-ending procession of torches that resembles a fire dragon. From afar, these new entrants proceeded straight into the tent of the enemy General.

Xiang Shaolong conclusively barked: “Retreat at once.”

DONG! DONG! DONG!

The sound of war drums echoed throughout the air.

Everyone exchanged glances with one another. Yingzheng had obviously traveled nonstop throughout the night. Without even stopping for a break or a drink, he instantly commenced the

attack, clearly demonstrating his determination in killing Xiang Shaolong.

In a distressed tone, Xiang Shaolong vexed: “Xiao Pan! You are too heartless!”

Ji Yanran hollered: “Abandon the horses! We can only rely on our feet to make our escape. Otherwise, it will be too late.”

Acknowledging her command, everyone started moving accordingly.

Watching the enemy soldiers advance from all directions in an overwhelming manner, their hearts sank straight to the bottom.

Book 25 Chapter 12 - At The Brink Of Death

By the time the fortress gates are breached, half of Xiang Shaolong's followers have yet to enter the tunnel. Exasperated, Xiang Shaolong ordered them to squeeze themselves into the newly constructed mausoleum as a form of concealment. At the same time, he sealed the extra-thick steel double doors of the mausoleum, hoping to buy as much time as possible.

It would be ideal if Xiao Pan was misled into thinking that they had left and gave up the search.

But at the back of their minds, everyone knew that this is just their wistful thinking.

When the occupants of a huge fortress have suddenly vanished, there must be a secret passageway that will lead them out of the fortress.

If Wei Liao fails to uncover the passageway, he would not be able to account himself to the newly coronated King of Qin.

Within the mausoleum, everyone is eyeing one another with anxiety. Watching the warriors enter the secret tunnel one by one, they could faintly pick up chaotic noises of war cries and hoof beats. Despite feeling restless and agitated, as if their hearts are on fire, they could only put their trust in the Will of Heaven.

Sounds of 'LONG! LONG!' resounded continuously. Apparently, the invaders are breaking down doors and conducting a search.

PONG!

Right before their eyes, the steel door is finally being hammered. The evil clutches of the enemy has ultimately found its way to this place.

After a round of pointless bashing, silence enveloped the mausoleum.

The hearts of Xiang Shaolong's followers are now stuck at their throats and they are having difficulty breathing.

They could easily predict the next move of the enemy. By tying a large log to a cart, the enemies can fashion a battering ram and use it to break the door down.

The next fifteen minutes felt like a century.

Putting themselves at the back of the queue, Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Tu Xian and ten odd Wu Family Special Forces members are armed with their crossbows, ready to defend the mausoleum with their lives. By holding back the enemies, more of their compatriots can make it to safety.

No one is in the mood to talk.

At this juncture, besides them, there are about thirty followers

who had yet to enter the secret passageway.

Fortunately, during the early days of construction, special attention was being paid to the tunnel ventilation. Otherwise, with so many people crammed in the tunnel, they would suffocate to death before reaching the exit.

Xiang Shaolong unconsciously glanced upwards at the center of the tall worshiping altar. Gazing at the ancestral tablet of Xiao Pan's birth mother Lady Ni, he resentfully smiled to himself. He thought: Ni'er, did this ever cross your mind; that one day, I, Xiang Shaolong, will be personally killed in cold blood by your beloved son.

HONG!

The entire mausoleum shook once but the steel doors remained intact.

HONG!

The three steel door fasteners that are securing the steel doors started to bend inwards and there is now a gap between the double doors. Through the gap, the light from fire torches can be seen and the battle cries are even more realistic than before. Like waves hitting the shore, the enemy soldiers are shouting incessantly into the mausoleum.

Luckily, by this time, Xiang Shaolong and his companions are the

only ones who are left in the mausoleum. The rest of them have entered the tunnels.

Xiang Shaolong bellowed: “Get in! Quick!”

Of course nobody dare to be sluggish. Like bees returning to their nests, everybody scrambled for the tunnels.

Before they could replace the steel cover for the secret tunnel, a giant HONG! sound rang out. Both the enormous steel doors collapsed onto the ground, taking with them part of the brick walls. Momentarily, the mausoleum is shrouded with dust.

The four individuals Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran stood guard by the tunnel entrance, ready to kill whoever that trespasses.

They had to do this.

Presently, the tunnel is filled with people. If the enemies begin to pursue them from the back, everyone would be slaughtered.

The more they can delay the enemy and prevent them from understanding the tunnel layout, the greater chances of survival the others would have.

The light from a fire torch is shining down the tunnel.

Xiang Shaolong and the others stepped backwards, avoiding the illumination of the torch.

A man excitedly shouted: “The entrance is here! They did not even have enough time to put the steel cover back.”

Xiang Shaolong and the others groaned to themselves. Out of the blue, beyond the passageway, the entire mausoleum became completely silent.

Next, sounds of kneeling and paying of respects is heard.

Although Xiang Shaolong and his companions are itching with curiosity, they are equally terrified. However, there is nothing they can do.

This man must be Wei Liao.

Yingzheng is amazingly quiet.

POK!

That was the sound of someone kneeling down.

From the edge of the tunnel entrance, Li Si's quivering voice sounded: “Great King, please have mercy!”

Wei Liao was astonished: “Chief Officer?”

What followed was another round of mysterious silence.

Wei Liao’s voice sounded again: “Great King, please give the order at once. Otherwise, if we miss this opportunity, it will be lost forever.”

He then dryly coughed once and wondered: “Why is Great King staring at the worshiping altar and the ancestral tablets?”

In the hearts of Xiang Shaolong and the other three, an indescribable feeling is beginning to emerge. Xiao Pan must be quietly gazing at the tablet of his beloved mother Lady Ni.

Except for the four of them, the others should have crossed the halfway point of the tunnel. In another thirty minutes, the evacuation would be complete.

Nonetheless, if Xiao Pan takes up Wei Liao’s suggestion, everybody will still end up dead.

The familiar voice of Xiao Pan finally sounded: “Official Wei and the others, Guaren hereby command that you retreat from this room at once. Only Official Li shall remain.”

Wei Liao was stunned: “Great King...”

Xiao Pan roared: “Get out!”

The sound of footsteps was heard.

Once his soldiers are out of earshot, Xiao Pan questioned in a deep voice: “How can we prevent the world from talking about this incident?”

Li Si answered: “After Great King has conquered the six States and united the lands, Great King can issue a nationwide decree, prohibiting anyone from mentioning the three words: Xiang Shaolong. Violators will be beheaded at once. This would certainly make everyone stop talking about him and the problem will be resolved accordingly.”

Xiao Pan coldly hissed: “If they did not talk about him but recorded him in historical documents, what should we do?”

Li Si replied: “Great King can burn their books and bury the authors alive.”

Below them, Xiang Shaolong is absolutely flabbergasted, never expecting himself to be the reason for Qin Shihuang to burn books and bury scholars alive. Concurrently, he realizes that the burning of the Book of Wu Pu is to deny the public of valuable knowledge.

Xiao Pan grilled: “Nevertheless, how should we explain the killing of Lu Buwei by Xiang Shaolong?”

His voice becoming louder, Li Si proclaimed: “It is really simple. The explanation is: To escape punishment, Lu Buwei fled back to his territory of Shiyi where he eventually committed suicide by drinking poisonous wine.”

Footsteps sounded again and someone came to the edge of the tunnel entrance.

After a short spell of silence, Xiao Pan’s voice lightly expressed: “Master! May you have a safe journey!”

Following that, Xiao Pan decisively thundered: “Retreat at once!”

The footsteps trailed off.

Unable to hold back any longer, the hot tears of Xiang Shaolong overflowed his eye sockets.

In his heart, he could feel the immense agitation of creating a crucial episode of history.

The minute Xiao Pan steps out of his mother’s mausoleum, he would no longer be the Zhao Xiao Pan from Handan.

Because he would have completely severed his past and become a true blue Yingzheng. In the future, all his energies will be expended on the grand scheme of conquering the world.

The instance he crosses the fallen steel doors, the six States are destined to be eliminated one after another.

Their opponent is the unshakable super conqueror – the founder of China, the bearer of the title: One in a millennium Emperor, Qin Shihuang Yingzheng.

Recomposing their emotions, Xiang Shaolong and his companions caught up to the main body by going through and exiting the tunnel. To their astonishment, they spotted Wu Guo and the Guardians among them.

It turned out that they were forced to take the roads after Lord Changwen barricaded the river route. As a result, they ended up arriving several hours after Yingzheng. Coincidentally, they ran into the others near the tunnel exit.

At the same time, Wu Guo brought updates from Wang Jian. Lao Ai was sentenced to death by having his body torn apart by five carriages and the two sons of Zhu Ji and Lao Ai were burnt alive.

Zhu Ji herself was escorted back to Xianyang.

Of course everyone knows that the real Zhu Ji is dead. The Zhu Ji that is returning to Xianyang and subsequently placed under house arrest is merely an imposter conjured by Yingzheng.

After the withdrawal of Yingzheng's massive army, everyone returned to the farms and mounted their horses before leaving

again.

Xiang Shaolong did not forget to bring along the ancestral tablets of Zhao Qian, Lady Ni and the other ladies.

Three months later, they finally arrived safely at the borderlands, fulfilling their long awaited dream.

Book 25 Chapter 13 - United States Of China

As the rebellion forces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are mainly staffed by foreigners from the six States, coupled with Zhengguo Canal being exposed as a trick by Han to destroy Qin, on top of Yingzheng's worry that the foreigners from the six States will continue to propagate 'rumours', Yingzheng implemented an 'anti foreigner' policy despite the mounting protests from his officials, instantly endangering foreign guests from the eastern States.

Li Si is fully conscious that he knows too much for his own good. Nonetheless, he is highly supportive of Yingzheng's dream to unite the States. At the risk of his life, he submitted the following report:

"When subordinate heard that the Court of Qin has decided to implement anti-foreigner policies, I felt that this move is inappropriate! In the past, Duke Lao was seeking talent. From the west, he recruited You Yu from Rong; east, Baili Xi from Wan; welcomed Jian Shu from Song; and embraced Pei Bao and Gongsun Zi from Jing. None of these five men are originally from Qin but with their support, Duke Lao was able to occupy more than twenty States, forming the Kingdom of West Rong.

Using the laws of Shang Yang, Duke Xiao reformed local customs and manners, causing the population to greatly flourish and the country to grow rich and powerful. The population rejoiced, and the feudal lords were subjugated. Obtaining experts from Wei and Chu, they gained sway over thousands of miles of land, and to this day their governance was strong.

King Hui used the stratagems of Zhang Yi and seized the three

river plains areas. In the west, he consolidated the states of Ba and Shu. In the north, he governed Shangjun, while in the south he took over Hanzhong. He embraced the nine barbarian tribes, and regulated Yan and Shao. He seized the dangerous passes to the east, which were easy to guard and made them hard to attack, cutting off the fertile land. He dispersed the alliance of the Six Eastern Powers, and made the west solely dominated by Qin. His accomplishments persisted to this very day.

Enlisting the help of Fan Wei, King Zao promoted him to the position of Marquis Xiang and disposed of Hua Yang, thereby strengthening the court administration and weed out corruption. By eradicating the feudal lords, King Zao is able to consolidate his authority.

The success of these four kings is undeniably linked to their reliance on foreign talents.

Regardless of perspective, these foreign advisors did not disappoint!

If the opposite had happened, for example, the four kings condemned these foreigners to lowly positions and did not exploit their capabilities, Qin will not stand to gain from their expertise and can never be as strong as today.

Additionally, this policy is not carefully researched and there is no distinction between truth and fiction. There is no basis to discriminate between citizens and non-citizens of Qin. Ultimately, the emphasis should be on genuine talent and not nationality. Thus, this policy is flawed."

From the frank and open assessment that Li Si had presented, besides exhibiting his undying loyalty to Yingzheng, it clearly elaborates ironclad truths and facts.

Finally, Yingzheng retracted his decree and abolished the ‘anti foreigner’ policy.

At the same time, Han Fei, the old friend of Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran, was forcefully invited to Qin.

However, his loyalty lies with his birth State and he spoke up for Han on several occasions. Due to his ineloquence, he failed to get into the good books of Yingzheng. Eventually, he offended Yao Jia and Li Si, and with the two men jealous of his talent, Han Fei was poisoned to death in prison.

After eradicating Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, Yingzheng consolidated his authority over Qin and subsequently began his conquest of the other six States.

Alone by themselves, none of the six States can withstand the might of Qin.

But if they worked in hand in hand, it is not impossible to give Qin a run for their money. For example, six years after Yingzheng’s coronation, Qin suffered a crushing defeat against the allied forces of Chu and the Three States. However, Han Chuang was down on his luck and perished during the skirmish.

Without Lu Buwei backing him, Tian Dan lost power. From then on, there are no more distinguished talents from Qi.

Learning his lesson the hard way, Yingzheng switched to employing strategies recommended by Li Si and Wei Liao. In an intricate manner, he exploited the three methods of bribery, sowing of discord and divide and conquer to destroy the six States.

Fourteen years into Yingzheng's reign, King An of Han was the first to yield to Qin. The next year, the armies of Qin embarked on a killing spree and conquered Han.

Personally trained by Xiang Shaolong, Heng Qi (Huan Qi) was promoted to Great General after accumulating a ton of merits. Unfortunately, he pitted himself against Li Mu, the gifted general who devastated the army of Xiang Shaolong. After incurring huge losses at He Fei and ashamed to face Yingzheng, Heng Qi fled to Yan.

Finally, it has boiled down to a war between the two renowned generals Wang Jian and Li Mu.

Under the leadership of Wang Jian and Yang Duanhe, the armies of Qin launched a massive campaign against Zhao. Meeting them outside Handan City, Li Mu engaged their forces and their fights resulted in a deadlock. Bewitched by Li Si's sowing of discord, Guo Kai went to the extent of persuading the King of Zhao to switch Li Mu with another general. Refusing to accept the switch, Li Mu was executed by the King of Zhao.

With the passing of a giant, there are no generals in Zhao who could stand up to Wang Jian. Like a gust of strong wind sweeping the fallen leaves, the armies of Qin swept Zhao into the memories of history.

After Yingzheng ruled for nineteen years, Prince Dan sent Jingke into Qin and tried to assassinate him. Failing in his mission, Jingke was mutilated and killed.

Finding a reason to counterattack, Yingzheng dispatched Wang Jian to Yan. After soundly defeating the armies of Yan at the west of River Yi, the next year, Wang Jian occupied Ji, the capital of Yan and killed Prince Dan.

With his son Wang Ben, Wang Jian went on to dominate more than ten cities of Chu. The next year, Wang Jian demonstrated his legendary abilities once again. By breaking a dam and flooding Daliang, he effortlessly erases Wei off the map of China.

Twenty three years into Yingzheng's reign, Wang Jian began invading Chu and inflicted heavy casualties to the army of Chu at Pingyu. The next year, Meng Wu successfully overran Shouchun. The King of Chu and Li Yuan ended up as prisoners of war while Li Yanyan committed suicide by poisoning herself, heralding the demise of Chu.

Twenty six years after Yingzheng became the King of Qin, Wang Ben breached the defenses of Lin Zi. Tian Jian, the King of Qi, surrendered unconditionally.

From this point onwards, the vanquished six States are like a cloud of dissipating smoke. At the end of the day, all their lands are now part of Qin.

Recollecting Xiang Shaolong's suggested caption of 'Shihuang Emperor', Yingzheng instructed his officials to evaluate the feasibility of this title now that he has united the whole of China.

Everyone is naturally full of praise and approval.

Therefore, Yingzheng gave himself the title of Shihuang Emperor. Removing the structure of marquises and lords, Yingzheng divided China into thirty six provinces. Confiscating all the weapons of China to safeguard himself, Yingzheng also constructed twelve golden statues in his likeness to remind the people of his authority. At the same time, he standardized the weights and measurement, road widths and carriage sizes of China. Yingzheng is also responsible for issuing a single currency for the whole country and deciding the language medium for all forms of communication. Finally, he resettled the richest one hundred and twenty thousand households to Xianyang

Indirectly, he has established the model for the future of China.

When Yingzheng ascends the Emperor throne as Shihuang Emperor, the majestic Huai Qing Platform is simultaneously being constructed.

The common folks are under the impression that their Emperor

is building this to commemorate Widow Qing.

Only those in the know like Li Si and Wang Jian are aware that Yingzheng is actually building it to commemorate Xiang Shaolong who is far away from the Central Plains.

Epilogue

Under the flying hooves of the horse, the ground rapidly fades towards the back.

With three of his brothers Wu Zhuo, Teng Yi and Jing Jun, Xiang Shaolong is riding at full speed on the fresh and crisp grassland that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Under the blue sky and white clouds, about half a mile in front of them, a herd of nearly one thousand wild horses are startled and instantly fled towards the north.

The four men started shouting. Squeezing the abdomen of their horses to change directions, they continued the pursuit.

Xiang Shaolong and his fellow riders divided themselves into two teams.

One team started flanking the wild horses from the side, forcing the leading alpha horse to change their flight path while the other team persisted in hounding the horses from the back.

After a short chase, the herd is intimidated by their horsewhips and had no choice but to jump into the river and swim towards the opposite shore.

Reining his horse to a stop, Xiang Shaolong thundered: “Kids! It is time to display your talents.”

On the opposite shore, more than a hundred men suddenly appeared with ropes in their hands, enthusiastically waiting for the horses to walk right into their arms. Among them are Wu Guo, Wu Yan Zhe, Zhao Da and Liu Chao.

Observing his brothers and men capturing wild horses with plenty of excitement, Xiang Shaolong praised: “First Brother is truly talented in picking a good territory. This location comprises of countless rivers and streams which is useful for farming and drinking. With bountiful water supply, fertile soil and limitless grazing grass, this is a piece of paradise.”

His eyes scanning the endless fields around him, Wu Guo inhaled a breath of fragrant grass smell and chuckled: “When I first came here, I did not feel good because I have this impression that we are forced to come here, like a self-imposed exile. But after living here for so many years, only death can force me to leave this place.”

Jing Jun suddenly barked to the men on the opposite shore: “That pure white horse! I want that pure white horse!”

Teng Yi was tickled: “This fellow, Dan’er has given him three sons and two daughters and yet, he himself is like a kid who has never grown up.”

At evening time, the men are satisfied with a rewarding day and started riding back to the hunting camp.

Ji Yanran, Qin Qing, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen, Tian

Feng, Zhou Wei, Shan Lan, Lu Dan'er and the other ladies are sitting on a slope, overlooking a group of more than thirty boys and girls aged between ten and fifteen years old. The children are riding their horses and playing polo on a grass meadow.

The air is filled with laughter.

One of the children is Xiang Bao'er.

He is much more brawny compared to the other kids. Wearing a beautiful cap made from eagle feathers, coupled with his thick brows and large eyes, he is already an outstanding character.

At this moment, he happened to bend down from his horse and use his mallet to dribble the ball. Under his skillful maneuvers, no one could snatch the polo ball from him.

Beneath their feet, like a shimmering green carpet, the boundless grass prairie seems to extend all the way to heaven.

A distance away, more than a hundred tents are clustered together. As the smoke rises from the cooking stoves, more than ten ladies are starting a fire and preparing a meal for their husbands and sons to enjoy later.

Nearby, the two men Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan are sitting on the ground and chatting idly with each other. Occasionally, they would throw a glance at the polo-playing children.

The game is now reaching a point of excitement and the spectating ladies clapped and cheered nonstop. Among them, Wu Tingfang and Lu Dan'er cheered the loudest.

Out of the blue, Qin Qing nudged Ji Yanran who is sitting down beside her. She joyfully exclaimed: "Hubby is back."

Shifting their gaze to the edge of the horizon, the group of ladies spotted more than a hundred black dots that are gradually becoming bigger and bigger. The sound of hoof beats is also faintly discernable.

Feeling in the mood, Ji Yanran stood up and hollered in her shrill voice: "I am going out to welcome our victorious warriors; who is with me?"

The children have already abandoned their game. With some of them riding ahead and some riding at the back, they are heading towards the approaching horsemen.

The sound of hoof beats reverberated thorough the air.

Ji Yanran's invitation is instantly taken up by everyone. Running to and mounting their horses, it wasn't too long until the ladies met up with their partners on the grasslands. Together, they rode back to camp.

Riding in front, the children are proudly leading the way back.

Slowing cantering beside Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, an emotional Xiang Shaolong gushed: “Heaven is indeed kind to us. In the past, I cannot imagine myself leading such a blissful and worry-free life.”

Qin Qing sighed: “Because of our past experiences, we are able to appreciate the value of living freely on the grasslands. Unlike that little fellow Bao’er; he kept whining and expressed his desire to return to the Central Plains and see the world.”

Wu Tingfang nagged: “In the future, you better not tell him any more stories about the Central Plains, especially about Chu. Bao’er has developed a liking for that place, how mysterious!”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “Every person has his or her own dreams. Because our dreams are fulfilled, we are contented with our lives. Bao’er is merely pursuing his dream! We should never try to stop him from pursuing his interests and must never force him to live according to our expectations of him.”

Ji Yanran is exhilarated: “Hubby’s words are really moving. Bao’er’s dream is to become an eagle in the sky, able to spread his wings and fly to any place he desires.”

Zhao Zhi guffawed: “Everyone is pampering him without any reservations! In my opinion, Little Zhen and Little Feng are the worst culprits!”

Teased by Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng are covering their mouths and giggling. Happiness is written all over their faces.

As if she suddenly remembered something, Ji Yanran smiled: “I nearly forgot to tell you something, Father of Bao’er. Bao’er finds his name too childish and wishes to change it.”

Unconcerned, Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: “As long as his surname is Xiang, he can choose whichever name he wants.”

Pretending to be angry, Wu Tingfang protested: “The name Bao’er is my suggestion; it is his birth name!”

Ji Yanran continued: “Noting his love for eagles, I recommended him to use the name Eagle (Ying).”

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “Xiang Ying! That’s quite a nice name!”

Qin Qing gently rebuked: “As a father, you do not understand your son well enough. He finds the word ‘Eagle’ too aggressive and beast-like. Moreover, others will make jokes about his name. He has decided on the word: Yu.”

Violently shaken, Xiang Shaolong reined his horse to a stop and unconsciously shouted: “What!”

The ladies, Teng Yi and the rest were stunned into stopping with him. All the attention is now focused on Xiang Shaolong.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing wave after wave of tsunamis.

Xiang Yu?

Isn't he the man who fought against Liu Bang for control over the entire China? And who eventually committed suicide by jumping into River Wu with the beauty Yu Ji? The one and only Chu Great Conqueror Xiang Yu?

What is going on?

Could it be merely a coincidence in their names?

Taking time into account, the probability is quite strong.

From the records of history, the Qin dynasty ended after two emperors.

Thirty seven years after Yingzheng became the King of Qin, he died of illness at Saqiu when he was touring the southern provinces. After him, the second Emperor perished three years later. At that point in time, Xiang Shaolong's son Xiang Yu is in his early thirties, the prime of his youth.

The cries of everybody brought Xiang Shaolong back to his senses.

Ji Yanran suspiciously probed: "Does Hubby dislike this name? But Bao'er loves it. If you want him to change his mind, leave us

out of it. You can speak to him directly.”

Recomposing himself, Xiang Shaolong started contemplating. Should he issue a warning to his son Xiang Bao'er? For example, when Bao'er meets a man named Liu Bang, he should unsheathe his sword and kill him at once.

But on the other hand, even though Xiang Shaolong is fully aware of historical developments, at the end of the day, he is unable to change its path.

Destiny is something that cannot be altered by mere willpower and effort.

Humans believe they are charting their lives; that is precisely because they are unaware of their actual fate. In fact, they are simply living their lives according to fate.

Only Xiang Shaolong is able to fully comprehend this insight.

One of his 'son' Xiao Pan built the Great Qin empire while his other 'son' Xiang Yu personally destroyed the same empire.

Qin Qing frowned: “What is Hubby thinking about!”

Abruptly breaking out into laughter, Xiang Shaolong replied: “I have thought through it and came to an understanding.”

Teng Yi's voice sounded: "What did Third Brother understand?"

Xiang Shaolong joyfully exclaimed: "From this day onwards, Xiang Bao'er shall be Xiang Yu."

The crowd rolled their eyes in unison.

With a baffled expression, Ji Yanran enquired: "What is there to understand about changing one's name?"

From her back, Xiang Shaolong leaned forward to her face and inhaled her fragrance. He laughed: "I understood one point. If you succeeded, so what? And if you failed, so what? Success and failure are irrelevant. The most important thing is to lead a fulfilling and extraordinary life, inscribing your everlasting name in the records of history. That indeed, is a life worth living!"

Even more puzzled than before, the crowd could never guess that he is referring to his own son eventually becoming the legendary and illustrious Chu Great Conqueror Xiang Yu.

Letting out a burst of heroic laughter, Xiang Shaolong prodded his horse and started chasing up to Xiang Yu and the other children.

Everyone swiftly resounded and nudged their horses in pursuit.

Under the magnificent and colourful sunset, the humans and horses seemed to have merged into one body with Mother Nature,

depicting a heavenly and ecstatic painting.

~~~ END ~~~